A photograph of a person rappelling down a narrow, vertical rock crevice. The person is wearing a white helmet with a headlamp, a red jacket, and dark pants. A red rope is attached to their harness and extends upwards. The rock surface is textured and greyish-brown. The text "Eldon Pothole Club", "Albania Kelmendi", and "Expedition" is overlaid in white serif font on the upper left. The year "2016" is overlaid in white sans-serif font at the bottom center.

Eldon Pothole Club
Albania Kelmendi
Expedition

2016

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Introduction

I admit that this report has taken me a lot longer than most to write up, heck I'm still convinced that I'm eventually going to write up a draft for Matienzo 2015 as I honestly believe it to be one of the best weeks caving I've ever been part of but at the moment that's on the back burner so to speak.

The report itself is written from my perspective (albeit a great and probably inaccurate one) the only contribution being from Rob Eavis who drew us up a fantastic survey and Dave Gledhill for his email correspondence from what went on in the second week.

On the first week of the Albania Kelmende expedition five of us set out to find, rig, survey, and explore EPC 519 further and this I believe was achieved to a moderate standard. Not only that we had a pretty awesome time doing it.

I declare that this report is all of my own doing and that I have correctly acknowledged the work of others to an extent. This report is in-line with most Eldon Pothole Club gibberish and on good academic conduct (and how to avoid plagiarism and other assessment irregularities). If I've learnt anything useful from my time in the Eldon it's to 'Never let the truth ruin a good story'.



Dave Gledhill 'When cheese is your life'

Sat 10th September - Departure

With our outbound flight scheduled for 1850 hours we left Dore after meeting up with Bob Toogood and Dave Harley at 12:30, picking Tim (SUSS) Webber up en route we were M1 southbound by approx 1pm. We reached Gatwick international airport around 5pm after the checking in of bags and the usual frisk of Bob through border control we headed straight to the airports finest ale house, 'The Red Lion'. The flight ended up being delayed so we managed to squeeze in a couple of beers before our flight.

We somehow managed to gain access to the Country once again, despite a nearly* moment when it looked like DG's bags weren't going to top up – again! A 5 euro taxi ride took us from Tirana airport to Hotel Tirana (across the road) where we quickly chose our beds for the night and headed straight to bar for a few beers.

**Nearly's don't count according to Bob*



Looking down the valley towards Nikc

Sun 11th September - Tirana to Lepushe

We got up around 8am after a decent night's kip to make the most of the all-inclusive breakfast and double espresso's. (Note. Hotel Tirana cost us 28 euros per person per night.) Luigi had arranged for a driver to pick us up at 9:30am. We jumped in the very smart people carrier and started to head off on our comfy journey. Albania seemed to have moved up market, we weren't used to this sort of luxury vehicle compared to local village bus we had used on as previous expeditions.

It was already baking hot with temperature in the mid-twenties when we reached Shkoder and we were glad to jump out for another coffee and a coke (way too early for beer). When we parked up just off a large oval roundabout similar to that of Owlbar (edge of Sheffield) except this was in the middle of a built up European city, We watched as our bags were removed from our nice comfy people carrier and thrown on the top of what looked like the Lepushe village bus (welded up side door to boot!) Luckily our bags were on the heavy side of 23kg and the bus was rather on the slow side of a racing camel which didn't leave us worrying about the un-strapped luggage jumping off the roof on the high mountain passes ahead of us.

Within half an hour or so whilst sat outside the bar spectating traffic we had observed a few things; a gentleman cycling with a scythe (yup), a lad cycling with a hacksaw, a goat falling out the back of a car which led to the driver pulling over to collect his livestock, a cow strapped down in the back of a trailer and an elderly woman cycling the wrong way around the extremely chaotic roundabout. It truly was a sight to behold - Tim was still baffled by the goat! We shrugged it off and carried on supping our beverages.

