

Fri 1 April

Met at Uncle Phil & Auntie Sue's. Collected them and their kit (excluding rope – which went with Gavin, Ralph and Daz to Graham's for inclusion in their load). Met the rest of the team at Graham's and went on to the ferry at Dover. We caught a ferry an hour earlier than that booked and ended up in Dunkirk for a slightly longer than expected drive to Ruoms.

Sat 2 April

Took turns at driving through France, mainly on motorways to Valance, then on minor roads to Ruoms. Found the town square just after midday and the house an hour or so later. We could not take possession for another hour. Graham was a couple of hours behind us. We discovered that they support the siesta idea, so the town was shut between about 12:30 and 15:00.

We took over of the house at 14:00 with the owner giving us a guided tour (in French) as she did not speak a word of English, so the hand over was interesting. We think we agreed we were leaving at 8:00 to following Saturday and would like her to appear early for the had back. She presented us with "Cadeau" consisting of Meil (Honey), Marrons (Sweet spread with chestnuts), Pasta sauce and some pink wine.

It is an interesting property on three levels with sufficient beds in an insufficient number of rooms. It was organised as a couple of family rooms plus a pair of bunks. Dave and Ros took the family room on the ground floor with Gavin in the lounge just outside. Ralph took the main lounge. Phil & Sue took the top floor family room, with Graham & Daz in the bunk room. Graham arrived and we went to find a supermarket. We had spotted a Londis on the way into town, but that proved to be shut (permanently we think). We found another one on the other side of town (Super U) which sold an eclectic mix of things from Briggs & Stratton lawn mowers to food. Cheese was very expensive but Sue found some fresh milk much to our surprise. Bought sufficient food for a couple of days and some general bits and pieces (including toilet rolls) for the week.

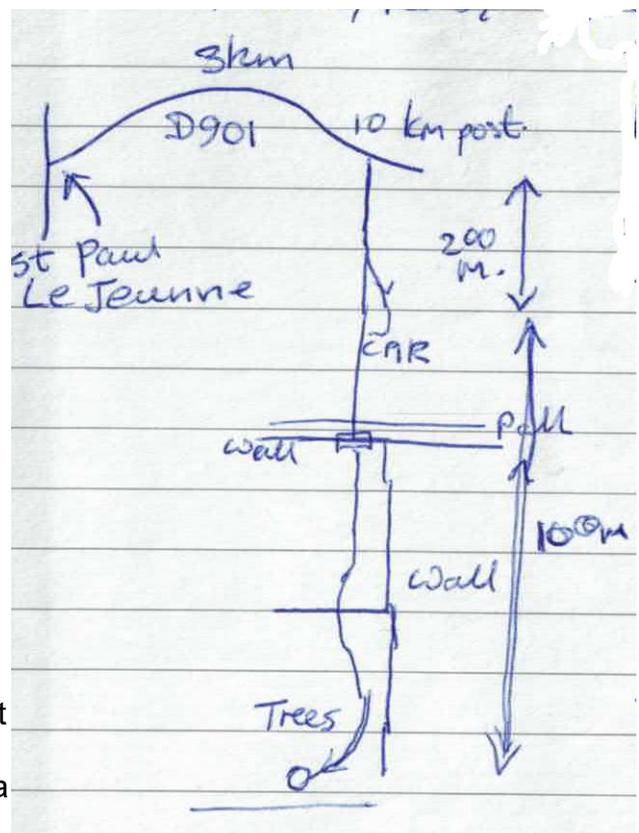


Sun 3 April

Phil, Graham, Ralph & Gav – failed to find Grotte des Chataigniers. They spent a lot of time searching the woodland behind the cafe/outdoor education place, but were unable to find the cave.

Dave, Ros, Sue & Daz – Started the day with a visit to Event de Peyreyjal. Drove straight to the area in which the cave was supposed to be and parked as directed. We then had a short wait for the rain to lessen so that we could look for the cave. Again the directions worked and we found the cave with a minimum of faff.

