

Penelope Vorster, Katarina Kosič Ficco  
RETURN TO ČRNA GORA 2023

In June of 2023, a team of twelve cavers traveled from Slovenia, the United States, Canada, and France to the village of Poprat, Montenegro. We returned ready to push hard in the cave Vrućićni Snovi, which we left going and with promising air in 2022. This year we were happy to be joined by several DZRJL members, and to merge biological inventory with exploration.

At the end of the previous year's expedition, we turned around at the top of a 30-meter drop that looked into what appeared to be a large, old trunk passage intersecting the dry canyon we had been surveying up until that point. After two days of putting ropes back onto our route, we began new exploration. Past this drop, we found a large breakdown room with a slope leading to the top of a tall canyon and a rushing stream audible below. This was the first time we made it to stream level in any of the caves we have explored in the area. We were excited – and breathing easier – now that we were past the very dry and dusty upper levels. Apart from this stream canyon, however, we noticed a draft of air continuing over some breakdown very close to the end of the previous year's survey. Following this air, we found what we were looking for: a 20 meters deep canyon that had air blasting in our faces and stream at the bottom, that we called 99 Luftballons and the best discovery so far, Zvijerko. The discovery started an expedition full of excitement and findings. Here are our stories.

**The Day We Found Zvijerko brezno (and the night we were trapped in the cave!)**

On June 24<sup>th</sup>, Jeff, Katarina, Mike, and Philip S. went into the cave to survey the stream canyon and to continue rigging into the drafty tube above the stream. Mike and Katarina continued the upstream survey, stopping at a waterfall that would require an aid climb. They returned to where they had split from Philip and Jeff and followed the ropes until they came to where Jeff was traversing over a canyon with a false floor. Holes in this false mud floor showed glimpses into a gradually

deeper and deeper canyon, and after a few stations, Jeff saw darkness ahead.

Jeff shouted to the darkness and the darkness echoed back. The team came together and listened to the sound of water falling far below. Mike threw a rock far out towards the center of the pit. The rock fell for three seconds before striking a ledge, dislodging rocks that fell a further three seconds and caused a massive echo resonating through the cave. By this time, it was evening and there were only enough

Teo Delić looking for animals in the newly discovered stream. The waterfall represents the lead left by the team at the end of the expedition.

