

## IB-14 Exit Cave – D’Entrecasteaux River Sump: Dive 1

Janine McKinnon

22 February 2013

**Party:** Mark Euston, Laure Gauthiez-Putallaz, (Diver) Janine McKinnon, Pierre-Dominique Putallaz, Ric Tunney

Mark, Laure and Pierre were down from Canberra for a four day weekend and offered to help sherpa my cave diving gear to Exit Cave, in exchange for the opportunity to visit the cave. It seemed like a bargain to me, so we jumped at the offer.

I won’t bore you with all the pre-trip dramas and organising (I’ll be boring you enough with the dive report), enough to say that we left the car park at 9:30 am on a lovely day. The track was in good condition, and very dry, and we reached the cave after a little over an hour walking.

We transferred dive gear to cave packs from walking packs before entering the cave zone. I have never seen the water levels so low in the cave. We barely got the soles of our boots wet crossing the stream to climb up to the gate. I thought this was a good sign. I didn’t quite realise just how low the water was.

We made quick work of getting to the junction of the D’Entrecasteaux River and there bid farewell to the other three. They were going up cave to look at a lead Mark found on last year’s Extravaganza. We agreed a meeting time of 3:30 pm back at the gearing up point outside the cave. It was then 11:40 am.

Ric and I started sorting out my dive gear in a leisurely manner. We had nearly four hours, after all.

Ric ferried my tanks upstream to the sump lake whilst I got dressed. This takes some time as there is a lot to dress up in.

I haven’t been up the D’Entrecasteaux streamway for maybe 20 years, and didn’t have a clear memory of what the sump looked like. When I got to the lake I could see that I had about 30 m of sump length before the end wall. There were three passages continuing on. The left hand passage did not seem to have any current. The middle and right hand passages were partly joined, and the middle was the longer before the roof appeared to lower to the water.

There seemed to be a very slight current coming out of the middle or right hand passage, but this was very slight. Usually, with high flow in the stream, the direction of the passage would be visible from the current flow, however the current was so slight as to be undetectable.

There was reputed to have been one prior attempt to dive this sump back in January 1994. The report was one paragraph in a larger Exit cave trip report, and the information was relayed second hand (*JSSS* 39(2):28 1995). Apparently the diver made 6 m before the cave became too tight for back-mounted tank, however I had two advantages:

1. I had 7 litre side-mount tanks (lower profile) and
2. I am quite small, and fit places others can’t.

Unfortunately the (very vague and short) report failed to mention anything about where the main passage started from in the lake. I’m guessing the stronger flow made it obvious.

Visibility was less than 0.5 m, before I moved and stirred it up [down? – Ed.] to 0 m. The very low water, and flow levels,

meant the water was very tannic. Picking such a low flow season was starting to look like a poor decision.

I started with a swim along the lake, checking to see if anything obvious appeared as I moved up the lake. Nothing did.

There was a narrow passage, water-filled but with air space, heading straight upstream (referred to above as the middle passage), so I decided to start with that.

I went back to the end of the lake, got geared up, and headed off with (optimistic) exploration reel in hand. I got to the start of this passage, swam (surface) along it for about 7 m, around a small corner, and then it started becoming shallower, and narrower. I ended up in 0.5 m water, air space above me for about 5m, in a tube/rift about 1 m wide. I tried to swim up it for a bit (hoping for sump at the end) but dragging tanks along in insufficient water to float was not proving very successful. It looked to pinch down about 5 m ahead of me.

I backed out (not very elegantly – luckily there were no spectators) and went back to report. I had seen no current in the passage, or felt air flow. It wasn’t looking promising.

I then tried the right hand passage referred to above. I could see a small gap between a blade of bedrock and a boulder in the floor. With visibility of less than 0.5 m the only way to know if anything goes is to go there. I headed down into the gap. I could just fit by careful orientation of myself and tanks. I dropped down 3 m and hit ground. I was in a gap in a rockpile. I couldn’t fit through a small gap that I could see dark void through. If I took both tanks, and my helmet off, I might possibly squeeze through. I wasn’t very keen on that idea at all, and certainly not without a really good reason to think this was the way on. I had nothing to indicate it was anything but a gap in boulders.

I tied off my exploration line, cut it, left it *in situ* and exited.

After another confab with Ric, I started looking along floor level, back towards the end of the lake where Ric was sitting, looking for something. My very poor visibility was only getting worse as the silt was flowing away only very slowly, and everything (and I mean everything) I touched crumbled to dust or spilled large amounts of silt into the water.

The rock below water level was extremely fragile and friable. It was also covered in many centimetres of silt. Tying off my line as I moved forward was very difficult as most of the rock projections I tried to use crumbled when I touched them.