We returned to the car to get changed and collect the rope, and were soon back at the cave. The initial drop was into a small chamber (using a large rock as the main belay with a spit as a

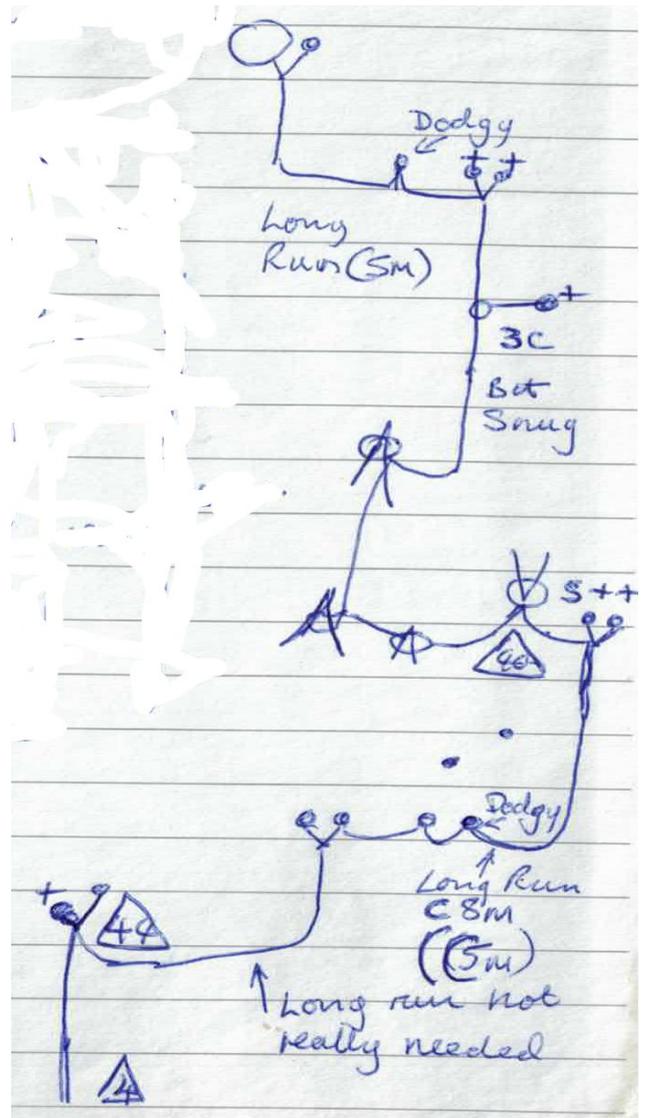




There was a 3 carabina long deviation part way down the pitch (with another new spit) which we initially missed but Darrel rigged as it minimised a rub point. The pitch became a little snug part way down, but soon opened out to allow a traverse to a natural belay on open passage. It dropped down to another natural and then through a slot to a third natural and a sling in the roof at the start of an interesting slope. At the bottom of the slope was the next pitch, with the Y hang bolt (both shiny & new) in the roof and quite awkward to rig. This was descended direct to the floor. Other spits were spotted on the way down, but were not used. On reaching the floor there was a 8m or so traverse along the rift to the spits in the left wall, the first of which was a bit dodgy, the rest were fine. (There may have

backup).

There was then a short crawl to the head of the second pitch where we had a dodgy traverse spit (the thread on this spit gave up on our return), followed by two new Y hang spits.



been another Y hang after that shown and before the final Y hang into the river passage.) The run out to the final drop was not necessary, but the rope on the pitch was helpful.





