

Trip Report: French Cave Diving, July 2010

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It was a tough choice. Do I spend the winter in Auckland, where it rains 4 days out of 5 and my house is always cold and damp – or do I head off to the Dordogne, where the temperature is 35 degrees, where the red wine and cheese are superb and most importantly where there are lots of caves just begging to be explored? Did I say it was a tough choice – maybe I'm just a little tired after two weeks of cave diving.

The Dordogne area is in the southwest of France and encompasses both the Célé and Lot valleys, which are where we did most of our diving. It is a very beautiful part of the world, with huge numbers of tourists meandering lazily through stunning medieval towns and ancient farming villages. I first came here (for cave diving) in 2006 and it is hard to imagine a more picturesque spot, with huge limestone cliffs, plunging gorges and gently crumbling buildings actually built into the rocks in some places. Add in the constant sunshine during our trip and a great choice of caves both above and below the water and you have the perfect recipe for a feast of cave-diving.



Rocamadour – one of the most popular tourist destinations

My buddy for this trip was Joe Hesketh, a good friend from the UK who had also accompanied me on my 2006 France trip. We have done many cave dives together in a variety of different destinations - mines in the UK, cenotes in Mexico, springs in Florida – and over time we have built up a great understanding underwater. And with Joe somehow managing to beg, borrow and steal a huge pile of tanks I knew this was going to be a good trip.



We based ourselves in Gramat, a small town conveniently located close to most of the caves we wanted to visit. Even more conveniently our accommodation was run by a French cave diver, Andre Grimal, who also happens to run the main compressor station in the area. I say compressor station, but this really does not do it justice. Andre's filling station is clearly a huge passion in his life and comes as something of a surprise in the middle of sleepy French countryside. He has several huge super fast compressors, probably more bank cylinders than all the Auckland dive shops combined, oxygen boosting facilities to 300bar and most importantly his pride and joy – a water bath for the tanks built into the floor, constantly chilled to 4 degrees and with an electric hoist system above for lowering and recovering heavy sets of doubles. I'm almost tempted to say 'over-kill', but you really have to see it to believe it. Quite what his wife makes of it all I'm not sure.

Our first cave dive of the week was at the Emergence du Ressel, possibly France's most well known cave-dive. The cave opening is hidden at the bottom of the Célé river, invisible to most casual visitors except in the winter when the amount of out-flowing water is so huge that there is a big bulge visible on the river surface. Usually in the summer the flow is much less, many times almost unnoticeable – which made it perfect for a shake down dive. To keep things simple we just took double 12s and a single stage bottle and did the short penetration, following the 'shallow route' or shunt as it is more properly known to the top of the shaft that drops to 48m.

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The cave was just as I remembered – a quite angular tunnel at the beginning, with big slabs scattered along the floor – and with great vis it was easy to see why the cave is such a constant favourite. The dive went well - no equipment problems and smooth communication. In fact everything was so smooth that we had gas to spare, so we decided to do another dive after lunch, this time exploring up into the large dry area of cave that is located between the first and second Ts on the 'deep route' or main tunnel as it is more correctly known. Again everything went like clockwork; it felt as though we had been diving together every week instead of not at all since our last trip in Nov 2008.



Entrance pool at Source de St. Sauveur

For our second day we decided to do something a bit more challenging and investigate a cave that neither of us had done before, Source de St. Sauveur. We got some good directions, a map of the cave, advice from Andre and headed off. Even with the map it was something of a mission to locate the cave and our poor car was groaning and wincing as it bumped along the very rutted track down to the cave – not surprising really given that we both had double 18L tanks, plus stage and deco bottles for the dive. However, once at the site we had it all to ourselves and the beautifully calm entrance pool (probably the best in the area) made up for the bouncy ride.

The dive it self was awesome, quite deep (74m), but again very comfortable. We explored all the way down the 45 degree slope until the cave flattened out and we enjoyed 5 mins in the deepest section before turning the dive and heading back to shallower passage. Something that was very obvious on this dive is the difference in line protocols between European caves and those in Florida and Mexico. The line in St Sauveur starts as a thick climbing rope and then changes into telephone cable – interesting!?