PHOTO: KATARINA KOSIČ FICCO

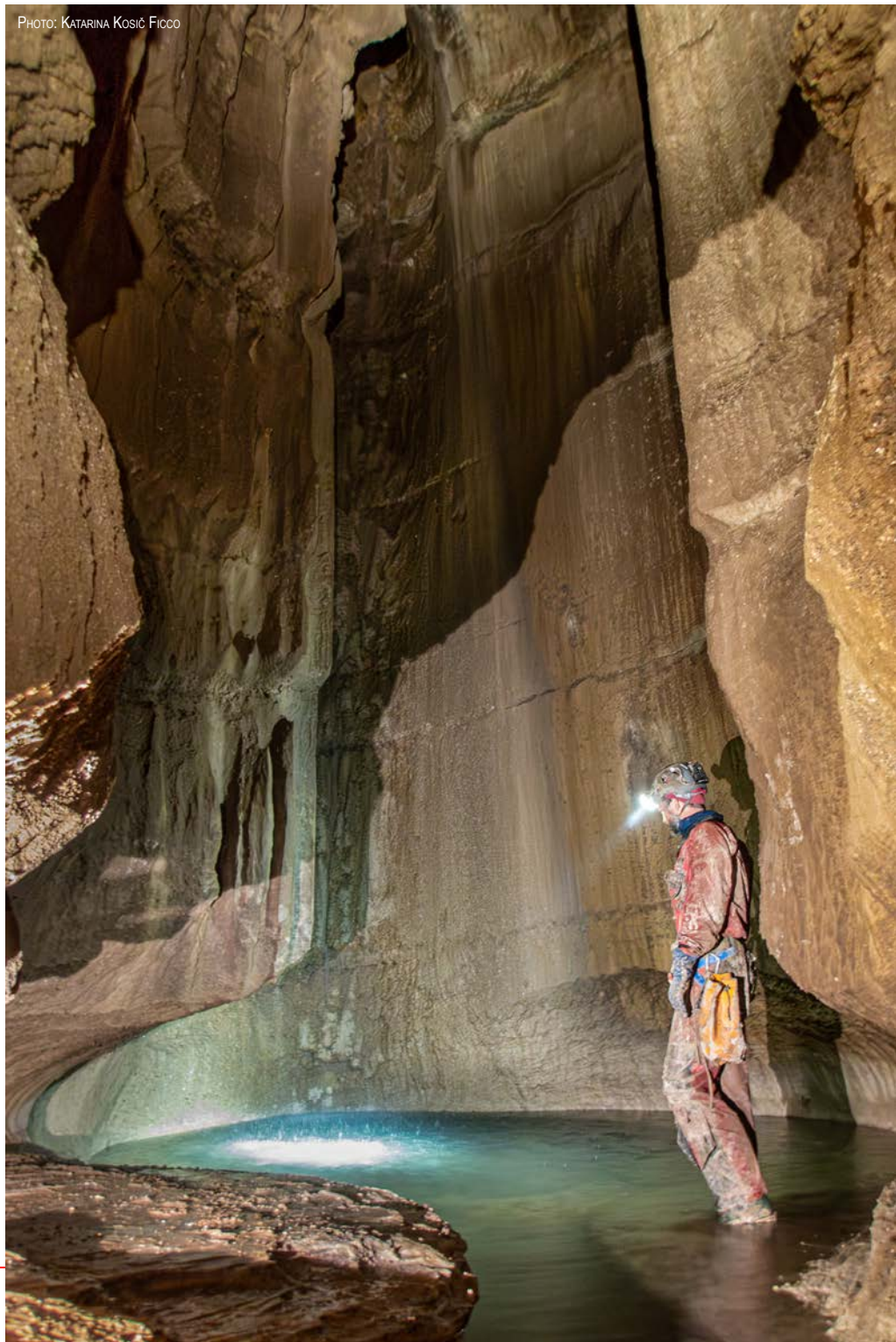


PHOTO: JEFF WADE



PHOTO: KATARINA KOSIČ FICCO



Top: group photo, from left. Top: Maja Zgmajster, Teo Delić, Tommy Cleckner, Riley Drake, Phillip Schuchardt, Philip Moneyhun, Penelope Vorster, Matic Di Batista, Špela Borko. Bottom: Danaja Delić Zgmajster, Katarina Kosič Ficco, Mike Ficco, Jeff Wade. Bottom: the team rests in a dry alcove near the very wet entrance of Vrućni Snovi while waiting for the storm to subside. Next page: Jeff Wade staring into the darkness of Zvijerko.



PHOTO: PHILIP SCHUCHARDT

bolts to set a couple of anchors. Jeff started right away – clearing loose rock and traversing out of this window to get a clearer picture of the giant pit. The rest of the team finished surveying to the edge and shot the Disto laser toward the far away walls of the pit. They measured 50 meters to each wall, with the pit depth well over 100 meters. Jeff ran out of hardware and rope and stopped about 15 meters below the passage they had arrived from.

Excited, the team headed for the entrance at 21:00. They did not know at this time that finding the big pit was only the first adventure of the day.

