**Alex Pitcher Award Report- Kate Smith**

From 15th July to 15th August 2010, I joined Imperial College Caving Club on their summer expedition to the Julian Alps to explore the expansive Slovenian cave systems there. ICCC have been present in the area almost annually since 1994, running joint exploration with a local club from the town of Tolmin, the JSPDT. From Tolmin we travelled 6km to the large limestone plateau of Tolminski Migovec, within the Triglav national park. Here I lived for 27 days with various members of the expedition, unified by the sole motive to find and survey virgin cave.

Six of us set off to Slovenia in a university minibus that was jam-packed with 2km of rope, food and caving equipment.  24 hours after leaving London and passing through France, Belgium, Germany, Austria and Italy we arrived at a member's flat in Tolmin. We were warmly welcomed by the members of JSPDT and the ICCC members who had arrived some days before to set up camp on the mountain. As one of three new cavers to the expedition (having been caving for barely a year). I was met with much excitement and plans for my first caving trip in the mountains.

The next morning we drove some way up the mountain to a farm belonging to a family kind enough to lend us some barn space to keep our supplies and equipment. From here we carried as much as we could the rest of the way up Migovec to 1880m above sea level, each member making several 'carries' over the course of the expedition.

Camp on Mig consists of tents dotted around the plateau and a communal living space known as the Bivi. The Bivi is a nice big shake hole with a little cave and an impressive stone bridge to provide some shelter. Here we cook, eat, drink and occasionally take naps. Tarpaulin is strategically hung around the Bivi to catch rainwater for consumption. When not underground the members congregate here to discuss the exploration and organise future trips. Because the depths at which we cave cave are so large, there is an underground camp at -550m with a capacity of four so that teams can rest between pushing trips.

The initial plan was to introduce us newbies gently to the huge depth of the Slovenian caves with several trips preparing us for underground camp, although this did not entirely work out. My first trip was to Gardener’s world, also known as Vrtnarija, one of the two main cave systems in Migovec. Having heard of how Slovene caves differed enormously to British caves I didn’t really know what to expect and found the prospect of entering this alien territory a little daunting. The first thing I noticed was how sharp and jagged the rocks were so that everything from my oversuit to cowstails got caught, frustratingly hindering movement. This wasn’t too much of a problem though, as the cave is pleasantly wide and tall with very few passages requiring crawling or squeezing. All of the hard work is in the large proportion of Single Rope Technique needed. On my first trip we went to -130m, the depth of a good-sized British cave, and it was lovely and very much in my comfort zone. We had, however, only been down small to medium sized pitches; from where we had turned round, at the top of a 60m pitch, things further on looked considerably more intimidating.

After a day off from caving due to mad blisters, the opportunity arose to help set up underground camp. I was initially a bit weirded out by this idea as I came to Slovenia with the eventual goal to make it to underground camp and now I was going to do what I came to do in 3 days time! However I am not one to say no to a challenge so hastily made my way underground before I could change my mind. A team consisting of another eager fresher, two experienced cavers and myself made our way down the largest pitches I had ever seen, the largest being Concorde (my favourite pitch), which at 90m high is big enough to fit a Concorde in and has the most magnificent limestone formations. After a few hours and considerably improving my descending technique we made it to the site of underground camp. It was a long way down and after seeing how much rope we had passed I was dreading prussicking up. I had never prussicked such a huge distance before, how do I know if I can do it? We quickly set up camp by pitching the tent, making the beds and unpacking food. We brought a MP3 player and speakers down so that any fears or panic in my head were soon drowned out by happy music and dancing. One thing I learnt from my month in Slovenia is that David Bowie can make any dire situation a happy one. After having some food and listening to the oh-so-homely Blackadder we went to sleep, 550m beneath (almost) solid rock and completely disconnected from the world.

We were awoken by members who were on the night train (caving at night, sleeping in the day) – they had already been pushing and wanted our beds. We reluctantly crawled out of our snugly sleeping bags into the 1oC cold and quickly changed into our cold and wet caving gear. Next was the gruelling ascent. Due to fear of exhausting myself I adopted a relaxed pace, taking a whopping 8 hours to get out of the cave. Unfortunately for the member behind, this meant waiting for me and led to attempts to speed me up such as force feeding me chocolate and even singing. At the first glimpse of sunlight I thought I was going to cry with happiness. It’s strange that after a mere 24 hours without sunlight you miss it so much and all that physical effort just to see it again makes it all the more magnificent. Unfortunately after this feeling subsides you realise things were a lot more exciting underground and that perhaps going back down is on top of the list of things to do.