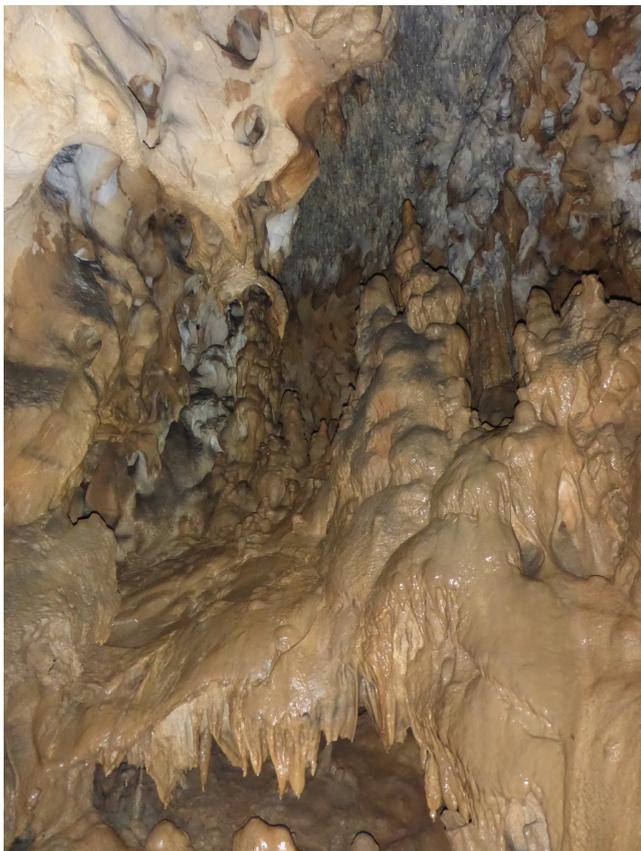
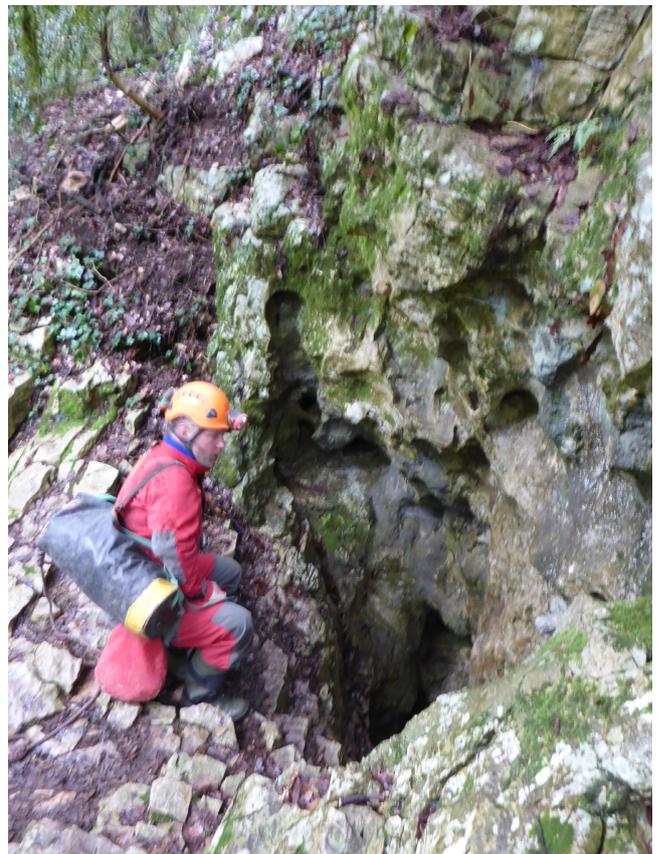
We initially went down stream to the sump (not far) and then tried up stream an over some formations to find extensive areas of well decorated passage and some classic phreatic tubes.

When we got out of the cave we drove around looking for Grotte de la Barbette, but were unable to find a bridge on the road where the description indicated there should be one.

When we had driven much further we found a bridge but the rest of the description did not really match.

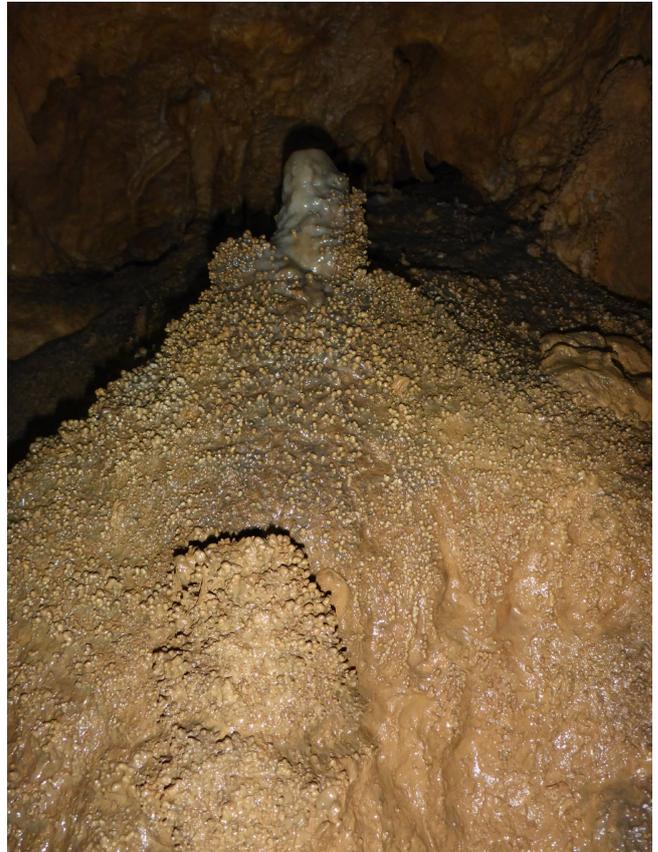
Mon 4 April

Following Philip's failure to find Grotte des Chataigniers the previous day, we all set out for a trip in that cave. We went straight to the cafe/outdoor education place which was roughly where the description said it should be and spent an hour or so searching the hillside.



