

DACHSTEIN 92

BY C.J. LOYD

My return trip to the Dachstein, in Austria, for the Dachstein 92 expedition can be summed up in one word - wintry.

Like any decent alpine area one must be prepared for snow; in the Dachstein anytime. We had in fact had a snowfall on August 29th, 1991, but it stayed up on the mountain tops where it belonged and occurred at night. This summer wasn't to prove so friendly.

I arrived early (after a hitchhiking race across Europe) to meet up with Richard Blake, who had lost the race but preceded me to the Weisburghaus. Rich had already been out scouting new territory and wanted some help on a dig that he had located. His new site was, of course, even further away than last years G7, in the bottom of the next valley. It did however have a stronger draft than anything we had seen on the whole plateau, so it warranted some work.

The entrance was covered over with a loose pile of boulders which quickly started filling the next hollow as we tossed them away. It wasn't long before we got a lot more cautious though - there didn't seem to be anything holding up all those rocks! After a careful look, I moved into the pile in an attempt to get through. I confirmed that we were right over a pitch head which I then tested out with a couple of dropped rocks. While I came out to add more clothes, Richard climbed down the drop which turned out to be an easy 5m chimney onto a snow cone. Following a tall rift for about 10m we hit a proper pitch which looked to be at least 30m. Sadly we had no rope to check it out.

Leaving site 9 behind, we worked our way down valley and located a few more strongly drafting holes. We got a little way into each of these but realized they were long term type digs - not something you travel all the way to Austria for. At the bottom of the main valley we came to a cliff band, overlooking another valley, which had a couple of dark holes beckoning us onwards. I had to almost physically restrain Richard, after all, we need to leave something for future trips.

The next couple days were spent waiting for the rest of the team who also had all the rope.

Snablet was returning for something like his 8th visit, his first taking place when he was 12 years old! He brought with him two newcomers. Andy "Leg" Summerskill had been on numerous trips abroad before (including one to the Rockies) and had been talked into this one mainly on account of the good Steigl, the local beire (Leg is a brewer). Max, on the other hand, had only caved in England and obviously didn't know any better.

Monday, August 31st saw us finally underway with Richard and I going in to rig the first three drops in G5. It took longer to hammer a way through the ice this year, but fortunately the ice column hadn't reformed. Lower down the ice meanders also had less ice, making that section a lot easier and at the top of the 50 there was no ice at all. Opening up the cave the previous year must have helped air flow melt it away.

Meanwhile, the others had been waiting for the rest of the gear to come up the hill on the sielbahn before carrying it over to the entrance. So now, with all the gear finally ready to go, it started to snow. We had been warned that the snow might reach as low as 2000m and were surprised to see it all around the hut (1840m) in the morning. Time to check out some of that Stiegl, eh Leg.

The walk out on the following day was not fun. Only 5 - 10cm of snow had fallen but this was piled into drifts knee deep in some places. It made the walk, requiring, due to its rugged nature, good concentration at the best of times, a treacherous nightmare. What normally took 1 ½ hours lasted 3 ½ and took its toll of bumps and bruises. What was even worse was the fact that we were now headed underground at 2:30pm on a glorious sunny, hot day. I.E. - peak melting time.

Richard and Max headed into G5 while Snablet and Leg waded over to G7 with 250m of rope on top of their personal kit. I waited around for a hour, for my gear to dry off, before going into G5. My timing was right on as I caught up with them just as Richard was finishing the 50. I wouldn't have wanted to wait around as I had gotten wet right in the entrance pitch and had to dodge new flowing inlets the whole way down. The place was just oozing water and it obviously hadn't any time to warm up after its change over from snow. Richard was so numbed he couldn't even finish the rebelay, part way down the 50 - his hands weren't able to put the mayon on the bolt. And, he hadn't even gotten to the wet part yet. The bottom 2/3 of the 50 was a thundering waterfall of

ice water - a shocking change from its bone dry nature of last year. Welcome to Austria Max!

