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JBN-8
EUROPE/RUSSIA

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Of Bones, Caves and History

In Which Our Fellow, Having Set To Entertain Himself By Exploring Caverns, Finds That Looking At France From Below Is An Interesting Vantage Point For More Observations.

PARIS, France October, 1999

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

"*Oui allo.*"

"*Chabert ici.*"

I needed only one word, not even his name, to recognize the voice of Jacques Chabert, president of *le Spéléo-Club de Paris* (the Paris Speleological Club), a century-old association devoted to cave exploration. Because of an old interest in caverns, I had naturally been drawn to this Club in the first months of my stay. In April, I even participated in the Club's annual underground *pique-nique,* for which the table was laid in a gigantic hall of chalk in a suburban quarry west of Paris. Having been properly wined and danced in the bosom of Paris, I was all the more ready when Chabert phoned in early May to invite me to join him for a camping trip in St-Pé-de-Bigorre, a tiny village in southern France. The pretext for this nine-hour road trip was five days of spelunking at the occasion of our sport federation's annual *rassemblement* (gathering). What a great occasion to use again my good-old equipment!

I had one good reason for bringing my exploration gear to France: With 30,000 known caves, the *République* is the Mecca of speleology. The country numbers about 20,000 modern-day cavemen — cavers, spelunkers, *spéléos*, *spéléologistes*, as they call themselves.[1] They survey 50 to 200 km of new galleries each year and organize about 50 international expeditions per year. The other superpower of speleology is the U.S., which harbors just as many caves, and the world's biggest (Mammoth Cave, a 560-km maze, in Kentucky). There may be as many American as French spelunkers, but France enjoys a special status as the birthplace of modern *spéléologie.* Consequently the French, who were the first to systematize and structure the discipline, remain the best organized. For instance, the *Fédération française de spéléologie* (7,700 members strong) is an active political organization that runs rescue missions and even a school (see sidebar 1).

I discovered caverns in 1987 when, as a young journalist, I embarked upon an expedition organized by the *Société québécoise de spélélogie*. I had then no

[1] Because the French are not afraid of big words, everybody refers to them as *spéléologistes,* who practice *spéléologie*, although the sportsmen refer to themselves as *spéléos*. English speakers who explore caves call themselves "cavers," and non-cavers call them "spelunkers." Those less concerned with sport and more with science are "speleologists." To purists, the exploration of abandoned quarries is not speleology, properly speaking, because these are artificial galleries and not real caverns. "I don't share this view," says Chabert. "Speleologists explore the caves they happen to have. In the Sptizberg islands, it's ice caves. In Hawaii, it's volcanic caves. And in Paris, it's quarries." The central problem comes from what you happen to call a cave. It is, after all, a very anthropomorphic concept: a cave is "enterable" space, which excludes a whole slew of orifices and conduits.

experience with caves whatsoever, but off I went to explore the caverns of Sierra Negra, in the State of Puebla, Mexico. The inhabitants of this isolated area of rainforest are Nahuatl Indians, descendants of the Aztecs. Because we could reach the sierra only by mule, getting there was half the fun. We explored impressive caves. One pit, called *Le Petit Québec,* turned out to be 328 meters deep in full drop. Another discovery, *Ehecatl*, is 800 meters deep and eight kilometers long — and it still "goes" — meaning, that's not the end of it and you can still go further.

This was how I discovered, at 22, this very bizarre discipline about which I have always remained ambivalent. After all, this is an extremely eccentric activity, and a hybrid one too boot, half science, half sport, with the consequence that it's hard to even figure out what it is exactly (see sidebar #2). I love the outdoors and don't mind getting cold, wet or dirty, but not cold, wet *and* dirty all at once, which is what you get in a cavern. This contradictory attitude called for some compromise. I ended up editing the magazine of the *Société québécoise de spéléologie* for five years and have been working on a novel on the topic. This is another common ground I share with Jacques Chabert, who has been the perpetual editor of the publication of the *Spéléo-Club de Paris*.

* * *

Chabert was the perfect companion for a peregrination across France. A self-employed translator of travel literature with an encyclopedic knowledge and an insatiable curiosity for people and places, he never runs short of topics of conversation. He is a true-blue speleologist, by vocation, which sets him in a class apart both in the underworld and as a person, although he would be the first to deny this. I had called him one day in March to get some information about his club and we got along immediately. Jokingly, we now call each other *Cher collègue* (My dear colleague).