The next few days were dedicated to treating blisters, nursing sore hands and resting strained muscles. When I was suitably fit and there was a bed free in underground camp the time arrived for my first pushing trip. We went down in a team of three and shortly after entering the cave met another team who had tales of their discovery of ‘Wonderland’, a passage with lots of promising leads and pretty stals. Knowing these leads were ours to follow we eagerly descended to underground camp. Some interesting incidents on the way down such as my hair getting jammed in the descender and a scary slip ensured things stayed exciting. I was glad to be back at underground camp, home sweet home.

Kicked out of bed at seven by the night train, I gingerly put on cold caving gear, ate some fishy cheesy soupy smash and headed off to ‘Wonderland’.  Unfortunately this involved an encounter with the scariest pitch I have ever and hopefully will ever come across. Initially named Leopard due to the Leopard spot shaped mud splats on the walls, it soon became known instead as Cheatah, due to that fact that a successful passage elicits a feeling nothing less than one of cheating death. Whilst waiting for the pitch to be rerigged in a safer fashion, a good deal of dancing was required to keep warm. The caves after Cheatah are majestic. Large amphitheatre-like holes, gloriously decorated passages and chambers full of large rocks to climb over, wiggle between and slide under. The name Wonderland was well deserved.

However, as wondrous as it all was, exploring this only recently discovered cave and wandering further and further away from camp really scared me. Sleeping so deep underground, waking up and travelling even further into the abyss sent me a little crazy. Normal life has never seemed so far away. Thankfully a new, never explored pitch was quickly rigged and as the newbie I was allowed to descend first into the virgin cave. Fear was soon replaced with excitement, I would be the first person ever in the history of everything to see and touch and just be in this part of the world. The pitch led to a nice sized chamber with a stream way at the bottom. No waiting for the other two, I scampered into the narrow passage, which became a pretty, winding stream way with crystal clear water and white limestone. This ended with a pitch that ended our pushing (but began someone elses). After agreeing on the name ‘Serpentine’, due to its snake-like meandering and association with the Serpentine Lake, we began the arduous task of surveying the new cave. After surveying we headed back to camp, tired and emotionally drained. Cheatah was no more pleasant going up than coming down, the slippery mud made it frustratingly tricky to reach the top. Glad to be back at camp.

After 6 hours of prussicking we made it for sunset and enjoyed the relaxed life of the plateau. The next day the survey data was entered into the computer and we saw our new passage in 3D and linked to the rest of the system. One week of caving and already 1.5km of cave ha been discovered! Over the next few days the rain came which kept the cavers underground and the rest of us huddled in the bivi. These days were dedicated to games of chess and cards. After the rain had ceased I had a little trip down system Migovec, the more thoroughly explored system that it is hoped connects with Vrtnarija. We had a day dedicated to scaling the nearby peaks, which provided some exhilarating climbing. We then travelled down to Tolmin and enjoyed luxuries such as pizza and swims in the emerald green water of the Soča river.

Showered and rejuvenated we headed back to the plateau, anxious to get back underground. Due to the amount of interest from Slovenians and ICCC members alike to get in on the action it wasn’t till the final days of the caving period that I got to return to camp. Two of us were to pack up camp and hopefully get some pushing done in-between. Camp was not a friendly as in the early days with litter and leavings of bodily functions tarnishing the once pure environment. After a long sleep with no one on the night train to wake us up we reluctantly got out into the cold and made our way to the pushing front. Although we found no further leads I was given a tour of the majority of the new findings this year. We saw some of the strangest formations such as several spirals of mud that looked like a plug had been pulled beneath them. The huge rifts and chambers are glorious and lots of fun to explore. We headed back to camp to finish the pack up and slept at camp for the final time this year. Had my last serving of fishy soupy cheesy smash (Thank god!) and went on my way. Heading out we met the various teams sent down to carry the remaining bags who made their presence known with singing heard from many pitches away.

The next few days were spent packing away the bivi, removing all evidence of our presence in the national park. After saying goodbye to the plateau we travelled to Tolmin and stayed in a member’s flat. The next few days were spent giving presentations to the enthusiastic locals about our exploration. A total of 2.2km of new cave all below -550m left spirits on a high. A connection between the two systems now looks ever more likely which, if found, would bring it close to being the longest cave in Slovenia. On our final night we celebrated our achievements with the JSPDT with traditional Slovenian music, dancing and drinking.

Very hungover, we packed the minibus and reluctantly left Tolmin. This will be an experience I will never forget. Not only has my caving vastly improved and my thirst for caving increased but it was the first of many caving expeditions I will be part of. The excitement of caving in new countries will always enthuse me but I have the feeling that as many times I may explore the deep caves of Tolminski Migovec we will always have unfinished business.