Someone remembered the ground in front of the cave being more open, so we wandered a bit up the road and eventually found the remains of a wooden cafe. The description to get to the cave was followed and the cave was found. Darrel decided that he would not join the rest of us on the trip and went for a walk, while we changed and headed back to the cave. Once inside we spent a long time looking for the way on, including Dave getting very close

to the awkward climb down, but not thinking that it was possible. Eventually we sent Gavin up into the roof to a pull-through Y hang you could see from just inside the entrance. This linked straight back into the second chamber. The way on was up a calcite slope from the second chamber, right at the top and down an unlikely looking hole (6m tat useful). The route finding from here on was much easier and the up-pitches were rigged, though we did parallel rig them as the in-situ rope was very slimy. The cave was quite sporting and very muddy in places, so most of the formations were discoloured. A good trip was had by all, though



we did not get as far as Phil's team had 11 years ago.

On the way back to the house we attempted to find the area in which Event du Foussoubie was. This seemed to be near a camp site on

the opposite side of the river to Vallon Pont du Arc.

We had good views over the Ardeche gorge on the way back.

Tue 5 April

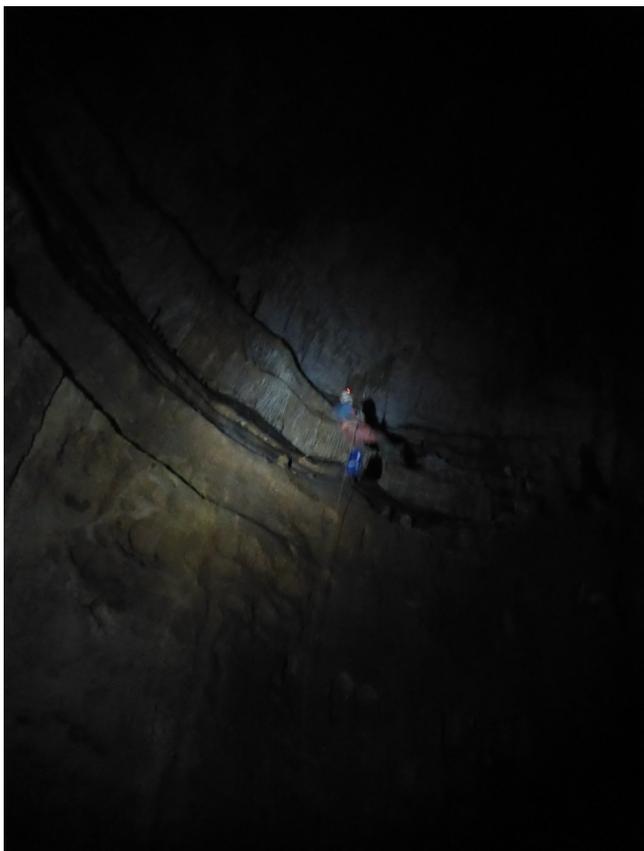
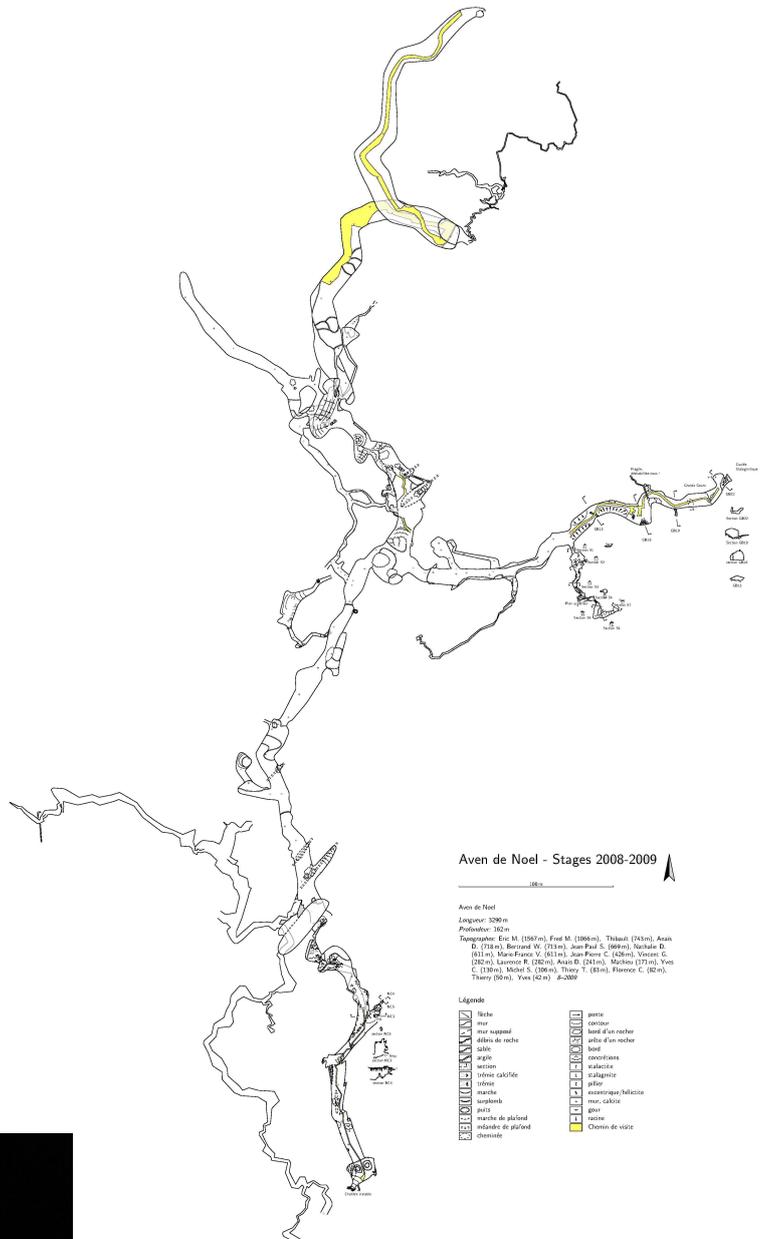
Philip's now regular crew (Graham, Ralph & Gavin) decided to visit Event de Peyreyjal as they had a map and accurate verbal directions to follow (and a kind of topo). They got to the bottom of the penultimate pitch to find water, it had rain for most of the preceding night and nearly all of that day. They would have got very wet getting to the last pitch, with no hope of descending!

