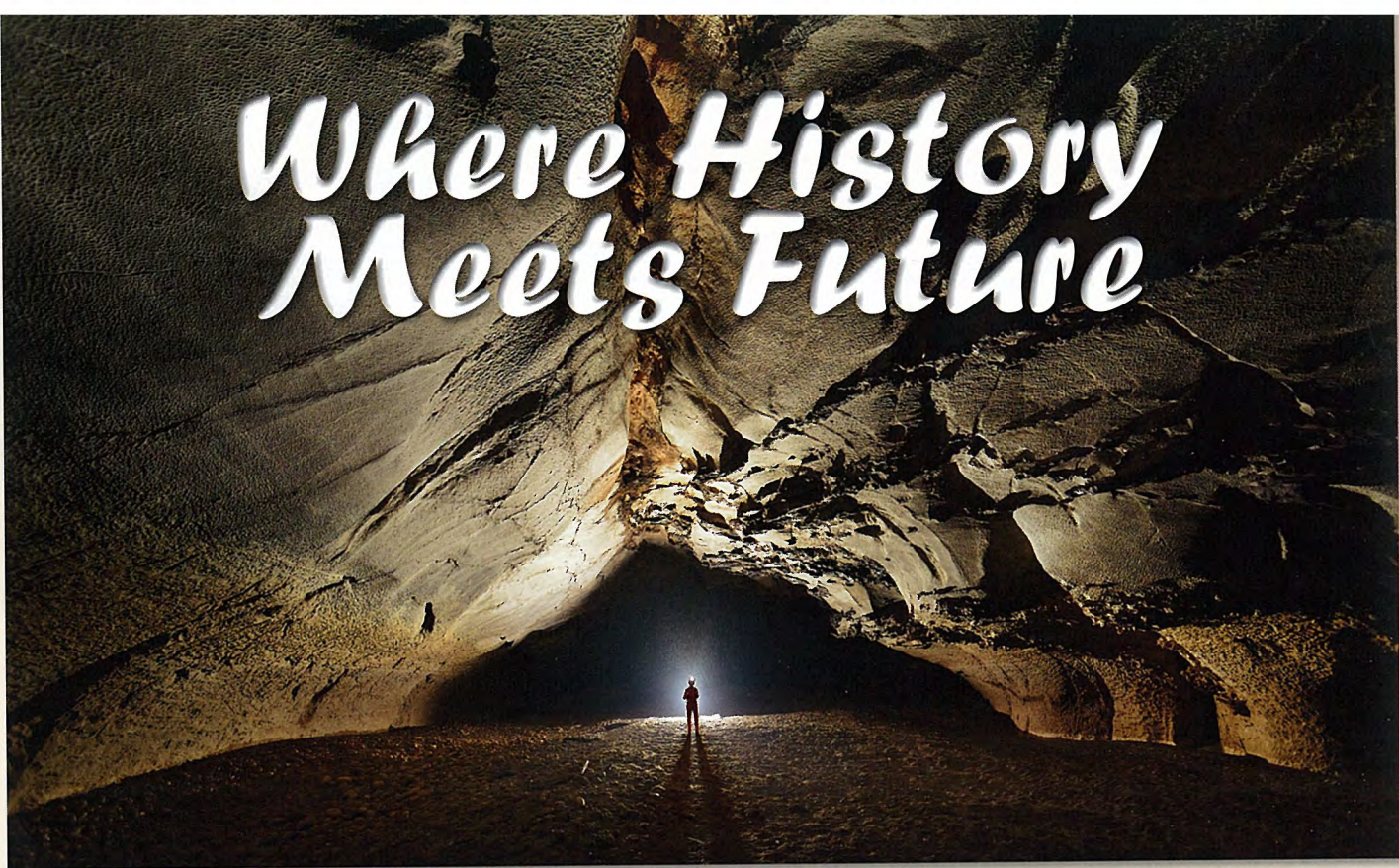


# Where History Meets Future



A sweltering week from 21 to 28 July drew cavers to the Czech Republic for the 16th International Congress of Speleology, a meeting that required immense planning – but what an incredible result. Chris Howes takes a cool look at what cavers experienced.

**B**RNO, the guidebooks suggested, was a city not worth the time to enter; an industrial base offering little to interest or attract a traveller. When last I passed this way the Czech Republic had yet to join the EU, the language was incomprehensible, everyone was friendly and Brno had been sidestepped en route to the Moravian karst. Some things had changed during the intervening decade: paying for every nuance of food listed on a menu had morphed into a more European approach, so that ordering coffee no longer meant requesting milk and sugar and being charged separately. Other memories returned: the open Czech nature, the beauty of the landscape, the riddle of a language written or spoken ... But the guidebooks, they were wrong ...

The Moravský kras or Moravian karst is packed with over 1,000 known caves – with five of these made into showcaves – and Czech cavers are among the most proficient in the world. The area has been protected by law since 1956, with some valleys closed to all but eco-traffic – road trains, cablecars and foot-

prints left by walkers – and covers a slice of the emerald green countryside about 25km long by between 3km and 5km wide. It is pitted by shafts such as the plunging Macocha Abyss and tranquil resurgences (even the subterranean Punkva river has been listed as a Ramsar Convention wetland) just to the north of Brno.

