

Caves & Caving



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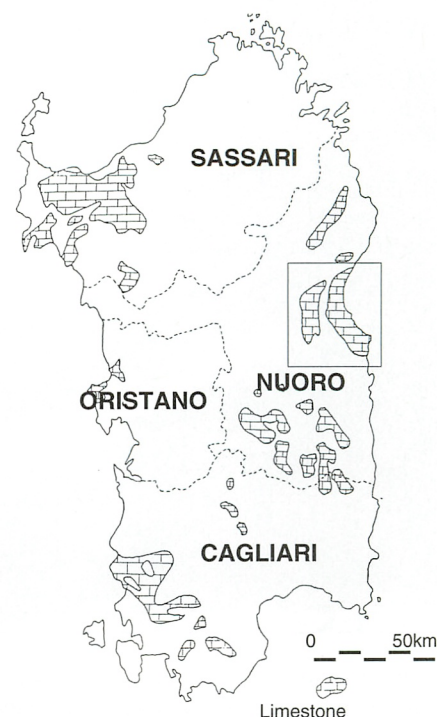
IN THIS ISSUE...

- **Borneo** *Caves of Kalimantan* •
- **Sardinia** *Beneath the Supramonte* •
- **Norway** *Trolldalsgrotta* •

'It's Better, than Sex'

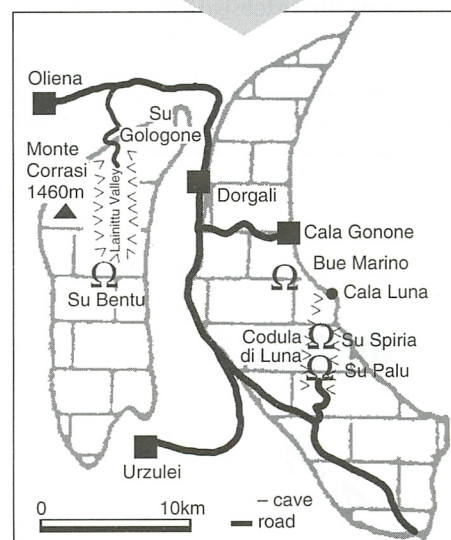
...was the claim of one team member on returning from a first visit into the superb Su Bentu cave system in Sardinia. Overshadowed by more accessible European karst and by more exotic overseas locations, Sardinia remains an off-beat venue for a caving holiday. But the quality of its caves and the potential for further large discoveries deserves a wider appreciation.

Afficianados of Sardinian caving, Kym and Buster Wright, describe some of the attractions.



