

Kruber-Voronja 2008 – Caving Log

21 August

Sitting on Ryanair flight from Dublin to Kaunas on what for me is the first day of the attempted Kruber expedition. Attempted, because there is a high possibility we will be turned away at the Abkhazi border, given the current situation in the Caucasus.

It was quite difficult to get my visa – I had to get it from the Russian embassy in Dublin because I am an Irish citizen. On the advice of a tourist agency in Vilnius, I bought a business, multiple-entry invitation from them for 300 Lt. However, the embassy did not accept it because I was applying for a tourist visa.

So here are a few pieces of advice for visiting Abkhazia:

1. Get a **double-entry, tourist** invitation on line (cost about 100 Lt). Business visas are more expensive and you can get in trouble at the border because you aren't on a business trip.
2. Check the latest visa application instructions at your embassy and follow them exactly – they don't accept any deviations from them!

23 August

First hurdle past! Giedrius drove Gintas, Jurga, Aidas, Oneta (Jurga's non-caving friend) and me to Riga in the morning, where we left for Sochi on an Air Baltic flight. We avoided excess baggage charges. We planned to get across the border into Abkhazia as soon as possible after landing.

The others had some trouble at passport control after arriving in Sochi, because they had business visas instead of tourist visas – but eventually they got through. We all jumped on a minibus, which just before the road border (across the Psou river), turned down a dirt track to the right. I thought we were making for an unofficial crossing, but it turned out to be the official foot crossing.

A man with a wooden cart took our bags and guided us across for a small charge. There was a queue of people waiting at each of the 3 checkpoints, but we seemed to make our own queue, which for some reason took priority. Not much questions from the Russian official – just a couple of stamps; all through in about half an hour. Then across the footbridge to the Abkhazian checkpoint. This was a man sitting at a wooden table outside, with a list of 29 names (presumably foreigners who had registered to cross that day). He looked at passports and clearance letters, ticked your name, and then you were through. Our man wheeled our cart up to one of the 30 or 40 minibuses waiting on the far side, and we loaded up and started driving into the dark...

Eventually pulled up at the station in Tsandripsh – a now derelict but once grandiose train station beside the beach (Black Sea). We were met by Uri Kasyan (expedition leader) after 30 minutes, and he took us to the house where we would spend the first few days. It was owned by a Moscow caver. We shared its attic with 25 Ukrainians, Russians and an Israeli.

We went straight to a PECTOPAH and had trout & beer – labai skanu. That night, swimming and then bed. The night was disturbed for an hour or two by one of our group having some sort of mystery fit which involved screaming and sedatives – an exciting start to the expedition!

24 August

Tourist day – swimming in sea, eating, shopping. Took a trip to a canyon where we spent about 4 hours wading and swimming in shorts only – no wetsuit nonsense. Swimming in sea again before bed.

25 August

Trip to Suchumi to get Abkhazian visa. Called into many places, including the Abkhazian KGB headquarters, before reaching the correct place – where we were scolded for wearing shorts. Apart from that they were very friendly & gave us visas with no problems.

Suchumi is an amazing place – full of dilapidated grandeur with empty skeletons of buildings everywhere.

Back in Tsandripsh, after dinner and a few drinks with Spelaeion club members from Kaunas and Moscow, slept on beach.

26 August

Up early for loading the two military open-top vehicles that would take us on the 6½-hour drive up into the mountains. The Ukrainians had a transit bag full of beer which they used to get gradually pissed during the journey.

There was a 1-hour hike with bags from the end of the road up to the campsite (at 2250 metres). This had to be repeated twice. Pitched tents, ate dinner and slept.

27 August

Surface day for most, packing food bags (about 20), pitching canvas over kitchen and dining area, setting up generator, fixing dry bags, etc. Uri also looked at most people's SRT skills on a nearby cliff face. 3-4 Ukrainians dropped the first pitch (-60m) with some bags. The cave was already rigged.

28 August

Scene of the day – 4 girls sitting around campsite table chatting while making explosive charges for the men to use later ☺

Today was the first caving day – an “acclimatisation” trip to -235m. Aidas, Gintas and I were together, carrying one food bag each. Others laid telephone wire to -100m (to connect to existing wire below this); while others carried bags into the Non-Kujbyshevskaja Series.

29 August

Second acclimatisation, to -500m. This was a lot easier than the first day. Down in a couple of hours (waiting for some rerigging of the big pitch), quick tea brew and chocolate, and then back up.