The driver of the Lepushe local bus service paid our tab and we set off making various shopping stops en route for the locals, collecting and dropping people at various villages en route. We again made our annual beer stop at Tamare – sticking with tradition. We arrived in Lepushe around 5pm pretty beat from the journey and headed to Bobs Bar aka Orange Bar (formerly container bar) for a couple refreshing beers, then made the final half mile drive down to Luigj Cekaj's - Hotel Alpini.

As it was getting late we decided to make a start preparing gear, ready for tomorrow's first hike up the mountain. It didn't take long for us to clutter the room with masses of caving gear. We sat down for Dinner at 8pm which was delicious followed by water melon, homemade wine and blueberry raki. Things were definitely improving in the village and with foundations for the tarmac road already reaching its centre it'd only be a few days before Lepushe would be brought in to the modern era.



Dave Harley grabbing gear from our transport

Monday 12th September – EPC 519: The survey begins

After having equipment issues and lack of batteries during the 2015 expedition when most of EPC 519 was pushed our main objective for the start of this expedition was to get the Cave surveyed to its present depth. Having speculated on how deep it was for some time and having been asked roughly how deep it was when trying to recruit cavers my best guess was around 300m...

We finished off sorting kit out around 9:30am and walked up to the village shop to get some more Mountain supplies. For 2 euros I ended up with 8 chocolate bars, 2 bottles of cola and a packet of oregano Lay's. Just as we neared the start of the switch-backs a local man approached us with his mule. He insisted we all put our heavy packs on to the mules back and he'd walk us up to the high pass where we'd part ways. Everyone except for me loaded this poor mule with their humongous rucksacks full of caving gear and the man pushed the mule towards the start of the steep shortcuts to cut out the switch-backs. I made sure to take plenty of photos for evidence of these so called 'ard Cavers! I came on expedition knowing that I'd be having to graft! We stopped at the spring half way up and filled our water bottles for the remainder of the day's work ahead of us.



Communicating with our Sherpa

After parting ways with the local and thanking him for his efforts and kindness (he insisted on not taking any of our money) we set off on the hard part of the hike across the karst, contouring around Half-dome in a boulder field around 1900m altitude and then the final slog up to the high col (+2100m) where EPC 519 is a 5min walk away. Once there we retrieved our stash of gear from the

previous year and sat about eating our pack-up waiting for the gang to arrive.



Dave Harley drawing up using TopoDroid

DG and Tim descended the cave first with intentions of checking rigging, tightening bolts and possibly getting to the bottom with the drill and rope ready for a push the following day. The first day is always hard work carrying your heavy bag up the hill, gravity is never your friend. Lucky for these guys they were partly mule assisted on today's ascent.

In the meantime DH and I calibrated the DistoX in a very small awkward rift cave. We managed to get a 0.32 error rate after three attempts so at 2:45pm armed with a Toogood we set off down the cave

surveying along the way. It all went rather smoothly and we met DH and TW at the nasty Shatter Pitch where DH and I passed them to continue surveying. Toogood followed them out, DH and I agreed we wouldn't go much further before we'd turn around as it just made sense, this could easily become a long day. We continued down to the Uneventful Horizon, a large ledge -30m down in a humongous 100m+ shaft. DH was impressed with the size of the place after the awkward

constrictions we'd just squirmed through. We built a cairn to continue the survey from tomorrow and after a cheeky 'Albeni' bar we headed out before we froze!

Happy with our work we arrived on surface at 6:20pm and started walking back down at 7:15pm. By this point it was pretty dark and DH had forgotten his head torch. Missing Bob's Bar we reached Hotel Alpini at 8:50pm and scoffed our faces for an hour before an early night, ready to do it all again tomorrow... I ended up with a pounding headache due to lack of water and an over-tight head torch, something that would have to be rectified if we were going to be walking down in the dark every night.