Max obviously didn't know any better, instead of insisting we retreat before hypothermia set in, he agreed to follow us further in "just to have a look". Actually I wasn't too keen on it either and left my vertical kit, at the bottom of the 50; just to be sure Richard didn't coerce me down the next drop. Richard led on, of course, despite only partial function in his hands.

Dodging a couple of new waterfalls in the once dry big chamber we relocated Richard's little hole of the previous year. Emanating from it was the sound of more running water. Not like the small streams we had passed earlier but what sounded like a raging river. Having regained the feeling in his fingers Richard plunged on in, "just for a look".

Max and I exchanged knowing glances and prepared to wait. It wasn't long, maybe 60 seconds, before involuntary shivering and chattering teeth forced me to get moving and I went in "just for a look". It wasn't quite as bad as it looked, the passage that is, and the water was nowhere to be seen. Ascending this tube/rift I met Richard coming back, asking for the next tackle bags to be passed forward. Max! Richard assured us that we could crawl over the next waterfall, the one responsible for the noise, around the following one, and that we would probably want a rope on the next climb.

Notice he didn't say pitch, that would have required vertical gear and I had purposely left mine behind. That ploy didn't work though as Richard had climbed down this pitch the previous year while exploring on his own. Surely we could follow with a rope for security. I thought I had a pretty good grasp of how crazy Richard actually was but I obviously had a bit more to learn. That drop was followed by two more climbs before we got to one that could be properly called a pitch. Richard almost fallen down this one the previous year, after a boulder that he was climbing up on shifted and moved.

I was warm now and wished that I had brought my vertical gear. This was starting to go places. As we got ready to put in a bolt, it turned out Richard didn't have his gear either. Max had inadvertently left both of theirs behind when Rich had gone on ahead. Fortunately we had enough stuff to jury rig a set and he went down a 20m rift into a flowing stream. This was yet a third major inlet, also seemingly headed back under the big chamber. Richard was able to follow the tall narrow rift downstream

out of sight where he then bridged over a 5m waterfall and around a few "interesting tight corners" (when Richard bothers to call something tight and has a smirk on his face the rest of us know we're in trouble) to reach a bigger waterfall. Cursing his lack of rope and backup support he returned, finding the climb up the waterfall required getting right into it to find the holds. Served him right. We already had two sets of chattering teeth and as soon as he was safely up a full rout was underway, leaving Richard stuffing a tackle sack and talking to himself. At least staying underground as long as we had, the sun had gone down and the meltwater had subsided, making the 50 just miserable rather than life threatening.

Back in the warmth on the surface, we retired to a nearby depression where we had set up a camp, to save on the walk back to the Weisburghaus. We were just about finished our diner when Snablet and Leg staggered in from G7. They had an interesting day, managing to lug all of their rope into the top of Razor Blade Alley. Mind you, they had to take the rope out of the tackle bag to get it through the Exhale, so it wasn't a speedy trip. They were dry though and while looking for an alternative route around Razor Blade Alley had come across a well drafting side passage. Popping into this they came out at the top of a 10m wide shaft with no bottom in sight. It looked like we were well-poised for the next day.

The clear starry night gave way to early morning cloud and by 8am raindrops awoke me in my bivy bag. Not fancying the idea of waiting out a Dachstein rainstorm in my bivy bag, I packed up and headed for the comforts of the Weisburghaus, leaving the others in their tents. The expected deluge never arrived though and the sun was out by 11 am. Richard and Snablet went back to G7 to push the new shaft. Max and Leg were still in shock from the previous days adventures and decided to recoup back in the bar.

Waking up from my nap back in the hut, I was surprised to see the sun shining, but Alfi, the friendly hostess, set me straight with the new weather forecast - snow down to 1700m. Knowing that Richard and Snablet were certainly underground by now, I walked back to leave a warning note. As it turned out they emerged from the cave at 10pm in the middle of a thunder storm and ran back to the hut in a record one hour, no doubt spurred on by the lightning blasting all around them.