An hour into our car trip, it came to me why Chabert's face had been so familiar. I had seen his picture in the very first book I bought in France, *Dans les abîmes de la terre* (In The Abysses Of The Earth). The author, Michel Siffre, narrates the story of experiments on confinement he conducted underground in the 1960s and 1970s (See picture). It turned out that in 1967, Chabert, then a young holder of a B.A. in English Literature, had lent himself to such an experiment that consisted of spending four and a half months underground in a cave with no possibility of seeing natural light! Those were the years. A passionate geographer, Chabert soon after crossed Amazonia in a canoe with a friend. He married, but this was not his last eccentricity. Two years ago, he took off with his backpack to walk 2,000 kilometers to make *le pèlerinage de Compostelle* (the pilgrimage of Compostela), a still-lively medieval tradition that took him from Paris to Spain's land's end in the western province of Galicia.

Old traditions die hard, and the date of the gathering had been set on *le weekend* (French for *fin de semaine*) of a very important holiday in France, the Ascension of Jesus, which is typical of the kind of practical jokes spelunkers tell among themselves.

Nine hours of driving and 250 FF of toll later, Chabert and I planted our tents in a cow field next to St-Pé-de-Bigorre in the Department of *Pyrénnées Atlantiques*, named after the barrier of conical mountains between Spain and France. Located in the foothills, St-Pé-de-Bigorre is the classical French *commune* (as puny towns are known in polite parlance). It features a public place, a central arcade, a big church, a 17th-century college and a few bars. The town's claim to fame is its proximity to Lourdes, the pilgrimage town where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to one Bernadette Soubirous in the grotto of Massabielle in 1853. The Virgin hardly showed any imagination in choosing such a place for an appearance. Like a Swiss cheese, the area around St-Pé-de-Bigorre is riddled with 800 known caves — one

Jacques Chabert, in 1968, plays guitar during the four months and half he spent underground. The purpose of confinement experiments was to measure how humans adapted to an environment deprived of the normal day-night cycle – like in a spacecraft or a nuclear submarine. It was found that the physiological day cycle could stretch from 24 hours to 108 hours depending on the subject and that people in such environments tend to spend more hours awake without loss of mental ability or skill. These experiments were conducted by French speleologist Michel Siffre, who was even hired by NASA to perform one on himself in Texas in 1972 – he was locked in for six months and thought he had spent only three when he was told his time was over.

underground river even flows under the *commune*.

Over 300 other spelunkers coming from all over France did just the same as we for their own idea of a good time: we camped and got rained on three days out of five. St-Pé-de-Bigorre is in the middle of one of the wettest areas of France, and I was probably the only one who did not know that rain may have been invented there. Interestingly, a friend of mine coming from the nearby town of Pau is aptly named Pierre Pluye (Rains).[2] This was a great opportunity for me to see if French people behaved differently wet and dry. They don't.

* * *

The organizers of the *rassemblement* (gathering) had done a good job of rigging and flagging over a dozen caves, ranked in order of difficulty from the flat to the ultimate (a 300-meter-deep cavern with an underground river). Feeling somewhat rusty, both Chabert and I chose to break the ice with the horizontal, 2-km-long *Grotte du Roy* (King's Grotto).

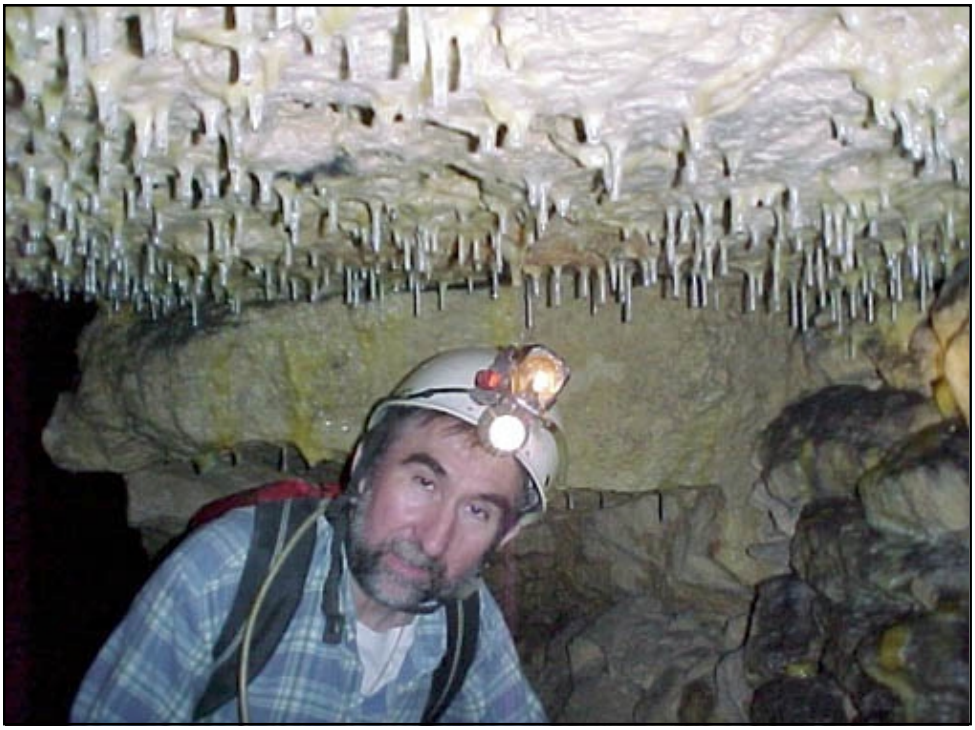
Lourdes is such a bore and so crass, touristically speaking, that things had to be done to keep the "pilgrims" (as tourists are known here) busy. Hence, a number of commercial caves have sprouted in the last 150 years, among which is *la Grotte du Roy*. The business went belly-up and the first few hundred meters displayed all the features of an abandoned cheapo touristic cave: sidewalk, gutters, fake stalactites. The non-touristic part, farther in, required us to climb slippery talus and breakdowns and crawl about one kilometer in narrow tunnels. We had a map of the cave but it quickly became wet and dirty too, before shredding. What we found at the end of this long crawl was well worth the trouble. It consisted of an immense chaotic passageway, 200 or 300 meters long, 15 meters high and five meters wide. We walked up and down huge boulders and breakdowns covered with clay and mud. The chamber ended in a sandbank. I was somewhat disappointed at the absence of speleothems, the technical terms for stalactites, stalagmites and the like. But Chabert was lost in admiration of the huge-spoon-shaped grooves in the stone, called scallops. "I've seen enough of these damn stalagmites," he said. "Look at the brute stone. It shows how the cave was actually produced."

