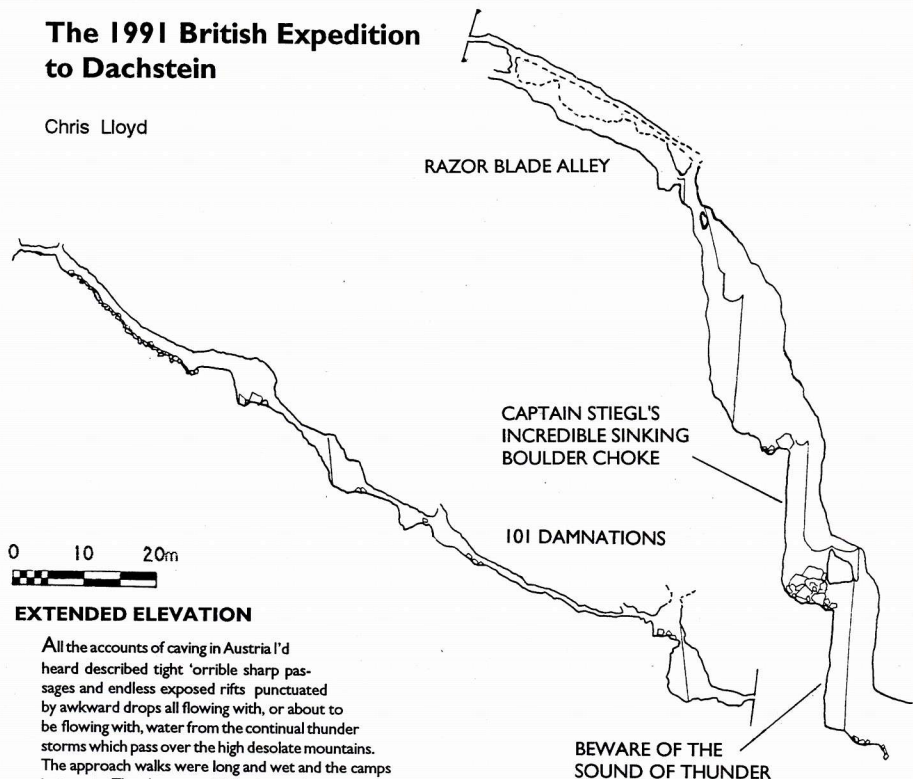


# The 1991 British Expedition to Dachstein

Chris Lloyd



## EXTENDED ELEVATION

All the accounts of caving in Austria I'd heard described tight 'orrible sharp passages and endless exposed rifts punctuated by awkward drops all flowing with, or about to be flowing with, water from the continual thunder storms which pass over the high desolate mountains. The approach walks were long and wet and the camps just wet. The dangers of lightning strikes were never dwelt on too long.

But people kept going back so surely it couldn't be all bad. One of these returning regulars was Paul Iberson and when he described this year's plans to push a cave discovered in a new valley which is located above the largest cave system in Austria, I decided to see for myself what Austria was like. The chance to find the world's deepest through trip was too tempting to miss.

I arrived at the Wiesberghaus on Monday, August 19, a day after Paul, Dave and Richard, and was greeted with a shot of schnapps from the friendly hostess Alfi and her husband Wolfgang. When I had returned with my second load the others had returned from humping loads up the hill and were settled into the bar wondering where our 5th member was.

Snablet turned up at 11pm having driven straight from a month's caving in Spain.

Tuesday saw us packing hundreds of meters of rope and other gear for the slog up to the cave entrance, located 1.5 hours walk from the hut over the most heavily dissected limestone terrain I'd seen. Building cairns as we went we eventually relocated the cave Richard and Snablet had found at the end of last year's expedition. They'd penetrated about 100m to the top of a large pitch so now Richard and Paul headed down with 200m of rope to see where it went. The rest of us spread out over the open valley to check for other entrances, of which there was no shortage. Rills, runnels, sinkholes and shafts were everywhere in the bare limestone and over each new rise another dark hole beckoned. But it quickly became apparent that it wasn't