Hence Brno's perfect location, offering visitors not only a gateway to the karst, but also a royal castle on a hill that perches over a city of medieval buildings, with narrow alleyways opening to tram-railed streets underpinned by a labyrinth of tunnels dug from cellar to basement, underground staircase connecting with workshops and market stalls (take a tour, for a fee). Here was the Augustinian monastery where Gregor Mendel conducted his experiments with peas – remember your schoolday science lessons? – and initiated the study of genetics, and here lies an immense sprawling convention centre. Opened in 1928, slender white, glass-linked supports confine cool air in arching splendour; the design defies its age and assumed lineage – it is not some grey concrete structure of the communist era, but a vibrant piece of architecture that could have been designed today. It was perfect indeed for the 16th International Congress of Speleology.

The congress is a week-long event held every four years and for 2013 over a thousand cavers from fifty-

three countries gathered in force to hide in the air-conditioned buildings or the beer marquee during the heat of July (and that month baked everything hard indeed – temperatures soared to a recorded 43 degrees in the windless sun). Run under the banner of the International Union of Speleology, the UIS, the skills that lay behind its organisation beggar belief, so seamlessly did everything run. Credit for this must go to a host of cavers, fronted by the president of the Czech SS and congress chairman Zdeněk Motyčka; from editing, preparing and printing the immense three-volume doorstep set of satchel-cased *Proceedings* to booking the venue, arranging funding, food and accommodations, manning the help desk and dealing with lecturers and incoming, tired travellers and happy (and unhappy) campers, we must all give thanks to the team.

The comment about campers? Most attendees opted for staying in nearby dorms, making tent city smaller than expected. This was to



have filled a strip of land adjoining the Australia Pub (aka cheap beer resource), but a few days prior to the long-arranged event, bulldozers tore up the grass in preparation for building works, meaning only a few tents sprouted in the concrete-hard, sun-dried debris – they were the diehard Brits, for the most part, who entered into a competition against the Aussies (which sported rules such as ‘you spilled beer, a point to us’) made up on momentary spurs (the Brits, I am told, won hands down). The remaining campers enjoyed a forced move to within the congress grounds and thus were central to everything – freshly cooked food, beer on tap with the congress sponsored by the local Starobrno brewery, the never-ending lectures and films, evening spectacles such as folk dancing and impromptu parties, and the captivating sounds of a bluegrass band, Druhá Tráva, with Katka Garcia singing into the balmy night, all became a minute’s amble away.

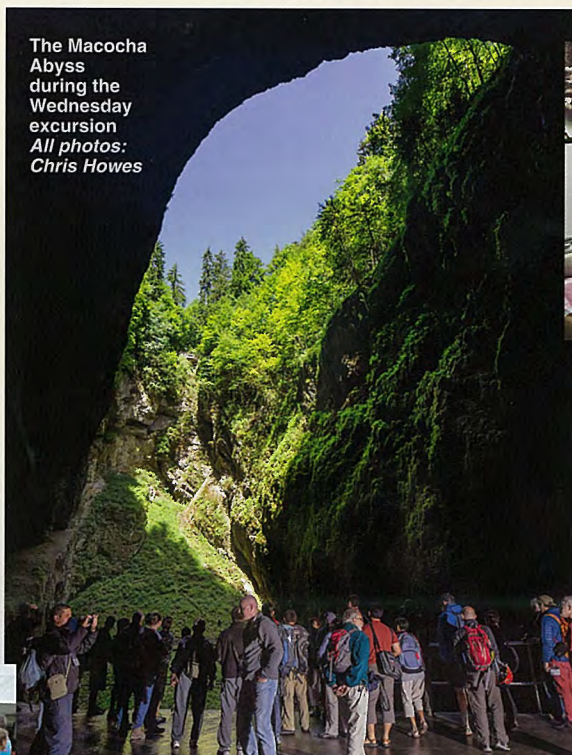
The talks (around 250 of them, plus meetings and other events) were, for the main part, technical in nature; the congress is a showcase event where science meets science, but explorers and historians can also reveal the background to their discoveries. Information was imparted, certainly, and the talks attended were fascinating and inspiring (*nobody* could see them all, given that several sessions ran concurrently), but it is the chance to meet old friends and make new ones in the ever-growing caving community that makes such meetings truly valuable. Thus, we could learn how microbes have gained increasing recognition for their role in cave formation (it’s not geology that made caves, the saying now goes; biology formed the passages), we could sit relaxed with contentment or rigid with excitement as 3D films and slideshows washed across us, controlling our emotions as the author desired, or we could take coffee in the company of names we had read about but never had the

fortune to meet and talk with.