In spite of the inclement weather Dave, Ros, Sue & Daz went for a walk through the camp site (Les Blanchés) to find Event Superior de Foussoubie. It was decided to look for the cave and having found it return to the car to change and collect the rope. Having got drenched tramping up the hillside we found some ropes that led down the cliff (later investigation indicated that this was probably the correct cave). We continued up the hill looking at the cliff when ever the scrub would permit but did not find anything more promising. Thoroughly drenched, we returned to the car for lunch and decided to abandon the effort. Sue had had enough of getting wet looking for caves and went back to the house. Dave, Ros & Daz went for another attempt to find Grotte de la Barquette, this time going further along the road, looking at a pikey encampment and walking over a hill (the weather had improved and while not hot, it had stopped raining). It was decided that the road had changed since the directions were written and that there was no hope of finding the cave by following them.

Wed 6 April

Dave persuaded Ros, Phil & Sue to have a go at a cave we did on our last visit (Aven du Despeyresse). This is located on the top of the north side of the Ardeche gorge. It can be done

to meet the person who was going to show us where the cave is situated. We met him in the town of Bidon, a quiet little town with, as far as we could tell, a single cafe and not a lot else other than vineyards. The chap lead us to the parking area for the cave (about 5 miles away) and then led us to the cave (about 100m) which was gated with a combination lock. Phil and Sue had already decided that they were not going to do the cave as they felt they were not fit enough for the long prussic out and Ros had also decided that she was not fit enough and would only go as far as the head of the main pitch. So the three of us kitted up and, with three bags of rope, headed over to the cave. Dave descended first, the rigging was on in-situ stainless steel staples which are much easier to find than spits! Gavin and Ros followed with a bag each. After the initial descent there was a short traverse and then the main pitch. With the first bag empty, they were re-distributed and Ros headed out. The rigging for the main pitch was again quite easy to find, though there

