

UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL SPELAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY EXPEDITION TO SLOVENIA, 1994

by

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ABSTRACT

An account is given of the preliminary explorations made in August 1994 in an area near the summit of Triglav mountain, Slovenia. No significant finds were made, however many openings were investigated and the exploration of one cave has not yet been concluded.

INTRODUCTION

The areas of exploration were the plateaux and upper slopes of the Slovenia's tallest mountain. Mount Triglav, standing at 2863.6 m above sea level, is the highest peak in the Julian Alps range of north west Slovenia. The country's capital, Ljubljana, lies approximately 60 km to the south east. Many peaks in this mountain system are over 2000 m high and the valley floors generally lie at 500-700 m above sea level. These areas were recommended by Dr. France Šušteršič who assisted the Society with the 1972/73 expeditions to the neighbouring plateau of Kriški Podi. France was unable to join the expedition as originally planned, but he was able to meet the expedition on arrival and provide general assistance and advice, including detailed maps of the area.

Tourist maps show much of the intended area as being under permanent snow cover. However in recent years the snow cover has been receding and by August 1994 only a few scattered snow plugs remained in some hollows. This meant that, in the caving sense at least, this was truly virgin karst.

The region is protected by the laws of the Triglav national park and camping is prohibited in unregistered areas. The original choice of accommodation was an abandoned Italian army barracks called Vojašnica Morbegna. Unfortunately during the winter of 1993/94 the roof had collapsed and rendered the building uninhabitable. As a result, the alpine hut Tržaška Koča Na Doliču was used as base camp. Whilst more comfortable, this was also more expensive than anticipated. The hut was situated about 2 km from and several hundred metres below the furthest plateau to be explored, although at a height of 2152 m a.s.l. "base" was still a stiff climb from the car park, 1500 m below in the valley. In the absence of modern conveniences, such as ski lifts and donkeys, most expedition members spent a considerable time during the expedition transporting all gear – caving, food, fuel and personal – up to Doliču. It was therefore a cause of some amazement when it was discovered that certain members had further burdened themselves with kites, late essay materials and half the 1994 output of a well known confectionery factory probably located in Dudley.

DESCRIPTION OF AREA

The Julian Alps belong to the thrust zone south of the Periadriatic Lineament; the boundary between the Adriatic subplate and the European plate. The summit region of Triglav itself is of overthrust reef limestone on bedded Dachstein limestone, both of upper Triassic age. The overthrusting is mainly in a south, south west direction.

Drainage from the summit is subterranean. In areas of Triglavski Podi Zaplanja the drainage could be heard both above and below ground but all attempts to contact these hidden waterways were foiled by infuriatingly small holes or choked shafts.

The first resurgence to the south of the summit appears at the head of a steep, narrow valley, Komar, at 1620 m. This tumbles down the hillside as a waterfall before sinking again then reappearing further down the valley and flowing on to the river Trenta (known locally as the Log).

The tree level is situated at approximately 1000 m a.s.l. Below this level the main trees are beech and conifers and above there are patches of dwarf pine (*Pinus mugo*) and rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*). The alpine flowers which were seen included *Gentia lutea*, *Delpinium elatum* and *Campanula alpina*. At higher levels vegetation was scarce, with the landscape mainly composed of rock, cliff faces and scree slopes. When the clouds came up the valley, settled on Doliču and emptied, a not uncommon scenario, a distinct air of desolation could be felt. In spite of the apparent lack of available nutritious vegetation several species of animal were noted in the area. Ibex were seen daily, marmots were rumoured to be seen along the path to the hut and an extremely large hare was disturbed catching the evening sun at Zaplanja. In addition the mountain choughs often gave air displays during those moments when the cloud lifted.

Main areas investigated

1. **Pod Planjo.** This is the plateau south west of the summit massif at about 2400 m a.s.l. This was an area of virgin karst dotted with snow plugs. The surface rock was shattered and crumbled without undue provocation. Care was needed when on ladders to avoid falling rocks. The majority of the openings were vertical surface shafts that either choked with rubble or ended in an impenetrable snow plug.

On the westerly edge of this plateau there is a small hanging valley. This area yielded a horizontal entrance into a tight, draughting, phreatic tube. Unfortunately this became impassable after an uncomfortable 70 m crawl.

