



GAPING GILL

UNDERGROUND CLIFFS. BOTTOMLESS PITS. EXPLODING SHEEP.
TIME FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT...

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In the dusty room inside my head, there's a cabinet. In it is a drawer labelled 'Things To Do Before I Get Too Old And Have Responsibilities And Stuff.' Inside lie the most cavalier and mentally damaging experiences I've ever considered trying. Like base jumping. Or Everest.


Caving isn't in there. That's in a drawer labelled 'No.'

As a mountain lover, my reasoning is thus: every step up from the ground is a step towards heaven. Now reverse that hypothesis – and add gravity.

No, I don't have experience to base this on. But I've seen the films. I *know* what's down there. But I didn't know this.

I first saw Gaping Gill in a book while researching an article about the Yorkshire Dales. The name rang a bell, but the picture didn't: a figure, stood beneath a plunging shaft of depth-weakened sunlight. After double-checking to ensure I wasn't reading a book about Venezuela, it slowly took

root that something quite otherworldly lay 300ft beneath Ingleborough. The hook was in. I was going to have to break my rule: whatever I had to do, and whatever terror it took to do it, I just *had* to get there.

For such an outwardly horrifying hobby, it came as a surprise just what a brimming little culture caving supported. In my mind, it was always the realm of people with huge hands, narrow stares and whey complexions. But Inglesport – in the North Yorkshire village of Inglesport – is a shop that approaches caving with the same bright, aren't-we-having-fun fervour that, say, Keswick approaches climbing. It was in the café above Inglesport that we met the brave couple who were charged with teaching me to embrace the dark side of the ground. Both had wide eyes and hands in proportion to their bodies. Tim even had a tan. 

Doing that caving thing – and trying not to think about the billions of tons of rock sitting just above...



Some superb gear. And wellies.



Surprise two: the entrance to Britain's largest shaft is a crack scarcely bigger than a toilet U-bend. Watching Tim slide inside was like watching an anaconda swallowing a giraffe. I stood meekly – as you do when you're oilskinned up like an oil rig worker, with a ganglion of hyper-specialised, Petzl-stamped metal and rope trickery you don't really understand dangling from your harness – and waited for Tim's shout from below.

To get to the bottom of Gaping Gill's main shaft, one cannot merely abseil in; frankly, this misses the point.

What is instead required is a navigation through a sweaty intestine of tunnels via an entrance hole called Bar Pot. Splendid – save for two obstacles: a vertical drop of 13m, and another of 30m. Not one to ease you in gently, the first of these vertical drops begins about six feet below Bar Pot's entrance crack.

Reaching it, I clipped onto the rope, my harness creaking and pinching as I eased myself into a dangle. After that second of okay-rope-my-life-depends-on-you uncertainty, I squeezed my descender, the fissure of sunlight above me vanished with a jerk and I felt a rush of air. Down I went.

The extensive, ever-changing systems fissuring our hills are the last vestige of truly exploratory adventure in Britain. Down here lie deep shafts leading Satan-knows-where, squeezes, flooded tunnels and hip-sized holes that – if you're cursed enough to fall down them – cap shafts falling hundreds of feet into dark, mud-filled wells. In short, the stuff of nightmares.

Bar Pot to Gaping Gill is comparatively well-travelled, but it's really just the path of least resistance through a web of altogether more difficult passages: some known (Quicksand Passage, Radagast's Revenge, Disappointment Pot), some not. Beneath our hills, there is still a hell of a lot to discover.

Finally, my feet hit rock. We were in a spacious cavern, the walls prickled with mini-stalagmites and sea urchin-like to the touch. Things got narrower and slipperier as we moved from the cavern to a tighter, steep tunnel, the bellrope chorus of our equipment echoing off the walls. There was soon a draught from ahead, and with it, Tim's instruction to clip into the rope. We'd arrived at the second – big – pitch.

It's a cliff. The bloody Channel Tunnel, but vertical. After watching Vicky descend, for a few moments I just stared down into the dark, the fireflies of their headlamps far below my only gauge of depth.

The strange thing was, I wasn't afraid. I moisten with sweat at the very thought of a 30m abseil off a

mountainside; but down here, my brain wouldn't believe its own telemetry. I could almost hear it trying to stallingly react: "A cliff? Underground? I'm afraid there's been some sort of mistake, old boy... I fear I shall just have to ignore it."