30 August

Bolting trip to “Everst” aven at ca. -300m. Attempted bolting trip rather, because we took a wrong turn in the meanders and ended up at a giant aven in the Non-Kujbyshevskaja Series. Took a look up an already bolted aven and descended a pit to a streamway, but nothing matched the description we had been given by Uri. By this time, too late to start, so we headed back.

01 September

After a rest day, entered the cave at 12:00 with “Group B” – Aidas, Gintas, Vito and me. Two objectives: place loggers at two sumps (-1710 and -1800m), and bolt up an aven at -1350m.

On Day 1, we just descended to -700m camp (people already staying at the -1200m camp). This took 5 hours because we were carrying three bags each through the Sinusoida meander. Without bags it could be done in less than 3 hours. The campsite is at the bottom of a magnificent 71m pitch. Tent is on top of a big boulder with drops on each side. Tent itself was

a Petzl make – very good – no condensation and very warm with a Primus stove running. Food was pasta, cheese and ketchup (to become our staple diet in the days to come...)

02 September

Dropped to -1200m in 4 hours. This section of the cave is much wetter, with a lot of cascades. Water was quite low – and rigging goes to a lot of effort to avoid it (often too much in my opinion – some was quite awkward as a result). Again, camp 1215 is at the foot of a fantastic 71m pitch.

03 September

Down to Chamber of Soviet Spelaeologists (-1710m). We stopped to say hello to Elza (Russian) and Leo (Israeli) at camp 1410 (“Sandy Beach”), then bumped into the others of Group A who were rerigging part of the route down to -1710m. The way is quite easy. It ends with a very nice 34m waterfall pitch into a wide, shallow pool – quite like the Berger. There is a collapse chamber next to this, where we installed our level logger. The chamber was dry when we installed the device, but in wet weather the water wells up from here (the lowest point of the chamber). I climbed a rope giving access to a secondary, smaller chamber with no obvious continuation.

Back up to sleep at Sandy Beach, along with Group A. Total trip 10 hours.

Sandy Beach was even more comfortable than the previous campsite. It is a big mushroom tunnel covered in silver Christmas wrapping paper, which can sleep 15. Had music that night – Uri hooked up an MP3 player to the telephone set. Several lucky cavers also got a back massage from Elza.

04 September

The big trip to -1800m, to install the second logger. This was my first dive through a sump, so a bit nervous... Donned my Russian drysuit – which took quite a while – and headed off with Gintas, Aidas and Vito towards the sump. Vito through first, then Gintas, then Aidas – who kindly went through twice to retrieve the goggles from Gintas for me. The sump is about 1½ metres long and less than half a metre deep, so pretty easy. After a practice in the pool before the sump, I plunged in and was through in an instant – actually quite a relaxing experience for some reason.

After the siphon, the cave is very active. Camp “1640” is now derelict – just some plastic sheeting and ground mats. “Way to the Dream” starts after this. It is tight and unpleasant – including a crawl on a calcite floor through a body-sized passage. Not the worst I’ve been through, but pretty long and damp. At the end, the floor is bashed through to the head of a small pitch. The passage opens up after this into “classic” caving – suddenly plenty of formations (before this the cave has very few), meandering walking streamway, etc.

Further on, the “Big Junction” was our destination. It is hard to reconcile with the survey, so we made an estimate and headed down the steeply inclined tube on the right to reach a pleasant-looking sump with a dive line, somewhere about -1810m. Vito made a footloop out of the dive line and perched over the sump to install the level logger – quite a precarious position. ☺

On our way back, we sampled some flies that we found. They were present for at least 100m of passage before the Big Junction, mostly drowned in the pools. We managed to capture two living specimens, but unfortunately they perished on the return to the surface. We think they were brought unhatched into the cave by cavers: this section of the cave is too far underground to expect them to be washed from the surface.

The trek back to Sandy Beach was a long one – the round trip took about 12 hours. Placed an atmospheric pressure logger about 50m above the level logger and continued into “Way to the Dream”. Here, Vito (by name and nature) was faster than me – even with a bag! It was the

only time I saw him tired though – and on the far side I took the bag from -1640 most of the way back to the 1410 camp.

The sump was very cold on the return, and my drysuit had leaked slightly. Cooked dinner while Group A slept beside us in the tent.

05 September

Very leisurely start – well into the afternoon before Aidas, Gintas and I ventured to the aven at -1320m. Vito left for the surface to join another expedition in a nearby valley.

The aven was about 30 metres high, the first 12 metres having already been bolted with rope in situ. I went first with Aidas belaying. I spent an age placing 2 Spits and some natural anchor belays, and generally re-aquainting myself with the bolting gear (knee-hooks) underground.