SARDINIA

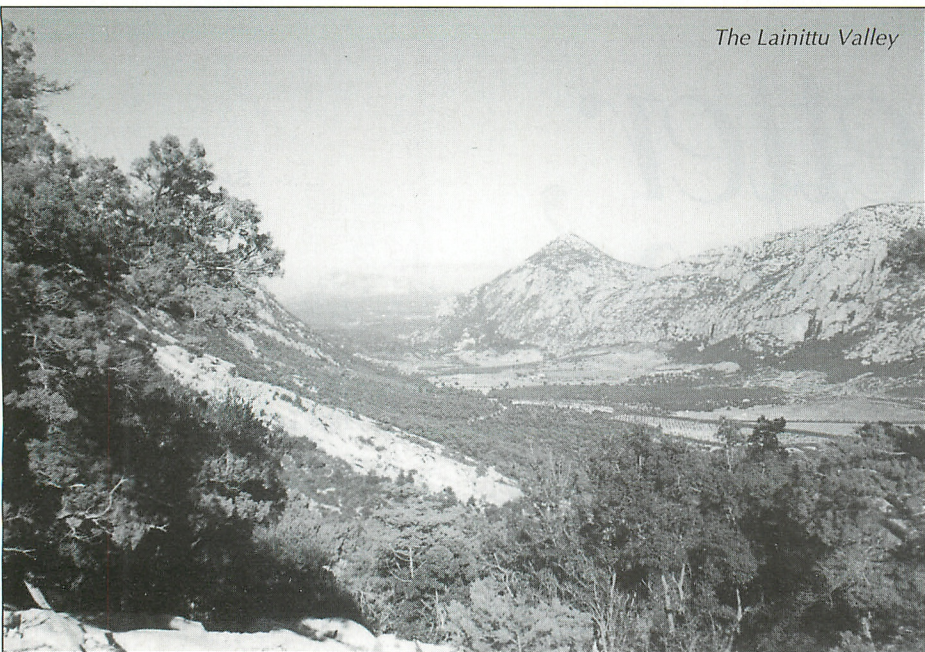
Expedition Area



The first study of Sardinia's caves was by one General Alfonso in the 19th century – or so say the local tourist guides. Just who general Alfonso was we never learned, and it was evidently not until the 1950s that any serious scientific approach to the island's caves began. Over the past twenty to thirty years a large proportion of the island's known caves have been documented, mainly by Italian and Sardinian clubs, including the well established Su Bentu and Codula di Luna systems.

Nevertheless, outside of Italy, and other than sporadic visits by British and French cavers, little enough is known of even these major and impressive caves, not to mention the far greater potential that obviously exists

The Refuge and Sa Oche entrance, with typical Supramonte terrain behind



The Lainittu Valley

in their vicinities. Karst formations cover only six percent of the island, a far larger area being dominated by igneous and metamorphic rocks. But the quality and exciting variety of the karst more than compensate for the relatively small size of the area involved.

Sardinia's major contribution to speleology is to be found in the north-east sector of the island in the extensive karst region of the Supramonte, a barren ridge of Jurassic limestone running north-south for 25km and extending eastwards for the same distance through successive gorges to a rugged and

beautiful coastline. The region is roughly bounded by the villages of Oliena, Dorgali and Urzulei, with the coastal resort of Cala Ganone giving partial access to the sea-board karst.