Dave Gledhill de-rigging EPC 519 after the first trip

Tuesday 12th September – The survey continues

We all woke up fairly beaten after a long first day in the mountains, it's always the case of acclimatising to the situation of beating yourself up every day for a week! A reoccurring theme like the movie Groundhog Day in a sense that we'd wake up and do the same thing day in and day out. Get up, complain about how tired and broke we felt, have breakfast, walk up to the shop and come out with a bag full of 'Albeni' bars instead of change because the Euro to Lek (Albanian currency) conversion rate looked pretty nuts! (Or so the shop keeper had us think) finishing with a final slog up to the cave entrance.

Once we were all present at the entrance we slung our furry suits out to dry in the sun whilst we feasted on ham, cheese and tomato sandwiched between some of Albania's finest stale bread. Dessert was a case of how many chocolate bars you'd have to spare. Tim & Bob had decided to have an easy day which left just DG, DH and I on today's surveying trip. DG headed off first with intentions of reaching the present bottom and reassessing the situation, whether to push through The Meanders at the bottom of the last cascade or continue the bolt climb at the head of the pitch. He'd already left 100m of rope at the Uneventful Horizon so he was to grab this en-route.

DH and I followed him down after a few more minutes on surface and picked up the survey from the cairn we had built yesterday on the Uneventful Horizon. It didn't take us long to reach this point and we started to survey down the big one pitch. This was quite interesting as the 50m pitch was split by five re-belays and the top third of the pitch mostly consists of a self-peeling wall. We tiptoed precariously, DH first with PDA, followed by me with the Disto. This wasn't too much of a problem except for communication issues towards the bottom of the pitch because of our proximity to the waterfall. We had a little breather at the bottom of the pitch, perched on a large fallen block. Away from splash-back so that DH could draw up the survey on the PDA. We continued down The Cascades to where we eventually met DG. This was all new to me as I'd only been to the bottom of the first cascade back in 2015 – I was impressed to say the least! The Cascades continued dropping down in impressive proportions to a ledge which dropped down a large 25m clean wash cascade with an active streamway at the back end. From here a dry ledge on the right led to the head of a further - 25m pitch which is where the rope was hanging from the 2015 expedition and where Barni had wanted the bolt traverse to begin from.



The two Dave's rigging the entrance pitch



Dave H ready to retreat

We stopped surveying at this point and DH drew up the final few pitches. He was getting pretty cold after working for a couple of hours in the freezing cold with only one glove on so after a bit of grub he headed for surface. DG and I had a quick chat about prospects having decided to descend to The Meanders rather than take the bold step and traverse out above the pitch head. We wanted to have a proper explore in The Meanders ourselves. DG placed a couple of new bolts and he was soon at the bottom of the 25m pitch which was rather aqueous towards the bottom. The waterfall pounding down the cascade crossed paths with the bottom of the rope which meant you got a thorough soaking. We continued the survey down to the base of the cascade and shot a load of plays to get a feel for the place then switched off the DistoX. DG led through the Meanders which were thrutchy and awkward in places for approx. 30m to the head of a 7m pitch.

Cold and rather muddy by this point we headed back to surface ready to bolt down this pitch on Thursday.

Once we had regained surface we quickly changed and made a quick descent off the mountain so that we could fully appreciate a well-deserved beer in Bob's Bar. Luckily for us we found a slightly pissed up Toogood sat in the bar chatting with the locals. He'd been there since about 2pm and had been bought quite a few beers which he didn't have the money for, Bob begged us for some change so that he wouldn't be sold off to the highest bidder. Luckily DG had enough spare change to fund Bob's drinking habit so we 'necked' a few more beers and promised to be back tomorrow.

