

KARSTOLOGY –
THEORETICAL OR APPLIED?

A short visit to Romania

by John Sweeney and Colin Bunce

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Of course there was no luggage. We'd only had five minutes to transfer at Amsterdam, how could there be any luggage! But we were met by Peggy and arrived at the Institute of Speleology in Bucharest about one am. Peggy turned on the light, the bulb blew – and there weren't any more lights on the three flights of stairs to the office where we put our heads down for a couple of hours. Some things in Romania were still the same.

At least the trains run on time – well usually. We weren't allowed to buy a ticket on the five am train (we later found it had been cancelled), so we had to hang around till eleven am. This meant we were travelling through the heat of the day, and the landscape of southeast Romania is pretty dull. But the last part of the journey was along the River Danube, past the Iron Gates, with great views of vast wooded limestone hills in Serbia. Finally we arrived in Baile Herculaine a small resort town nestled in a long narrow valley. The valley is due to a long fault line which also allows thermal mineral waters to rise to the surface where they have been used since Roman times for curative properties (Think Lisdoonvarna, add heat and some Roman remains).

We were attending the 28th symposium on Theoretical and Applied Karstology organised by the Romanian Institute of Speleology. It was held in the Minerva hotel - an imposing structure of 15 floors overlooking the town. We had a room on the tenth floor at the back with a great view of the 300 metre high limestone cliffs that form one side of the valley.

It didn't take us long to unpack, and there was no hot water till later in the evening, so we hit one of the many bars in town for refreshments and mich – a kind of barbequed sausage. Several beers later and I was due to give a slide show on the Burren. The other delegates were a mix of Romanians, some Iranians, a Korean, a Brazilian, a Russian lady, an Italian and John Gunn; and there was quite a bit of interest in the pictures. We ended up back in town again to show them how we do symposia in Ireland. The big problem was that the lift only worked until midnight when the little old lady who drove it finished work, then you had to take the stairs!

There were many presentations at the symposium, although some speakers had had to cancel at short notice. All were made in English and most were fairly heavy going ... “mineralogy of skarn hosted caves at Baita (Romania): implications for speleogenesis”; comparative studies on Pleistocene small mammal associations from karst deposits of central Dobrogea and Oltenia, Romania”.

Sunday afternoon saw the first of the field trips, a bus tour up the valley stopping at various points of historical, hydrological and geological interest. Included on the tour was a swim in the open-air naturally heated swimming pool. However later on, after the “*banquet*” (I hope the symposium organising committee are reading this!) we got a group together for a late night trip to one of the hotter sulphur springs where you can relax in your natural hot tub before cooling off with a dip in the river.

Sometime over the weekend there was an earthquake in a nearby town but I have to say I missed it – but John swears he left his wash bag on the table and it was later found on the floor!

Monday and Tuesday had more field trips. The first was to Topolnita cave which is typical of Romania's larger caves systems: we were inside for three hours, most of it in huge passage with fantastic formations. Also typical of Romania it was followed by a fantastic barbeque. Tuesday saw us heading through a stunning gorge on the River Danube. Before climbing up to look into the gorge from the top of the 200m high limestone cliffs, this was followed by a short trip through Pestera Ponicoava - another spectacular cave ending with a view out onto the Danube.

The real aim of the trip was to renew the friendships with the Romanian cavers we had met before, to make some new contacts and to think about plans for further trips to this caving paradise. We also wanted to see what state the economy was in and despite rumours of hyper inflation things didn't seem too bad. Beer is still very cheap (10,000 lei = 30cent) and now we were getting more lei for our dollar. There seems to be plenty of investment as new buildings are going up and there are a lot of new cars on the roads which are also improving, until you get into the hills.

We left Romania in 1999 with a promise to bring some of our friends back to Ireland for a visit, this has still not happened due to visa problems but we hope to try again for 2003. And another Youth Cave Romania? Maybe!

Finally we would like to thank the SUI expedition committee for a contribution to our expenses.