

Short report on the 2016 CUCC expedition to Austria

The 2016 expedition – the 40th anniversary of the Cambridge University Caving Club expedition to the Loser Augst-Eck plateau – was a resounding success, with 30 people in all participating over the six weeks. Although we experienced some setbacks with a significant portion of the time during the expedition seeing weather that was much wetter than usual, which caused problems with access to some areas, a total of 6127 m of passage was surveyed, bringing the total length of the Schwarzmooskogel cave system over the 120 km mark.

This expedition divided its resources between two main pushing areas: deep leads found in 2015 below Kraken Chamber in Tunnocksschacht, and further explorations in Balkonhoehle, now in its third year as a major project. The significant length of rope required for these projects, as well as the number of expeditioners working on the projects, meant that we were unfortunately unable to pursue our third main objective, which was to explore some of the further reaches of Kaninchenhoehle. This remains an objective for future expeditions. Additional smaller projects completed this year included pushing leads in Champagne on Ice (also in Tunnocksschacht; first dropped in 2014), Korokorohoehle, Eislufthoehle, and Plateauhoehle 90/1.

Current lengths

258 (Tunnocksschacht): 4095 m surveyed: 18101 m long, 903 m deep (deepest single cave in the system)

264 (Balkonhoehle): 2032 m surveyed: now 9002 m long, 314 m deep

Total length of Schwarzmooskogel system: 120371 m long, 1111 m deep

Tunnocksschacht

The 2015 expedition saw the deep leads in Tunnocksschacht, Number of the Beast and Clayton's Cock-up, pushed to just over –600 m and –400 m respectively. Both were left with extremely promising ongoing leads at the bottom. The commute to the pushing front below Number of the Beast had become a rather serious undertaking, and we felt that we had reached the point where camping was necessary to facilitate efficient exploration.

An underground camp was set up in Kraken Chamber (approximately –600 m) with facilities for up to four cavers at a time. Access to the camp was hampered during periods of extremely wet weather (the Procrastination pitch becomes impassable in flood), but having recognised this hazard, we closely monitored the weather forecast, and all those wishing to camp underground were able to experience it at least once.

The camp proved very successful, with the steeply ramping Octopussy passage yielding plentiful leads beyond. The deepest point reached this year, visited by a total of four cavers, was a dry mud sump next to a sandy dig at the end of Song of the Earth – a 15–20 m round passage carrying a substantial streamway. This disappeared into a pile of boulders, but the cave continued in substantial phreatic ramps to the mud sump, which was surveyed to –903 m. This is easily the deepest we have ever been on a CUCC expo in Austria, and we believe that we may have stumbled across the equivalent of the Stellerweg streamway draining the other way (it is heading roughly west). The big question is: where is the air coming from? We presume the existence of as yet undiscovered cave that is not yet connected to the SMK system at a higher level – so this is a very significant find.

There are still plenty of leads in this area, so it was decided to leave some of the camping equipment in situ, which should make setting up next year's planned camp somewhat easier. In addition to our exploratory activities, a species of pseudoscorpion was discovered and subsequently identified as being endemic to the area.



Camp Kraken. © R. Lawson



Hydra, below Camp Kraken. © R. Lawson



Survey of Hydra, below Camp Kraken

Balkonhoehle

Although first explored just two years ago in 2014, Balkonhoehle has already been explored to over 9 km in length and was connected to the main SMK system in 2015. The principal foci of exploration this year were the expansive Long Drop pitch series (descending around 200 m), Cathedral Chasm (found to connect in elsewhere in the cave forming a closed loop), and Hilti-a-Plenty. On the very final trip of the expedition, a caver inadvertently discovered a very large chamber (over 40 m in every direction) while waiting for his companion to derig. This will certainly be one of the focal points of next year's expedition, and the rest of Balkonhoehle still has plenty of promising yet relatively easily accessible leads to occupy us in future years.



Balkonhoehle © I. Peachey