

# The Palace of Ismeno

by Mike Towler

“Can you see the carving?”, I call from the base of the ladder.

My English friend Huw from Benabbio peers over the lip of the cave forty feet up the cliff and grins. “I think you should come up here and have a look.”

Actually, and I apologize for breaking up the flow of the story already, we’re not going to call him Huw. Some Italians might read this. And while they have many virtues, Italians are generally not capable of pronouncing the letters H and W, so this is something like the worst word in the world. When called upon to say it most of them grimace slightly, eventually splutter something like “Urgh..” and then throw up their hands in resignation. So let us, as they do, call him “Evans”.

Anyway, Evans beckons for me to ascend the ladder. It’s quite a construction. The previous year I had a bunch of visiting physicists drag the twelve-metre ladder I bought to work on the roof of our church - the longest they had in the DIY store - all the way up here but it was a couple of metres too short to reach the cave. This summer I call Evans, who fixes things. He’s a problem solver. His response was to strap his telescopic ladder on to the end of mine, and now it’s long enough. It looks pretty terrifying, but we’ve secured it with a rope and now it seems stable enough.

Evans has just climbed it. He has entered the Palace of Ismeno. As far as I can tell, he’s the first person to get up there in 127 years.



Here’s what Barga priest Canon Pietro Magri had to say in his book *An excursion to Mount Gragno and the cave of Cascaltendine*, on his approach to this spot in the year 1880:

*And what a beautiful sight! The wide entrance to the cave opens up at the base of an enormous hollow in the mountain which has the general shape of a parabolic curve, though this is somewhat irregular and imperfect lower down on the left-hand side. The upper edge of this great cavity is the edge of the summit plateau of the mountain and is garnished with holm oaks.*

That's Cascaltendine itself, which is easily accessible and well-known and which I may have mentioned in er.. both of my previous contributions to Barga News (I'm really not obsessed with caves, OK? I'm just working this through.). Anyway, this article is not about that. However if you stand in front of Cascaltendine, look up to the left, and track your eyes around the giant overhanging cliff then according to Magri you see "*a hole of considerable size some way above a wild fig tree*". It's not obvious and you probably wouldn't see it if it wasn't pointed out to you, but it's there. That is the Palace of Ismeno. That's what we're doing today.

Magri goes on to say that Bertacchi, a gentleman who published the first description of Cascaltendine sometime in the 1700s "*was not able to investigate this hole on account of not having any ladders, but it was visited by members of our party and Ferruccio Salvi has communicated the following description to me.*"

Salvi's prose style is not up to that of the priest, and there follows a somewhat leaden description (see later) which ends:

*Before coming down from the cavern we used a chisel to inscribe our initials and the year 1880 on both walls of the passage near the entrance.*

Magri continues.

*A most curious thing at this point was the sight of people appearing at the mouth of this barren and empty cave at such a considerable height. This was a most astonishing spectacle and we were able to enjoy the effect at the very moment of Diversi's appearance at the hole. We called out to him as he popped out with a cap on his head, wearing glasses, with a mattock in one hand and a piton in the other, but it no longer seemed to be him; there was something strange, something fantastical, something idealized about him. [My brother] Magri, who went up there and saw him inscribe our names, painted a verbal picture of him as a kind of wizard. The idea never went away and our friends christened the cave "The Palace of Ismeno".*

Ismeno being the counsellor and wizard of the King of Jerusalem who stars, for example, in Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* and, later, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. But of course you knew that. Obvious required knowledge for your sophisticated man about Barga in 1880.

Anyway, some years ago I was shown a tattered copy of Magri's very rare little book that lives in a drawer in our neighbour Delma's dining room table. I ended up translating it, and conceived the idea of writing a little photo essay for our website, matching up the descriptions in the text with the current reality. That was all fine, except that I had no way of getting into the Palace of Ismeno. In 1880 Magri simply hired some big guys with big ladders from Cardoso, but I couldn't do that. How then could I see if the chiselled initials were still there?

Well here we are - it's Friday 3rd August 2007 - and Evans and I are at the cave with ten quantum physicists from around the world who are attending a summer school at my Institute. Now your average quantum physicist is not normally considered essential equipment on a tricky mountaineering expedition but today we have heavy gear to get up to the sheer rock face, and Evans and I are grateful to the quantum Sherpas for helping to carry it.