2. **Doliču to Pod Planjo.** The slope on the way to the plateau from the Doliču hut yielded many entrances. This area was mainly cliff and scree but the rock was much less ice-shattered than that of the plateau. The majority of the caves explored here were tight, wet rifts which narrowed after a short distance and became impassable.

3. **Triglavski Podi Zaplanja.** This plateau lies to the west of the summit of Mount Triglav. An outcrop of rock, Glava v Zaplanji, separates Zaplanja from Pod Planjo. On top of this outcrop lie the remains of the Italian army barracks, Vojašnica Morbegna.

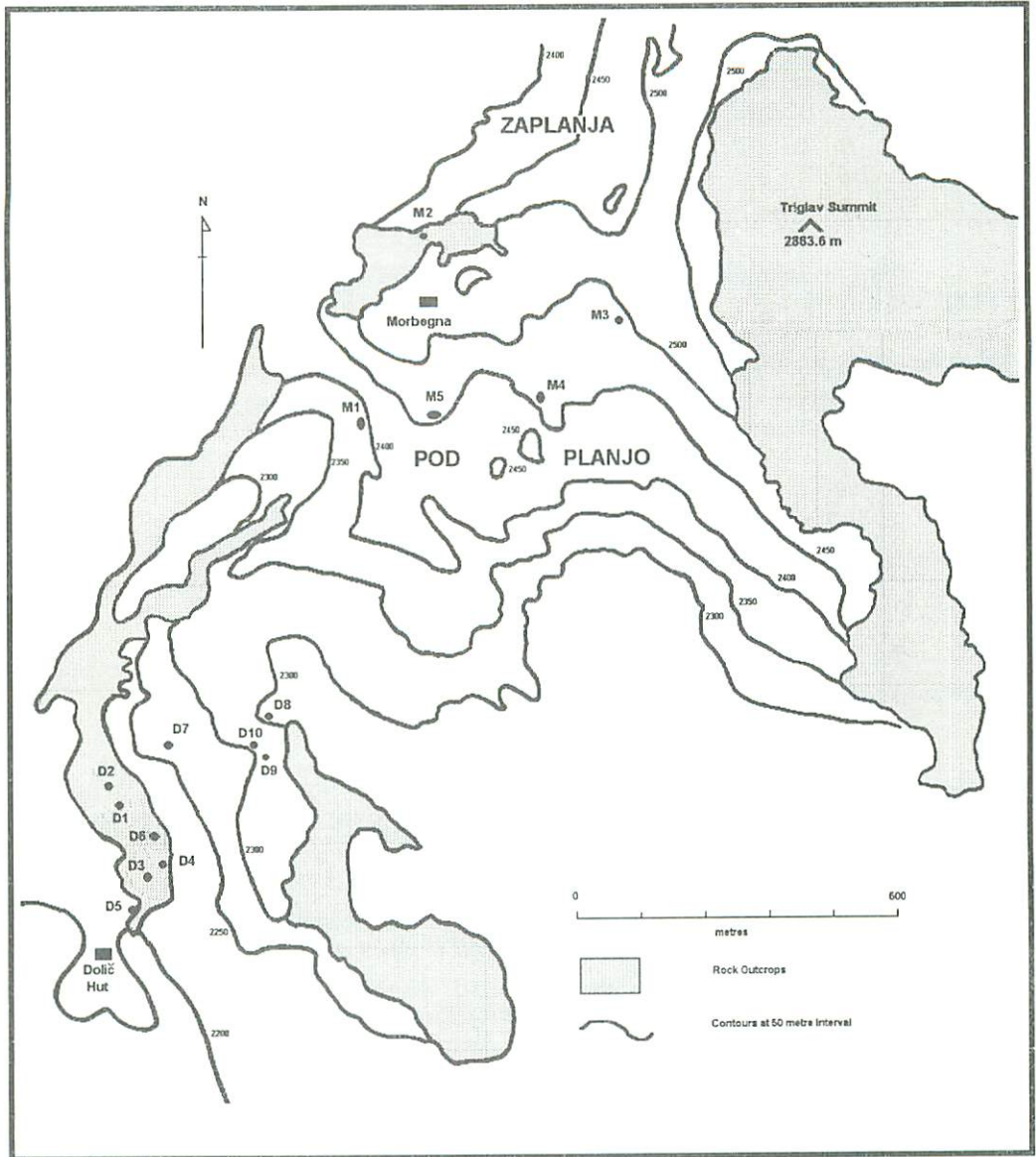


Figure 1. Area Map

In this area water could be heard running underground following a night of heavy rainfall, but again the surface rock was shattered and filled all shafts. However, this was also the area where a cave was found very close to the end of the expedition which has yet to be fully explored.