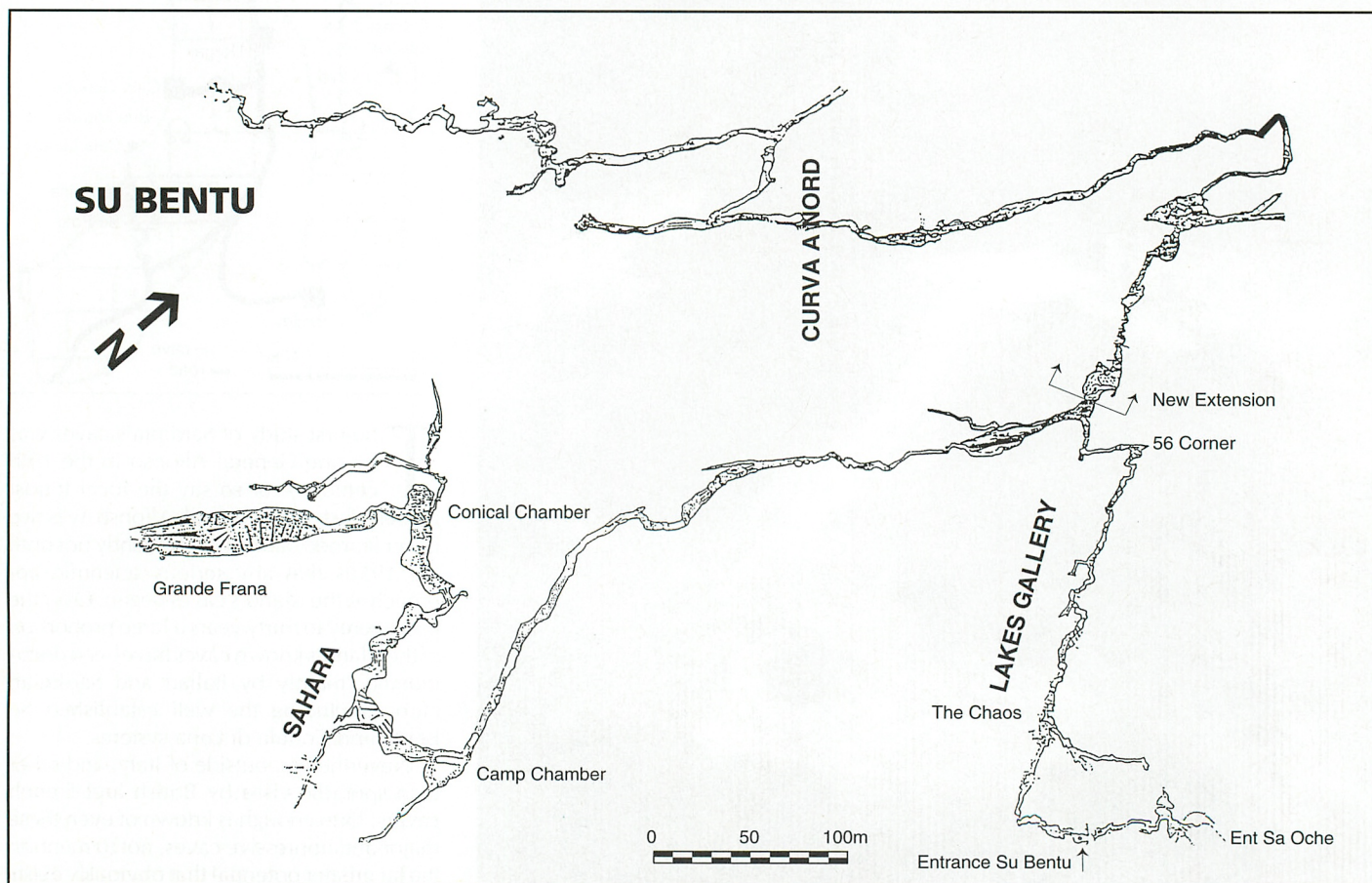
After some eight previous visits to the region, occasionally with other groups but often on our own, getting to know and cave with the local Sardinian cavers, we had a good grasp of what the area had to offer. Keen to go back again, but hoping for support for our photographic and video projects, we were interested to hear that the Red Rose CPC were planning a two week holiday in

the summer of 1996 and offered ourselves as guides. The two of us travelled overland with camera gear and tackle, to be joined a few days later by the Red Rose team who flew into Olbia and hired a couple of cars. Costs for either journey were not cheap at about £450 a head, but own transport is essential once on the island for any serious caving access.

Su Bentu - The Supramonte and Lainittu Valley

Approached from the north, as those who land at Olbia by sea or air will do, the Supramonte is at once impressive, rearing up as a wall of towering, white limestone cliffs giving way to an inclined bare plateau rising to the region's highest summit, Monte Corrasi, 1460m. This was once bandit country, a region notorious for secluding villainous types with a Dick Turpin-like reputation, the hostile landscape rebutting all attempts to locate and arrest the miscreants. The legendary town of Orgosolo sits on the western slopes of the Supramonte, but happily banditry is a thing of the past - although gun toting shepherds strolling into your camp can give rise to momentary panic!