Way up on the ledge, Evans's expression tells me that there is something to see. I grasp the ladder

and head upwards. The ladder flexes alarmingly; the rock on which it leans is crumbling and unstable. Forty feet up I step over the parapet. I become aware of a dark, dusty passage, higher than a man, descending into the heart of the mountain. Evans gestures to the right hand wall. I see a piton battered into the stone, an antique rope still attached it. Above it and to the left, chiselled into a low rock shelf, in letters four inches high: D.P. MAGRI 1880 BARGA.

On both walls, Magri said. I look to the left. Less clear, but there's an inscription. Blowing away some of the dust, I see: DIVERSI, SALVI 1880. I nod. He didn't make it up - that's what we came for. Flash. Flash. Photos.



The top of the ladder is moving. There is a scraping sound. The hirsute head of Colin Glass from Switzerland - a man so hairy that my friendly baby daughter Saska is terrified of him - appears above the rim of the cliff. Not without difficulty, he manoeuvres himself onto the platform and descends into the gloom. The first hippy to enter the cave. Not long afterwards, Hamad Alyahyaei the Arabian guy. The first Moslem ever to enter the cave. Then I-Chun Lin the brave Chinese girl.

The first female, and the first Asian. Probably.

It's time to explore, and we set off down the passage. After a while the ceiling comes down low and we crawl on our hands and knees through the dry dust. There is a junction. It is then I realize we only have one hand lantern between us, and that somehow, stupidly, we have left the head torches at the bottom of the cliff. Colin and I wait in total darkness in the inner chamber as Evans and the others head back to the entrance to retrieve the equipment. If my mother didn't read this, Colin and I would have communed with a cigarette whilst we waited.

Presently the others return, the beams of their head torches made visible by the clouds of smoke billowing in the confined space, and I fish out a battered copy of Magri's book from my back pocket. I read aloud to the others the text of Salvi's report which Magri quotes, speaking quickly as I pass through the dull bits:

*The entrance is, when facing outwards, to the right of the principal cavern around 12 metres above the level of its floor. It proved necessary to overcome this difference in height by means of a ladder, as the sloping wall containing the entrance is almost vertical and in consequence inaccessible without the ladder.*

*At its mouth the cave is 2 metres and 20 centimetres in height with a width of 1.80 metres, but 8 metres inside the ceiling has descended to only 0.90 metres and henceforth it is necessary to proceed on all fours to a distance of 23 metres from the entrance. The initial breadth of 1.80 metres reduces, 8 metres along the passage, to just 1.50 metres and stays that way until the 23 metre point mentioned above, where the cave is 2 metres broad and 1.60 metres high. This is a good place to rest since even though one cannot stand up completely, those of limited stature may, by inclining their head slightly, stretch their back and straighten their knees.*

I note this is where we are now.

*Beyond that point the cavern divides into two branches. The passage on the right descends rapidly with a gradient of 40 percent; the one on the left has a 30 percent upward gradient.*

*After 4.60 metres the first passage leads to a little lake at which point the cave ceiling descends to within only 60 centimetres of the mirrored surface of the water. This is matched by the depth of the lake and so the total distance from ceiling to cave floor is only one metre and twenty centimetres. Proceeding beyond this point is exceedingly painful, for although the water only comes up to the level of the knees one is obliged to maintain the back bent almost horizontally. Moreover the water is exceedingly cold and indeed almost freezing even in summer. Nonetheless, as we wished to know if new passages existed beyond the lake one of the guides was persuaded to try to pass this obstacle and he succeeded, though not without some fatigue and discomfort. After proceeding another 6 metres and happening upon the other side of the lake, our explorer found a sudden elevation in the ceiling which permitted him to stand up but 1.20 metres beyond this point the chamber came to an end.*

*Those who enter the left-hand branch may like to know that it is a metre in height with a breadth of 0.90 metres. One must climb, as I said, up a 30 percent slope and 3.10 metres inside the cave bends sharply to the left where unexpectedly we encountered a great abyss in the floor, providentially made visible by the light of our lamps. We threw a stone into it and immediately heard the splash of water.*

*One of the guides undertook to climb down into this sinkhole, where the damp walls - only 0.8 metres apart - allowed him to support himself by pushing against them. As soon as we saw his head disappear and had lowered a lamp to provide him with light, the guide told us that he was touching*

*the water with his feet and immediately afterwards he found the bottom.*

*While the walls of this well were being examined, one of us happened to be still at the edge of the pool in the right-hand passage described above and he observed that he was able to see the light of the lamp held by the man in the hole. In this way we discovered that the two branches of the cavern were in fact connected through an extension of the little lake as far as the sinkhole in the left-hand passage.*