Such a congress is, therefore, far more than a set of talks. By design, the week is always punctuated by a Wednesday excursion, mainly this year to Moravian showcaves, but also on offer was a week of ‘night caving’ – a chance to escape for a late trip to the karst – and a series of competitions. Just as at Hidden Earth, a SpeleOlympics course gave challenge to anyone willing to negotiate a series of heating ducts joined to used tyres, all against the clock. The SRT-based events were fascinating even beyond the speed and skill shown by the competitors (two female Russian competitors awed spectators with the slickness with which they negotiated the course; the winning time by Amina Chanysheva was a mere 108 seconds). The ropes were hung on high using a cable cranked taut between pillars – another useful facet of the huge building, as it was placed by firemen driving a full-size engine inside then using the turntable ladder to gain the height. Nearby were a children’s climbing wall, a ladder climb and a squeeze machine that was passed by one woman at an incredible 14cm wide.

Such entertainment was contained in one arm of the building, while the other hosted a display of early photographs linked with the work of pioneer caver Karel Absolon. In between, trade and club stands stood in back-

to-back rows selling books, posters or simply to wave a flag; Croatian, Czech, German, Italian, Slovene, Spanish and yet more societies and national organisations were here, including a British Caving ‘pavilion’ to promote the work of BCA and BCRA, the Mulu Caves Project, Hugh Penney’s venture into cave-based Hand-knitted Pottery, *Descent* tucked into a corner alongside books from Wild Places, the forthcoming European Speleological Congress, and kit on sale from



The Macocha Abyss during the Wednesday excursion  
All photos: Chris Howes



Opposite: Philippe Crochet’s winning entry in the Photo Salon open category

Top down: Andy Eavis, Zdeněk Motyčka, the British Caving stand and taking seats for the banquet

Bottom row, left to right: The conference centre and Rotunda theatre, the arched interior and its display of early photographs, the congress badge, food served Czech style, the squeeze machine, Robbie Shone receiving his awards, the survey salon and Wookey on the rope course





Starless River with advice always on hand from Ursula Collie and Tony Seddon.

Upstairs, a balcony stretched away bearing the fruits of the photo, art and surveying competitions, while a theatre ran almost non-stop film entries. A full list of winners may be found in the *Daily Journal*, downloadable from the congress website ([www.speleo2013.com](http://www.speleo2013.com)), so here it must suffice to mention only a few names that *Descent* readers may recognise from past pages. Robbie Shone cleaned up the photo salon with awards in the Scenes from Nature, the Enhanced and Surreal Imagery and the Story Series categories, while Philippe Crochet and Annie Guiraud carried off the prize for the best cave photo in the open section. Henry Rockliff did well in winning his age category for 100m SRT in 7 min 58s, Becka Lawson shot up and down the ladder

climb in 11.8s, while Rob Eavis took 55s to win first place in the obstacle course and Wookey took the next age category above at only 8s slower (and, unofficially, I hear that Rob narrowly missed taking a prize in the video section with his imaginative sequence that won the Video Media Salon at Hidden Earth 2011; see *Descent* 223 and watch the film at: [www.vimeo.com/20918866](http://www.vimeo.com/20918866)).

As such things inevitably do, the week came to an end but, even so, it was certainly a high point. Traditionally, the congress is completed with a banquet and in this we were not stinted. Beer and wine flowed freely and the buffet was plentiful enough to satisfy a mass of cavers (really!), so that everyone was relaxed when it came time for the speeches. We heard from the congress president Pavel Bosák and an address from the outgoing UIS President Andy Eavis.

The idea of holding a regular international congress was mooted in 1949 and the first was held in Paris in 1953. The UIS itself was formed during the fourth meeting in Postojna in 1965, presidential terms being fixed at four years – the interval between meetings. The first two presidents

(Bernard Gezè of France and Arrigo Cigna of Italy) served for two terms, but since then all presidents have held office for one term only, until Andy took the reins in 1997. He passes the baton to Kyung Sik Woo of the Republic of Korea, who will at minimum serve until the next congress in 2017, in Australia.

The week's final event, aside from the party and dancing until the early hours, came in the form of the Presidential Surprise, when Andy sent everyone outside. An immense and lengthy firework display wowed everyone who craned their necks to the starlit night. It was an incredible end to the week.

As delegates set off home or to enjoy post-convention camps spread across Europe, Brno must have become slightly quieter. Those departing may remember all the good times, the conversations, the meetings planned, the research yet to complete. Czech cavers can reclaim their lives, return to their caves and stand proud – if muddy – in what they achieved.

A congress such as this will be remembered as one of the best ever produced. The 16th International Congress, Where History Meets Future; it was down to you.



## What's in a title?

THE 16th International Congress of Speleology carried a strapline: Where History Meets Future. This was inspired by a series of anniversaries to commemorate 770 years since town privileges were bestowed on Brno, 290 years after the first descent into the Macocha Abyss, 60 years since the first congress was held in Paris, and the 40th anniversary of the last time the congress was held in the former Czechoslovakia in 1973.



Czech dancers in national costume, the city of Brno and the awesome fireworks

Top: Party time, exiting from the Punkevní showcave tour, and Druhá Tráva with Katka Garcia