For the rest of the week we continued in the same fashion, mainly doing one big dive a day, usually a long shallow penetration out to 850 or 900m+. The two caves that were best for this were Source de Landenouse and Fontaine St Georges. Of these Landenouse had the best visibility, but also the more challenging entrance. Unlike the rest of the caves Landenouse does not have a surface pool. Instead there is a big cistern/water tank built by the farmer for holding water for his crops – with the cave entrance located at the bottom of the cistern. In order to start the dive you have to lower yourself gently down a metal ladder, which depending on the water level can be anything from a 1m climb to 6 or 7m. We had about a 4m climb to manage on this trip, which is still pretty difficult when you have to do it with double 12s and multiple stage and deco bottles.



The cistern at Source de Landenouse

The most surprising cave for me was another new one (although not new for Joe) called Font Del Truffe. Of all the entrance pools this was the least appealing and didn't suggest anything special might lay beyond. Indeed even the entrance seemed a little dubious, two tight pinches in quick succession, both negotiated in near zero vis due to the silt we generated when kitting up in the entrance pool.

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The entrance pool at Font Del Truffe

However, once inside the visibility was spectacular and the cave enormous fun. It is a real twist-turny rollercoaster of a tunnel, with many depth changes and multiple sumps. We were lucky enough that the water level was high enough to pass sump 1 without removing any gear and we also managed to swim the short distance to sump 2 before we were stopped. In fact the passage from sump 1 to 2, although short, is probably the most amusing section of cave – corkscrews and switch backs combining in a fairly tight passage to keep you constantly alert. For many people this more restricted space might seem like a bad dream but for us this was definitely fun.

Just like it is when cave diving, eventually our time ran out and we had to stop - it was time for Joe to return to work in the UK. Having negotiated multiple caves, multiple gas bottles, crazy French guidelines, interesting entrances and several punctures on the rutted cave tracks we assumed that getting to the airport would be simple – how wrong we were.....

With both of us being of the type that hates to be late we left our accommodation in Gramat with plenty of time to spare and arrived at Brive La Roche airport with 2 hours to go before the flight. We were greeted with what was clearly a deserted aerodrome and an untended runway that was hosting some kind of market. Unsure of what was going on we asked (in very broken French) about flights – to be greeted with lots of laughs. The airport was closed and had been for some time – didn't we know? There was more laughing when Joe mentioned the name of the airline and some talk about heading down the motorway to see the Gendarmerie. Had Joe somehow been caught up in an internet scam?



Joe before our dive into Fontaine St. Georges

We headed back down the motorway and found some signs to a new Brive airport – ok crisis over – only it wasn't. Something was going on and there were policemen everywhere and Route Barrée signs in the direction we wanted to go. However, there was nothing else we could do, so fighting our instinctive English reluctance to cause a fuss we ignored the road closed sign and headed straight on, only to meet our first French road block 100m later. The policeman shook his head - no way through here. Joe tried his limited French vocabulary and said he had a flight to catch, to which the Policeman looked astonished - but on producing the ticket he waved us through. For the next hour we negotiated more and more road blocks, went around numerous farmers fields and dirt tracks, tracing concentric circles ever closer to this mythical airport. At each road block we were greeted with the same – no you can't come through, followed by 'A flight, really? Ok' And as we got closer the number of Policeman at each roadblock grew, the small pistols on the belt turned into larger weapons and at one stage we even got a couple of motorcycle outriders – and we still had no idea what was going on.

Amazingly we finally cleared the last roadblock and made it to the airport – to see a runway full of military planes carefully arranged for something..... Somehow with just a few words of French and an e-ticket on an iPhone we had passed every roadblock and security checkpoint and got a ringside seat at the centre of the biggest senior air-force personnel gathering in France for many years. And almost unbelievably (although this was France) there really was a City-Jet plane waiting to take Joe home. In terms of an interesting ending to a trip it really was a case of truth being stranger than fiction.