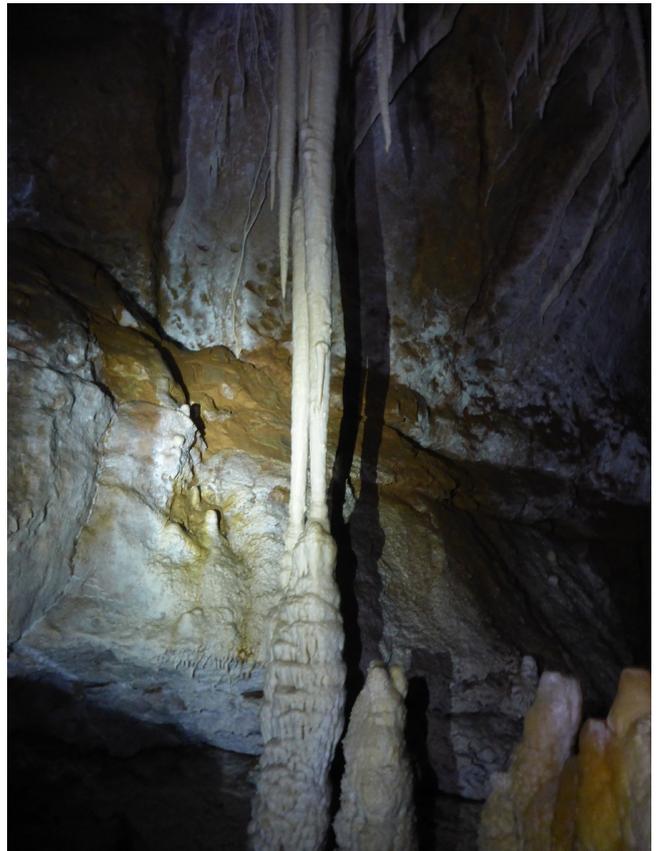


was a lot of stretch in the rope at each rebelay (getting worse as we descended and they become more spaced out). The topo recommended the use of an “étrier” at each rebelay (this is a short ladder used as a way of getting your weight off the rope to allow a changeover at the rebelay). Both of us found that the rope, initially appearing to be plenty long enough disappeared when you took your weight off of it and, when you did manage to get your knee/foot into the loop, the rope stretched so much as not to take your weight off your cowtails. Dave resorted to the use of his prussic foot loop to get weight off of the rope.

Having got to the bottom, looking up, Dave could only just make out Gavin at the final rebelay, even with extra light from the bike light that he had brought with him. We had been



told that there were some in-situ aid ropes on the way through the cave and that the SRT kit would be necessary to complete the trip, so we kept SRT kits on and headed off towards White Passage. The cave was fairly airless (this is normal apparently) and any fast movement soon resulted in puffing and panting, so it was going to be a relatively slow trip. We had no trouble





finding White Passage and it was spacious and well decorated until it eventually closed down with a couple of grovels (one of which broke the bike light). The route through the decorated sections was well marked.



Returning to the main passage we headed towards the fossilised bat. At a junction we found a water container (we had been told about) filling with drips from above, we both had a good drink before continuing. We then found some pre-rigged SRT pitches and traverses and some huge dry gower pools, some of which were as deep as Gavin is tall and

requiring a run and jump to climb out of the downstream side. We followed another taped area to an ascending pitch and then to end of the cave (again well decorated). From the bottom of the pitch a smaller passage led to some digs and the calcited bat. We passed the bat three times before finding it (not far into the smaller passages), we had also done some unnecessary grim crawls and SRT pitches down to what was clearly a dig. Very hot we removed oversuits and headed back to the entrance pitch (stopping for another drink and getting lost once). Still overly warm we ascended the pitch without oversuits, the section up to the first rebelay was hardest,





above that there seemed to be a higher proportion of oxygen in the air. Dave took the oversuits in a small bag up the pitch and Gavin de-rigged leaving the carabinas in the rope and intending to haul the big bag from the top of the main pitch. So the first thing that happened was that the bag got caught, as we were now overdue, Dave headed out to say we were okay and get Phil (in Ros' SRT kit & helmet) to come and help haul. Having set up the hauling system, the bag relented and we were back



out of the cave quite quickly.

A good trip, but quite airless at the bottom and a long prussic out.

The remainder of the group (Graham, Ralph & Daz) had gone to look for Grotte de Mont Blanc, another cave that we had done in 2005. In spite of searching for several hours they were unable to find it.