Caves are great works of dissolution. Contrary to general belief, caverns are not formed by volcanic eruptions or by erosion, but by a chemical reaction, namely corrosion. Underground water containing carbon dioxide (CO^2) is in fact a light acid that attacks limestone. Over centuries, small crevices, joints and faults are enlarged and become caves. Once the water begins to flow under the effect of pressure or gravity, more corrosion occurs and erosion sculpts grooves and other fantastic shapes. Cave formations like stalactites are produced when the waters have receded. As water drips, a tiny quantity of CO^2 evaporates from the water, and an equal amount of calcite is deposited on the stone. Over centuries and millenniums, you get those petrified symphonies of stalactites, stalagmites, flowers, draperies and columns, in millions of shapes and colors.

The next day, Chabert and I wanted to test ourselves on ropes. We spotted on the list a pit cave whose entrance consisted of three pitches of 15, 12 and 13 meters in cascade. This was an ideal practice ground. Most caves are not horizontal and involve some descending and climbing, and this calls for ropes — alloy ladders were abandoned 30 years ago. I had learned rope-progression techniques 10 years before,, but it had been eight years since I'd last sat on rope.

"The beauty of rain is that it readies you for the worst," I thought as we stoically donned our equipment on the roadside under a downpour. Two spelunkers walking onto a wet, muddy, slippery trail in the rain develop a typical rickety-clack racket produced by the swinging and banging carabiners, descender, ascender, cow's-tail, light

[2] Salut Pierre.



Jacques Chabert makes considerable effort to look excited in front of a row of stalactites in the underground quarries of Paris. "I've seen too much of that stuff."

generator and helmet that comprise the general gear when one amuses oneself down and up ropes in darkness.

We finally made it to the cavern, named *Borne 109* (Milestone 109) because it was located just next to a milestone numbered 109. I could think of other names as I contemplated the entrance — a minuscule orifice that 100 mud-splashed feet had already properly lubricated before our own entry. The rope was tied to a solid metal rail laid over it and locked into concrete. I clipped myself to the handline in order to approach safely and then set my descender. This device is just a swiveling rack with two fixed capstans and a locking carabiner. It has never ceased to fascinate me that great masses like mine can be held in suspension as the result of friction created by a mere 8-mm rope passing through a flimsy-looking set of pulleys.

After eight years of armchair speleology, I had expected to be scared of sitting on the rope, but I felt confident about my equipment and did not blink an eye when I found myself in netherspace (spelunking poetry for "hanging on a rope"). So I gently slid down the orifice and found myself, two meters lower, at the top of a vast conical pit. The fragment of sky that was the entrance became smaller as I rappelled down. I landed at the bottom of the first pit, in the twilight zone, pretty content with myself for being wet, dirty and down.

