

14th International Congress of Speleology—Greece, 2005

text and photos by John Moses

Every four years, the world's caving community gathers for the International Congress of Speleology, held under the aegis of the International Union of Speleology (UIS). From August 21–28 some 60 National Speleological Society (NSS) members joined the gathering on the shores of Greece's Calamos Beach, about an hour's drive northeast of the Greek capital of Athens. Calamos Beach is a resort village composed of many vacation homes, narrow lanes, and a few hotels.

There was an extensive technical program, with the opportunity to learn about the most recent speleological research and exploration throughout the globe. Many of the attendees were there to present scientific papers, attend the symposia, or participate in the International Commission meetings. Although there was no printed proceeding, about half of the abstracts and complete papers were collected on the CD given to each delegate. As with the NSS annual convention, there were also pre- and post-Congress excursions to featured cave areas. At mid-week, the participants were loaded onto buses and taken for a day-long tour of ancient ruins of Mantinea near Tripolis, a poolside buffet, and tour of the Capsia Cave. The last is a swallow-hole system on the edge of an extensive drainage, with several well-decorated rooms, currently being developed as a show cave. Human remains recovered there date back to late Hellenistic years (4th–5th century AD).

The UIS is composed of the national caving organizations of more than 60 countries. The NSS represents the USA within the UIS, and has a single vote in a General Assembly composed of the member countries' delegates. One of the most important decisions the Assembly makes during its final Congress session is the selection of the next venue, four years hence.

USA SELECTED TO HOST NEXT CONGRESS

After nearly four years of preparatory work, commencing after the 13th International Congress in Brasilia in 2001, the US bid committee made a presentation, on behalf of the NSS, to host the 15th International Congress of Speleology in 2009 in Kerrville, Texas. Concerns about visa problems for foreign visitors to the US and the issue that no two Congresses have ever been held in a single nation were suitably addressed and the inter-

national delegates responded favorably to the proposal. In a unanimous vote by the 39 countries present at the final General Assembly, Kerrville was chosen. After the vote, the first registration for the 15th ICS was awarded in a lottery drawing to the delegate from Poland, Michael Gradzinski.

The previous Congress held in the US, in 1981, was based in Bowling Green, Kentucky. The NSS bid presentation pointed out that the distance from Bowling Green to Kerrville, about 1400 kilometers, would encompass all past European Congress venues. Also highlighted in the presentation, the bid committee has been working with NSS members experienced in US visa procedures to attempt to reduce the risk of visa rejections for the visiting speleologists. The current US visa procedure was a concern expressed by many potential visitors from countries subject to visa requirements.

Dr. George Veni, who co-chaired the NSS bid committee for the 15th International Congress, will continue as the president and Dr. Louise Hose will be vice-president of the 2009 Congress organizing committee, subject to confirmation by the NSS Board of Governors. A detailed account of the proposed 2009 event is in preparation for a later issue of the NSS News. For more information see the web site at www.ics2009.us/

OFFICERS ELECTED TO UIS GOVERNING BODY

The UIS is governed by an elected "Bureau" composed of a president, secretary-general, vice-presidents, and 8 "adjunct secretaries." They are elected in an at-large ballot by the General Assembly of country delegates and serve for the 4 years between Congresses. The NSS nominated Dr. George Veni for adjunct secretary. He was elected on the first ballot and received the most ballots of any candidate. The other officers elected were: President Eavis (UK), VP Bosak (Czech), VP Klimchouk (Ukraine), Secretary-General Nader (Lebanon), and Adjunct Secretaries Benedetto (Argentina), Hapka (Switzerland), Mercado (Puerto Rico), Mihevc (Slovakia), Williams (New Zealand), Woo (Korea), Lauritzen (Norway).

