

Y.C. ROMANIA – 2004 REPORT

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF Y.C.R.

The origins of Y.C.R. began in Wilson's Hospital School (Co. Westmeath) back in 1993, and grew from a number of school exchange trips made to a school and orphanage in Romania. These were co-coordinated by one of the teachers, Mr. Ernest Lawrence, as part of The President's Award. During the course of these trips Ernest became aware of the many caves to be found in Romania. As caving was an interest of his and a school activity he decided to investigate further. In 1996 Ernest and Colin Bunce- a qualified Cave Leader and Outdoor Pursuits Instructor made a preliminary caving expedition to Romania and also made contact with the Romanian Institute of Speleology (a government funded research organization studying all the scientific aspects of caving). The Institute has a field base in South-west Romania close to a number of spectacular caves that are being intensively studied. We realized this would be an ideal base for a youth expedition.

During 1996 and 1997 a team of 16 young people was selected and trained, and a successful expedition was held during July of 1997. During 1998 and 1999 a second team were selected and trained and another successful expedition was run in June of 1999. On both expeditions the young Irish cavers mixed with the Romanian cavers exploring and scientifically examining the caves in the surrounding areas.

Following these two successful expeditions it was felt that we should return the great hospitality that had been shown to us in Romania by inviting some of our Romanian caving friends to Ireland. Unfortunately this was not possible due to the difficulty in obtaining visas and for several years we were left in an embarrassing situation. Also in 2000 Ernest Lawrence retired from his school and Colin Bunce assumed the role of team leader.

In 2002 Colin and John Sweeney made a visit to Romania to attend the 18th Theoretical and Applied Karst symposium, which was also attended by some of our Romanian caving friends. Again we invited them to visit Ireland as we now felt the visa situation should have been resolved. This was indeed true and visas were granted. Funds were collected to cover all the costs of the visit and in July of 2003 two Romanian speleologists had a two-week tour of Ireland and visited many of Irish caves.

In preparation for another youth trip it was decided to run an expedition for leaders and potential new leaders. As several previous YCR participants (Claire Woods and Seamus Breathnach) have now completed their BCL award we also felt we should see if they were interested in completing the circle and returning as leaders. We also wanted to examine the suitability of a new area for a YCR expedition.

AIMS 2004 – 2005

Youth Cave Romania was set up with a number of general aims:

1. To give a group of young Irish people training in caving skills, and associated scientific knowledge, thereby preparing them for leadership roles in schools, universities and adult caving clubs.
2. To provide a focal point for such training.
3. To introduce Irish students to the planning and carrying out of an overseas expedition.
4. To bring together young people from both North and South Ireland in adventurous and challenging circumstances.
5. To explore some of Eastern Europe's most spectacular caves and karst regions, and to meet some young Romanian cavers.
6. To give young Irish cavers an introduction to underground scientific research by working alongside Romanian field researchers.

This year's trip was not a youth trip and had a number of specific aims different from above:

- To examine a new area as a possible base for further expeditions
- To integrate possible new leaders into the team
- To become aware of the present economic situation in Romania

TEAM MEMBERS 2004

John Sweeney	Team 1
Adam D'Eyto	Team 1
Jess Buckley	Team 1
Cate King	Team 1
Phillip Delamere	Team 1
Colin Bunce	Team 2
Claire Woods	Team 2
Carmel Broderick	Team 2
Seamus Breathnach	Team 2

EXPENDITURE BREAK-DOWN

Flights(Dublin- Budapest)	- €340
Train 2 nd class inc. seat reservation (Budapest- Cluj)	-€40
Accommodation	-€40
Transport and guide fees- (per person per week)	- €65
Food (and beer!) (per person per week)	- €40

LOCATION 2004

The location for this year's visit was different from previous years. We have previously used the field center belonging to the Institute of Speleology in Bucharest. This is located in Closani, near Tirgu Jiu, in the Southern Carpathian Mountains of south-west Romania. However after two visits to this area, and now with more contacts and friends in Romania, we felt it was time to look at a new area. The karst area investigated this year is in fact the same area that we attempted to visit in 1996 but at that time we did not have enough contacts to get access to many caves.