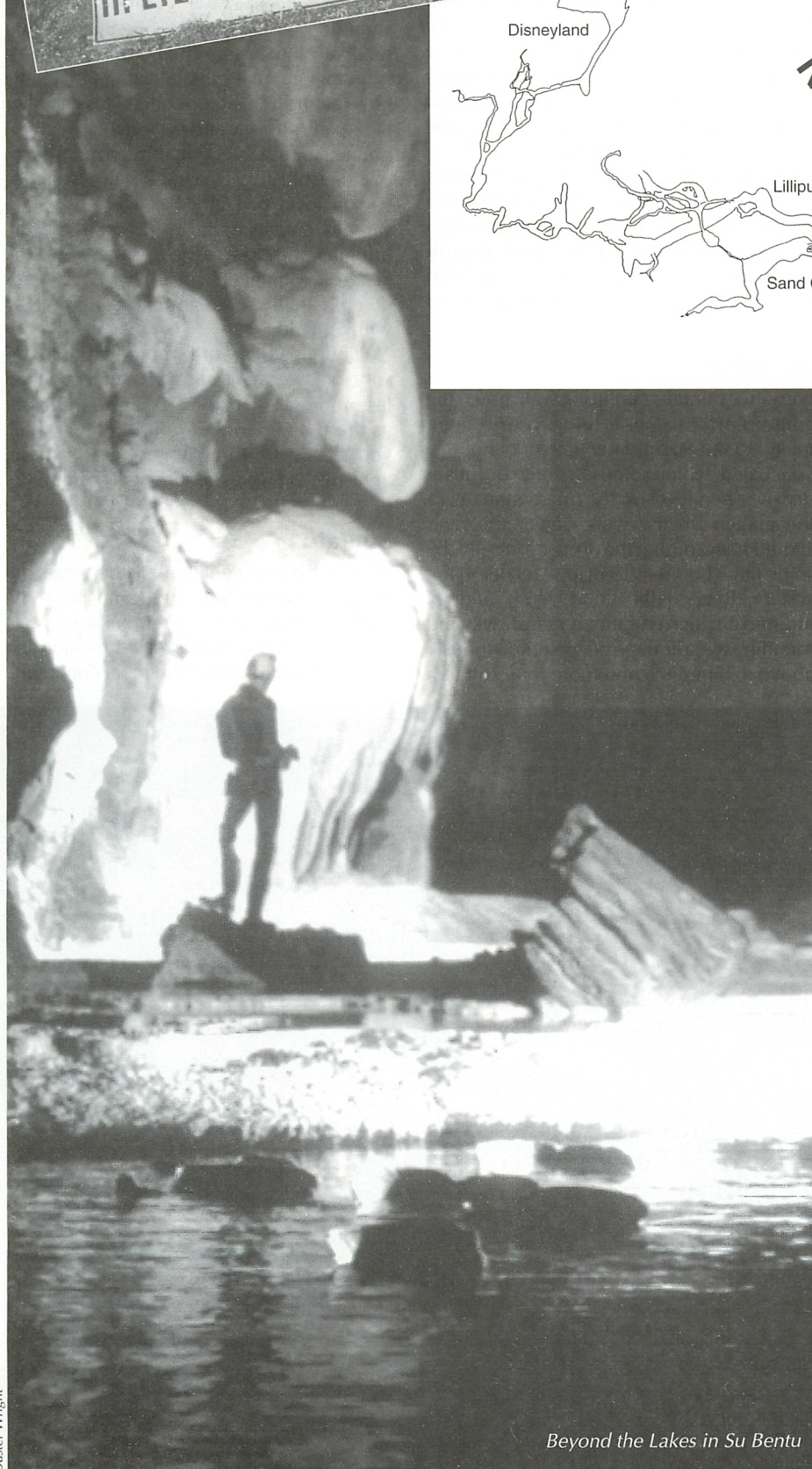
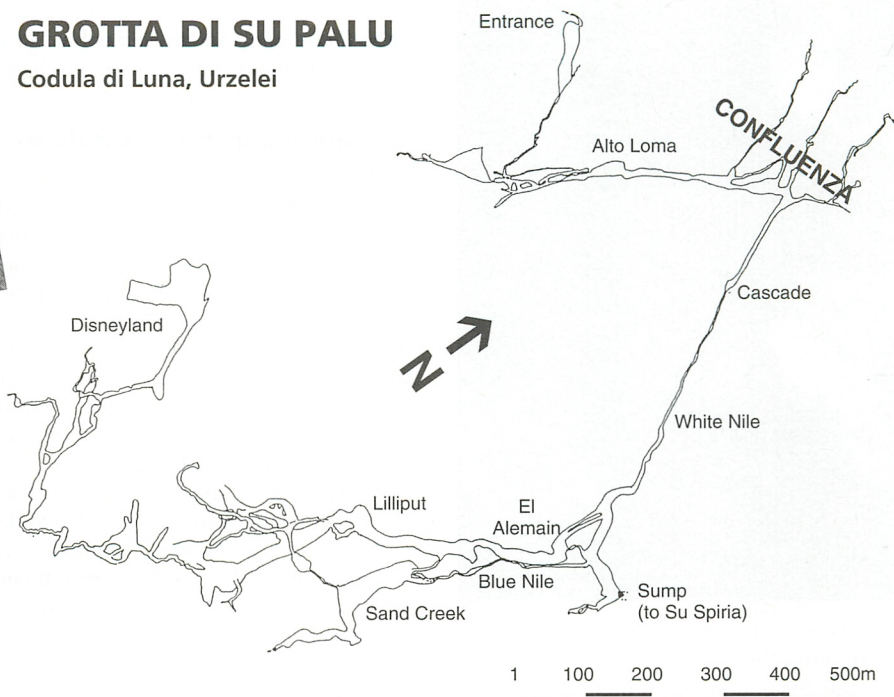
Our first objective was the well known system of Su Bentu in the Lainittu Valley which drains to the north of the Supramonte massif. Leaving the main Olbia-Nuoro road a series of indifferent metalled roads lead to the mouth of the valley at the Su Galagone resurgence, a local picnic spot where a cool spring issues forth all year round. The impressive rising was dived by the CDG in 1981 but without result. From the picnic car