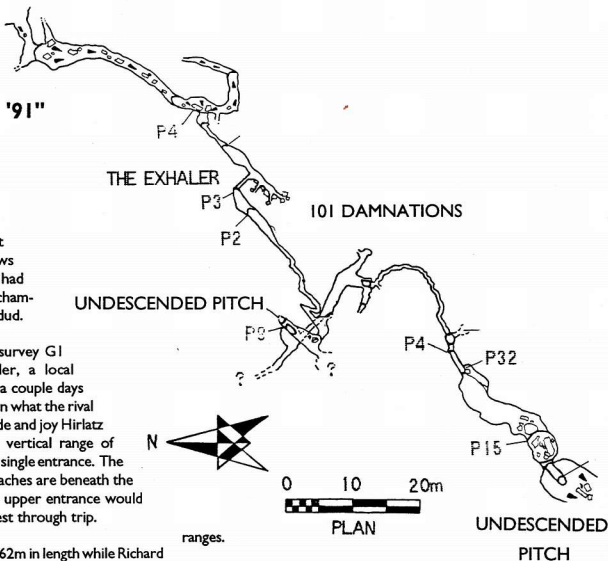
**G7**  
**DACHSTEIN, AUSTRIA.**  
**B.C.R.A. GRADE 5B**  
**DEPTH: 166m**  
**LENGTH: 262m**  
**EXPLORED AND**  
**SURVEYED**  
**"DACHSTEIN '91"**

going to be as easy as it looked, as everything was choked with rubble or snow plugs. A few hours later we regrouped back at G1 (the abbreviated name given our first cave) and heard the same news from Paul and Richard. They had dropped a 40m pitch into a big chamber with no way on. Our first dud.

The next day we returned to survey G1 accompanied by Peter Schieller, a local Hallstatt caver who was up for a couple days recce. More likely checking up on what the rival British were doing above his pride and joy Hirlatz Hohle, a 68km system with a vertical range of 1000m most of which is above its single entrance. The map plots indicated its upper reaches are beneath the area we were exploring and an upper entrance would possibly make the worlds deepest through trip.

We surveyed G1 to -100m and 162m in length while Richard and Dave were further up the hill checking out G2. Snablet had discovered the horizontal entrance the previous day leaving it at the top of a pitch. Richard dropped that and spent an hour negotiating a squeeze to get to the next drop. They left it at that vowing to name it Quaking if it went (in memory of Britain's most infamous tight cave). Fortunately it didn't!

Thursday saw Snablet and Paul start in on G3 while Richard and Dave dispatched G2. I had good views in mind as I set off up the mountain to check an entrance near the top of a large cliff. So far the weather had been un-Austrianly brilliant and I wanted to get as high up as my sore knees would allow. A very exposed scramble got me down to my targeted hole, which was a horizontal tube headed straight into the hill. Getting excited I abseiled back down with my pack and crawled in to check it out. After 20m the narrow passage opened into a chamber with two parallel rifts continuing on into the mountain. I checked these finding a pit along one while the other branch went in and looped back around to the other side of the pit. Exploring about 100m I knew I'd have to return with the others and some rope. Further up the mountain the views were spectacular across all of the Dachstein and over to the surrounding mountain

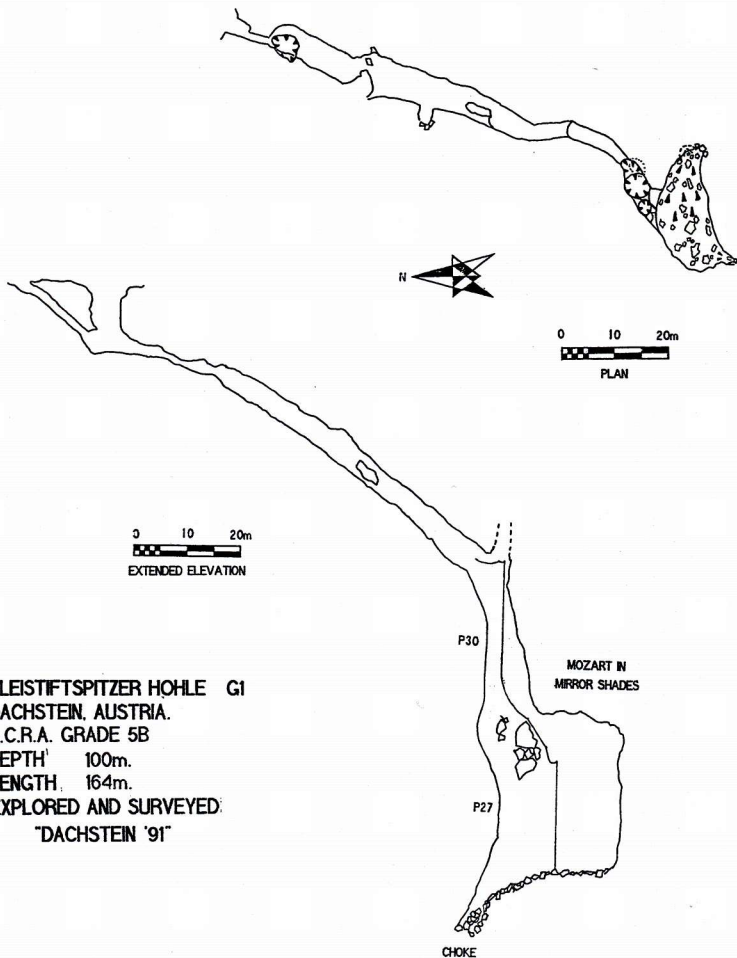


ranges.

