

# FROM THE RIVER TIMAVO TO THE SEVEN HILLS OF ROME

**Via Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and France:  
Ten show caves in Western Europe. PART 2 – France and onto Italy.**

– Andy Spate

So off from the *Fontaine de la Vaucluse* to the *Grotte de Orgnac* arriving late in the afternoon in time to make myself known to the very helpful and hospitable Mme. Eliane Marion at Reception. The buildings, carparks and gardens at this *Grand site de France* have recently been rebuilt – a grand site indeed! It rejoices under the full name of the *Grotte en Ardèche et Musée de la préhistoire d'Orgnac l'aven* indicating that as well as the cave there is a fabulous Museum of Prehistory.



*Grotte de Orgnac* – complex stalagmite  
with petal-like plates around base

Poking around the rather fine outdoor interpretive material including some excellent models of cave and karst development I heard the noise of primary-aged children at play. Around the corner was a large classroom with a sandpit where these lucky kids were practising their archaeological excavation skills. A bit like the pit just outside the rear of the Flinders Chase National Park Visitor Centre that many ACKMA members saw a few weeks ago.

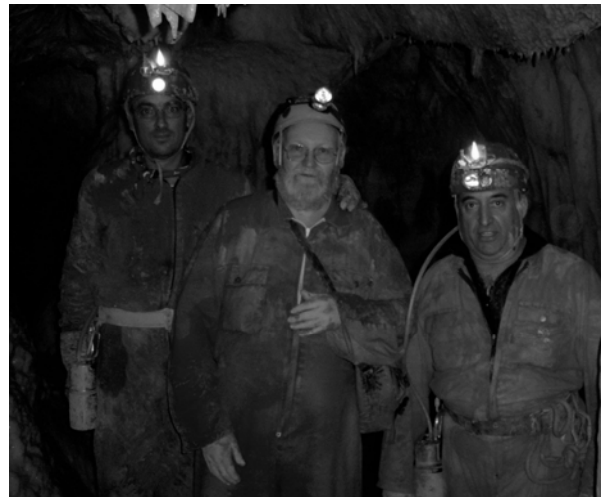
So about 30 people gathered for the party – including a nattily dressed French lady in a 'Parisian style' with two small dogs on leads. I guess she is waiting outside I thought to myself. Wrong again! They went through the cave with us including the odd leg-lifting episode! I was to find that about half of France's 108 show cave operations allow dogs on leads. And that dogs shitting on the floor of the TGV train restaurant car seemed to not produce the response that we might expect. Down through a not inconsiderable

flight of stairs through a tunnel into the first of three huge chambers. These huge chambers, common in European caves, have no equal in any Australian, New Zealand or Korean show cave. This cave was first discovered in 1935 by the renowned Robert de Joly who descended through an enormous *tomo* in the roof of this enormous chamber.

Interesting mix of old and new handrails and punched steps in stainless steel. I liked the slightly smaller diameter of the handrails that we commonly use although they were rather too high for my liking. The track lighting was interesting with much being fairly redundant. Although all tracks had handrails there were little spots inset into the track surfaces – but well distant from the edge? There was also white strip lighting to show path edges.

The huge chambers had the expected huge stalagmites with the petal-like plates around their bases that one comes to expect in these big holes. Again we do not have good examples in our show caves.

Indeed, the only good example I can think of is The Khan stalagmite in Kubla Khan Cave, Mole Creek. The complex form and structures of the stalagmites in these European caves is truly wonderful – and difficult – for me at least – to comprehend the mechanisms which produce the weird shapes.



Frasassi – on the adventure tour. Andy with  
Guides Pietro Izzo and Gianni Barbarossa

Generally the cave is well lit and in the final chamber – after a frightening number of steps reaching ever downward – there is the expected light and music display. As it is a one-way cave one should look back to appreciate the cave fully – unfortunate plethora of naked lights. Unfortunate amount of lampenflora. Again a fine sound and light finale before getting into the lift for the 121 metre ascent to the surface!

Grotte de Demoiselles – entrance to the cave, visitor centre and restaurant



The tour itself was conducted almost entirely in French although I was provided with a fine English language tour guide pamphlet. The only English was the comment made to me that 11oC was too cold for a tee shirt! Me! The tour seemed to consist of 45% dirty jokes (judging from visitor response), 35% 'elephants ears' etc and 20% 'science'. Tour length is one hour although ours was about one hour 20 minutes. It is open 10 months with about 130,000 visitors a year. One group every ten minutes in the summer – and some of these are delivered in English and other languages. About \$A15.