GROTTA DI SU PALU

Codula di Luna, Urzelei



Beyond the Lakes in Su Bentu

park a track winds up southwards and then descends dustily into a broad valley of olive trees and vineyards and flanked by bare limestone ridges. As the head of the valley approaches some 8kms on, a fork to the right leads to a lone building, the Refuge, and plentiful free camping in the welcome shade of some scrub birch trees. A couple of hundred metres on up the obvious dry (in July!) riverbed is the Sa Oche cave, the flood rising for the Su Bentu system. An impressive overhanging entrance leads on into smaller passage with several climbs down and ramps leading to pools and lakes to a sump. Beyond this (divers only) is the bottom end of the Su Bentu system.

Su Bentu

Su Bentu itself is a higher entrance 50m above the Sa Oche cave and reached by an easy path just behind the refuge. A cool breeze blows from the entrance rising to a strong wind as a narrow section above the first 12m pitch is negotiated. Straightforward caving in a dry upper series, with one or two short crawls and climbs, reaches the Chaos and further ramp pitches of 12m and 20m to the stream level. Downstream through deliciously cool (or bloody freezing, depending on your build!) gour lakes lies the Sa Oche sump. Upstream through Lake Gallery lies half a kilometre or so of similar swimming in emerald clear, deep gour lakes. Wetsuits are mandatory and a 5m ladder helps to overcome a more obstinate gour half way along.

A final long swim and duck lands you out of the water at 56 Corner, where a red 57 is daubed on the wall! More swimming through a final series of beautifully scalloped pools heralds the end of the waterway and a climb up into handsome dry passage 10m x 20m high. This leads on as a fine march for 500m



A 5m stal in Su Bentu

Su Bentu system to 15km in length. No cave appears to have been found downstream of the Sa Oche sump and the water has 8km to go in a straight line before it sees daylight at Su Galagone. Food for thought.

Su Palu, Su Spiria – Codula di Luna

After a hot and dusty week in Lainittu, camp was moved to the Codula di Luna, a deep gorge some 10km east of Lainittu but requiring a 45km drive! A steep, hairpinned metal road ends at a ford after which the route continues as a track. Once again shady camping by the ford with this time the bonus of a river to swim in! (Note: for both Lainittu and Codula di Luna, drinking water must be carried in from clean springs).