Philip and Jeff left first, followed by Katarina and Mike. Once Katarina started the first climb, Mike mentioned that the stream levels must have increased as he can hear it rumbling beneath him. Not particularly concerned as the majority of the cave

leading out is extremely dry, they continued their ascend. Once they reached Queezer Teezer things became even more interesting. Loud rumbling sound, resembling a washing machine, was coming from behind the wall, making the team happy that they first discovered the dry route into the cave. The team had just learned two things:

1. The route the water takes from the surface is quite closely parallel to the standard route.

2. It was raining, probably a lot.

This was quickly confirmed once the team came closer to the entrance, and they could hear water in the entrance canyon that was usually dry. Phillip went to check the conditions and returned with the report that a thunderstorm on the surface had turned the entrance shaft into several waterfalls and the entrance canyon

into a river. Realized they are trapped in the cave, they made an impromptu bivy in a sandy alcove of a dry passage. Once Katarina and Mike reached them, they stopped them explaining that they are not leaving anytime soon. Resigned they got comfortable on the shelf and spent several hours switching between naps and snacking. The peak of the evening was when Jeff, Mike and Katarina woke up to a clinking sound of the gear. Once they turned on their lights, they saw Philip staring at them and holding the wall. Among loud bursts of laughter Philip explained them that he was cold and decided to do squats in the dark so he wouldn't wake them up. Since he couldn't see he decided to hold on to the wall. After several hours of shenanigans and miserable naps (by that point the team was quite cold), the storm subsided a little and they were able to exit.



The team made it back to the camp around five in the morning, where the rest of us woke up to bring them beer, tea, hot food, and hear the exciting news.

### The Day We Had a Big Day (Happy Birthday to Špela)

The shaft, which the discovering team named Zvijerko Brezno, lived up to the excitement generated at the camp. It was big and beautiful, with multiple intersecting domes and several high leads visible. After a couple days, the shaft was rigged and surveyed to 205 meters depth. The upper section is largely dry, and characterized by breakdown on one wall, with large sediment slopes and huge slabs of detached rock. After a pinch point about a third of the way down, the shaft transitioned to a wet, straight sided dome with several waterfalls entering from far above. 50 meters from the bottom of the pit and about 30 meters from the current rigging is a large window in the wall with a breakdown floor visible. The team wanted to check this lead and speculated that even if it was not a way on, it could be considered

as a location for an underground camp. At the bottom of the shaft are large boulders rounded and polished by large amounts of water, suggesting that you do not want to be in the shaft during big rain events.

We had less than a week left on site and expected more wet weather. There was a concern that the ropes in the lower, wet section of Zvijerko might get hammered by the waterfalls when it rained heavily, so we made the decision to derig at least the lower section, and leave the large lead in the side of the shaft for a future year. With just one day left to access lower Zvijerko, we decided to consolidate our efforts. Objectives for our day trip were the following:

1. Continue survey
2. Update the rigging diagram
3. Collect invertebrates for the biological inventory
4. Collect mummified bats for study
5. Take photos of Zvijerko
6. De-rig the lower pitches.

We assembled a team consisting of The Ladies and Jeff for what we expected to

be a pretty long day.

We decided that Maja, Špela, and Katarina would look for the animals. Riley and Penelope had surveyed the big pit earlier in the week and were ready to go back for more. There was a pit of about 50 meters that Tommy had rigged on the previous trip that needed to be surveyed. On the way out, Riley and Penelope would make a rigging diagram for Zvijerko. All of us would travel down and then up the pit in a group, helping light and model for the photos Jeff planned to take.

As with the best plans, things started to go wrong almost immediately. Shortly after entering the cave, Riley felt very sick. Riley suspected she was having an allergic reaction due to gluten cross-contamination in the camp kitchen. She turned around and planned to join Phillip M. and Tommy, who were having a smaller day surveying some leads in the upper part of the cave. With our team reduced to five cavers, the rest of us continued to the bottom of the cave.

