



# Dachstein Caving Expedition 2022

There have been British caving expeditions to the Dachstein plateau, high in the Austrian Alps, for over 50 years. The Dachstein is a world-class caving destination with large amounts of both limestone and potential. The annual summer expedition attracts hardened expedition cavers, students and others from a large number of caving clubs and countries.



*Figure 2: Descending C1  
(credit Alex Reid)*

In 2018 the expedition made the historic connection between WUG Pot, high on the plateau, with the monster 112 km Hirlatzhöhle system at the bottom of the mountain. This increased the total depth in the Hirlatzhöhle to over 1500m, making it the 9<sup>th</sup> deepest cave in the world.

Normally the expedition runs every year. Unfortunately Covid-19 meant that we were unable to run an expedition in either 2020 or 2021, and so the 2022 expedition was the first since 2019. Together with some uncertainties regarding costs at the Wiesberghaus, this led to an increased expedition fee this year. Many long-term participants were

unable to attend this year due to work; many other cavers were very busy with other expeditions as Covid restrictions were eased, and a number of participants who were signed up had to withdraw for various reasons.

The result was one of the smallest expeditions in some years with only 12 members in attendance. We also suffered badly due to wet and stormy weather, which significantly hindered exploration,



*Figure 1: Re-rigging the entrance series  
(credit Paul McCarron)*



*Figure 3: Rain on the Wiesberghaus  
(credit Andrew McLeod)*

and a single case of Covid-19 at the end of the expedition. Despite these difficulties we still made good progress towards several of our objectives.

The Dachstein is a training expedition; as well as having several cavers join us in Austria for their first expedition we also ran our usual open-invite expedition training weekend on the 20<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> May, which was well attended by 35 cavers. As usual, cavers from several other expeditions were invited and attended.



Figure 5: Stretcher-carrying practice (credit Chris Jewell)

injuries and planning for rescue. Day two went to a local stone mine to cover stretcher carrying, surveying and stretcher hauling.

Prior to the expedition, we set a detailed list of objectives. The first objective was to re-rig WUG Pot as some of the ropes were now getting old (particularly with the three-year gap due to Covid). With only 11 people on the trip, re-rigging the entire cave was implausible, but teams began re-rigging shortly after arrival in Austria. This went well for the first few days, although the weather then started to turn from dry and hot to cooler and often stormy; there were a few trips that headed into the cave but had to be aborted due to stormy weather.



Figure 7: Re-rigging the underground camp water pitch (credit Paul McCarron)



Figure 4: SRT self-rescue practice (credit Chris Jewell)

These training weekends have been organized for

more than 20 years, aimed at deep Alpine caving but useful for all expedition cavers. The first day covered SRT kit setup, how to manage SRT obstacles and expedition-style rigging, rock-breaking techniques, underground emergency and survival kit, underground camping, and SRT self-rescue. A local caving doctor gave an evening talk on expedition medical risks and issues, followed by a talk by a member of a local cave rescue team who is also a paramedic on medical kit on looking after yourself on expedition, treating basic



Figure 6: Underground hauling (credit Chris Jewell)

A first camping trip was planned to install permanent Cavelink antenna, survey various leads and push the Forbidden Aven by bolt climbing. The first attempt to descend the cave was abandoned due to wet weather causing flooding on the pitches, but over the next two days all five campers made it to the bottom.

The Cavelink system was generously funded by Ghar Parau and is shared between the Dachstein expedition and the Cambridge expedition. It was put to good use here; a weather forecast was sent down to underground camp warning of impending rain. The weather continued to be problematic at best, preventing any further

camping trips until nearly the end of the expedition.

Towards the end of the trip there was time for one more short camping trip to an open lead, but here Covid struck with one member testing positive. Given that one of the campers was feeling ill (although testing negative) and the potential consequences of falling ill 700m down, the camping trip was reduced into a bounce trip to retrieve the Cavelink system and some drill batteries.



Figure 8: Ibex on the high plateau (credit Andrew McLeod)

Given the weather (generally dry but with storms forecast) a lot of work went into surface prospecting of old and new caves. New entrances to known and unknown caves were dropped, and exploratory walks along various paths were taken to find promising new areas.



Figure 9: Carrying gear to the cave (credit Paul McCarron)

As often happens, some of the most interesting caves were discovered right at the end of the expedition... We chose to expand our prospecting area to more distant areas that were still easy to reach; for this reason we chose to explore the area beyond the Simonyhütte along the 650 path. This is a fairly long but easy 2 to 2 ½ hour walk; it had been looked at before by a few people but typically only in passing while heading for the nearby Via Ferrata. At between 2200 m and 2300 m high, this was one of the highest areas we had prospected. What we discovered was a relatively large number of horizontal passages heading into the hillside.

Most of the Dachstein caves are primarily vadose: vertical pitches, punctuated by tight meanders. There is generally little significant phreatic development until around 600m down, when the massive passages of the Hirlatzhöhle are encountered. The surface of the plateau is covered in vertical shafts, but most are blocked by boulders or scree. So it was an unusual surprise to find a large number of horizontal entrances heading into the hillside.

The area, and the caves, were heavily frost-shattered so loose rock was a serious issue. It is likely that the area is covered in ice and snow most of the year and in the past only rarely be accessible, but climate change has led to the retreat of the glacier and less snow. We entered and surveyed several of these caves, with several still on-going. We are hoping and expecting that once we have gone more than 100 m or so into these caves, there will be no more frost-shattering.

Next year we intend to continue the re-rigging of WUG Pot and complete the climb of the Forbidden Aven. There are still various open leads in WUG that could not be explored this year, due to the weather. Prospecting will focus on the new area near the Simonyhütte; we will need to cache gear closer to the caves and/or find additional accommodation or cave camping in the area to reduce the amount of walking and carrying.



Figure 10: Difficult terrain (credit Paul McCarron)

**There is still plenty to do in the Dachstein!**