Australian Caver No 143 Feb 1998

Journal of the Australian Speleological Federation Inc



Cocklebiddy

Alpine Style

by Stefan Eberhard

Imagine a large tunnel filled with water. Beams of green light strip away the darkness and reveal the grand architecture stretching away into the distance. The water is crystal clear and the sculpted white rock is displayed in intricate detail. Blocks of rock lie haphazardly on the floor, undisturbed since they fell from the roof thousands of years ago. The fragile skeletons of ancient sea creatures, as old as the rock itself, protrude from the walls. Imagine as if in a dream - that you are suspended weightless in the inner space of this tunnel. You are relaxed, breathing easily, and "flying" through the tunnel which twists and turns before you, constantly changing in size and shape as you obediently follow its contortions.

The silence is broken only by the crash of air bubbles escaping from your regulator, and the reassuring metallic whine of the scooter motor. The powerful light held by your companion following behind casts a gigantic moving shadow onto the wall ahead. The phantom image becomes blurred, mirage like, as you cross the boundaries between water layers of differing density. The tunnel seems to go on forever. You lose touch with time and distance. The raw elements of light and dark, water and rock, noise and motion react vigorously to overwhelm your senses. Euphoria envelopes you.

Scootering through Cocklebiddy is not always so much fun. I recall an occasion on my most recent trip there when I was controlling the scooter and towing Tim Payne behind me, but the length of the tow strap was a bit short so that Tim's bulk tended to rest upon my legs. This meant that I couldn't lift my fins above the wash of the scooter propellor, nor could I use my fins to stabilise myself. I found this situation extremely irritating and the urge to kick Tim in the face was becoming almost overwhelming. As we sped along through the underwater tunnel I became so preoccupied with this thought that I failed to notice - until too late - the wall of the cave looming rapidly toward us.

When we hit there was an alarming explosion of escaping gas and I was convinced that the end was near because I could hear and feel my precious air

supply draining into oblivion. Amidst the noise and confusion Tim had the presence of mind to quickly turn-off the tank valve which had been knocked open in the collision. In cave diver speak, this was a 'crash and burn' situation. The incident had not been life threatening as it turned out, because was carrying plenty of additional air supplies. Nevertheless, the 100 Bar pressure of valuable air that got wasted in those few

seconds was a sobering reminder of the unforgiving environment in which we had chosen to play this game.

Our game was an 'alpine style' approach to reach the end of Cocklebiddy Cave. Alpine style is a term derived from mountaineering. The concept essentially involves a small team carrying the bare minimum of equipment and climbing fast to reach the summit of the peak. Moving fast and efficiently in the mountains means that you are exposed to the natural hazards for a shorter period of time and therefore have a greater chance of survival, so long as everything goes according to plan. Climbing alpine style contrasts with the



Tim Payne with scooter - photo Stefan Eberhard

traditional 'expedition style' approach which involves sieging a mountain with plenty of back-up resources in the form of large numbers of climbers stocking intermediate camps and installing kilometres of fixed ropes for retreat in case of bad weather or accident.

In the unpredictable mountains, bad luck can strike anyone at any time no matter how good, or careful, a climber you are. The difference doing it alpine style versus expedition style is that if you get into trouble you are much more reliant upon your own resources. This may seem like stacking the odds against yourself, but for many climbers this is an acceptable risk. Doing it alpine style helps preserve the challenge by keeping climbers and mountain on a more level playing field. The great

sense of satisfaction and personal achievement which goes with pulling-off a successful alpine style ascent is reward enough in itself. A more tangible benefit to the lightweight approach is that it is logistically easier to organise, and sometimes cheaper.

Cocklebiddy Cave consists of a single, straight tunnel more than 6 kilometres long, of which more than 90% of it is underwater. From the entrance lake the first sump is about one kilometre length to the air-filled Rockfall Chamber. Dive gear must be transported over the Rockfall Chamber to the second sump which is 2.5 kilometres in length. The second sump leads to another air chamber named Toad Hall. Dive gear must be carried across Toad

Hall to reach the third and final sump which is 1.8 kilometres in length. The shallow depth of water in Cocklebiddy (usually less than 15 metres) means that decompression is not a serious problem.

The first tentative dives into Cocklebiddy began in 1972, but the end of the cave was not reached until more than a decade later. As the divers pushed further into the cave they needed more air tanks, but to help them carry these extra air tanks they needed other divers, who in turn needed their own air supplies, and so on. The immense quantities of air required for long duration dives of this type necessitated the development of special techniques and equipment such as underwater sledges which could be loaded with extra air cylinders and equipment and then pushed along by the divers. The prototype sledges were unwieldy devices which had a disturbing tendency to become overly buoyant as the divers drained the air from the tanks lashed to the sledge. On one occasion, a long distance into the second sump, a disaster was narrowly averted by piling rocks onto the sledge to restore neutral buoyancy. As the length of the cave grew, so too did the logistics expand exponentially. In much the same fashion as a Himalayan expedition, the pyramid of support gradually extended further inwards to allow one, or just a few, fortunate divers to reach the end.