This suited me just fine, and – hesitating only briefly – I swung out and began haltingly to descend.

At the bottom of the big pitch, all threads of comparison to the topside world snapped. We were deep now, and it felt it; the darkness was total, noises crisp, air fetid. Down here, *nothing* lived: just us.

But (and it's a big but) weirdly, this was okay. As Tim descended the pitch, Vicky approached.

"Now there are some holes down here, so be careful."

"What kind of holes?"

"Deep ones."

"How deep?"

"Deep."

This last word was said in the kind of flat baritone that signalled this really wasn't a thread I should pick at. The idea that the cracks to the left of the passage as we crept by could fall any deeper into the earth than we already were seemed inconceivable. I tried instead to focus on our goal ahead: the main chamber.

I couldn't wait to see it. I even raced ahead at several points, only to sheepishly stop at a junction and wait for Tim and Vicky to indicate the right way. It would be easy to get lost down here: route-finding isn't based on lines indicative of heavy travel like on a mountain, and often the most obvious directions turned out to be wrong. This I began to fully appreciate about 20

minutes from the bottom of the second pitch when we reached an antechamber.

"What do you reckon?" Tim asked.

"Straight on," I said, resisting adding the word 'silly'.

"Nope." He indicated a hole the size of a letterbox at his feet I hadn't even noticed. "Feel the draught?"

Sure enough, cold air was twirling lazily through the opening. "Draughts, eh? Bit of a clue?"

"Aye, sometimes." He said, slipping his legs into the hole. "Sometimes not."

The tunnel beyond this squeeze was claustrophobic: a squashed toilet roll of beige, waxy walls, the ceilings arched by strange, symmetrically ridged hollows.

It was strangely beautiful, but deeply uncomfortable. At times it was a stoop-walk stumble, at others a hands-and-knees scramble over the hard rock and sometimes a shuffle-on-your-belly squeeze. After a bruisingly long slough along the gritty tunnel, we heard the hiss of water ahead. We'd arrived.

There it was, better than the picture: the cathedral-sized cavern, a curtain of water draped from the chimney of light far, far above. Countless people must have looked into Gaping Gill from the surface with little appreciation for just how far that innocuous hole went, but down here the extreme size of the shaft was hard to miss. Close to the waterfall, as if to emphasise the previous point, we discovered a sheep that had evidently fallen in. It had literally exploded on impact.

But this aside, all the shuffling, headbanging and bruised knees had been worthwhile: Gaping Gill is *breathtaking*. The treasure at expedition's end.

But this is caving's big trick. It isn't expedition's end: it's barely halfway. The perfect inverse of hill-walking, in this topsy-turvy subterranean world getting to your objective is the easy bit: it's getting home that requires the work, and ahead of us lay a couple of hundred feet of vertical climb. It was a knacker journey back through the tunnels and up the pitches, and by the time I was once again wedged tight at the top of the first pitch, grappling with my wires, covered in dust and sweat, I was tired and gasping for daylight. But we'd made it.