The Codula di Luna runs 15km north east from the gorge head to its debouchement on the beach at Cala Luna. Contained within the gorge are several cave systems, including the Complesso della Codula di Luna (Su Palu – Su Spiria), the fourth longest cave in Italy at 32km.

Su Spiria

Forty-five minutes confusing walk down the gorge from the campsite brings you, if you're lucky, to the Su Spiria entrance, cunningly concealed behind some Oleander bushes at dry river bed level on the true right bank of the gorge. On the walk down, the river should have (during the dry season) sunk by some large boulders to reappear later in the system. Beyond the flood debris and fly infested 2m high entrance a steep, awkward Mendip style rift deposits you precariously above a 25m pitch and more loose rift to a

10m second pitch through boulders. Hereabouts the original way on, the Meandro degli Stivali (translates: Boot Rift) is concealed in an alcove and we only saw it on the way out – thankfully. The alternative is not much better, however, and a lot of thrutching is required to reach pleasantly decorated chambers before the 8m third pitch and some pleasant passage ending in granite (yes – granite!) chokes.

The way on is a short way back, an easily ignored flat out crawl – (Sardinian caving shouldn't be like this?) – opening out dramatically into a large chamber. The contrast is amazing – one minute eating gravel, the next reeling from agrophobia! This chamber is actually passage and the start of the unpronounceable Cazzinboricauizenagua, 800m of huge old fossil passage with an active stream level beneath. Passage infill occasionally creates uphill walks of 40 to 50m bringing one close to the roof in places. The active stream level beneath the Cazzi leads complicatedly upstream to a sump linking with Su Palu.

Undoubetdly worth more than the cursory look we gave it, Su Spiria will nonetheless impress even if one only ventures as far as the Cazzi. However, if you don't think you should be thrutching about in loose, tight rifts on your continental holiday, try this...

Su Palu

Also on the true right bank of the gorge, but only 10 minutes from the campsite, is the gated entrance at the side of a steep scree slope 30m above river level. Permission and a key is available from the local commune.

to Camp Chamber and then more sandy pleasantries through the marvellous Sahara Passage. Several hundred metres forward a delicate step over a hole in the floor (a 90m shaft!) reaches Conical Chamber and a more complex route through loose boulder chokes to the Grand Frana. This huge fault chamber, 300m x 60m x 100m high is stunning. The plod up the slope under the great fault wall takes twenty minutes to reach the col, from where the chamber plunges down the other side to end in a choke. Impressive it is, even to Berger and PSM freaks!

The recent discovery of about 6km of passage parallel to the Grand Frana route, and branching off near 56 corner, brings the

Gour pool, Su Bentu





Looking over the terminal sump
to the Blue Nile, Su Palu

Buster Wright

A short crawl leads to a 30m inclined pitch (handline possibly) and large sloping chamber. At the bottom a small feeder stream is followed through a flat out wet crawl to pop up in sparkly, calcite coated chambers which are pursued to an intersection with the Alto Loma. Instructions: romp forward into a magnificent cave.

The fine Alto Loma leads for some 500m with little difficulty but just enough thought in places to a choice of routes (tape marked) down through boulders to the Confluenza. Here, small streams unite and flow forward into the beautiful White Nile, a shapely river passage adorned with pure white formations. A rumbling noise ahead announces the arrival of the 12m cascade pitch which can just about be rigged dry via a traverse and balcony. More fixed rope traversing and final 10m pitch land one back in the stream which quickly enlarges as the impressive terminal sump lake is approached. The deep green lake covers the whole floor of a large chamber, into which pours from the other side the Blue Nile, an inlet stream. The sump is the connection route to Su Spiria, and the chamber is one of the most perfect cave settings you can imagine.