I had now been in the water for two hours, although only about half that time (or maybe less) had been spent actually underwater. My visibility was even worse and I was feeling a bit “done for the day” so to speak.

It was time to adjourn and reassess.

We went back to the junction with Exit main passage and started packing up. Ric again brought the tanks back whilst I undressed. We decided to leave the tanks, and much of the gear, in the cave. I had only used a small amount of air so the tanks could manage without a re-fill. Let’s face it, I have to actually find some underwater passage to dive in before I need lots of air!

We left most of the kit up at the barrels at Camp 1, and brought out the clothing (to dry) and the regulators (to clean the muck out).

We left the cave and arrived back at our rendezvous point at 3:15 pm.

The others didn't arrive back until after 4 pm, so to keep moving, so as to present less of a target for the multitude of mosquitoes, we went looking for another possible bridge point across the river.

Ric found a very likely-looking tree upstream of the current crossing tree by about 50 m. We arrived back at the cars a bit before 6 pm.

We will return next weekend to have another go.

Gotta love Tassie; it's either too much rain or not enough.

KIT:

2 x 7 litre Faber steel tanks. 2 x APEKS XTX 50 second stage regulators. 2 x APEKS cold water first stage regulators. Razor harness. 2 x 3 kg weights. Rude Nora light, 2 x Intova back-up lights. 4th Element Thermocline Explorer and long sleeved top, Bare Polarwear 200, DUI TLS 350 drysuit. 7 mm gloves, 2 x hoods, mask, Diverite fins, Diverite Nitek Q computer. Exploration reel, safety reel.

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## **JF-463, JF-599, JF-464 and a few others**

**Alan Jackson**

**23 February 2013**

**Party:** Stephen Bunton, Mark Euston, Laure Gauthiez-Putallaz, Alan Jackson, Andreas Klocker, Pierre-Dominique Putallaz

Mark was back getting his caving fix for the month. He wanted help with a dig up near the JF-385 & 386 Wherretts Swallets (see SS392:9-13). They'd excavated all the mud in October 2012 but couldn't move a couple of large rocks. We bumbled round the McCallums Track to just before the dry gully that heads up to JF-385 & 386. I gave my usual spread out advice. Within 40 seconds we were so spread out that when Laure shouted out she'd found a cave only 30 m from McCallums Track only Andreas and I were close enough to bother heading over to her. The hole was a good one – a small entrance located in a small depression half-filled with roots and dirt but issuing a magnificent draught and a view down two small consecutive pitches. By the time Mark found us we'd tagged it – JF-463 – on the only bit of limestone bedrock hiding under the overhang of roots and dirt ('uphill' side of entrance) and decided that since we came to dig and we had all the tools that we'd leave this promising cave till later and focus on our first target.

We spread out again, finding Bunty on the way – he'd gone via Warhol in his travels. Nothing else of interest was found on the way to the dig. It'd been several months since their first effort in this hole so a bit of tidying up was required to remove the mud and crap that had washed back into the entrance. This revealed the large dolerite boulders that were causing the problem and we made light work of them, once we figured out how much potential energy we had to supply – dolerite is stronger than limestone!

Andreas did the last shift and cleared the entrance of offending bits of rock and the pitch was open. Laure headed down first while Mark acted as a human plug to prevent the back wall of the entrance (which is a freshly excavated face of mud and rock prone to shedding bits of itself every now and again) throwing projectiles at Laure. Mark, Andreas and I headed down shortly after (just using the rope as a handline since Laure had proven that the walls were acceptably stable). The cave consisted of a ~5 m pitch (or climb) with a couple of massive dolerite boulders perched halfway down, followed by a steep ~7 m slope to a small chamber/aven. Here the cave intersected a near perpendicular joint. To the left the joint was very narrow and headed up; to the right it was a bit wider – widest at the bottom – and descending steeply but the base was full of rocks and fill. Mark got enthusiastic about digging out the cobbles but the only sensible suggestion he made was bringing Anna up, as her six year old frame would probably have fitted with enough gumboot pressure from behind. The

joint/narrow rift could be seen to continue for 5-6 metres but there was no obvious opening-up beyond and I suspect the cause is lost in this particular cave. We tagged it JF-599 – on the left of the entrance, when looking up hill, on an arête of limestone. There was a bit of dirt and moss on the tag spot so it is likely that this tag will get grown over in a decade or so – armed with a GPS and the photo of the entrance we took it shouldn't be hard to find again though. It is likely that over next winter, when water flows into this entrance, that it'll change a fair bit – i.e. the back wall of mud and rocks will collapse/settle. Hopefully the hole is big enough now that it'll stay open but there are some large dolerite boulders in the mix that might be big enough to plug the entrance again.



*'Digging by committee' in JF-599.*



*Andreas and Pierre at JF-599 post dig.*