Meanwhile Snablet and Paul had dropped 3 pitches down the tight meanders in G3, and we all converged in time to have Richard go down to find the 4th one choked. This quickly lead to a consensus to keep Richard off future pushing trips.

With 3 duds and nothing good in sight, Paul and Snablet attempted to locate a cave closer to the hut which another of their group had pushed to -250m last year. That was unsuccessful, as were our attempts to push my G4 up on the cliff.

Spirits were dropping fast and another day was lost looking for last year's Verborgten Hohlen, while Richard and Snablet started in on the extremely small G5. It's small drafting opening had been spotted earlier but left as a last resort. Richard managed to rig and drop the 20cm wide entrance slot after much verbal abuse. Snablet and I checked other entrances waiting for Richard to return. Eventually the cursing returned and Richard emerged with the bad news that it was going, though he had had to break through an ice blockage to find the way on. Snablet was sent in to rig the second drop with easily the most awkward rigging so far encountered. While Richard returned with more rope I worked on enlarging the entrance as it was starting to look

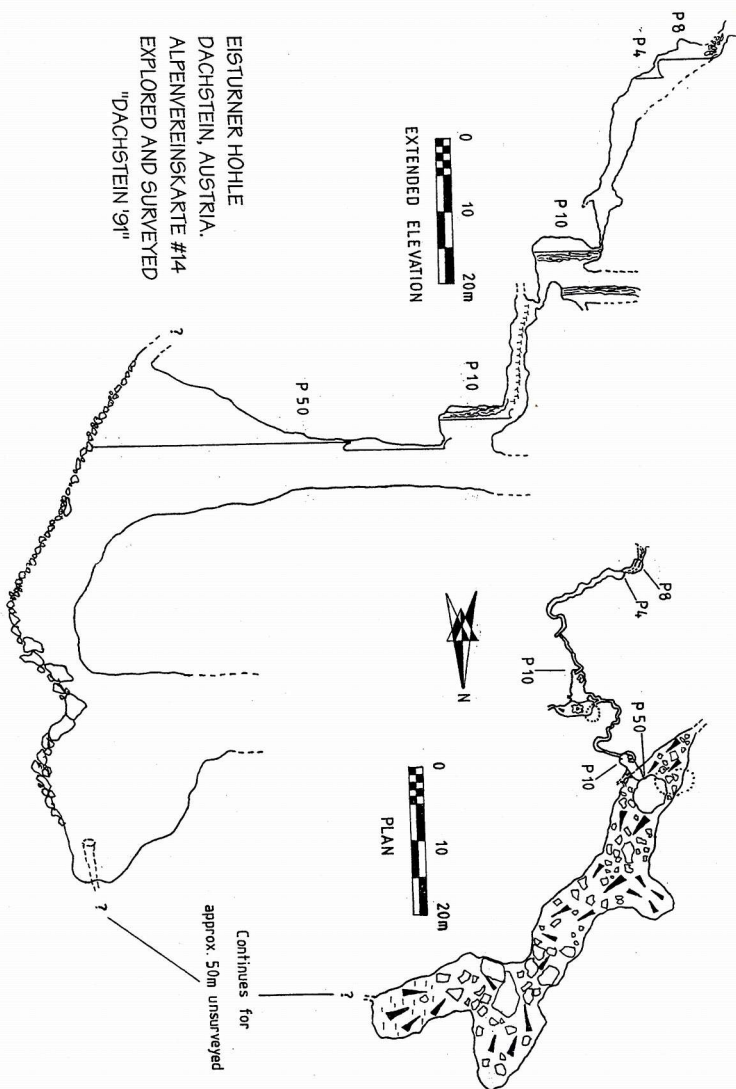


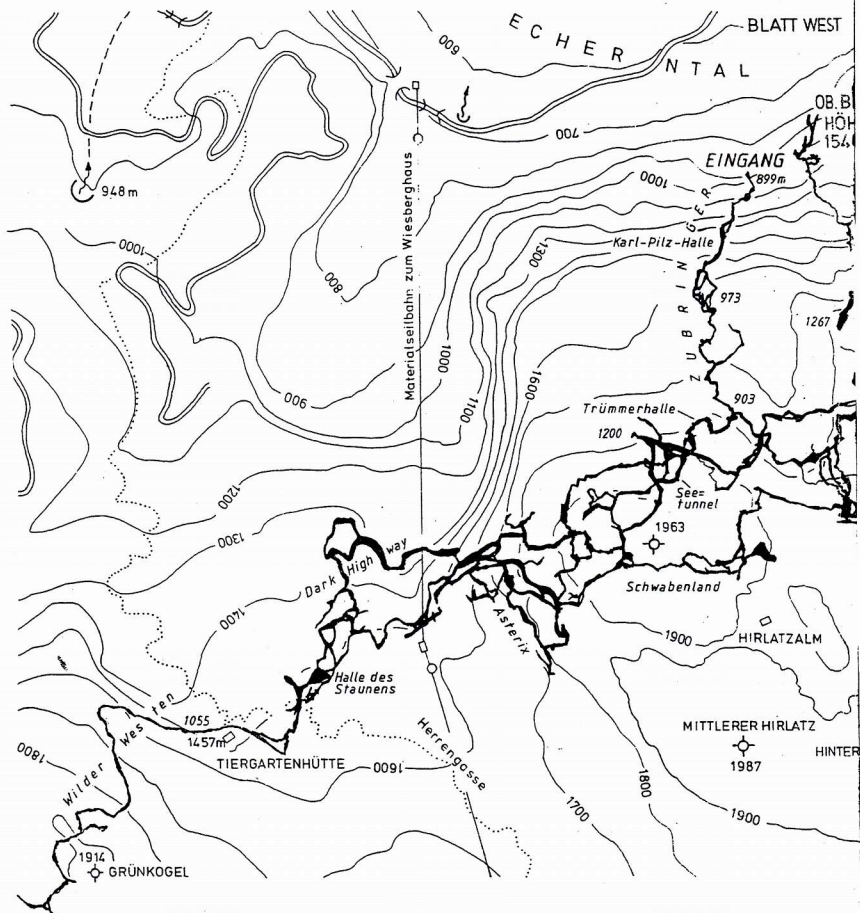
BLEISTIFTSPITZER HOHLE G1  
DACHSTEIN, AUSTRIA.  
B.C.R.A. GRADE 5B  
DEPTH' 100m.  
LENGTH 164m.  
EXPLORED AND SURVEYED:  
"DACHSTEIN '91"

1960 m  
a.s.l.

0 10 20m  
EXTENDED ELEVATION

EISTUKNER HOHLE  
DACHSTEIN, AUSTRIA.  
ALPENVEREINSKARTE #14  
EXPLORED AND SURVEYED  
"DACHSTEIN '91"





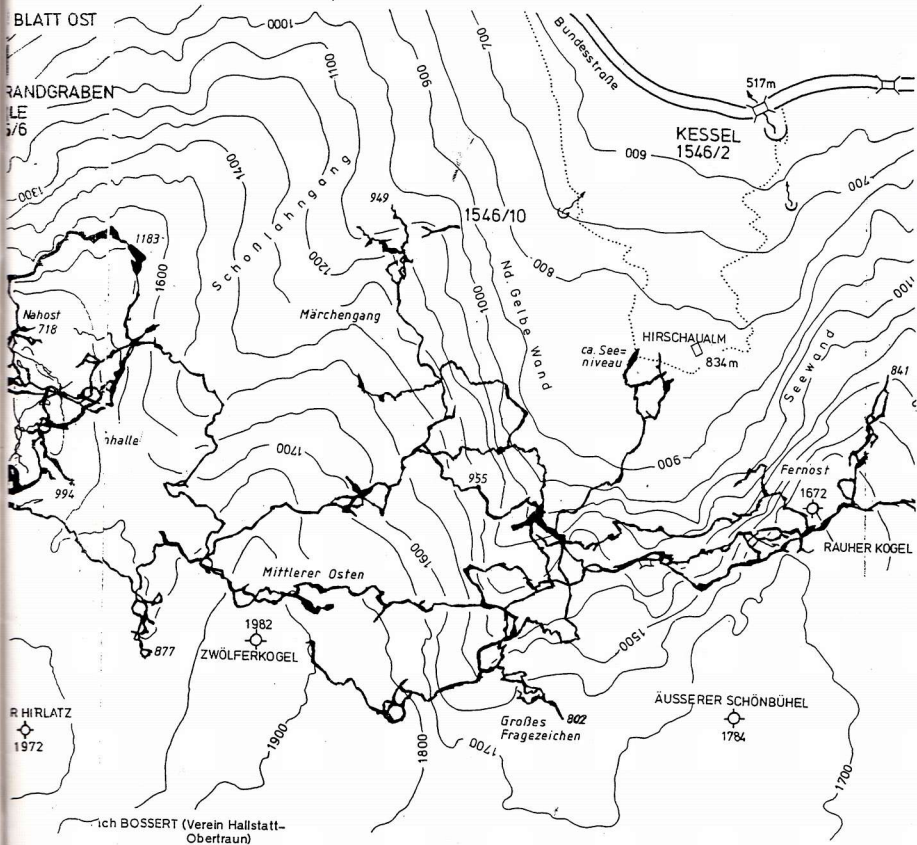
like we might all be using it a fair bit. On their return they were grateful for a hot brew as they had been crawling along ice flows and had turned back at the top of a big pitch where everything was coated in ice. Maybe this will be the one.