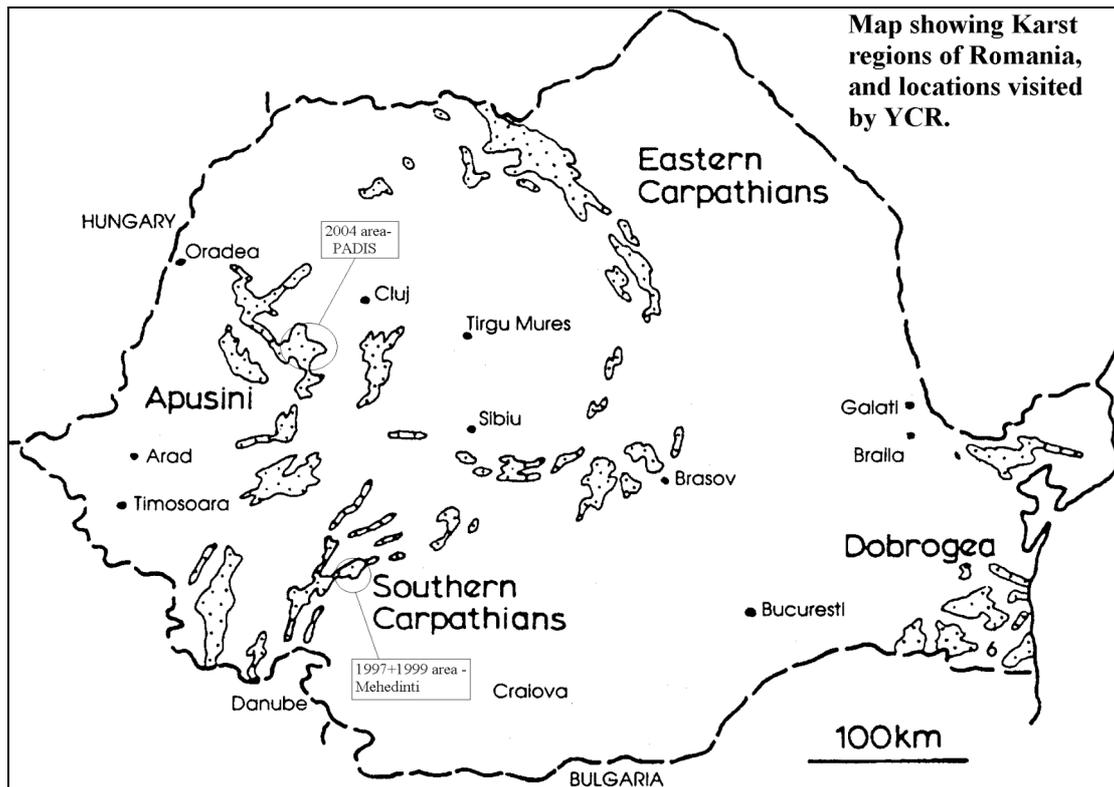
Romania can be divided into three main regions, in the south and east is the flat plain of Wallachia. In the north-west is the mountainous region of Transylvania. These two regions are separated by the long curving ridge of the Carpathian mountains. One of the best-known caving areas of Romania is the Padis Plateau in the Bihor district of the Apuseni Mountains. This area is at the center of the Transylvanian region and is characterized by steep wooded hillsides where many large rivers sink and reappear.

Our base this year was Ic Ponor—a tiny settlement to the north-east of Padis itself. Road access to the area is difficult, there is a national road over the mountains from Rachitele in the east, to Pietroasa in the west. This passes through Padis, but it was last resurfaced in the 1960's (however it may be remade in the next year or two). The nearest large town for extensive shopping was Huedin about 50km (almost 3 hours) away. Many of the small villages have small local shops for bread, beer etc; the nearest to Ic Ponor was in the village of Doda Pilli about 8km away (a 30 minute round trip).