CAVING EXCURSIONS

The Greek countryside is a treat to the caver's eye, as limestone outcrops across much of the landscape. The Hellenic Speleological Society has recorded more than 8,000 cave and karst features in its database. A sampling of these, on more than 20 excursions, was offered as part of the pre- and post-Congress activity. Unfortunately, the cost of this year's excursions (averaging about \$120 per day) appeared to deter the Congress participants from taking advantage of the scheduled trips and most were cancelled. One excursion made by several NSS members was a post-Congress caving trip to the south



NSS cavers at the International Congress in Greece

Peloponnese region.

Led by three members of the Greek club "SELAS", six of the visiting speleologists left Athens on August 29th by car to view a few of Greece's caves, pits and monuments of antiquity. The first stop was the Mycenae ruin south of the city of Corinth. Popularly known as "the palace of Agamemnon," the ruins date to around 1300 BC. Unable to resist the lure of the underground, most of the group descended the 99 steps to the bottom of the cave-dark cistern carved into the limestone bedrock. There, the ancient city stored water (now dry) for times of drought and the not infrequent attacks by hostile neighbors. If even a portion of the Homeric mythology about this civilization is grounded in real events, war was a staple.

The winding, two-lane road south from Mycenae leads to the north coast of the Gulf of Argolidas and the town of Nafplio, the first capital of the modern nation of Greece. Outdoor cafes along the waterfront offer such refreshments as the national summer drink of café frappe (instant Nescafe mixed with ice, sugar, milk – shaken, not stirred) and views of the little round fortress (the Bourtzi) that was built in the middle of the harbor by Venetians who ruled here in the 1400s.

The road continued south along the Gulf to the white-washed village of Leonidio and offered numerous opportunities for sea vistas as the switchbacks took the route up and down the coastal mountains. Leonidio is set back from the shore at the mouth of a high-walled limestone valley. The guides went shopping for provisions there, while the rest of the party enjoyed a late-afternoon swim.

The road turns west through the narrow lanes in Leonidio, away from the sea and into the mountains. While the road is paved, it gives a good impersonation of a West Virginia two-lane with coffee jitters and no guard rails. The limestone cliffs lining both sides of the valley are frequently pocked with cave passage fragments ("...you drive and I'll look for caves"). Hanging high above the road, partially set into a recess in the rock, is the Elona Monastery. The hermitage is now open to the public and offered a phone booth with spectacular views.

The only side road leads north 9 km to the red-tiled roofs of Paleohori village at an elevation of about 1000 meters. A large house, built in 1923, and belonging to the village, served as the post-Congress excursion's base of operations in the region. As in many Greek villages in the region,

the streets are only one lane wide and when two vehicles meet, one must back off. Tourist buses do not visit Paleohori. North from the village the paved road ends and some vehicles do not have sufficient ground clearance to proceed further.

At a pull-off about 2 km from the village, a trail leads down the mountain a short distance to Aliunkze Pit. It was a 30 m blind warm-up with a single re-belay below the entrance. The Greek technique is pure "Alpine SRT." Most American rigging would not have used the multiple bolts or re-belay. Everyone in the group successfully negotiated the pit, as several local shepherds looked on.

About 1 km further along the road and a 30 minute hike down the mountain was found the entrance to Propantes Pit (-315m). The guides had shown photos taken by a pre-Congress excursion to the blind pit. It takes about seven seconds for a dropped rock to fall the 285m of the main shaft. This area of Greece was ruthlessly controlled under German occupation in WW II. According to our Greek guide, the Nazis offered captured partisans a pardon if they could jump across the mouth of the pit. At the widest, Propantes is about 7m. When Polish explorers first bottomed the pit (in 1980?), they recovered human remains and returned them to the village. The beautiful green countryside and warm Mediterranean summer can't dispel some chills. The group decided to pass on the opportunity to bottom the 6 re-belay drop.