France had mentioned a cave he had noted on a previous climb to the summit of Triglav and one day was spent searching for it but without success, and it was decided that without his guidance time was being wasted and attention was then concentrated on the above three areas.

DESCRIPTIONS OF CAVES EXPLORED

The caves around the Doliču hut and on the slope up to Pod Planjo were numbered in order of discovery and denoted by the letter D (standing roughly for the area around Doliču). Those caves on the top two plateaux are preceded by the letter M (as both plateaux were overlooked by the ruined Morbegna barracks). Only those caves into which a person could actually insert themselves for some distance are noted. Many other small shafts and holes were investigated. The positions of all caves described are shown in Figure 1.

D1. 13° 49' 28"E. 46° 22' 4"N. Altitude 2180 m.

An enlarged fracture pit containing a snow plug. A draughting tube at the back of the plug was followed for three metres before it turned a corner and narrowed.

D2. 13° 49' 27"E. 46° 22' 05"N. Altitude 2170 m.

This passed underneath an overhang of rock and came to the base of a rift, estimated at 15 m in height which was deemed to be unclimbable.

D3. 13° 49' 30"E. 46° 22' 00"N. Altitude 2170 m.

A narrow descending entrance rift was followed for 10 m then horizontally for another 15 m until a hanging boulder choke was encountered. Further progress was not attempted.

D4. 13° 49' 32"E. 46° 22' 00"N. Altitude 2190 m.

A narrow rift entrance was descended for 8 m and then followed for approximately 25 m to the top of a torturous pitch of about 10 m at the foot of which water, entering from various small inlets, disappeared down an impenetrable hole. A 2 m climb to the left led down to a small circular aven. The main rift was followed above a stream to a further pitch of 20 m, leading to another pitch of 15 m, after which the streamway disappeared and the rift became impassable.

D5. 13° 21' 57"E. 46° 21' 57"N. Altitude 2200 m.

A steep ascending rift can be followed for 6 m to a sharp dogleg bend which was too tight to pass. Beyond the bend the rift could be seen to continue for at least another 3 m.

D6. 13° 49' 31"E. 46° 22' 02"N. Altitude 2200 m.

A large entrance leads to a 5 m pitch. About halfway down the pitch a large wet passage could be seen, but not reached, through a tight tube.

D7. $13^{\circ} 49' 32''\text{E}$. $46^{\circ} 22' 08''\text{N}$. Altitude 2270 m.

A small entrance led into a 20 m pitch with two blind chambers near the base. A second pitch of 10 m dropped onto a rock floor from which a small chamber could be reached through a squeeze. No way on could be found.

D8. $13^{\circ} 49' 40''\text{E}$. $46^{\circ} 22' 10''\text{N}$. Altitude 2300 m.

A scree slope led to a very loose rift. 23 m of ladder were descended until an impassable snow plug was reached.