I zipped down the second pitch, feeling great confidence, but I soon remembered the challenge of this sport is as much mental as physical. This realization took place in the tight crawlway that was taking me to the third pitch. I had entered feet first, which is the thing to do inside a descending squeeze. For precaution, the procedure is to tie oneself to the handline when there is one, and so I did. At the end of this descending crawlway, I needed to slacken the rope and let go backwards, without even seeing what the situation was. This was kosher, but extremely counterintuitive. Lying in the crawlway with both my legs hanging in the air over the next pitch, I looked at my gear and the thin rope. This was easy, they were right against my face. "Jean Benoît, *mon cher collègue*," I thought. "This is where you trust your gear or get out."

I let go and found a comfortable ledge on which to lean backwards over the pit. I executed a series of mandatory maneuvers and then zipped down to the bottom. I was laughing, because it had just occurred to me that, for the first time in five months, I had not thought about the next newsletter. Speleology is also pure escapism.

Whereas the first two pits were crude cones of irregular limestone, the third was covered with flowstone. This most common calcite formation is produced by calcium-saturated water slowly oozing from the ceiling, walls and floor. Over the centuries, the water produces deposits of smooth brown, yellow or amber stone that make the cave look like a petrified glacier.

Jacques was not impressed by all this flowstone, but I was and I looked around for a while before shooting for the climb, the second half of our rope drill. As opposed to climbers who start from the bottom and ascend by finding the proper footholds and grips and for whom the rope is just a protection, spelunkers start from the top, go down on rope and climb back up on the same rope. In the movie *Cliffhanger*, actor Sylvester Stallone does the trick by pulling himself up hand over hand, but spelunkers use their arms for more intelligent tasks and prefer pushing with their legs. For this purpose, spelunkers use two blocking devices that have the property of sliding when pushed up, and of gripping the rope when any kind of weight is applied. Only the legs do the lifting because one blocking device is connected to a set of stirrups. Americans call this sit-stand motion the "Frog system" in honor of the French who invented it and for the fact that it looks a bit like a frog swimming.

This is a great method when mastered and frequently

practiced, which was not the case for me. I arrived exhausted at the top of the last pit, and had trouble extricating myself from the narrow, slippery orifice. The only way out was by chimneying, which consists of climbing using the counter pressure of back, feet, arms, knees or elbows while pushing up the blocking devices. It was raining heavily and my surroundings were covered with very liquid mud, so I was completely brown and steaming hot when I freed myself from this, excuse my French, *merdier* (shithole).

A group of spelunkers were waiting for their turn to go down, commenting on the equipment and the technique of this apparition from the depths. One spelunker with a ponytail was protecting himself from the rain with an umbrella, which was somewhat surreal since he was wearing a dirty and ripped spelunking suit. I cursed my way out, and the French went berserk when they realized that they were hearing a French Canadian debouching and blaspheming his way out. The guy holding the umbrella asked:

"*Comment dites-vous, monsieur le Canadien?* (How did you say, Mr. Canadian?)"

"*Tabarnaque!* (untranslatable French-Canadian curse referring to the Tabernacle, that little niche in the Church where the holy bread is transformed into the body of Christ if you believe in Transubstantiation)."

"*Merci*," he replied in a state of bliss, and he went on chanting: *"Tabarnaque! Tabarnaque!"*

The Virgin, who lives nearby, must have heard, because the rain suddenly stopped as we squished our way back our way to the car.

We were getting undressed on the roadside when the mailman, who was driving by, stopped his car. Chabert, still half dressed but ever a great conversationalist, went to talk to him. To our surprise, the mailman evoked a local version of the Blair Witch Project.

"So, have you found the nun?" asked the mailman, laughing.

"What nun?"

"Well about 10 years ago, a nun came to visit her family and help for the harvest. She went to pee in the woods and nobody every found her again."

"Right here?"

"Around here."

"We'll keep our eyes peeled."

I am glad to write that we found none of the nun, nor her bones — and neither did she find ours. Not that time anyway...

This is me, wet and dirty, but not yet cold.

* * *

"*Oui allo*."

"*Chabert ici*."

"*Cher collègue!*"

It was then mid-July, and Chabert was calling to invite me for a little outing in the abandoned quarries and ossuaries beneath Paris. I found the proposal perfectly cool, and not only because an afternoon in the underworld would be fresher than the hot Parisian summer. For a thorough visit, all you need is a good guide, proper lighting and dirty clothes. Jacques had the guide and I had all the dirty clothes he wanted. The only precaution was to be discreet because our activity, although not illegal, was not perfectly legal either. To put it in other words: the twilight zone is a shady zone. For reasons of public order and safety, the police had already reduced the number of entrances to the network of underground quarries from 250 to two. And zealous policemen occasionally raise eyebrows whenever they see shady characters approach quarries, although Chabert doesn't exactly look like a gung-ho technorave-bash organizer.

