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A favourite Swiss hobby: speleology

One of the last adventures

Researchers without textbooks, discoverers without patents, scientists without teaching posts, adventurers without onlookers: people who feel happy in the world underground fit into no pattern.*

The starting point of our journey is Beatenberg in the Bernese Oberland. We cross the Bärensei Alp to reach a region of karst-like limestone which has been washed out by water for millions of years. Hohgant sandstone and layers of mar overlie the limestone. This is an ideal combination for the giant cave system which developed beneath the fairytale charm of the landscape at the foot of the Seven Stallions.



We – mountain guide Martin Gerber, speleologist Roland Zurflüh, the photographer and myself the journalist – fill our Davy lamps with water from a wooden trough. A few minutes later we stand at the entrance to the caves. Preparing to venture in takes time; our two guides thoroughly check the equipment, which along with our wetsuits includes instruments of every description for climbing and abseiling.

The cave into which we then crawl bears the modest name of A2. It is in the vicinity of the «Seven Stallion Network» known to pot-holers all over the world and was discovered in 1973 by members of the Berne Speleology Association. It was 13 years before a team succeeded in blasting a narrow passage to penetrate this huge labyrinth, of which so far about ten kilometres have been mapped.

After 15 metres the first shaft appears – to the layman it looks like a yawning black hole. While we are still fumbling with our safety hooks at the top, Martin Gerber has already dropped 20 metres as quick as a flash. The glimmer of his Davy lamp at the bottom of the shaft gives us the courage to follow him down the rope, dangling in the dank air. Unfortunately we do not have much opportunity to admire the shell limestone on the slippery rock which he has described to us. The second shaft, which is immediately upon us, is «only»

* This account is abridged from an article by Bernhard Wenger which appeared in the Berne daily, «Der Bund», on September, 8, 1994.



“It can be as narrow as you like down here – but nowhere do you feel so free”. (Photos: Hansueli Trachsel)

have to move over to the next rope hand over hand using a spring hook which you cannot open for ages because of your clammy, mud-covered hands. Thanks to the patience of the mountain guide we overcome this obstacle too.

Farther down, the two speleologists start their measuring. Pot-holers have a gentleman's agreement that a cave should be surveyed by one team only. Small red markers are fixed to the wall. With the aid of a compass, an inclinometer and a tape measure, the researchers make a precise map of the cave, which spreads out like a labyrinth.

During the measuring Martin Gerber suddenly decides to climb into a side shaft. After a few metres he disappears into a small hole. For some time you can hear stones being pushed aside as he crawls forward – and then complete silence. Asked later why he practises speleology, he answers: “It is the last great adventure, this search for new, undiscovered passages along which man has never passed. It can be as narrow as you like down here – but nowhere do you feel so free”.

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ten metres deep – as Roland Zurflüh hastens to console us.

In cavers' language, a meander is a horizontal, narrow and serpentine gallery, made by water erosion. At this point, the speleologists have had to blast

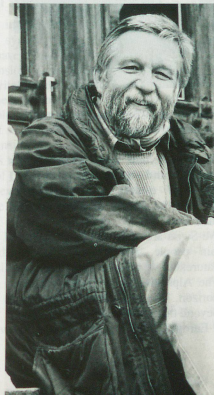
more than once in order to penetrate farther. The next shaft has another scare for the uninitiated: on the way you have to switch ropes without holding on – in other words sweating profusely, with a Davy lamp which keeps going out, you

Geologist Fredy Breitschmid on underground Switzerland

“The earth may one day take revenge”

Sand, loam, scree, rock: those who build on or into Switzerland's underground meet all sorts of surprises. The Berne geologist and lecturer in ecology, Dr. Fredy Breitschmid, is a man with an analytical mind.

Swiss Review: Glaciers are wasting away. The ever-frozen underground, known as permafrost, is beginning to melt. Climatologists paint horror scenarios of gigantic avalanches looming over us. All this means a tremendous amount of extra work for geologists. Has your profession really got a grip on the changes taking place in the Swiss Alps?



Fredy Breitschmid: The earth is like a living being. It is always in movement. So we can never keep a complete grip on it. But we must distinguish between two types of change: that which is caused by human activity and that which takes place naturally. Disasters like earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and landslides – I am thinking, for example, of the one at Flims – occurred before the existence of mankind. We can do nothing to stop Africa, which is shifting millimetre by millimetre in Europe's direction and squeezing Switzerland together in the process. We try to think ahead, but we cannot halt such a development. When, for instance, a holiday camp is built on bad ground in Canton Fribourg, it is unfortunately bound to collapse in the long run. Let me put it this way: Switzerland is getting smaller without human inter-