This area is much more alpine than the area around Closani the valleys are generally at about 1000m altitude, while the highest point reaches 1640m (Magura Vanata). This means higher rainfall—about 1500mm per year, and lower temperatures—an annual average of about 9°C.

Access to the caves is mostly by forestry track and then on foot. There are many walking trails in the area which are very well marked with different coloured symbols painted onto trees and rocks every few metres, many of these pass right by the cave entrances. However some of the caves had no trail to them and would be extremely difficult to find without a local guide.

The central area of these mountains has been recently classified as a new nature park, but at present there are no wardens and few signs of any attempts to protect or clean up the area, hopefully this will come soon.



DIARY 2004

- August 14 First team depart Ireland and travel to Cluj-Napoca
- August 15 Travel to Ic Ponor, walk to Somesul Gorge
- August 16 Drive to Beius area, Pestera Bătramuți
- August 17 Avenul Sohodol
- August 18 Return to Ic Ponor
- August 19 Avenul Bortig
- August 20 Cetatile Ponorului and Ghetarul de Focal Viu
- August 21 Pestera Onceasa
- August 22 Poarta Alunului. Second team depart Ireland travel to Cluj-Napoca
- August 23 First team in Pestera Rece. Second team travel to Ic Ponor
- August 24 Full team in Pestera Negra
- August 25 Full team in Humpleu Cave. First team depart to Cluj-Napoca.
- August 26 Second team in Pestera Pepii, Cetatile Radesci and Somesul Gorge.
- August 27 Poarta Alunului, Pestera Wassa, search for Pestera Onceasa.
- August 28 Cetatile Ponorului and Ghetarul de Focal Viu
- August 29 Pestera Onceasa, last member arrives
- August 30 Ghetarul de la Barsa, Avenul Fata Rachitii
- August 31 Avenul din Sesuri
- Sept 01 Pestera Coltului
- Sept 02 Depart Ic Ponor, travel to Pestera Ursilor show cave and on to Cluj
- Sept 03 Train to Budapest, flight to Dublin.

CAVES IN AREA ONE

This is the area immediately surrounding Ic Ponor and consists mostly of deep wooded valleys. The caves we visited in this area were mostly horizontal, dry, fossil caves, often showing beautiful phreatic passage development although now well above the level of the valley floor. Entrances are generally found on the valley side with no obvious present day geological control indicating the great age of many of these caves. Area map included.

Pestera Rece (Cold Cave). Total length 2000m.

Location – Ten minutes drive up the Ponor valley from the house, then 5 minutes walk up the hillside on the left. The entrance is a crawling size tube.

Description – A traverse line from a tree at the entrance passes one reblay to reach the head of a 7m free hanging pitch into a sizable chamber. This is quickly followed by a very tight 5m ladder pitch. This is followed by a series of small chambers linked by crawls and muddy squeezes. (It may be advisable to have 2 x 10m traverse lines if group is in-experienced.) Larger passage is reached leading down some small climbs to a 30m deep lake. This can be bypassed through a triangular shaped passage to enter a beautiful passage covered in crystals and popcorn. This emerges into a bigger passage which leads down to a river, sumped in both directions. The downstream sump leads to more passage where lots of bear skulls have been found arranged in patterns indicating human presence. (The cave is not cold!)

Pestera Onceasa (aka Dragons Cave and P.Smeilor). Total length 310m.

Location – fifteen minute drive up the Ponor valley from the house to the start of the footpath with red crosses on the left. Twenty minutes walk following the path brings you right to the cave entrance.

Description – A walk in tube shaped entrance enlarges to a massive passage leading straight into the hillside for 200m. At the far end the floor is covered with bones – mostly cave bear bones! It seems many people come here looking for bear skulls and dig up the bones taking only what they want. There are some further large passages at the end of the cave and evidence of an extensive false floor.