The next three days were spent trying to stay warm which meant one was either in a sleeping bag or the bar (it, being next to the kitchen, was the only warm room in the place).

This unfortunately used up our time for exploration and meant that we had to derig both caves, in the next two days so that we could leave on schedule. So Monday morning, with the sun shining, we set off through the drifts to derig G5. Needless to say three days of snow had made matters worse and we were regularly dropping up to our armpits in covered holes. At the base of the cliff band, mid walk, four army helicopters flew past, no doubt shaking their heads at the crazy English below.

The derigging went well with Richard and Snablet getting the unenviable task of derigging below the 50, while Max and I waited two hours before going in to meet them there and detackle the top. On the 10m pitch, above the 50, I was left mouth agape as the first pin came out in my hand and the 2nd knocked the whole flake they were sunk behind off the wall. Have to put a bolt on that one next year!

With the trail already broken, the walk out to G7 wasn't so bad. We decided that we had enough time to survey and push a bit before derigging. Richard and I quickly slid down the 150m of shaft they had rigged the other day, marvelling at the size of it. It wasn't going straight down, but at every ledge and jog it got a little bigger. They had left it at the end of a 30m traverse with the opposite wall 10m away and another 50-m pitch waiting.

I was keen to get out in front and got what turned out to be the not-so-nice job of setting the next bolt, under a splattering waterfall. We were bone dry up to this point and positioned in the middle of a large chamber/shaft which happened to have this stupid little 2' x 2' hole in the ceiling. Now it had started to spit water. I moved over to get out of the spray and by the time I'd set the bolt, the spray had moved over and was trickling down my neck again. Not a good sign. Ten metres down I had to put in a rebelay, to avoid a bulge, and pendulumed over to get a better hang and avoid the water. A nice 40m hang put me on a ledge in a shaft 15m x 25m wide and still dropping down.

Richard caught up with me to finish the next bolt and continue down another 20m to a boulder strewn floor. Beside me the waterfall seemed to be slowly swelling and while Richard was looking around below, he noticed another start up on the far wall. No time to be headed down. Finding another

deep looking pitch ahead, it seemed a reasonable place to call it quits and begin detackling.

Snablet was just reaching the traverse on his survey down and Max, at least, was glad of an excuse to head out. He'd done very little vertical work before coming here and hanging out at rebelay, using the tape measure and survey instruments (his first time on these), in Captain Stiegl's Incredible Waste Disposal Unit, was a bit overwhelming. He was actually standing up to the rigours of the trip extremely well. Not having previous experience as a benchmark was a boon in his case. He had to borrow a carbide light for the trip (never having used one before) and he then had the whole head set fall off in a stream in G5, while he was trying to figure out why his helmet was on fire. We told him one had to expect these problems with carbide but when his generator threads fell off in the exact same spot the next trip, dropping his generator into the stream, he was beginning to doubt us. Who knows what he was thinking about while using a dim, temperamental, backup electric light on the biggest pitch he'd ever seen (the biggest pitch in England is the 95m in Gaping Gill - which he hadn't done anyway). Whatever it was, he still came back in to help Richard and I carry one of our four bags up through the Exhalar and into the twilight.

Because we were heading back early to catch the BCRA conference, in Bradford, that was the end of the 1992 pushing. We'd only managed ~150m of new survey but it is sure looking good for the next time. G7 has two big wide open routes, one fairly dry and the other wet, while G5 is going strong, though it is going to be a lot of work. If it does turn out to be the top entrance to Hirlatzhollen, the largest cave system in Austria, there will be a lot of pissed off people; not only will it be opening a second entrance, it could possibly make one of the worlds deepest through trips.

(The long black squiggly line on pages 10 & 11, the Canadian Caver Vol.24, No.1, is Hirlatzhollen - at 70km the longest cave in Austria with a vertical range of just over 1000m. [reproduced here as the background image - ed. note])

For more information refer to the Canadian Caver, Volume 24 Number 1, The 1991 British Expedition to Dachstein.