After emerging from the lift house one wanders down through a not very good kiosk and into the Museum of Prehistory that is simply magnificent. Fabulous, high quality souvenirs and books in here unlike in the kiosk. The displays, models and so on are very good indeed. About 70% of visitors pay a premium on the ticket price to visit the museum – although not many stayed long.

All in all this cave is well worth a visit – the stalagmites and the museum are a must! Back to the village of *Ornac L'Aven* for a couple of glasses of *vin (very)ordinaire rouge* at the *Hotel les Stalagmites* and then a very fine dinner and bed in the *Hotel de l'Aven*.

Had a lovely wander round the stone village in the morning before setting off to the *L'Aven Grotte de la Forestière* only to find that it was closed for the winter. Rather cross but it turned out for the good as I had more time in the *Gorges de l'Ardèche* and the next two caves. The gorges are just fantastic although the high and winding road is a little nerve wracking. The *Pont d'Arc* is a well-known feature and a two or three-day canoe trip through the gorges would be a highly memorable experience. This was the only one of the numerous spectacular karst gorges found in this part of France that I was able to visit – got to go back!

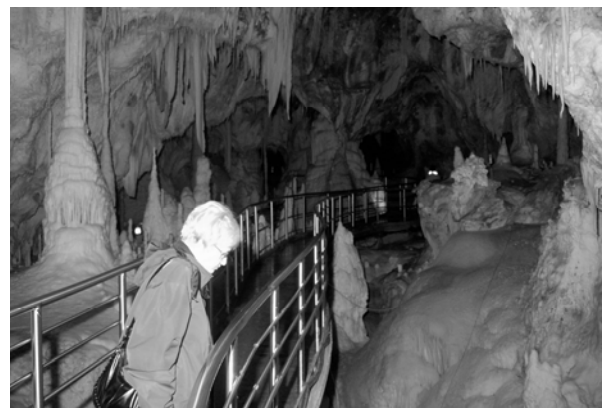
In the middle of the Gorge I found the small *Grotte de la Madelaine* where I had a splendid one-on-one tour with the fine English-speaking Mlle. Edwige Benoit. It is actually two caves – one enters through *Obscure Cave* and then through a short tunnel into the *Grotte* proper and then back up again. A wonderful little cave but it is a bit over-lit in places with some unnecessary lampenflora and there is the obligatory sound and light display. I was learning to enjoy them!

Absolutely magnificent views of the Gorge from the cave entrance and access paths.

English and French language tours in the summer; about 50,000 visitors in ten months party size of 40 – or was it 60 (which must be very difficult)? The small, but adequate, visitor centre and coffee shop contains some great interpretive signs and models. Again a must for a visit if one is driving through the Gorge.

Onwards – ever onwards further along the Gorge – many more photos taken! And then the *Grotte de St Marcel d'Ardèche* and another one-on-one trip through this very large cave with Mlle. Sylvie Pesenti. Above ground the site is not as pleasant as the *Grotte de la Madelaine* but the cave is a great contrast. Down an enormous flight of 416 steps to a huge stream passage with wonderful scalloping, bellholes, cupolas etc. Also a great deal of large speleothem scattered around. Wonderfully well lit in some places, not so well in others.

One of the main features of this cave is a splendid flight of rimstone pools said to be the largest in any European (show?) cave. These are lit underwater in a variety of changing colours which is a little twee but not too bad. Two sound and light displays in this cave. Lots of fanciful names for speleothems – allegedly left behind by the exploring cavers. Also to be found is a good Palaeolithic cave painting of a bison high on the cave wall – executed in the 20th Century! A copy of a genuine painting in the non-tourist part of the cave.



Frasassi – Renata Marinelli (Executive Officer of the International Show Caves Association) in the cave.

Again well worth a visit. Funnily enough both Edwige and Sylvie didn't like their maximum party sizes. Note that I have mentioned that in the high, summer, season there are English language tours in many Western European caves. It may be possible to organise a winter holiday guiding in Europe – but at least some German, French or whatever would be very useful and I suspect that the pay might be somewhat less than a cave guide might get in Australia. If anyone is interested I can provide some email contacts.