Pestera Pepii. Total length 600m

Location – Fifteen minutes drive up the Somesul Cald valley. The entrance is a resurgence just beside the road on the right hand side.

Description – The cave is a single passage following the river, The floor of the cave is mostly moonmilk so is quite slippery this combined with occasional pools makes for a short, fun trip. The water comes from Pestera Coltului higher up the hillside.

Pestera Coltului. Total Length 3000km?

Location – Somewhere on the hillside above Pepii cave, and very difficult to find. Fifteen minutes walk (about 100m vertically) above the road just to the right of Pepii cave but left of a small gulley coming down the hillside.

Description – A low tube shaped entrance with a very strong cold draught outwards. This very quickly enlarges to a large passage and a stony slope to a pitch head. The approach is on jammed boulders so there is a traverse line. The pitch is about 20m with a reblay half way down on more jammed boulders. A stony floored passage becomes very steep and ends at a small 3m hole in the floor, this should be taken one

person at a time to ensure the inevitable avalanche doesn't bury you. More steep stony passage leads down towards the sound of the river. An easy 5m long traverse reaches the stream level, downstream leads to a sump(?) the water resurging at Pestera Pepii. Following the river upstream through a series of easy climbs leads to a large sized streamway with some fine formations. The river floor is covered in moonmilk so is slippery and contains some thigh deep pools. After about a kilometer of large canyon passage the cave changes to a lower flatter shape that was the limit of our visit.

Somesul Cald Gorge and Cetatile Radesei cave. (Survey included)

This area is reached from the end of the road up the Somesul Cald valley. There is a small parking space at the end of the track and the path marked with red dots starts from here and can be followed up the east or west side of the gorge. We followed the west side (right hand side looking upstream). The path begins by climbing steeply up the valley side through the trees passing a large, but short fossil cave (**Pestera Honu** – 30m), before reaching the plateau level. The path continues close to the edge of the gorge, about 100m deep, with a couple of viewing points before descending back to river level at the head of the gorge. At this point several rivers converge, one of these can be followed back upstream into a narrow gorge where a number of small climbs up jammed boulders and logs leads into a 30m high cave entrance. This is **Cetatile Radesei** a 250m through cave in huge passage. Tourists regularly visit this cave so there is a rough path and some Romanian ladders, at several points there are skylights in the roof letting in natural light, but a headtorch is very useful. The path can be followed right through the cave and out the large upstream entrance.

Pestera Poarta Alunului (Peanut Tree Gate Cave) (Total length 500m?)

Permission is needed from Cluj Speleo Club.

Location – From Ic Ponor follow the road east for 100m and turn right into a forestry track up the Alunului valley. Stop after about ten minutes (100mtrs past camping sign), where there is an overgrown rough track to the right that fords the river and then climb up the hillside to a low, wide entrance.

Description – The entrance is 8m wide by 1m high, but soon increases to large walking size and passing a number of round chambers on the left (one called the Chapel). A muddy, slippery slope leads down to a series of interconnected meandering canyon passages with slippery moonmilk and mud climbs between them. The lowest level has a passage with some beautiful coral and popcorn.

It is believed this cave is connected to Pestera Rece through the hill.

N.B. There is another cave called Pestera Alunului nearby! (Maybe on the other side of the same valley, this is 4.8 km long with active and fossil levels)

Pestera Wasa Total length 75m

Location – In the Alunului valley, 300 metres down the valley from Poarta Alunului, immediately above a resurgence.

Description – A single passage with a beautiful arched roof over a mud floor. The floor shows a number of bear hibernation pits and has been dug at the entrance to collect bear bones.

Pestera TH Length 200m(?)

Location - Five minute drive up the Ponor valley. Stop at road junction where an ox-bow in the river is obvious. 10 minute steep walk up the hill to the left. The cave entrance is at the base of a cliff. There is a bear skeleton in cave. 30 min trip.

