

Course Report: GUE Cave 1 Intern, July 2010

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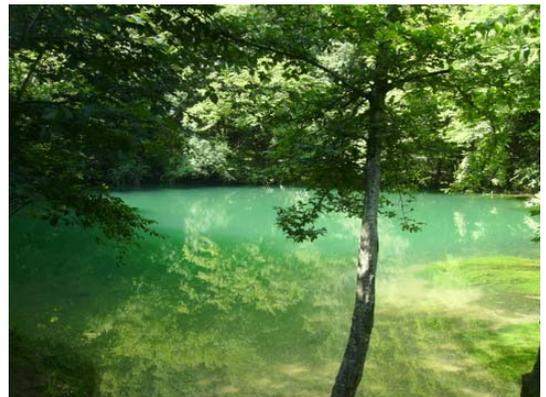


“You are either one of us and you understand or you’re not and you don’t.” I can’t remember when or where I first heard this quip, but it is now one of my standard replies to the obvious question asked of most cave divers, ‘So what do you see down there?’ In truth it’s not very helpful, as it neither answers the question nor soothes my soul, but then trying to give a 5 second sound-bite which accurately describes the world within a world is equally difficult. The unfortunate reality is that without actually doing a cave dive it is very hard to understand our motivations.

Photos and video help of course and over time I have amassed some amazing pictures and video for the talks I give, but it’s not enough. It is immensely difficult to obtain good photographs and video in the cave environment, and this coupled with the cynicism and doubt which comes from easy access to photo-manipulation software means that all too often I’m left feeling that my audience still doesn’t get it. And so we are back to the beginning, if you really want to understand cave diving you have to do it.

Of course wanting to go cave diving and actually going cave diving are not the same thing – or at least that is the message I try to give during my talks. Cave diving for the untrained is extremely hazardous, statistically on a par with base jumping, and when I say untrained I don’t mean non-divers. A depressingly large percentage of cave fatalities are among open water instructors who seem to believe that a shiny new badge makes them invincible. Which of course raises the next obvious question, ‘Does anyone in NZ offer cave diving training?’ For the last 3 years my answer has always been ‘no’ – but that is going to change. As of July this year I have started interning to become a GUE cave instructor.

I began by contacting my original cave instructor Chris Le Maillot, a Frenchman based in Mexico. As well as introducing me to cave diving, Chris is a GUE training council member and also the person who first suggested I become a GUE instructor. I asked him what I needed to do to be able to intern on one of his classes – half expecting him to say ‘do 500 more cave dives’, but apart from a couple of admin bits with HQ he was happy for me to join a class as soon as I was able. Knowing that he was going to be teaching in France during July and already having a trip to the UK booked for late June I immediately signed up for the first free class.



The class I joined as an intern was based in Carjarc, which is in the Dordogne area of France. The students were Bert from the Netherlands, Dusan from Bosnia and James from NZ. With Chris flying in from Mexico it made for a very international mix. The class was scheduled for 6 days, Sunday to Friday, and we were all warned that the days would be long. That was an understatement, however as James has already written a great article about the structure and content of the course and how to survive it, I don’t intend on repeating the same information. Instead I want to highlight the key issues are far as interning is concerned.

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The first issue for all diving classes is preparation, but this is especially true of GUE classes. As anyone who has done a GUE class can attest the intensity and focus demanded is immense, the days are long and the skills and knowledge required to pass are not easily obtained. As this was my first intern I knew I would only be observing the class, but even so preparation was vital for me as well. I decided that a weeks cave diving before the class was necessary, just to make sure all my kit was working, my weighting was right, I knew where the caves were, I was over my jet-lag, I was used to driving on the right hand side of the road, um, ah..... OK, so my excuses didn't really wash with Mel either. But come on – France in the middle of summer, lots of caves – I couldn't really only do the class could I?

So what was it like?

Reviewing the copious pages of notes I wrote during the 6 days it's clear the first thing I was impressed with was the lectures. There is a substantial amount of material to cover across a lot of areas, ranging from history and geology to techniques and accident analysis. The depth of knowledge required is huge and yet Chris made all the lectures appear effortless. Clearly this is one big area for me to work on.



The next major element of the course is dry runs and again there is a lot to cover. Laying lines, tying into a main line, following a line blind, following a line whilst out-of-gas and blind at the same time, searching for a lost line, searching for a lost buddy, valve failures and so it goes on. As a GUEF instructor I fully appreciate the immense value and importance of good dry runs, but they are even more vital in a cave environment. On a GUEF course it is always possible to return to the surface to clarify points if necessary, but you can't do this in a cave without wasting huge amounts of time. Everyone needs to know exactly what they are expected to do before they get into the water!



Which brings me onto the in-water skills – the most important and challenging part of the course – but also the most fun. As an intern I have to make sure I don't interfere with the students learning process and where possible I should be helping out. I also need to be close to Chris so that I can see what he's doing and so that he doesn't have to be concerned about my safety in the cave. It's hard enough in the open water trying to maintain your position relative to the students whilst drills are underway, but now trying to do it relative to the students and Chris, and doing it in the more restricted cave environment, in the dark, without smashing into the walls or ceiling – it's hard. Having had a week of diving before the course I was more familiar with the caves, but in hindsight a month of diving would probably have been better.

And just in case you are in any doubt, when I say 'in the dark' I mean it. Although all the students are using lights (until Chris gives them failures...) Chris doesn't use a light, although he always has them if necessary. The reason is that he wants the students to get used to communicating with each other using their lights and having his light switched on as well hinders this learning process. Which means as an intern and not part of the

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class I also had to hide my light and therefore navigate the cave in the dark. Now do you understand why I said it was hard?

The final point I want to highlight is class control. From my vantage point, usually close to the roof, I watched the underwater equivalent of ballet dancing. Chris seems to glide around the cave, instinctively knowing exactly where he needs to be to control scenarios, check gas pressure and avoid getting wedged between students and the cave walls. It's an instinct developed after years of practice and complete familiarity with the caves and it's inspiring to see. At no point did he ever lose touch with any of the students, no matter what scenarios he was running – I clearly have a lot of work to do to match such control.

So what happens next?

At the end of the class I sat down with Chris to debrief and talk about the next steps. Clearly one intern is merely scratching the surface, I need to do many more – but one point more than any other sticks in my mind. There are not many GUE cave instructors in the world, so becoming a GUE cave instructor is much like joining an elite club where membership is strictly by invitation only. If I want to join then I need to prove that I deserve it - and that is clearly going to be the hardest part of this entire process. I will be doing many more interns over the coming year. It's going to be fun.