One point to note about most of these caves in Eastern and Western Europe that Kent, Steve and I have visited is that most operations have only one cave and one tour unlike many of the bigger operations in OZ and NZ. Not easy to be a guide.

Frasassi – 12th Century church in the Santuario della Madonna di Frasassi cave high in the Frasassi Gorge



Next stop to be the village of *St Bazuille de Putois* below the *Grotte des Demoiselles* somewhere beyond *Nîmes*. Bit of a horrible trip – confusion between *Arles* and *Aix* on the same highway but 1800 apart – and the usual problem with French signposting on roundabouts – plus some incompetence. Arrived late in the afternoon and saw stainless steel and glass glinting in the setting sun high up on the hillside. Went up to see what time the cave opened in the morning. Discovered ANECAT having cocktails before their AGM the next day. Seemed to behave much as an ACKMA meeting. ANECAT is the *Association Nationale des Exploitants de Cavernes Aménagées pour le Tourisme* – the French equivalent of ACKMA!

After a fabulous dinner and a fine country homestay I returned to the *Grotte des Demoiselles* at about 0950 for a 1000 opening – a little delayed after the night before in the result. Here I met up with Mme. de Gruilly, the wife of the President of ANECAT, and the Past President Dr André David from the Aven Armand – a cave I had wanted to get to but had by now run out of time. The infrastructure at the cave entrance is simply amazing and modern being completed in 2002. A tunnel constructed leads up into the cave via a funicular railway. The cave itself is practically one huge (again) chamber (*La Grande Salle*) with a smaller chamber opening off to one side to the original large window entrance high on the hillside first explored by the great French cave explorer E.A. Martel in the 1870s.

The path winds around *La Grande Salle* tunnelling here and there through massive calcite and limestone bedrock. The steps, pathways and handrails are 1930s concrete which fits surprisingly well into the cave environment. Fantastically well decorated – those big stals again! And huge columns. There is more calcite in a couple of European show caves than there is in all Oz and NZ show caves together! Again a must see.

A good tour with four languages in the ~30-strong group which included some loud teenagers who were very effectively shut up by the guide. Groups of up to 60 which 120,000 per year. The cave is cleaned yearly in the vicinity of the pathways with a five yearly lampenflora attack using hypochlorite. Fine model of a cave bear – *Ursus spelaeus* – in the entrance tunnel.

Then down to the village to partake in the ANECAT AGM – all in French so I was fairly much at a loss to know what was going on although there was a nice little row about radon and governments and OH&S that made me feel at home. There are about 108 show cave operations in France – almost all of which are members of ANECAT and at a guess I would say that about half would have been at the AGM. There were also trade representatives selling souvenirs in bulk, ticket machines and cave management consultancies as well as a fabulous collection of freebie posters and pamphlets – prick up your ears Scotty ... Apparently there are about six million cave visits a year in France with some caves only open for six months, others ten with only a few open all year.

I was invited to address the meeting which I did extending a strong welcome to all to come to Buchan next year. There seems to be some interest and it would be wonderful if some of the fabulous welcomes that I received in Western Europe could somehow be returned. I Am very grateful to Guihelm, Mme. De Gruilly, David and Alain for their friendship and hospitality that included a splendid lunch to sustain me on my way toward Italy.

A very scenic trip back past Aix-en-Provence and along the *Côte d'Azur* – a place to be avoided at all costs especially at the rush-hour and considering that the tollgates on the motorways occur about every 20 metres – or that's what it feels like! Eventually found a hotel high above the coast with only two other people dining so I survived before my very wet drive into and across Italy on my way to Frasassi. Fifty tunnels in the first 80 kilometres! And huge viaducts!

The village of San Vittore Terme at Frasassi is an interesting mix of ancient with castles, churches on one hand and a Korean-style souvenir village at the carpark on the other. A bus takes the visitor up to the cave about one kilometre distant. I had established contact with Renata Marinelli, Executive Officer of the International Show Cave Association (ISCA) and she had booked me into the local hotel. Interesting place. The bathroom was too low to stand in too pee but comfortable enough. Renata came to meet me the next morning to take me to the castle where she works to meet the president of the Frasassi cave operation – Mario Mingarelli. Then back down through the wonderful Frasassi Gorge to the cave, which, although known widely as *Le Grotte di Frasassi*, was originally called *Grotta Grande del Vento* – Great Wind Cave.