Everyone was back up the hill the next day with high hopes, though with threatening weather we didn't want everyone in the same cave. Richard headed in with more rope while Paul and Snabiet surveyed in behind. Dave and I headed over to the next valley to check some more entrances the wide-

ranging Snabiet had located. After Dave had scouted one out in shorts I kitted up and took our 20m push rope to get down the first 7m free hang. Using the tail got me down another 10m over an ice lip into an icy chamber. A cold draft was blowing up an ice-coated ramp and I couldn't see around the next corner. Another hopeful to check.

Back at G5 we waited for Richard to emerge with the news that Paul was headed down a 50m pitch on a 30m rope. Fortunately he had another rope and managed to bottom





the pitch into a large chamber, over 30m long. But there was no apparent way on.

The next day we were even later than normal getting up and an official rest day was proclaimed. We lounged in the continuing beautiful sunshine thankful that the usual expedition rains were absent this year. Later we strolled to Oberfeld, a cafe at the top of one of the cable cars which is run by, and subsidized by, the Austrian army, including the beer prices. This was the start of what ended up being

a long evening as we were later invited to join Heidi's birthday celebrations back the Wiesberghaus, one of the many local inebriations we were invited to join.

The repercussions were somewhat predictable back at the entrance to G5 the next day. Nobody was up to the hard work required here and two were only capable of the walk back. I went to push G6 supported by Dave snoozing in the entrance. Snablet as usual was finding more entrances, which was good as my effort brought me to a small drafting hole too

small to pass. Some chiseling or a little bang would get one through to the larger space beyond though.

Wednesday was to be our last full day on the hill, so G5 had to be finished. Snablet and I went in first to continue the survey with Richard passing us to check the bottom while Paul and Dave pulled up the rear photographing. Now I got to experience for myself just how 'orrible it really was. And it was. Below the ridiculous entrance slot a series of nasty, tight, twisty meanders had to be negotiated flat out on ice ledges, earning the cave its full name of Ice Gymnastics Cave or Eisturen Hohlen. The vicious hairpin corner at the top of the second pitch almost turned me back, but my legs did manage to bend that way enabling me to back out of the 50cm diameter hole dangling on my cow's tail, feet still caught in the hole. Once sorted out I could head down the 15m pitch into a chamber dominated by the 20m high, free standing ice pillar on the other side. Almost 2m in diameter, it had an ominous bend in the bottom, the whole thing must be creeping down!

Another series of tight icy meanders and a short pitch put us into the spacious ice coated alcove at the top of the 50. It was 5m in diameter for 30m before bellling out in to the large chamber below. By the time we surveyed to the back Richard was nowhere to be seen, only a small slot in the corner suggested there may be more passage. We speculated for a good while if it would go or not until we heard grunts and Richard's customary cursing coming out of that same small hole. Initially relieved that we wouldn't have to go in chasing him, he confirmed our fears that indeed it did go.

I led the way out meeting Paul at the top of the 50 where I gave him the bad news. If that wasn't bad enough a huge crash shattered the silence and the walls shook as if they were going to fall down. We wanted to dive for cover but were both tethered to the rigging. At the bottom Dave and Richard dove for opposite walls while Snablet had to cover on the rope trying to make himself as small as possible. But nothing came down and once the silence was complete again it was broken by three people simultaneously exclaiming, "What the fuck was that!". Nobody could say for sure but the consensus was that it was the ice pillar above collapsing.