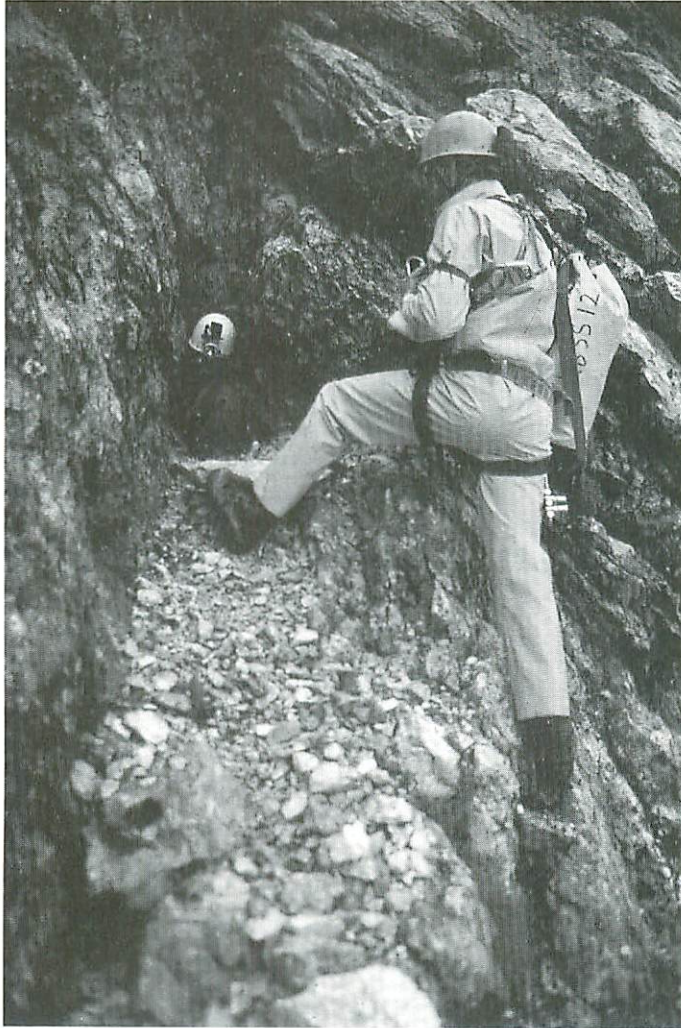


Figure 2. D4: a typical tight rift entrance near the Doliču Hut.

D9. 13° 49' 40"E. 46° 22' 06"N. Altitude 2330 m.

A perfectly formed tubular pitch could be descended for approximately 35 m. There was no way on from its base.

D10. 13° 49' 39"E. 46° 22' 08"N. Altitude 2305 m.

A large slit, 0.5 m wide and 3 m long, led to a roomy pitch. After 20 m a rock bridge was reached which provided a good rebelay point for a further descent beside a snow plug to a total depth of approximately 60-70 m. No further progress was possible as the snow then blocked the shaft.

M1. 13° 49' 49" E. 46° 22' 30" N. Altitude 2440 m.

A 1m drop led into a horizontal phreatic tube twisting to the east, into the hill. A torturous crawl led through two small chambers each about 2 m x 2 m x 0.5 m and containing flakes of terra rosa. After 50 m, a 90° bend had to be enlarged slightly with a bolting hammer to allow further progress, however the passage went around another 90° bend and became impassable. A draught could still be felt.

M2. 13° 49' 54"E. 46° 22' 42"N. Altitude 2430 m.

A large, loose pot was descended for 10 m into a chamber 12 m x 15m. A further descent of 8 m was made at the south end through rocks. A small draughting phreatic tube was found but it was blocked with boulders and deemed impassable. However later in the expedition, this was rediscovered and dug out to enter a passage 2 m high and 5 m wide, running beneath a bedding plane. An arch at the end led into a small chamber both 1.5 m wide and high with a hole in the floor which led to a pitch. This pitch and other holes in the passage floor were not explored further, although several holes seemed to lead into a rift.

M3. 13° 50' 11"E. 46° 22' 37"N. Altitude 2495 m.

A drop was found beneath a rock arch beside a snow field. This became choked after 4 m.

M4. 13° 50' 04"E. 46° 22' 32"N. Altitude 2455 m.

A snow plug in a depression 3 m deep and 5 m across had been hollowed out to form a snow cave. At one side of this a pitch could be descended for 15 m but was choked at its foot.

M5. 13° 49' 55"E. 46° 22' 30"N. Altitude 2450 m.

A round, 0.5 m diameter, pitch in unusually unshattered rock ended after 15 m.

DISCUSSION

The fifteen caves detailed above comprise the main sites noted by the expedition. Many other holes, slits and shafts were investigated but all very quickly became either choked or impassable. Much of the rock is severely shattered, mainly as a result of its proximity to the overthrust and additionally due to the action of frost and ice.

Glava v Zaplanji, the outcrop upon which the ruined building, Morbegna, is situated, seems the most likely area to yield access into Triglav's netherworld. Two caves: M1, draughting strongly but completely impassable after 70 m, and M2, not yet completely explored, are to be found heading into this mass of rock. Unfortunately due to several problems: lack of sufficient funds for a longer stay, lack of water after several days without rain, the more experienced expedition cavers having to leave for other commitments and a shortage of fuel, camp had to be broken after only nine days in the field. A return has been suggested, but this would require the logistical problems, especially that of accommodation, to be addressed very carefully.

EXPEDITION MEMBERS

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James Sugg

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