A week later, I was waiting for Chabert at our rendezvous point on Place de Rungis, in the 13th *arrondissement*. The second person to show up was our guide, Jean-Paul Delacruz, who drove his motorbike in his spelunking garment — anything but discreet. A copy editor for *Le journal officiel*, the National Assembly's official publication, Jean-Paul Delacruz is a passionate explorer of quarries. Never leaving home without his camera, he collects shots of paintings, sculptures, engravings and graffiti produced by troglodyte artists. He had organized this outing for the purpose of finding a gallery said

Our guide, Jean-Paul Delacruz, arrived at the Place de Rungis on his chopper dressed just like that.

to contain some interesting works of art. As you can see, our excursion would be mostly among *lettrés et gens de goût* (men of letters and of taste). Jacques soon arrived with another friend of his, one Gérard Potier, a mason but unfortunately not a freemason — a French Freemason Bricklayer in the Catacombs of Paris would have been too cool!

Place de Rungis is right next to an old, abandoned train station, near the mouth of a 20-meter-wide tunnel that used to be a section of the city's inner-circle railway. We entered the tunnel and followed the old tracks for about a kilometer. The darker it got, the less graffiti and broken glass there was. In the middle of the third railway tunnel, which was right below *Parc Monceau*, we turned our lights on. Along the wall, a few rough stairs took us below track level to a short crawlway dug straight into the wall.

One, two, three, four, and we found ourselves walking inside a man-made gallery into the underworld of Paris. There were telephone wires running that way, as well as some bottles and graffiti - people came this far for some jolly good gothic fun. We could stand straight and walk fast. So we did, for a few hundred meters. In places, the gallery is made of raw stone, and the diggers' scraping marks still show. In others, the gallery is walled with fine masonry. The place is absolutely silent, but for the occasional rumor of the subway — coming from above. Except for some wet areas that require a leg-straddle on each side of the gallery in order not to get wet, the quarries are mostly dry, although their depth of 20 meters places them well below the level of the Seine River.

After a few hundred meters, we found a carved-stone street plate, indicating which street was above our head, and Delacruz changed direction. He was carrying a map of the network of galleries, but plates have been carved at every gallery intersection to tell you what's overhead. There were no such amenities two centuries ago when the porter of one convent disappeared in the quarries. His remnants were found 10 years later and were identified by the set of keys next to them. Because the porter was not supposed to be there in the first place, nobody knows how and why he lost himself, but historians speculate that he might have been looking for some legendary wine cellar. The porter never found the port wine, nor the way to port. Chabert, who doesn't want to become another *mystère de Paris*, never leaves home without his compass and two days of lighting in reserve.

Below Paris, there are 300 kilometers of such galleries — and many more in the suburbs. Every kilometer is a reminder of why Paris is Paris. Some of these galleries date back to the 13th century. There was no machinery at the time, and quarrymen preferred working in tunnels. Unlike spelunkers, they were not doing this to capture someone's attention, but because this made the work eco-

Jacques Chabert straddling a partly flooded gallery below Paris. A suburban friend of his has found his house to be located some 11 meters over an old quarry. "He bored a 11-meter pit from his basement and now enjoys 250 km of cellar."

nomical. The exploitable bedrock of limestone is 15 meters deep, and digging an open pit meant shoveling aside just too much prime agricultural land. Hence tunneling.

Quarrying was grueling work, but a true craft. The best stone for masonry had to be found, then the quarrymen scraped the shape of the block some two meters deep with iron bars, before breaking the block loose using wedges. Unlike London, which was built mostly of wood, Paris was built with that splendid native yellow limestone that produces the city's particular light. Another abundant material in the area, chalk, was used to make plaster, which has fireproofing properties. After the great fire of 1666 destroyed London, the King of France ordered that all wood structures in Paris be covered with plaster, thus preserving the capital from major conflagration.

Édouard-Alfred Martel is generally recognized as the founder of modern speleology. He coined the term in 1895 although his first exploration dates back to 1888. This eccentric lawyer organized hundreds of exploration campaigns in France and abroad and even gave a course of speleology at the university of La Sorbonne in 1900.

In all, the four of us walked for five hours in abandoned quarries of the 13th and 14th *arrondissements*, covering a rather huge distance without ever being lost. We examined all types of art, masonry and plates, in addition to traces of modern exploitation, like wheelbarrows, sheds, wells and old steel ladders. Stepping down one of these ladders, we went down an extra level and found the gallery that Jean-Paul Delacruz had been looking for. There were many samples of drawings — not good enough for *le Louvre*, but of some historical interest. They decried and described the working conditions of a century ago; one was a note left by a communist running away from conscription.