Above the Blue Nile, or alternatively reached by a ramp a short way back up the White Nile, lies the sandy, flat El Alamein, base camp for local cavers working in the system. El Alamein's level floor is a perfect football pitch and some dazzling ball skills were displayed by some and gross incompetence by others before the team moved off to video its way out. Two intrepid members

soldiered on up a series of short climbs and exposed traverses to finally thrutch up between some enormous granite boulders into Lilliput, a huge upper level fossil gallery which leads eventually to the cave's termination at Disneyland. After twenty minutes of switchback scree slopes in mega passage they felt they'd got the picture and returned to the livelier streamways.

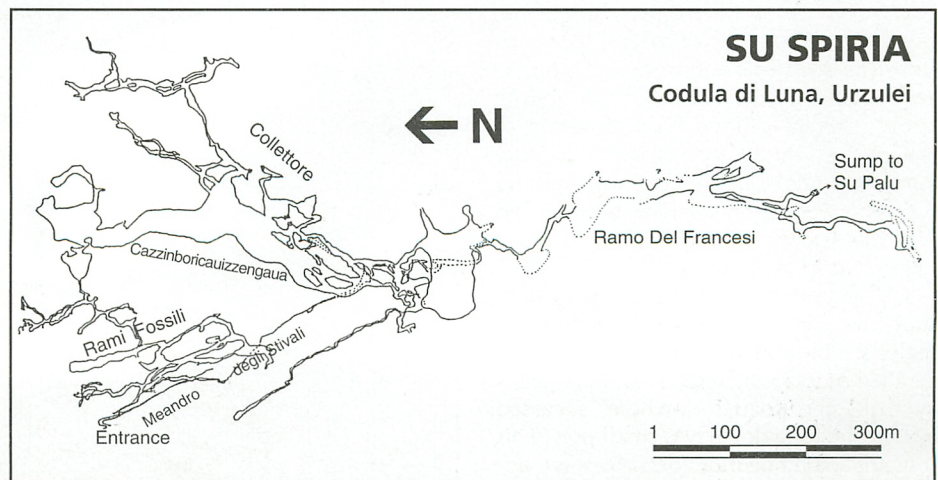
Once more, Su Palu provides a superb tourist trip which could easily be extended to a more serious stay with an uptodate description and survey of the cave.

Cala Ganone and the Bue Marino

On the road from Dorgali south to the head of the Codula di Luna, a left turn through a tunnel takes you on the road down to the

resort of Cala Gonone. No high rise blocks here, although the Stevenson family had obligingly opted to stay in a hotel for their holiday and invited us all down for a swim. The proprietor was only mildly shocked when fifteen filthy cavers leapt into his pool, which says a lot for the Sardinian temperament.

Another attraction of the resort is the pleasure boat rides out to various 'secluded' beaches and to the Bue Marino show cave. Two large tunnels debouch directly into the sea and access is by boat only. Once partitioned off into a language group (the smallest in our case) our guide led us on a crocodile tour of the left hand branch tunnel, the path winding endlessly on through a large phreatic passage, the sea-water pools giving way to fresh water ones criss-crossed by



bridges and overhung by magnificent formations. A large assembly hall sounded the end of the tourist trail with the tunnel disappearing into the distance. According to the guide this branch went for another 5km, but access was forbidden.

Explaining that we were English speleos there was a change of heart and we were directed to the Mayor of Dorgali to seek permission for a visit, duly granted after a torrid day tracking down the elusive official.

Taking an early boat the next day we arrived complete with camera gear, inner tubes and great anticipation. Once past the show cave we headed off up the massive tunnel in a blaze of camera lights and for the next three hours alternately walked, paddled or more often swam along the large passage which varied little in size but just carried unerringly on into the distance.

What with filming and photography only four of us reached the end, another deep turning into the terminal sump. For those who like swimming in big passage, this is the cave.