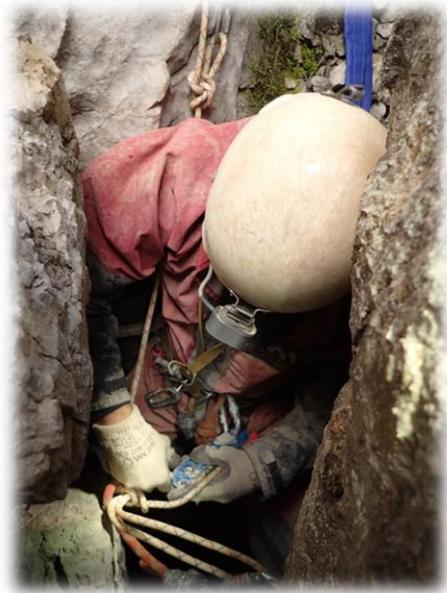
A worthy mention of Toogood nearly getting whisked off to marry a local young widower down the valley which he kindly refused to our astonishment!



Bob kitting up

Wednesday 13th September – There's a storm brewing

Last night we'd agreed over the beers that today was going to be a rest day. Not your normal do nothing rest day but a walk up the mountain for some surface prospecting with intentions of descending a few holes. It was a tough hike this morning for sure, DOMS from the previous two days finally catching up with us, we eventually made it up to our stash at 12:30 where after placing a few pieces of wet kit out to dry in the ever fading sun we sat and ate lunch and waited for the rest of our party to arrive. Once reunited DG and I scrambled over the karst armed with the drill to a shaft DG had spotted in 2015 which he wanted to descend. We momentarily lost each other and I ended up high close to the top col whilst I could hear DG drilling away he could not hear my shouts over the Karst. It was whilst I was yelling that the first rain drop splashed on my face.



DG about to Descend

Wearing only a skimpy pair of jogging shorts and a long sleeve Helly Hansen top I quickly leapt across the boulder field to re-join the gang at our stash. This was also where we heard our first crack of lightning! There had been a lightning storm every night since arriving in Albania but luckily we had always managed to get off the mountain before the storm had engulfed the range. Today we weren't so lucky! We broke off in to two teams shortly after dinner; BT, DG and I were to head to DG's freshly bolted shaft whilst TW and DH went surface prospecting higher up and to the west of us. As DG kitted up Bob and I winced and flinched with every crack of lightning, the storm was indeed slowly heading our way. DG dropped the hole to approx. -10m before returning to surface when suddenly the lightning cracked really close by us quickly followed by a thunderous roar!

It was at this point that we decided with all the metal work on and around us that this was not the best place to be in our situation. We quickly de-rigged and headed back to our stash as the clag came over. Hail started hammering down on us to a point that any exposed flesh would suddenly start throbbing with pain. In a couple of minutes we were completely soaked from head to toe cursing ever venturing this high in the mountains today! I was worrying about DH and TW, they were nowhere to be seen and we were about ready to chuck down our gear and make a quick exit.

All of a sudden two shadows appeared out of the cloud. All of us quite relieved to be together we settled down our gear which was more of a lobb everything we have in the hole and worry about this another day - LETS GET OFF THIS MOUNTAIN! Tim asked, "Anyone taking poles?" to which we all hastily barked "NO!"

We rapidly descended, by the time we had reached the river crossing below the summer village the weather had settled and it was only 2pm. The river was now a swollen brown torrent compared to what we had seen earlier. This did mean one great thing was to happen... We'd get to spend a good few hours in Bob's Bar drinking beer and eating cheese! The sun eventually showed itself and we had a cracking afternoon talking rubbish as per.

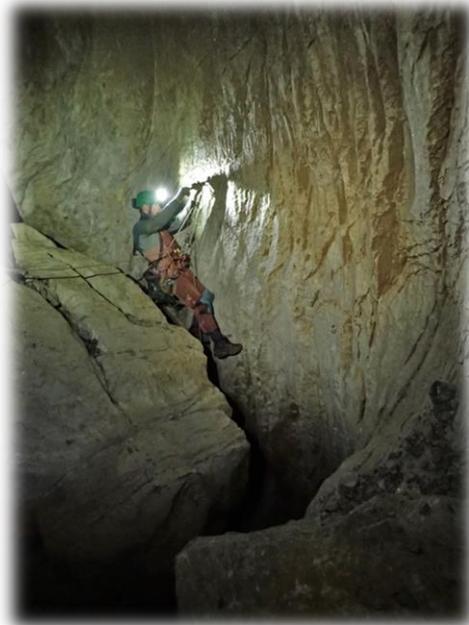


DG – Pub time!