Dinner in Paleohori was taken at the open-air tavern in the village square at about 10 in the evening. The Greek salad was a constant, as were the Greek French fries (fried in olive oil). The main course was goat, lamb or chicken. Food was served family style and the distinguished speleologists soon learned that the fastest fork into the bowl got its owner fed. English was the common language of the group in sharing caving stories. Two of the Greek



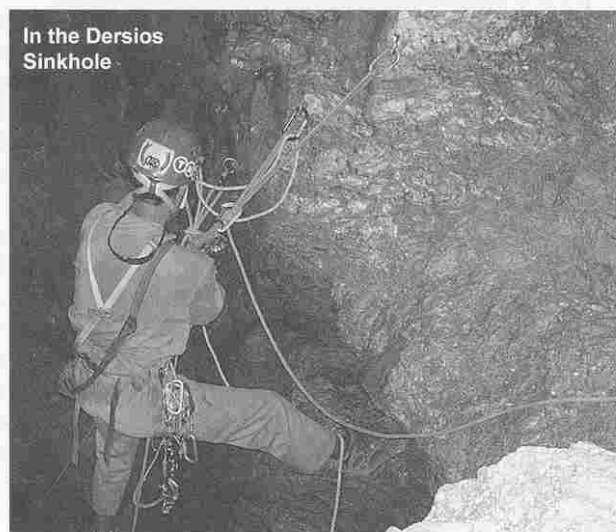
George Veni and Sherry Graham man the the ICS 2009 bid table

guides recounted their efforts earlier in the year to participate in the Krubera Cave (world's deepest at -2080 m) expedition in Abkhazia. They were forced to bypass closed Russian border checkpoints to enter the disputed region. Their efforts got them to the -1400 m sump in Krubera and a significant portion of the survey below -500m. After dinner it was commented upon that village children go to bed later than speleologists.

About 3 hours drive from Paleohori and southwest of the city of Sparta is the Mani Peninsula. In Agios Demetrios, near the village of Selenitsa, is the mouth of the Katafygi (Refuge) Cave. The cave entrance is only 10 m above the waters of the Messenian Gulf.

As indicated by the name, the cave served as a hiding place for Greek villagers during the Ottoman rule, the Nazi occupation, and more recently for Communist guerrillas.

After ducking into the entrance opening, the main part of the cave is largely



dry, walking passage with evidence of extensive formation vandalism. Painted on the cave wall in at least two locations was the 'hammer and sickle' of the Greek Communists. A few upper level leads connect back into the main cave. While this part of the cave is dry and contains few live formations, the guides pointed out a descending solution tube which tied into the water-filled passage underlying the main cave. Here, the fresh and salt water reportedly form layers.

The cave continues for a horizontal distance of about 2 km. Near its end, several squeezes and less-obvious routes provide access to extensive displays of calcite flowstone coated with a layer of helictites. This was a surprise for the visitors who'd wasted many shots on the damaged formations found earlier. Exiting the cave provided the opportunity to strip off the cave gear and scramble off the rock slabs into the sea.

The exploration of Dersios Sinkhole (-160 m) on the plateau north of Leonidio is a current club SELAS project. The area around the cave is taken up by marginal farming of terraced land and goat herding. The entrance pit is in the bottom of a widened joint and appeared to be the swallow hole for a wide area of surface drainage. There were 5 rope drops, all less than 25m and several additional handlines rigged along the steeply dipping streamway. Generally, the passages were 1-3m wide with a high ceiling. In this active cave, very little flowstone was seen. The Dersios cave temperature seemed cooler than the earlier caves visited (13 °C = 55 °F). As the passage approaches the sump, the floor is taken by deep, water-filled potholes. To stay dry, the cavers climbed into the ceiling slot and chimneyed above the potholes. The sump initially stopped exploration at -105m. During drought, the explorers were able to pass the sump but it fluctuates with the influx of water into the cave. The ongoing exploration in the cave involves diving three sumps with air-filled passage between. The tour group looked in at the deep sump pool and routed for the surface and Leonidio's cafes.

The guides from club SELAS (www.selas.org/english.htm) in Athens were Yiannis Vavourakis, Elias Kazais, and Methodios Psomas (of SPOK Crete).

Award winner at the ICS in Greece!
Beneath the Cloud Forests by Howard M. Beck
A History of Cave Exploration in Papua New Guinea
\$ 42.00 +shipping. Available from your local dealer.