Katarina took on double duty, helping collect invertebrates while also running



instruments for the survey. Once we reached the top of the pit Jeff started to explain what his plans are. He finished his description by stating: "I will need you to hold the light, spread your legs and stay as still as possible," not realizing the company he was in. Katarina looked to Penelope and asked: "Did he just say that we need to spread our legs and stay still?" and received the response: "Pretty much." All the ladies burst out laughing enjoying the embarrassment on Jeff's face once he realized what he actually stated. Continuing in the same positive and cheerful spirit we found that Tommy's description of the 50-meter shaft below Zvijerko to be accurate: the pit ended with water sinking into the breakdown and a couple of small mud siphons. The route on which we could continue was now above us. Returning to the bottom of Zvijerko, we rejoined Maja, Špela, and Jeff. Jeff was preparing the camera equipment while Maja and Špela collected some very charming creatures, including a large centipede who posed for a few photos.

Katarina and Penelope started working

their way up, making a detailed rigging document. Maja followed third and we all stopped from time to time when Jeff decided we were in the right spot to light photos. Špela kindly volunteered to come up last, de-rigging a 60-meter rope from the bottom of the pit and coiling the 160-meter rope above that at the anchor below the dry section. A few hours and many photos later, the first four of us convened above the shaft for a pot of coffee in the Bothy bag. Once Špela ascended the shaft the clock turned midnight and she was welcomed by a Happy birthday to you song that the team sang from the Bothy bag, as her birthday just started. Despite an extra year she was feeling invigorated after hauling the ropes, and she and the 60-meter rope elected to keep moving and lead the way out of the cave. We packed up our little shelter and Penelope followed Špela, while Jeff, Maja, and Katarina planned to collect and photograph mummified bats on the way out. Taking their time to exit, Penelope and Špela both enjoyed naps at the entrance until the rest of the team joined them at 4 am. It was Špela's birthday and

**Previous page: Špela holds a specimen of a centipede in Zvijerko.**

**Above: another centipede, this one from Vrućični snovi.**

we suggested that this must be the best way to start a new year of one's life!

The sun rose while we hiked across the plateau on the way back to the car. After 24 hours on his feet, Jeff was still full of energy! He ran circles around us, taking photos in the early morning light. We arrived back in camp at 07:00 to a group of concerned men as our callout was at 8:00 and we barely made it and celebrated with a breakfast of pivo and watermelon.

### Time in the Community

In addition to making progress in Vrućični Snovi, our team checked other pits and caves in the Poprat area and followed up on reports of bats using caves in the Korita area. As always, we invested in listening to the stories and priorities of our local friends and hosts. Locals in the area are concerned with water access to



PHOTO: JEFF WADE

support living on the plateau. Herders use cisterns to water their animals, and drinking water for the area is sourced from the spring in Korita. With Korita growing and tourism bringing more people to the small mountain villages, interest in other water sources remains strong. Our team has yet to identify another accessible and consistently flowing water source, but makes sure to follow up on reports from farmers of water in caves.

We are always happy to spend time visiting our friend Martin's in Poprat, and each year are introduced to more members of the local community. Martin and Viktorija always welcome us into their home with delicious food and drink, kind faces, and good information that helps us on our mission to explore. They also generously allow us to camp in their field, which we turn into a happy home base for the duration of our stay. Kola and Tanja sell us meat that they raise and cheese that she makes. This year we were able to celebrate a great expedition (and Mike and Katarina's 8<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary) with roast lamb, Montenegrin rakija, and of course, the Teran we had rationed since leaving Slovenia.

Top: Zvijerko brezno.  
Right: Collecting water.

### Results and Next Steps

In 2023, we surveyed total of 2.9 kilometers, pushed Vrućični Snovi to 1.5 kilometers and 503 meters of depth. In addition, we surveyed 15 more caves in the area. We welcomed Teo, Maja and Danaja back to the team after a couple years apart, and added Riley, Jeff, Špela, and Matic to the ranks. We were also able to perform some biological inventories of Vrućični Snovi. During the survey we collected centipedes, spiders, pseudoscorpions, springtails, and diplurans.

We look forward to returning in 2025 for another round of exploration in Vrućični

Snovi and other caves. We have quite a bit of swinging, traversing, and aid climbing in our future!

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PHOTO: JEFF WADE