I offered to let Paul go ahead since he had been waiting around getting cold, but he said it was quite alright, I could go on up. Everything was fine until I got to the short rope below the ice pillar chamber, where the tattered rope bag was below the rig point and a huge boulder jammed in the passage. These weren't there on the way in! The panic level started to rise until Snablet arrived and told me the bag had been moved on the trip in and that the way out was beneath the boulder not over it. Eventually I worked out the sequence to get my head around the corner to confront the real damage. A huge ice block was blocking the entrance into the chamber. That definitely wasn't there on the way in!

Fortunately I was able to wiggle out over the block and sure enough the pillar was missing. Hanging on the opposite wall was the rope for the next pitch, now with its bottom embedded in the ice rubble which totally covered the floor. Luckily it didn't get wiped out like the ice flow next to it. Obviously the pillar had fallen right across the chamber hitting the far wall. Too close, far too close!

It was a great relief to get out of that chamber, and negotiating the meanders above wasn't nearly as hard as on the way in, even dragging tackle bags. The rest of the derigging went well and with everything off the hill the rain finally arrived, raining all the next day.

Friday was departure day for Paul, Dave and Richard with Snablet driving them to the train station in Salzburg, but only after a huge lunchtime feast and schnapps from Alfi and Wolfgang to send them on their way. I spent the afternoon checking small holes on the nearby cliff face, to no avail.

Snablet returned the next day and we headed back up the hill to survey G7, his last find. It went in about 50m at a steep angle and then followed a tight meandering bypass another 30m to a spot choked with boulders. These were removed and Snablet squeezed into the hole not returning for a good while. He said he'd gone in to where there was a large black space.

We returned the next day with a couple of ropes and a rigging kit. Getting into the choke was much quicker, now being familiar with the route, even the Exhaler (a 20cm wide body long squeeze) was not so bad. Surveying through the next section was another story; its name of 101 Damnations about sums it up. But the black space beyond was spacious and an 8m drop led to continuing passage. The survey was put on hold to push on ahead.

The way on split and Snablet was volunteered to check the lower narrow slot while I went on above, in what turned out to be the same route. This was confirmed by me dropping a rock on his head while trying to get the tackle bag down to him so he could start on the large echoing drop below. By the time I wormed my way down through the Razor Blade Alley he was at the end of his 20m rope ready to head out for more.

Returning with more rope we continued surveying to the big drop and pushed it 40m to the bottom with a couple of rebelayes. A 10m horizontal jog took us to yet another shaft, 6x8m in diameter and deeper than the 20m of rope we dangled in it. Foiled again but with bolts set we would be ready to go tomorrow. Not getting back 'til after midnight, tomorrow was declared a rest day.

Well rested, we were actually caving before noon on Wednesday taking in yet more rope to see what we had.

Snabilet headed down the last pitch on a 50m rope and hit a boulder pile at 30m with no obvious way through. A bypass was noted and I pendulumed over into it finding a 2m diameter tube leading down into darkness. As I was placing the bolt for this route the boulder pile beneath Snabilet shifted, settling a few centimeters, and bouncing stones could be heard echoing far below both him and me. He moved quickly to tie back into the rope while I hurriedly finished setting the bolt. I had to place another rebelay 5m down and only got half way through when my light died, leaving Snabilet to lead down again. He descended hesitantly as the odd stone was still popping out of the sinking boulder choke behind me and crashing somewhere below him. A 25m free hang put him into a 6x8m high passage wich sloped down towards another dark pitch sounding deeper than any we'd done yet, 60, maybe 100m? But lacking rope and time

we surveyed out derigging as we went, thankful to be clear of the Beware the Sound of Thunder pitch and Captain Steigel's Amazing Sinking Boulder Choke. Another sporting cave to return to next year.

Back at the Weisberghaus we calculated our new depth to be -166m, over a few Steigel's (the local beire) and a wonderful farewell dinner from Alfi. And of course we didn't get away the next day without a couple farewell shots of schnapps. Prost! Prost!

*Chris Lloyd has written for The Canadian Caver & B.C. Caver. He is a roving Canadian caver and climber who while not globe trotting calls Rossland B.C. his home.*

**G6  
DACHSTEIN, AUSTRIA.  
B.C.R.A. GRADE 2A  
"DACHSTEIN '91"**