Pestera Humpleu Total length 40,000m plus

Location – On the road back to Rachitele, where the road makes a hairpin bend beside the river, where a forestry road crosses the river and divides into two. Crossing the bridge and walking straight up the hillside opposite for about 5 minutes reaches the small and gated cave entrance.

Description – The entrance has a strong draught blowing out of it and soon leads into large sized passage. This continues on a grand scale passing through a couple of lower sections (where you can almost reach the roof) before climbing up into an even larger passage with boulders the size of small houses. A river can be heard at a lower level and can be reached at one point by descending a long slope in a large chamber.

Another huge room (about 100m in length) can be reached by keeping to the right at this point.

There is extensive passage to be reached upstream at the river level but this needs a wet suit.

CAVES IN AREA TWO

Most of the other caves that we visited were in the area around Padis itself. This was about 15 km from Ic Ponor but took about 45 minutes traveling time due to the nature of the roads. This area is a high plateau with many vertical caves having entrances on the plateau and reaching active streamways in their lower levels. There is one large valley (Glavoi) which leads to the major sink at Cetatile Ponorlui, many of the caves we visited were on the edge of this valley. Area map included.

Pestera Neagra Depth 178m, Length 1000m(?) (Survey included)

Location – From the road to Glavoi follow the yellow strip trail up the valley side to the west. On the plateau follow the path through the trees to the left until it descends to a large sinkhole, which is the entrance.

Description – The entrance passage is an active streamway descending a series of pitches. We used high-level rigging which can be used in most water conditions, I guess there is an easier rig following the river level. The survey shows the pitches as 10m, 10m, 30m, 7m, 30m, and 20m. Our guide had never been down the last pitch and was surprised at the amount of cave beyond it; a narrow, meandering stream canyon passing a large dry inlet passage on the right before entering a larger passage containing another stream. There are several more large inlets all leading to a sump.

Tackle – The rope is required in the following order: 10m, 80m, 35m, 50m, 30m. 5 Slings, 40 hangers.

Ghetarul de la Barsa Depth 112m, Length 800m? (Survey included)

Location – From the road to Glavoi follow the yellow strip trail up the valley side to the west. On the plateau follow the path through the trees to the left until it reaches a bigger path, the cave entrance is a short distance to the right.

Description – A steeply descending walking size entrance leads down to an ice-floored passage with several ways leading into the main passage. Climbing up a boulder blockage leads to a traverse which can be passed at floor level. This leads to a 10m pitch with a simple take off. A squeeze through moonmilk leads to a narrow

streamway which is followed to a short traverse onto an 8m pitch. This is followed immediately by a step over some more moonmilk to a 6m pitch. Beyond this the cave narrows and a climb up reaches a traverse to a 10m pitch, followed by a short climb down to some more stream passage ending in a sump.

Ghetarul Focul Viu (The Living Fire) Length 165m

Location – From the campsite at Glavoi follow the yellow dot trail up the west side of the valley and onto the plateau. The path leads to the entrance after about 30 minutes walk.

Description – The cave was somekind of show cave and had wooden steps for the descent from the entrance into the main ice chamber. This has recently collapsed and there is a sign at the entrance saying “no entry”. Climbing over this a steep descent on ice (hand line very useful) enters the main chamber lit by daylight through a large hole in the roof. Below this is a pile of snow and surrounding this is a floor of ice. There are several ice stalagmites around the walls.

Cetatile Ponorlui Length 7500m (survey included)

Location – From the campsite at Glavoi follow the main track down the valley and then follow the Blue dot trail. This leads down to the river and follows this down to an enormous cave entrance 84m high (the highest in Romania). The trail continues up an iron ladder and into Doline 2 surrounded by impressive cliffs and scree slopes. It passes another entrance to the cave before climbing up again to the plateau above. Following the trail to the right leads to a couple of Balconies overlooking doline 2 and a third doline which can only be entered from the cave. The trail continues back to rejoin the main track again.