This is a cave that I very much wanted to see and took more than four precious days from my short time in Europe to get to it as I had heard Elery and others praising it over the years. Although a truly remarkable cave perhaps I had allowed it to become too important in my mind. Not that I regret visiting it for one moment. The cave is entered through a 200 metre long excavated tunnel with three sets of doors to keep the cave climate happy – *Grande del Vento* is very accurate! The tourist trip runs for another 600 m in and out on essentially the same track. It has about 300,000 visitors each year with groups of

up to 60 with language groups in summer. It must be a very difficult cave to guide because there is no real way of controlling party movements as the lights are switched on all day from a very impressive switchboard in the cave office. There are no gates to bunch parties up and the path widths are constrained by passage size in many places. There are proposals for an exit tunnel that would be the making of this cave if the environmental and money issues could be sorted out. The fittings are stainless steel.

The cave is amazingly white – the limestone must be extraordinarily pure as the speleothems are usually white, cream or a very light yellow at the most through almost all of the cave. In some ways it is difficult to fully appreciate the cave and its contents, as there is not much contrast between the colours of bedrock and the speleothems. That said the calcite forms are mind boggling, as is the first chamber that is said to be the largest in a European show cave. The Grotta Gigante at Trieste also makes this claim – they must be of relatively similar dimensions but Frasassi is entered from the bottom and is essentially horizontal which does make life somewhat easier. The cave was originally entered by a very long descent into the first chamber. Some of the stalactites and stalagmites are simply enormous and very complex.

After the first enormous chamber the cave is very much smaller and one can appreciate the speleothems better. Some are protected by glass in fittings that could be much improved by following Chester Shaw's approach at Maracoopa or perhaps Peter Bell's at Mammoth Cave at Margaret River. I think that the cave is over-lit in some places and there are a distressing number of naked lights to be seen for a cave that has been so comprehensively studied and designed before opening. A C-Bus or similar approach to lighting this cave would certainly make guiding easier and improve the visitor experience. *Lampenflora* is controlled as soon as seen – this sounds to be virtually a fulltime job.

I would certainly have like to spend much more time in this wonderful cave. I did have the opportunity to go on an adventure tour in this cave. Overalls, wellington boots, helmets and lights provided. I must admit that I was aghast when 23 other young adventurers (in two groups)

turned up for the 3.5 hour trip. Some had done the tour before and some had a bit of English. My guides, Gianni Barbarossa and Pietro Izzo, were wonderfully helpful and there were many calls for 'Andy to come forward' so that I could be shown special features or avoid the squeezes that guides seem to delight in inflicting on their clients in such situations. And some who are not guides! Great fun was had by all and some nice stuff seen. Interestingly even the mud is white in Frasassi and at the end of the adventure we were all washed off (with piped water) before we got back onto the tourist track. However there was an impact with 26 people at once and I think there may have been some souveniring of stals and there was certainly a lot of mud moved around. Musical stals also.

I also had the opportunity to have a look at the local scenery which included the very spectacular Frasassi Gorge. High up on the side of the gorge is the *Santuario della Madonna di Frasassi* – a large cave entrance and cave running back some 400 metres. Set into the cave entrance are a tiny 12th Century church and a much larger (and more expensive) 19th Century church built by Pope Leo XII who was born at the nearby village of Genga (where Renata's castle is situated). Most dramatically for an ex-member of the Lord Howe Island Board of Management I was astonished to see a Lord Howe Island palm in the small church. The *Santuario* is the site of an Easter pageant and school and scouting-type groups visit the cave regularly. A few small signs about bat conservation may not have much impact.

All in all the Genga district was fun and very interesting. So off to Rome the next morning – most of a day's drive and the initial encounter with the GRA (Grande Roma Autostrada = ring road) was somewhat alarming but thankfully not for long. Onto the plane for Frankfurt – lovely view of the Alps poking their peaks through the clouds at sunset – and thence to Singapore, Sydney and my own bed! I want to go again!

For more information on these caves and others around the world visit the great site <[www.showcaves.com](http://www.showcaves.com)>. Those of you who manage caves show look at the site and update it where needed – which is in quite a few places!



Village of St Bauzille de Putois – Andy about to address the AGM of ANECAT.  
President Guilhem de Gruilly (far left) and Secretary Alain Frances