Gintas next – placed a further 2 Spits. Total time 4 hours, and we left the rest for the next day. Slept at -1410m.

06 September

Up earlier this morning, and Aidas and I returned to the bolting site. Gintas followed 2½ hours later with Liena and Lorsche, and a very welcome Primus and tea/food. I went first and gained about 8 metres by a combination of 3 Spits, some natural anchors, and slings, skyhooks and my footloop. Aidas then placed 3 more Spits and using some more naturals reached the top, where he tied the rope off. I ascended and we explored 50 metres of metre-wide, 8-metre-high streamway to reach another aven.

This aven is about 20 metres high, and the first 10m of it are free-climbable. We left it for next year. On the way back, I installed two Spits at the 30m pitch head to give a dry freehang to the bottom. A great day had a bit of a damp end at the -1210m camp because the Primus wouldn't work properly. Went to bed after a couple of hours of trying unsuccessfully to fix it. The bolting result was worth getting wet for though!

07 September

Ascent to camp -700m took 7 hours, with Aidas, Gintas, Lorsche, Liena, me and 8 bags. Much more comfortable night, because we had radioed the group ahead and asked them to leave behind their stove at the camp. We sang some songs before bed – all very romantic ☺ There was some argument about when to leave for the surface – early next morning, or later in the evening in order to reach the surface for the following day's sunrise.

08 September

After sleeping on the decision, we slept longer... and got up at 16:00 for food. Left camp at 19:00. On the first pitch, my footloop broke (after 4-5 years of service, this was the first cave where it showed any signs of wear). I had a reserve, but further up, on the 110m pitch, this broke too and I slipped half a metre onto my Croll. I quickly clipped a cow's tail in and tied the two ex-footloops together – a temporary solution to get me out of the cave. My Croll started slipping on the rope at this stage also, and it was a bit unsettling because I was expecting the footloop to break again at any instant...

Stopped for a quick cup of "boiled sweet" tea before making the surface at 04:00 (9 hours). We had overestimated the journey time and were a bit early for sunrise. Our total time underground had been 7 days and 16 hours, and it was a great pleasure to find Jurga waiting on top with some fabulous courgette ("mushroom") soup. At the campsite there was an impressive view of distant lightning flashes from all directions.

09 September

Rest day to nurse my eyes after 7½ days of contact lenses and dust! Thunderstorm on surface.

10 September

More rain – sheltering under the dining awning as hailstones pelt the outside and the others poke the ceiling to empty pooled water. Spent day drinking tea and eating.

11 September

Took a couple of pre-made charges and practised some explosives on the surface with Aidas. Halfway through the exercise we realised we were exploding and ex-toilet...

We walked over towards the neighbouring (unexplored) valley, but were caught by mist and rain. Reached the top of the mountain ridge and checked out 2 cliff face caves (going nowhere) and Podarichnaya Cave (already blasted to -9m).

12 September

The rain cleared to give a sunny but cold morning for our last day on the mountain – enough to partly dry all the wet gear. Called into the Armenian summer farmhouse at the bottom of the valley, where we were given goats' soured milk, cheese and wine.

Our return to Tsanpridsh was quicker than the ascent. 7 people on board a 4x4, with 4 in the back on top of the bags and with legs stuck out the sides as we drove past sheer drops. Ukrainian and Lithuanian songs for the first part of the journey, helped along by the Abkhazian wine.

On the way down, we called into a couple of houses to buy bread, cheese and figs. Some 4 hours after leaving, we arrived in Tsandpridsh, where we stayed in a guesthouse owned by the driver. Relaxing evening with swimming and Abkhazian wine, food & music.

13 September

On our last day we got up for an early swim and a wander into the markets in town. Gintas persuaded the bus driver to call to our front door at two o'clock so that we could load up the bags.

The guard at the Abkhazian border crossing was friendly. After seeing my Irish passport he asked if we were at war with England. I assured him it was over and we had won. At the airport check-in we were way overweight – to the tune of 300 Euros – but Gintas's banter and the promise of a couple of bottles of Riga balsam seemed to do the trick and we got through without excess baggage charges.

Unfortunately I made the mistake of showing my Abkhazian visa at the Russian border, and it was confiscated (even though the Russians had in the previous few days signed a treaty recognising the independence of the Abkhazian state). So if you are going that way in future, don't show them the visa to them – it's a very pretty (though illegal) document and a great souvenir of a doubtless memorable trip!