The cave itself is obviously huge but also contains a number of deep lakes so needs wetsuits or boats to visit.

Avenul Fata Rachitii (aka Enthusiasm pot) Depth (30m?)

Location – A few minutes walk above the road to Glavoi at the top end of the campsite. The entrance is a small shaft beside a Rachitii tree.

Description – The 8m entrance pitch lands in a muddy chamber where a large muddy passage can be followed to the second pitch of 8m. This lands in a streamway where a short traverse leads to a 10m pitch into a large muddy chamber with a sump. This final chamber can flood very quickly.

Avenul Bortig

Location – Forty minutes walk from the camp site at Glavoi following the yellow dot trail past Cetatile Ponorlui.

Description - This cave is a spectacular 100m wide x 80m deep shaft. It holds snow and ice all year round and is Romania's 3rd most important ice cave. P1 (50m) Tie off to trees on right hand side of pot. On the cliff face, there are 2 re-belays with word of another to be installed. At the ice, P2 (30m) is reached. Y hang in ceiling (2 hangers). Tackle – P1 80m rope. 3 long sling. Rope protector. 3 hanger. P2 30m rope. 2 hanger.

CAVES IN OTHER AREAS

Avenul de Sesuri Depth – 217m, length – 2500m,

Location – Park at the entrance to Scarisoara ice cave, near the village of Girda. The cave is located five minutes walk through woods and fields to the west.

Description – The entrance is a shaft, belayed from a tree with several rebelayes, The cave descends a series of pitches in passage of increasing size. Two eighty metre ropes and one 30m rope allowed us to reach the lake, a large knee-deep muddy pool in a huge chamber at about 120m depth. Beyond this are more pitches and chambers.

Scarisoara Ice Cave Length 800m

Location – In the village of Scarisoara which is about 2 hours drive south of Ic Ponor on seriously bad roads!

Description- A large entrance shaft has recently been fitted with new metal steps to descend the 50m to the ice lake- the largest block of ice in a Romanian cave (75,000m³). A new walkway has also been fitted over the ice and equipped with sensor lights that go on and off automatically. But the walkway doesn't extend to the second chamber which makes it a bit disappointing. There is a lower chamber but this is a scientific reserve.

Pestera Bătramuli - Old Mans Cave

Location - Somewhere in the Beius region. To get here one would definitely need a guide! Be prepared for very rough driving.

Description - This is an average trip in a nice karst region. The cave has a 10m entrance pitch. The rest of the cave is walking and crawling. Not too interesting. At one point, the local cavers got bored of the caves lack of speleothems, and began to make mud sculptures. I must admit, that although this is not my favourite practice, some of the sculptures are rather impressive. 3 – 4 hour trip. (Not worth the drive)

Avenul Sohodol – (Dry Valley Cave)

Location - This cave is in the same region as Pestera Bătramuli.

Description - Excellent trip to -250m. Beware of glass and domestic rubbish inside the entrance. Entrance pitch of 5m. Once inside the cave has a number of pitches which are nice and big. This trip is well worth it for its verticality. Further information for rigging can be got from Horatio.

Pestera Ursilor (Bears cave) Length 1500m

Location – This is a show cave and is well signposted. It is on the western side of the mountains near the village of Chiscau, south-east of Beius.

Description – The only well developed show cave in Romania, it was originally developed with the help of the Institute of Speleology, but it is now a private operation. There are double sealed doors to help maintain the micro-climate and the tour is quite fast. Lights are turned off quickly after the tour has passed (very annoying if you are at the back trying to take photos). However this means that there is almost no lampenflora anywhere beyond the first small passage. Once through this the cave is spectacular, large tubular passage with abundant speleothems. The cave also contains many bear bones and the tour ends at a reconstructed skeleton of one such bear.