Bue Marino has some 14km of passage and is the third longest cave on the island. It lies at the bottom of the Codula di Luna gorge and would appear to be the main drain for the Su Palu/Su Spiria system and others in the gorge. A couple of our party who opted for a dry trip walked up the gorge from Cala Luna to the campsite and passed Italian cavers digging in what they hoped would be a back-door entrance to Bue Marino beyond its upstream sumps.

Summary

The Supramonte region of Sardinia contains magnificent caves of large extent and great passage variety. Systems of 15-30km length are no small beer anywhere, and it is only a matter of time before these are extended.

Plentiful more caves and shafts exist if one can locate them – the barren terrain makes exploration difficult and the heat, in summer at least, makes it almost impossible.

But large caves there undoubtedly are beneath these mountains.

In other limestone regions of the island there are also long cave systems, including the longest 'drive-thru' show cave in Europe! Well worth a look if you have time to tour the island.

A good knowledge of Italian and access to local cavers and their journals and surveys is obviously the best way to get up to date with developments on the island, otherwise precise locations and descriptions can be harder to come by.

We will be pleased to supply information to interested parties, including addresses of local caving clubs. Contact: Kym & Buster Wright, 6 Packhorse Row, Norton, Mansfield, Notts NG20 9JY.

Logistics


Overland travel and two sea crossings (all bookable via travel agent), approx. three days travel, cost c£450 for two people in one car.

Air travel, Gatwick-Olbia return, incl. car hire (Fiesta between five people), incl. petrol and airport parking, c£420 per person. Possible contact:

Camping: free, but contact local commune for permission first. eg, for Lainittu Valley, contact Comune di Oliena, CAP 08025, Provincia di Nuoro, Sardinia. Also full facility campsite at Cala Gonone, probably £7-£8 per night.

Wild campsites best not left untended as feral pigs on the loose can wreck tents and open tinned food unassisted! The only thing they don't seem interested in is booze!

Water: drinking water scarce in wild campsites Lainittu and Codula di Luna – best ferried in bulk from springs (Su Gologone for Lainittu) or bought in supermarkets.

Shops: good range of shops and supermarkets in Dorgali, Oliena and Cala Gonone. Some shops in Urzulei. Prices fair. 

Longest and Deepest Caves in Sardinia

Longest (in metres)

1	Complesso della Codula di Luna (Su Palu-Suspiria)	32.000
2	Complesso Su Bentu-Su Oche	15.000
3	Grotta del Bue Marino	14.000
4	Grotta di Ispinigoli – S Giovanni Su Anzu	11.000
5	Grotta di Is Angurtidorgius	10.255
6	Grotta di Su Mannau	6.350
7	Complesso di Corongiu de Mari	5.000
8	Grotta di Monte Corazza	5.000
9	Grotta di S Giovanni	3.920
10	Grotta Rolfo	3.487
11	Sa Rutta 'e s'Edera	3.232
12	Sa Ucca 'e su Peltusu	
13	Grotta di Nettuno	2.500
14	Grotta di Tilipera	2.300
15	Grotta L Donini	2.266

Deepest (in metres)

1	Complesso della Codula di Luna (Su Palu-Suspiria)	-297
2	Voragine del Golgo	-294
3	Abisso della Candela	-276
4	Sa Rutta 'e s'Edera	-256
5	Su Disterru Orgolesu	-240
6	Voragine Filos d'Ortu	-228
7	Complesso Su Bentu – Sa Oche	-204
8	Voragine Ospacco	-190
9	Voragine di Punta Arbona	-181
10	Nurra de Su Neulaccoro	-180
11	Voragine Dorghive'	-179
12	Nurra de Su Cherchi Mannu	-174
13	Abisso della Galleria Gasparro	-169
14	Pozzo Cadrighia	-169
15	Pozzo Camilla	-168

(Info: Jo De Waele & Leo Fancello: <http://www.vol.it/IT/ASSOC/SPELEO/grotte.html>)

El Alamein Camp, Su Palu