Quarrymen quarried below Paris in total anarchy until the beginning of this century. There were no plans of where the galleries were and no working standards. Some were poorly supported and most had been forgotten, which was fine as long as these quarries remained outside city limits. The expanding city began to encroach in the 17th century, and new construction caused some galleries to collapse. The problem became so severe in the 18th century that Louis XVI created in 1775 an office to find, survey and reinforce these galleries: *l'Inspection générale des carrières* (General Inspector of Quarries). An architect, Axel Guillaumot, was put in charge. His name appears on most pillars near Place Denfert-Rochereau, his starting point. Guillaumot enjoyed massive funding, hence the miles and miles of masonry walls, hundreds of supporting pillars, fine stairs and wells that can be found everywhere in the maze.

A testimony to a long and rich history, these quarries served as chapel, bunker, crypt, ossuary, cellar and even mushroom bed. Throughout the 19th century, thousands of tons of common white mushrooms were produced below the City of Lights until city-dwellers got tired of the emanations coming from the fermenting dung in which they grew. The network was so extensive that the French installed sentries and loopholes in the galleries during the Franco-German war of 1870-71, and so did the Germans during the Occupation of the 1940s. Signs in German are still visible and old bomb shelters can still be visited. A few blocks away, the Resistance was also using the quarries as secret passages. Tragic things have happened, like the massacre of the last 800 *communards* (insurgents of the Commune uprising in 1871) in the quarries of *Les Buttes Chaumont*, in the North of the city. The quarry was walled in and nobody ever found where it had happened at all.

But the quarries' most famous use, to this day, is that as an ossuary. The Catacombs of Paris contain the bones of six million Parisians. Between the 5th and 18th centuries, so many people had been buried in the *cimetière des Saints-Innocents*, next to *Les Halles*, the central market place, that the ground had been raised two meters over street level. The authorities realized they had a public-health problem when an over-packed communal grave burst into the basement of a neighboring house. So King Louis ordered all cemeteries closed inside Paris and emptied of their bones. These would be stored in the first sections of abandoned quarries that were just being reinforced. Bones were trucked at night, followed by processions of chanting priests, and thrown into the gallies any old how. In the early 19th century, the new *Inspecteur des carrières*, Héricart de Thury, probably to save space, began piling the bones with great art, adding altars and engraving quotes on the walls in the pure-minded spirit of the nascent romantic era. This created an aura, and, to this day, hundreds of

Héricart de Thury (not shown on this picture) took only two years to make the Catacombs presentable to the public — in the spirit of the nascent romantic era. The use of the term Catacombs is somewhat of a barbarism since, contrary to the original Catacombs in Rome, no early Christian hid below Paris to escape the persecutions of the Roman emperors who were using them as burning material and lion feed.

people line up daily to visit the official Catacombs.

There was no such fuss in the unofficial Catacombs, like the one where Jean-Paul Delacruz took us below the *cimetière* Montparnasse, a messy heap of reddish bones certainly akin to what the official Catacombs looked like before Héricart de Thury's quaint work. As we approached, we began spotting bones and skulls here and there. The ossuary proper is a star-shaped chamber with a huge pillar in the middle. It was created during the cholera epidemic of 1832, as the authorities were looking for a way to get rid of old bones to make room for new. The overall result is a mess of bones.

Rather than exciting, as I expected, the effect was prodigiously morbid, to the point that the quaint, official Catacombs appear almost Disneyesque by comparison. Being squeezed against one another, we ended up walking on the feet and heads of generations past as there was no other way to move around and take pictures. In some sections of the chamber, you still find remnants of candle wax on skulls, a sure sign that there had been some strange goings-on in there. I was surprised at how quickly we got accustomed to the perfectly horrible, although I will never forget either the hollow, wood-like sound produced by the reddish bones underfoot. There's not much to us humans, really.

This took place months ago, and as I write this I realize that I may have committed a profanity, a desecration, not just a mere flirtation with the horrible. But was it profane? Can one trample bones with respect? We acted out of curiosity, albeit morbid, but without knowing what this was all about, and certainly without the intention of committing a profanity. Maybe the unease comes from proximity. Would I feel exactly the same coming out of a Roman, Egyptian or Aztec necropolis? It is odd, because those bones are what's left of people who laughed, ate and made love just as you and I a few centuries ago. Yet those bones are not those people, no more than their decaying bodies were. When, then, can we say that dust has returned to dust, and ashes to ashes? ❑