Thursday 14th September – The big push

Waking up knowing this would be our last big day out in the mountains was kind of a bitter sweet feeling, on one side we knew tomorrow would be an easy day and gear would have to be brought down off the mountain, on the other side we had one more trip to rack up and we had to make the most of it.

We had now passed the achiness of walking up to 2200m altitude every day with a large pack but were getting to the point where something would have to give sooner or later, either ending in a proper rest day; doing nothing or being a flight back home to England. We made an early start and reached our stash at the Cave entrance around 11:10am, Bob had decided against hiking up the mountain today, TW and DH were heading back to their find from the other day before they were hailed off so it was just DG and myself today. We made quick progress descending to the present depth of the cave. Just above Shatter Pitch I overtook DG and carried on ahead of him. Once at the pitch head above The Meanders I took off my gloves and sorted out the bolting gear. Our plan was to drop down to The Meanders and drop the pitch which Dave and Myself had reached on Tuesday. Whilst waiting for DG I took the bold step across the pitch head to retrieve the rope which Barney & Co. had left the previous year neatly coiled at the pitch head. This is where Barney had suggested bolting across as the Cave was at its widest point. It looked much more promising than down in The Meanders so in a split second decision I retraced my bold step picked up the bolting gear and started to bolt my way across.



JP bolting across the traverse



DG ascending the lower of the Cascade pitches

DG finally reached me just as I was about to descend a 5m drop to some comfy ledges. He asked why I had bolted across as the plan was to drop all the way to the bottom? I shouted over my reasoning and after a few words he shrugged and I carried on. I bolted around an alcove 20m up from the floor of The Meanders to an opening where we dropped a further -10m to a ledge where the Meander was at its largest. Impressed with the size I placed another bolt and told DG to abseil down so we could explore.

We were both standing on a ledge approx. 20m from what looked like the floor of The Meander where water could be heard. This was at the base of a boulder run in which led to a boulder blockage about 10m high which looked nasty! The right hand wall was pretty fractured but clean rock, whilst the left hand wall was solid and after a nose which protruded out for a couple of metres continued for 10m to a large black space which would pass the nasty looking boulder blockage and drop us down the other side in to possible open passage. Smitten at this and running low on bolts I placed the last of bolts which would just about get us around the

nose but with no protection on the other side and only the two of us down here we were both becoming increasingly cold from the stream. Unfortunately this was to be our turn around point.

We started to make our way back to where we had started bolting from and assessed what could stay in the cave and what had to be removed. We both ended up with a couple of medium sized bags and we headed out after taking a few photos. Once on the surface I felt fairly relieved knowing the hardest of trips were behind us but also jealous of the others whose plane was landing tomorrow and would find out what was indeed beyond the boulder blockage.

We met DH & TW on the surface whose Cave was down to 100m and still going but had ran out of rope. We all walked back down together in the light (for a change) and headed to Bob's Bar for a few celebratory beers. On arriving back to the main road something massive had happened. The tarmac foundations had reached the centre of the village – Lepushe was about to change for good, and be brought into the 21st century!



DG at Bob's bar

Friday 16th September – Easy like Sunday morning

Having completed my Caving trips for the week I woke up feeling elated and rather glad that I wouldn't be walking up the mountain another day as today I would be running up it. After a quick pack of the bags we said our fair wells to DG, Ade Pedley & Colin and off they went. We had a fairly relaxed morning and soon after breakfast I started out on my jog up the hill. I stopped in the shop first for a couple of chocolate bars and headed up to the peak to the right of the col passing our trio en route at the river crossing. By the time I hit the summit it had started to rain and the winds had picked up, so legging it down off the ridge and towards the col was my only option. I passed our friendly trio saying fair wells once again, this time they were now less enthused by the onset of rain which we had pretty much gotten away with all week! By the time I hit the track the rain had stopped and the sunny valley was beginning to warm up. I met DH & TH chilling out in the garden taking in the views one last time before our trip back to Tirana.