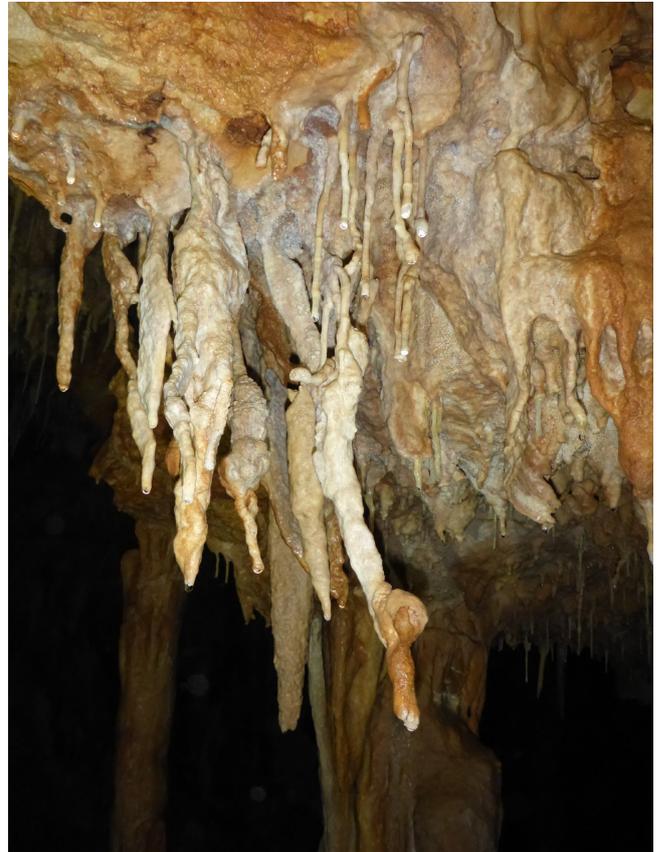
Fri 8 April

Dave, Ros & Daz set off for a final attempt to find Grotte de la Barquette. This time armed with a GPS and some dodgy French coordinates, we parked as near as possible to where the description said and set out for a walk. After walking for about an hour on forestry tracks we passed a cave, named in a tree as Grotte