SIDE BAR 1

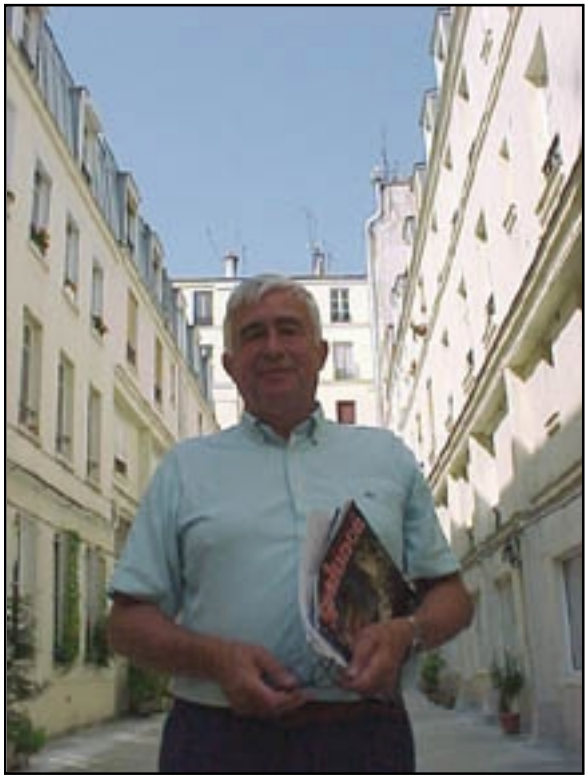
A MINIATURE GOVERNMENT

The strongest specific difference between the French and the rest of humanity is their mode of organization. *La Fédération française de spéléologie*, for instance, is nothing short of a mini-government. The word Fédération doesn't have the meaning of a loose, decentralized organization for the French, who regard this as anarchy. Rather, it is a status thing: it means that the association is the official representative of the sport to the State.

A number of perks come with it. First of all, the Ministry of Youth and Sports gives the *Fédération* an annual subsidy of 1.5 million FF (U.S.$250,000), which is little below a quarter of the annual seven-million-FF budget. More interestingly, the Ministry also lends, and pays for, five civil servants to act as managers and also to serve as liaison with all levels of government. Because the head office in Paris is in the center of a speleological desert, the bulk of the material and staff, as well as the 8,000 sq.-ft. office, are in Lyon, close to where the real caves are.

Between the clubs (where the fun is), the head office (where the politics are) and the Lyon office (where the right stuff is), there are two more levels of government. Seventy-eight out of France's 95 *départements* and 21 of its 26 regions need an elected speleogical committee to debate interdictions, subsidies and exploration campaigns. And, more importantly, rescue. "French speleologists are the only ones in the world legally responsible for their own rescue," says Bernard Lips, an engineer from Lyon and a director of the *Fédération*. Rescue is a big macho thing everywhere in the world, but especially in France, where firemen and policemen customarily refuse to be told what to do. However, investigations proved that a few deaths had resulted from not knowing what things are like down there. Since the early 1980s, each *Préfet*, the head of police in each *département*, has a technical advisor for speleological rescue. This advisor effectively calls the shots in case of emergency. It is the departmental committee that organizes the rescue teams, and that manages rescue training and drills. French rescuers have intervened as far as Poland and Morocco.

Education being a strong value in French society, the *Fédération* created its own Ministry of Education, called *École française de spélélogie* (French Speleogical School) — an original structure that only the *Société Québécoise de Spéléologie* replicated. The School trains beginners and advanced speleologists in rope techniques, in rigging, in anchoring, in rescuing, in teaching, in the scientific approach and even in cave-diving technique (there is such a sport!). In addition to all this, the school studies proper techniques and material, and sets standards. For one such test, for instance, they dipped nylon ropes in all sorts of fuels in order to test the rope's endurance under various conditions. "Manufacturers lend us their testing facilities," says School director Joel Possich, who in real life trains locomotive drivers for the national railway. "This is in everyone's interest."



Says Bernard Jodelet, General Manager of the Fédération française de spéléologie, *"A man just phoned to report a few kilometers of new passages in a cave where he also found the upper section of a femur of a mammoth. Speleology is a dream."*

Sidebar 2

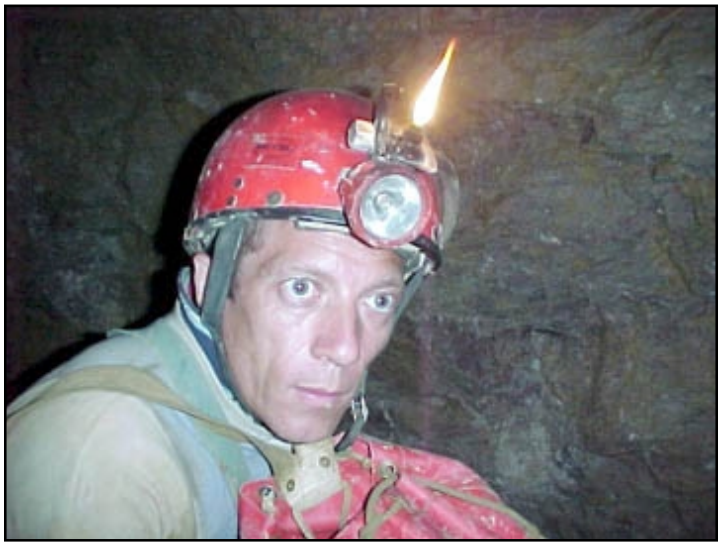
WHY

"Literally, speleology means a discourse on caves, and it refers not to a science but to the practice of exploring and studying those geological formations," says Jacques Chabert, president of *le Spéléo-Club de Paris*. But why do spelunkers splelunk?