Week Two

Below is an email from DG of what happened during the second week of the expedition;

Hey Dave!

How's it going?

Dying to know how the second week has panned out??

Jon.

Ey up Jon,

A bit of a mixed bag....

Weather was pretty shite - wet, cloudy and cold for the most part, and that didn't help matters much. Carried on bolting the traverse along the ledge from where you left off. The big space we were looking into is a large breakdown chamber. The boulder slope we could see levels off, but covers the whole floor with no signs of any way on at that level. The chamber is an oval of around 8m x 10m. Very difficult to judge height as you can't really see the top, but I reckon it is a good 80m+, most likely a shaft coming in.

Dropped down to the streamway from the point you left off the traverse. This ended up in the stream beyond the point we reached when we thrutched through the crabwalk and could see a pitch down (7m?). From landing back in the stream beyond the first crabwalk, it went back into another section of crabwalk for around another 15m, going back under the boulders above, before reaching another pitch of about 10m. This landed in a narrow rift, but not as loose for another 15m, but this starts to narrow - the walls are also getting signs of mud on them. There is a solid natural roof to the rift when it goes under the breakdown chamber, so is unlikely to be a continuation/development of the same cave as above.

At the end of the 15m, the passage turns 90 degrees right but this is through a squeeze and what most likely seems to be another small pitch. Not pushed as it was already wet, and no idea as to how much rain had fallen since going in. It needs another visit but on a dry day.

Thoughts are that the stream is a new development through what could be a much older system which is trying to fill itself in every so often. Hopes are that the stream will break through the current

narrowness into another more mature system below. Given how other shafts have ended, it seems as though the same may be happening here, but not certain. I can't see how the current stream formed the majority of what we descended to get to where we left off. Not killed it, but it needs luck and good weather. Very unnerving as being the only three people out there, shit weather and thoughts of shepherds pinching entrance ropes.

I found another shaft around the back of the hill we are currently under, looks evil but not descended yet. There are also another few new shafts we found higher up near the col (2300m) to look at.

I ended up absolutely fucked, and on Monday (or possibly Sunday) slept for 18 hours. Due to continuing shit weather, revisited Taluski and Vaso for a poke around but nothing new I'm afraid. Ideally pushing needs a couple of groups of 2 underground, with another person on surface for mental reassurance.

Cheers

Dave

Forgot to mention; with the general descending nature of the streamway, the pitches so far and the pointy bit near the bottom of the 25m cascade shaft, I reckon we've got the 300m. Still need to drop the big rift with the stream in the bottom which you reach by climbing up and over the boulder slope to the right from uneventful horizon. There is also the continuation down of the rift with fins in which you found when we first went in. It might just come out higher up the shaft above uneventful horizon, but you never know...