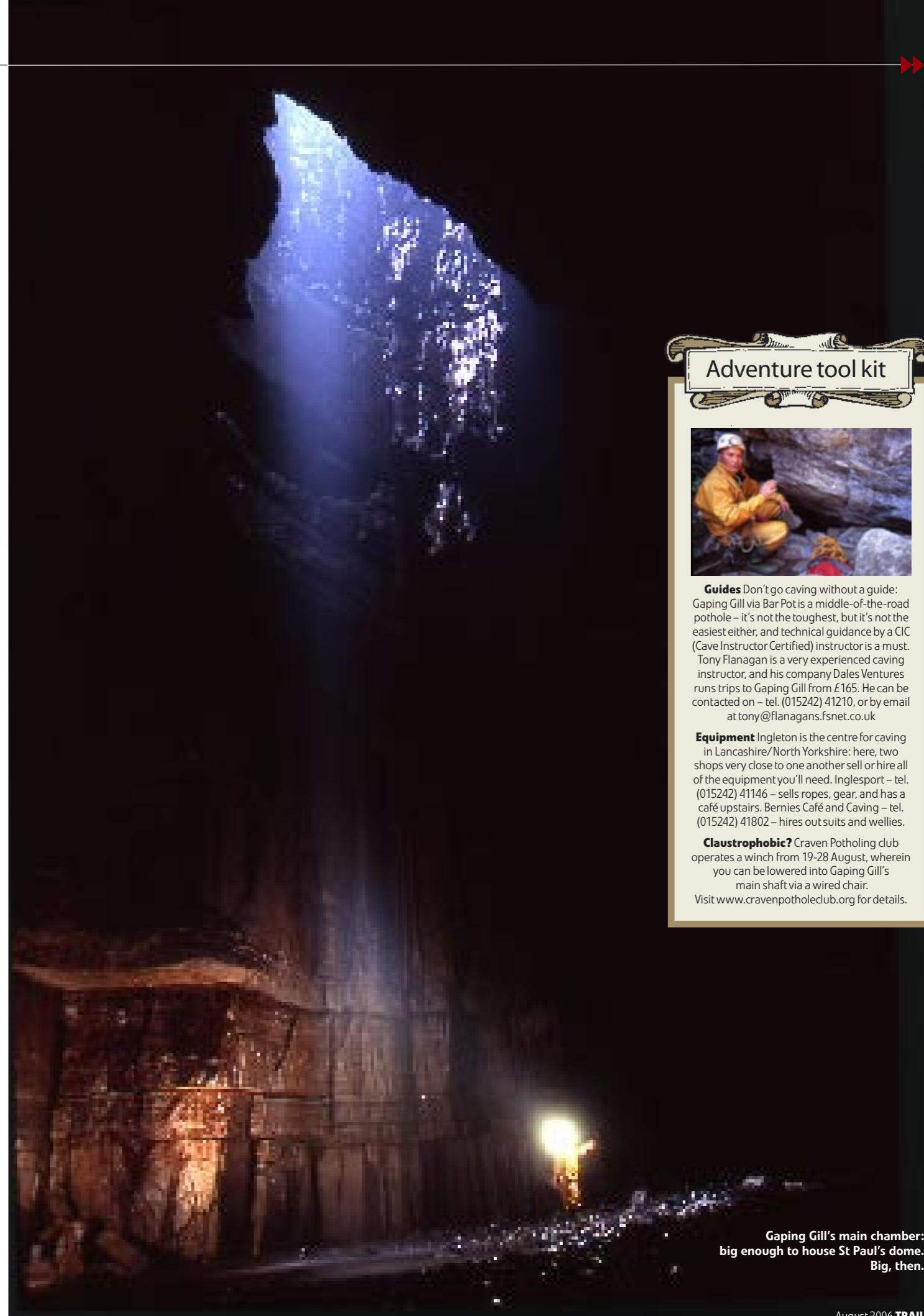
"How'd we do?" I asked Tim, as he passed out a bag of gear and emerged, grinning.

"You're alive, mate – so you did okay."

So is caving a proper adventure? I'll say. It's like discovering a trapdoor in a house you've lived in for years. Surprising, for sure. Unknown, certainly. Scary, yes. But you can't *not* look. I'll never do Everest. Base jumping? Maybe once. But *this* I will do again. **T**



The big pitch.



Adventure tool kit



Guides Don't go caving without a guide: Gaping Gill via Bar Pot is a middle-of-the-road pothole – it's not the toughest, but it's not the easiest either, and technical guidance by a CIC (Cave Instructor Certified) instructor is a must. Tony Flanagan is a very experienced caving instructor, and his company Dales Ventures runs trips to Gaping Gill from £165. He can be contacted on – tel. (015242) 41210, or by email at tony@flanagans.fsnet.co.uk

Equipment Ingleton is the centre for caving in Lancashire/North Yorkshire: here, two shops very close to one another sell or hire all of the equipment you'll need. Inglesport – tel. (015242) 41146 – sells ropes, gear, and has a café upstairs. Bernies Café and Caving – tel. (015242) 41802 – hires out suits and wellies.

Claustrophobic? Craven Potholing club operates a winch from 19-28 August, wherein you can be lowered into Gaping Gill's main shaft via a wired chair. Visit www.cravenpotholeclub.org for details.

Gaping Gill's main chamber: big enough to house St Paul's dome. Big, then.