Jean-Marie Chauvet and two spelunking friends found 32,000 year old paintings in a new cave in the Southern region of Ardèche in 1994. The forgotten painters had used perspective, a technique viewed until then as an invention of the Italian Renaissance some 31,500 years later.

Caverns can be studied just for the heck of finding a new geographical area. This is the purely descriptive aspect of it. Caves are of interest to geologists, hydrologists, hydrogeologists, archeologists, ecologists and paleontologists. They can also be studied for their physiological effect or their ecology. After all, caverns house bats, and some species of insects, fish or spiders have adapted to this extremely hostile environment to the point of being unable to survive outside.

Yet, the science is difficult to dissociate from the sport, since caverns are rarely fitted out for wheelchairs. And many spelunkers couldn't care less about the science, and go just because they are sports. I confess, to my embarrassment, that I have never known why I was interested in those God-forsaken places. Why do I go get cold, wet, dirty and miserable in a cave, hanging on a rope, or crawling over long distances, under scant lighting, with clay in the gloves and sand in the underwear, marinating in wet clothes? Spelunking is an elaborate form of masochism. Maybe a perversion of stamina.



Spelunkers usually prefer lighting themselves with acetyl gas rather than electricity. Although more powerful, electrical light is reserved for emergencies or wet environments.

But here's the problem: every time you question spelunkers on their motivation, they give a commonplace answer or get angry. Pure curiosity may be what it's all about. Cavemen used to dwell in the entrances of caves, but a few marginals went deeper, to paint, for instance. The oldest painting, in a southern France cave, is 32,000 years old. However, traces of coals and footprints found very deep in caves are ample proof that some cavemen found

nothing better to do with their days than just go.

So why? The best answer came from a climber — maybe because climbers have a better perspective and are less myopic. Journalists kept asking George Herbert Mallory why he would risk his life to climb Everest — this was in 1924 just before Mallory disappeared on top of the world. His answer: "Because it's there." Maybe spelunkers are the catatonics of the underground: they go because it's there and they have to keep busy. "'Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt." This explanation has the merit of including modern-day and good-old-day cavemen.

Philippe Drouin (center), editor of Spelunca, *the FFS official publication, checks the effect of vinegar on a stone to see if it contains limestone.*

Aside from the adrenaline rush it can provide, speleology brings great esthetic and intellectual rewards. When you see anything at all, caves are beautiful. Their attraction may also come from their symbolic, allegorical or psychological significance. This makes them one of the strongest metaphors of human conscience. It is not by accident that you find reference to caverns in all religions. Few words are loaded with such an emotional charge, except maybe "the sea" — another cold, wet, miserable place.

This is because caverns are the last frontier, the only place of pure geography where you have to go in order to see for yourself. No plane, no satellite, no funny robot can take you where a speleologist can go. Aside from space and the bottom of the sea, it is the last area of dream. Call it the space program of the poor. To paraphrase Captain Kirk in the TV show Star Trek, spelunkers go to places where no one has ever gone before — and is ever likely to return to.

In France, where speleology has enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy for a very long time and where the media regularly report findings, discoverers of new caves are often referred to as "inventors," as if the fact of bringing light where there had been none before actually created the space. This might have to do with the fact that literature is highly valued in France and that the geographical, descriptive approach to speleology, both scientific and literary, has strong appeal in a land of the Encyclopedia. Discovery is a form of appropriation.

Spelunkers may go for the glory, but the glory remains pretty obscure. In the eyes of nonbelievers, caves are generally regarded as a metaphor for what they are, a dark dead end. But to spelunkers, who use a variety of signals and codes to understand each other in the echoing wells and pits and chambers, one thrilling scream sounds just like music: "It goes!" This is probably the mystery of caves, and the mystery of the interest they raise and have raised.

INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University.**[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. **[SOUTH ASIA]**

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Paige Evans. A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Whitney Mason. A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called The Siberian Review in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.**[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." **[sub-SAHARA]**

Jean Benoît Nadeau. A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."**[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Susan Sterner. A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women.**[THE AMERICAS]**

Tyrone Turner. A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.**[THE AMERICAS]**

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. **[EAST ASIA]**

ICWA Letters **(ISSN 1083-4273)** are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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