Half Dome

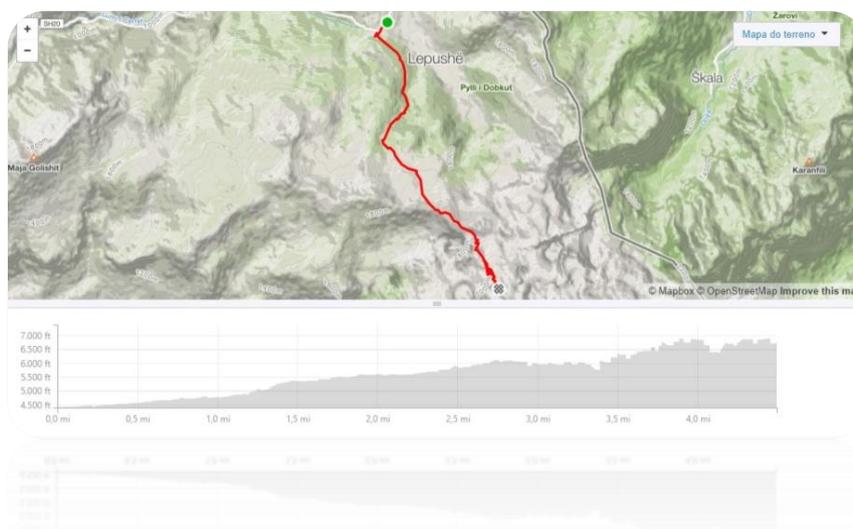
Description

Looking at my track logs from the week I had covered 50 miles and 27,500ft. of vertical gain.

The entrance to Dragon Cave (EPC-519) lies at an elevation of 2081m altitude (WGS84 396680 4705331) in the Kelmendi Province, Albania. The entrance is located high on the right hand side of a bowl up at 1900m altitude when approached from Lepushe. The entrance is a tight vertical rift 3m long with the Y-hang from natural threads, rope protectors necessary.

The entrance pitch (40m) is broken up with 3 rebelay which enlarges just below the initial squeeze and hades to makes for some awkward prussiking on return. The pitch breaks out into a large shaft floored with boulders. At the far end of the shaft two routes can be taken; the right hand wall leads to an awkward squeeze/thrutch between a large garage sized boulder which leads to the head of a large pitch chocked with boulders marking the pitch head. You can also follow the left hand wall down an exposed climb (6m). A fine 35m pitch leads two a boulder floored shaft with a large wall of rock splitting it in two. Directly below the pitch is blind so a swing is required to reach the opposite side. Once on the floor a crawl and climb (2m) down through horrible loose rock leads to the head of Shatter pitch. The pitch is 20m landing on a choked floor. To the left a tight corkscrew rift leads to a large undescended pitch. A balcony 12m down the pitch breaks out into another parallel shaft (25m) with possible climbs in the roof containing old rotten stal. This chamber can be descended a further 10m down a mud slope passing under a large fallen block which leads to a further pitch. This next pitch head is rather snug and drops you a further 20m to a chamber with a steep mud floor at the base with further possible climbs in the roof.

A crawl at the lowest point soon breaks out into a much larger shaft containing a 30m pitch broke up by two rebelay. It's here where you realise that you're standing on a large choked platform 55m from the floor with the roof being some 30m above you. Shafts can be seen in the floor here between boulders which have yet to be descended. Follow the obvious way down a solid wall under an alcove "The Uneventful Horizon" which is up to 30m diameter in parts and drops for 50m, broken up by 5 rebelay reaching the floor of a cascade. There's obviously a lot going on above you here in this large shaft but nothing has been explored. A 5m pitch down a poised boulder leads to the start of The Cascades. A traverse followed by 2 pitches to another traverse and a further pitch in lovely clean washed pitches (Yorkshire style pitches) eventually drops you a further 50m below the base of the Uneventful Horizon and marks the start of The Meanders. This continues for 30m of tight sideways shuffling to a 10m pitch in water. 15m of crabwalk style passage leads (passing chokes above and a large aven 80m+ reached from traversing out above the last cascade) to a further 10m pitch which lands in a narrow rift. This continues a further 15m but starts to narrow and the walls begin to show signs of flooding. Here the passage turns 90 degrees right through a squeeze which has not been pushed, to what looks likely to be another small pitch. We think the depth at the lowest point will be over 500m.



