

Graecum est; non potest legi * -

APXEIO ΠΕΛΕΟ Holiday Caving in Greece, 2002

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Well normally at this time of year we're off to Mallorca for our winter caving, but for various reasons we ended up doing something different. The sum total of my literature and web searches for caving references had turned up almost nothing on Greece but eventually I was able to make contact with Stefanos Nikolaidis from the Hellenic Caving Club. There are no cave descriptions or surveys in English so the attached email was pretty all we had to go upon before our arrival.

So it was with some trepidation that we arrived at Athens airport on the afternoon of Saturday 19th November. But we needn't have worried. Three carloads of Greek cavers were waiting for us at arrivals complete with a huge club flag. We were soon whisked off into the Athens traffic and onto the club's headquarters via the hotel. That evening we had a long discussion with the club as to the possibilities but eventually were agreed on a possible plan. One member, Anastacia, kindly volunteered to run off some copies of the surveys and contact the Ministry of Archaeology to arrange for a permit. This was to be faxed through the following day although ideally we should have arranged for a permit in advance (slightly tricky when you don't know what caves you're going to be visiting and a permit is required for each cave).

Then before heading off to a welcome dinner another member of the club, Georgia Tartari, recently retired, asked us if we'd like her to accompany us for the whole 2 weeks! This seemed ideal, as she knew where most of the caves were and communication would be so much simpler with someone who could speak Greek. So unbelievably there we were, five hours after arrival, with a selection of caves to choose from, swapping tales of caving adventures and enjoying plate after plate of mezedhes at a nearby restaurant. It still amazes me how caving trips just seem to slot into place. But don't ask me about the wine as this was about as good as it got. My recommendation is to stick to the beer!

The Sunday was spent doing a spot of sightseeing, 'restauranting' and checking out the prices in the outdoor gear shops. Not that cheap really. We also managed to get an excellent deal on a hire car. I say hire car, but this was more of a minibus a la Moles en vacances.

So bright and early on Monday we were off for our first cave. We picked up Georgia at the caving headquarters, a few dodgy ladders (more of that later) and after a supermarket stint braved the rigours of the Greek roads. The only comment to make here is that the roads aren't as bad as they used to be but the drivers are probably worse than ever. Monday's plan was to head North to visit Baroutospilia, only 3 hours drive from Athens and then spend the night at Stefanos's house.

* "It's all Greek to me" is usually attributed to William Shakespeare, in Julius Caesar: "Those that understood him smiled at one another and shook their heads; but for mine own part, it was Greek to me". But virtually the same phrase had been used the year before in 1600 by another Elizabethan playwright, Thomas Dekker: "I'll be sworn he knows not so much as one character of



the tongue. Why, then it's Greek to him". Actually, the phrase is older as it comes from a Mediaeval Latin proverb "Graecum est; non potest legi" (It is Greek; it cannot be read). Both the Latin and the English meant then just what the phrase does now, to refer to something that is unintelligible.

ΑΡΧΕΙΟ ΣΠΕΛΕΟ

Baroutospilia

This makes for a gentle introduction to Greek caving and involves more walk in and tussling with goats than cave. However the entrance is a sort of Greek Bournillion and as such is the largest in Greece. Park just outside the village of Polidrosos, north of the Mount Parnassos national park and walk up the small valley. There's a faint path that runs right up to the entrance as until very recently the local farmers used to use the guano as a base for explosives. The huge fossil entrance that lies half way up the mountainside on the right hand side is easy to spot. At the back of the main entrance the cave closes down to a complete choke barely out of sight of daylight. There is an interesting climb up on the right hand side that leads to a small continuation (fixed hand-line), but again it soon closes down. The most interesting part of the cave lies behind the secondary entrance on the left. An attractive section of large fossil gourds leads to a small pot and decorated grottos. Total trip time including allowances for the photographic tendency was little more than an hour and half, which was ideal considering that we were benighted on the walk back down to the bus.

The Pindos Mountains

Although we probably ended up doing a lot more driving than was ideal for a two weeks holiday, I was quite keen to visit the entrances of Epos Chasm and Provatina. So after dropping South to Stefano's house on the coast at Itea we then had a lengthy drive to the Pindos, which are North of Ioannina, the regional capital. This took seven hours plus allowing for the meandering of the coastal road, police speed cameras, Albanian refugee roadblocks and lunch in a traffic island in Nafpaktos. Our base was to be the mountain hamlet of Kapesovo where Georgia had booked some rooms in a mountain B&B. For some reason every hamlet around these parts starts with a 'k', which made for entertaining route finding. Our accommodation was certainly a talking point of the trip. It was decorated with some intricate hand painted wallpaper by the deceased husband of our host. But it was quite expensive and rather claustrophobic due to the owner and her friends popping in and out as soon as we arrived. On the first evening we met up with another member of the Hellenic club, Manolis Dianantopoulos, who was working as an adventure guide and hence living nearby. Through the blurred gaze generated by the local spirit (quite nice actually) we gleaned a few more cave descriptions. The plan was to do one of these small pots before heading off to Provatina.