Ever since being a sherpa diver on the

The Australian expedition following on the heels of the French involved 14 divers, four sledges and 80 air tanks. It took two weeks to do a single major push which involved establishing an advance base camp in Toad Hall. In gung-ho style, Hugh Morrison snatched the world record back by pushing a single tank in front of himself as he squeezed a further 200 metres beyond the end of the French guideline. The end of the cave was not visited again until 12 years later, when Chris Brown extended the passage another 20 metres. Techniques had evolved somewhat in the intervening period so that the 1995 expedition exploited the use of scooters, but still required six support divers, two sledges, and 60 air cylinders.



Stefan Eberhard in Cocklebiddy - photo Tim Payne

1983 expedition I had secretly harboured the desire to do an alpine style trip to the end of Cocklebiddy. Despite the legacy of large-scale expeditions at this site, I knew a lightweight trip was possible because that was how the French did it when they scooped the prize of exploring the third sump, right from under the noses of the Australians. Francis Le Guen and his team of four other divers arrived at Cocklebiddy in September 1983, just one month before a major Australian assault was due to take place. The French had an advantage with their underwater scooters. and over a six week stay they did two epic pushes, claiming afterwards to have reached the end of the cave 1.6 kilometres into the third sump. At the time this feat represented the longest cave diving penetration in the world.

I believe there will always be a place for both expedition style and alpine style approaches in cave diving and mountaineering. There are of course, all manner of gradations in between these two styles, but the fashionable approach has tended to be away from the big expeditions and towards smaller groups. Both of the big cave diving expeditions I've been involved with - the 1983 and the 1995 Cocklebiddy expeditions - were thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding experiences for me. On these trips I learnt a great deal about diving techniques, and I also learnt a great deal about people, because expeditions tend to bring out the best, and the worst, in people. I wouldn't swap these valuable

life experiences for anything.

Tim and I would not have contemplated our alpine style trip without the experience and invaluable knowledge of the cave we gained from previous expeditions. No amount of planning, technical expertise, or sheer bloody-mindedness would have got us through otherwise.

Thus it was in 1997 that Tim told me, "You need six tanks, two scooters and an attitude."

"But what if my scooters fail?" I asked him.

"Then I'll give you one of mine," he replied.



Tim Payne diving in Cocklebiddy - photo Stefan Eberhard

"And if that scooter fails too?" I countered.

"Then I'll tow you out on my other scooter", he retorted, "and in the unlikely event that all the scooters fail we'll still have enough gas to fin out! Now, ...I have a spare scooter you can buy."

"Can I test drive it first?" I queried.

"Sure." Tim replied.

"OK, if it gets me to the arse end of Cocklebiddy and back I'll buy it - if it doesn't you can go and retrieve it yourself," I said.

"It's a deal."

I found Tim's confidence somewhat disarming, but encouraging nonetheless. The crux of doing a long penetration into Cocklebiddy Cave is lugging the heavy dive gear across the air chambers. In my opinion the greatest hazards lie, not in the flooded sections, but in the Rockfall Chamber and Toad Hall where there are loose and treacherous rockpiles. Nevertheless, I confess to feeling a bit vulnerable out there in the middle of the second sump, with the nearest air space more than a kilometre either way, with just Tim and his bloody scooters my only companion and lifeline.

Underwater caves are a much more predictable environment than the big mountains and I don't consider our trip to have been at all bold. It certainly wasn't epic - we were both surprised at how easily everything came together. We did one set-up dive to the Rockfall Chamber, had a rest day then went for it. I helped carry Tim's gear over Toad Hall to the third sump - with twin backmounted tanks and one stage tank he scootered almost to the end of the known cave and explored a couple of side passages on his way back. We exited the cave after 18 hours underground. We had another 'rest' day then retrieved gear from the Rockfall Chamber. We were back on the road having being on site for one week. I would argue that our dive involved less risk than attempting to climb a glaciated mountain, and I certainly felt much safer in the cave than I do driving in my car.

Cocklebiddy is no longer the Everest of underwater caves, although the comparison may have been appropriate in those heady early days when it was the longest cave dive in the world and the end was nowhere in sight. To reach the end of Cocklebiddy these days is no big deal, but it's no picnic either - it takes years of training and experience, lots of gear, and lots of money. It helps too, if you've got a rat in your belly making you do it!

Our trip was not alpine style in the pure sense because our strategy relied upon an initial dive to the Rockfall Chamber to set up gear for the big push, and afterwards, a clean-up dive. The next challenge in Cocklebiddy is selfevident. No set-up dives this time - just walk in, swim to the end of the cave then walk back out with the gear you've got on your back - that would be one hell of a trip. With the rebreather equipment that is readily available nowadays, such a trip is very feasible.