Dragon Cave

(EPC519)

Kelmendi Province, Albania

WGS84 396680 4705331

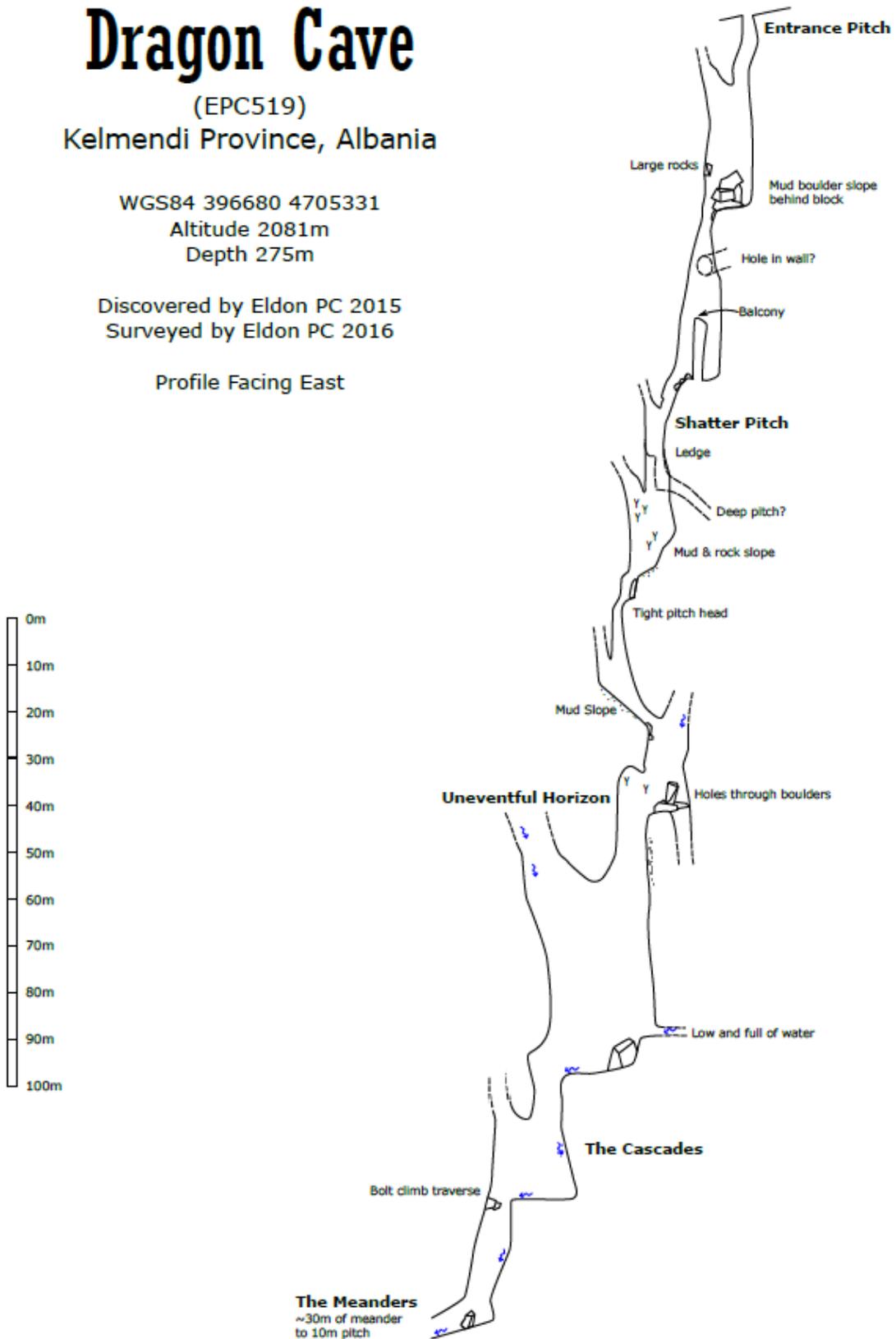
Altitude 2081m

Depth 275m

Discovered by Eldon PC 2015

Surveyed by Eldon PC 2016

Profile Facing East



Acknowledgements

A big thank you to Dave and Barney for supplying most of the gear to be able to bottom the cave along with motivation and lots of hard graft, including many previous reconnaissance trips to the area, digging up valuable information.

Also a big thank you to Luigj Cekaj, his Son & Daughter in-law who provided excellent hospitality as always during our trips to this awesome place!

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