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This was chosen as it seemed fairly easy to find and had few nice pitches. But as is always the case caves are always easy to find when you know where they are. The start of the walk was a small mountain track just down valley from Kapesovo. This was easy enough but the critical directions started from the chapel of St. George. Now there were two small mountain churches indicated on the map and I'm certain that the local caver pointed to the wrong one. So we spent the first afternoon thrashing around on wooded hillsides looking for the damn thing. The church



was locked up so Georgia couldn't even pop inside to check whether we were starting from the right saint. It was a classic case of trying to make the terrain fit the description. I mean, what exactly does a small plateau look like? After many hours fruitlessly searching we eventually decided to wander further up the hill to just check that we shouldn't be looking around the vicinity of the other church. Typically once at the second church everything slotted into place and we found the cave in less than half an hour.

So it was back the following day to actually do the thing. The entrance is a fine 30m pothole in a limestone pavement. There were plenty of naturals to start the rig but once over the lip I could find absolutely no bolts to create a free hang. Ah yes, I remember now – continental rigging. Not keen on this approach I thrashed about in an overhanging tree and was able to select a suitable bough for the descent. The rest of the cave was pretty straightforward. A couple of small pitches drop into a little pool, which proved highly entertaining depending upon how bothered you were about getting your feet wet. Beyond was another 30m + rope for which we had insufficient rope. The locals had mentioned a traverse to a draughting rift and possible continuation. I had a tentative look at this but the crumbly calcite naturals looked too suspect for my tastes.

The walk to Provatina

Although we were essentially equipped only with holiday caving gear, we had brought a few tents and decent sleeping bags. So we'd set aside a couple of days to walk up Mount Astraka to go and see the historic entrances of Provatina and Epos Chasm. The walk starts at Papigo and makes for an extremely pleasant hike. There are plenty of springs in the lower slopes to refill your water bottles and all routes are well signposted. We arrived at our projected mountain camp and just had enough time to whizz over to look at Provatina before dusk. The entrance is an imposing gash in the cliff edge and awkward to climb up to. It must have been quite an effort back in the '60's lugging all the kit up there. As an aside, a few days later we bumped into an old farmer in the bar in Kapesovo who actually remembered Jim Eyre. Apparently he owns the stone hut that overlooks Epos Chasm.*

That evening it fell to well below freezing and we all wore every item of clothing we had with us. Not quite the Mediterranean trips we normally indulge in. So we were up pretty early to try and get some warmth back into our bones. Before descending back down to Papigo we ambled over to the other side of the mountain to look at Epos Chasm. This is an extremely dramatic entrance. A sinuous gorge meanders to the base of large doline and is very photogenic. The entrance pitch is right down at the bottom of a rift and it's quite an easy daylight climb to the bottom. And just looking over the lip of the entrance shaft is quite a sight let alone actually abseiling in. After a spot of photography Julie enlivened the day by bashing her head quite nastily on a jammed boulder. Helmets, helmets.

The Peloponese

After the Pindos we were keen to establish a base in one location and do a solid weeks caving. So rather than drive all over Greece madly ticking off sites we decided to head South to the Peloponnis to base ourselves at Georgia's house near Sparti. Again this was quite a drive so we decided to break the journey up by staying at the resort of Xilokastro just after the Andirio ferry



crossing. The coastal road that runs along the North of Peloponnis is a nightmare of a drive. It's a two-lane A-road that has been converted into motorway status by judicious use of the hard shoulders which double up as the inside line. However you can also overtake on the opposite 'carriageway' if that takes your fancy. Add in a few broken down vehicles, Greek driving and motorway speeds into the mix and it's a recipe for disaster. We were extremely glad to reach Xilokastro in one piece. This is a popular beach resort with Athenians but was reasonably quiet on our stay as it was now out of season.

Ermis Cave

Before pitching up at Georgia's we decided to visit the Greek version of Goatchurch on the way. This is extremely easy to find as the forestry commission has handily installed tourist signs in the last couple of years (nearest village is Trikala). Ideal for all those nice young kids who wouldn't honestly think about trashing a cave would they? On our exit we cleared out the whole cave of rubbish, spent torch batteries and bales of twine. But judging by the dates on the graffiti I fear that this cave will soon be ruined. The massed hoards were already in the cave when we arrived, all equipped with bails of twine and the odd pocket torch. We preferred rope to twine but none of the climbs actually needs an aid. We had a good old rummage around, particularly in the last chamber, which seems to have escaped the worst ravages, presumably protected to some extent by a low squeeze. It was immediately apparent that Ermis has a strong draft and it wasn't long before Julie had spotted a way on at the end. I bashed a way through and was soon wriggling into new passage. This was not what you'd expect at the end of Goatchurch. Everything was well decorated but of particular interest was a forest of stalactites hanging far off the vertical, presumably due to earthquake disturbance. After 30-40ft or so a boulder choke was passed to reach the head of a reasonably sized pitch.

I steamed back to the minibus to go and pick up the kit whilst the others struggled with the squeeze. Julie, pregnant and showing reluctantly decided not to follow unless we found something absolutely massive. Peat and I did an extremely rough survey and then rigged the new pitch. A bit of gardening was needed and rather a lot of nerve: one of the Greek ladders had previously snapped and been repaired a few centimetres off set. Hmm..The pitch was 14m and followed by a choke and another 8m pitch, free climbable. Unfortunately the draft was emitting from a small crack which will need a hefty lump of persuasion to pass.

* Ref. Eyre, J. (1981) The Cave Explorers. The Stalactite Press, ISBN 0-9690790-2-8