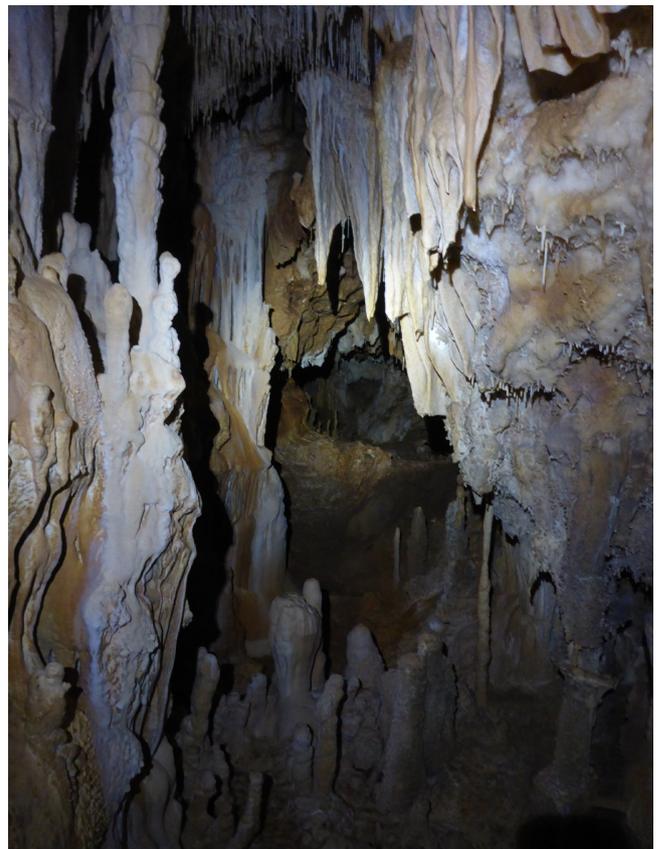


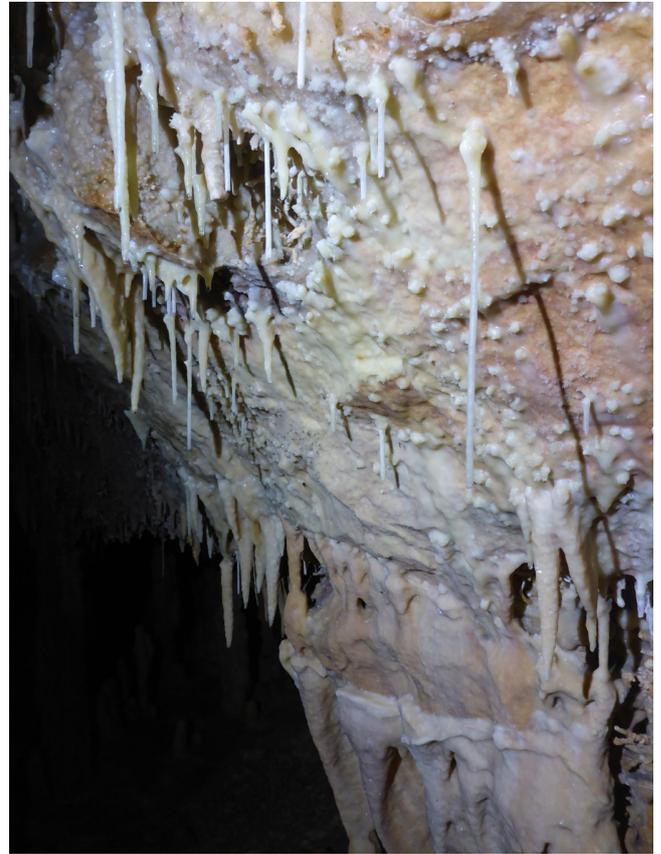
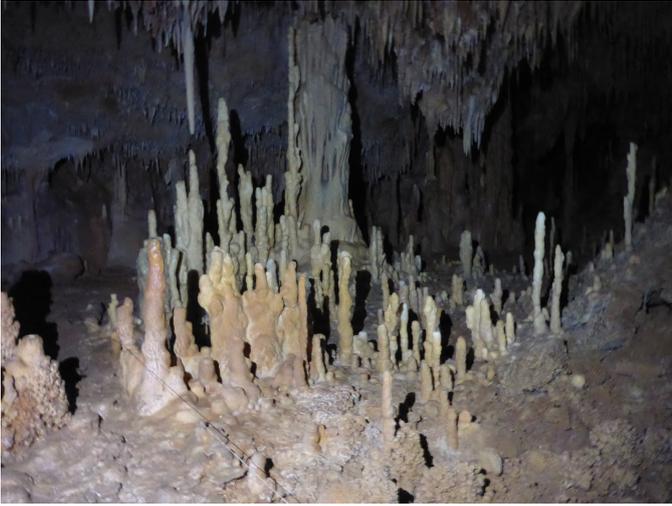
Estevan. This had a snug looking entrance pitch with a short drop to another pitch. As this was not the cave for which we were looking, we continued down the path closing in on the coordinates. These eventually led us to a plateau area with no sign of limestone let alone a cave. Searching the area we eventually found a limestone outcrop but still no cave. Dave then wandered back up the track we had initially descended for 90m (as stated in the directions to the cave) and turned right for another 20m and there it was. Five minutes





later, back at the road and a further ten minutes to get back to the car. We brought the car to the large layby (five minutes from the cave) and changed before heading up the track to the cave. This was another well decorated cave but with





much easier access (if you ignore the directions), the result of which was that a large proportion of the formations had been deliberately damaged.

We spent about two hours in the cave, never far from the entrance, looking for the way into the remainder of the cave. Finding several apparent leads which soon narrowed down to become impassable. We decided to go and have a quick look at Grotte Estevan, it being only a couple of minutes further up the track.

Abseiling in was only possible for Dave by extending the stop on a cowstail so that it did not have to pass through the entrance at the same time as his body. The second pitch had



a couple of spits next to a pair of excellent naturals. The naturals rigged we descended the 3m or so into the cave. This was again well decorated and this time a tape path had been marked to try to reduce the damage. Ros joined Dave in the cave but Darrel decided that the entrance was a little snug for him. With the marked path, route finding was much easier, and it was not long before we found a sign indicating the connection to Grotte de la Barbette. The passage was far too small to allow either of us any chance of a through trip. Having thoroughly investigated the cave Dave struggled back out the entrance, which was more of a climb than a prussic as the hole was quite small.



Out of the cave Dave decided that we needed to go and look for another cave (with no intention of doing it this time). So we changed and headed for the small village of Tharoux. The directions said to park outside the graveyard and walk through the village and up the hill to the cave. This time the directions worked perfectly and led us straight to the wrong cave, with the correct cave just a little further up the hill. Having found the cave, we headed back for the car and on to our house in Ruoms to pack for the return home. Phil, Sue, Graham, Ralph & Gavin had decided to have a tourist day including looking at a show cave (Grotte de Chauvet) near Vallon Pont d'Arc and watching a rescue practice near the arch.

Sat 9 April

The plan was to set off early for the ferry. So Graham's car load left at about 7:00 and Dave, Ros, Phil & Sue waited for the woman to return the key. She eventually turned up at about 8:00 after being phoned (she had forgotten about our early departure). Inspection complete we got off about 8:30, but still got to the ferry terminal early enough to catch the ferry before the one on which we were booked. We got home early on Sunday morning.