*This whole cavern is clearly undergoing a process of natural enlargement through the action of the waters, which presumably flow into the lake through the vault of the sinkhole and then exit through the cave mouth. Both the floor and the walls which curve down to them show obvious signs of erosion, and this is without doubt produced by the action of the water which in times of heavy rain must infiltrate the little lake, raising it to the level of the highest point of the cavern whereupon it discharges through the entrance.*

*The rock in which the cave has formed is the usual Albarese stone [an expensive ivory-coloured local limestone used e.g. for the facade of Barga cathedral] - carbonate, that is, limestone from the Cretaceous epoch perhaps with some Pleistocene character though as we were unable to recognize any traces of fossils there must remain some doubt about this.*

*Before coming down from the cavern we used a chisel to inscribe our initials and the year 1880 on both walls of the passage near the entrance.*

Ten minutes of exploration show us that sometime during the previous century and a bit the underground lake has disappeared; whether temporarily on account of this summer's dry weather or permanently is unclear (Magri was here in late September). Magri's supposition that the two passages are connected turns out to be correct, and we are able to crawl down the sinkhole in the left-hand branch and end up near the lowest point of the right-hand one. Just before I get back to the junction having traversed this loop I find Evans. He is waiting for me. He is determined I should do something first today and he points out that as the cave was flooded on the only known previous visit I could be the first person ever to complete the full circuit of the two branches. Oh yes. Bow. Elvis impersonation. *Thankyuhverymuch.*

Back at the entrance, Evans, I-Chun, Hamad and Colin in turn step over the parapet high in the air - some with more confidence than others - and descend the ladder back to base camp. I begin preparing to follow them, but then I see that some of the other guys want to come up here. Matus Dubecky - the first Slovakian tough guy to visit the cave - arrives. Then Amit Raj Sharma. The first Indian Professor. Then Aleksandra Vojvodic and her 'husband' Jonas Hartwig. The first Swedish vegetarians. And finally Mikhail Kibalchenko. The first Russian. Maja Stojkovic and Dan Fors, apparently not being slightly mad, seem happy to sit at the base of the cliff.

I hadn't really planned on bringing them all up here, but the students seem excited to be doing something slightly dangerous. In today's risk-free world, you can bet that there are some of them who have never been allowed to sneeze without a safety rope. Maybe today will be thrilling for them, maybe it will be scary. I just hope we don't kill one.

Anyway, after a little more exploration we evacuate. I help the last group of students to descend without incident and I am left alone in the Palace of Ismeno. Remembering Diversi, I ask Evans to take a photo of me from the ground. As he lifts the camera, I wonder how best to look like the wizard of the King of Jerusalem. Realizing that I don't know, I shrug, and in the absence of a mattock (whatever that is) I wave a tiny hammer. As I step off the parapet, I wonder how long it will be before someone makes it up here again..





As I touch the ground I affect insouciance. “Well, quite a successful day all round, don’t you think?” I say breezily. Internally I immediately remind myself not to say things like that till later, it being a well-known fact that ninety per cent of mountaineering accidents happen to cocky people on the way back down. And, sure enough, as the ladder is being pulled off the rockface there is one plan in my head to get the thing horizontal on the ground, and the three other guys helping me turn out to have three different plans. Before I can impose order a shower of rocks gets dislodged from the crumbling parapet, and a largish one smacks into Amit’s head. He’s wearing a helmet, and gets away with a bruised arm, but clearly we’ve been lucky. Cursing inwardly, I pretend everything is OK and tell everyone this sort of thing happens all the time, but I’m annoyed. It takes the gloss off the day.

As we manhandle the heavy ladders and equipment back down the precipitous slope that leads down from Cascaltendine back to the main path, I begin to reflect on Magri’s final words concerning the Palace of Ismeno back in 1880:

*The people around these parts say that in former times there was a wild fig tree, rather taller than the one we see today, which the local boys could easily climb in order to get into the upper cave. Now one most certainly cannot reach it without the aid of a ladder. There are others who say that the wall we have described was once of such a prodigious height that people could climb up there, but as we could observe no vestiges of masonry near the cave we cannot really assert anything in this regard.*

I don’t believe the thing about the wall (though what remains is ancient, impressive and mysterious) but it occurs to me that if some of these eighteenth century local boys were Chinese or Moslem or Swedish vegetarian immigrants then some of the entries in my long list of firsts above are not really true. It’s also possible that Speleoclub Garfagnana have their Annual General Meeting and Official Club Orgy in the Palace of Ismeno every September, but I really couldn’t see any evidence that this is the case. No graffiti apart from Magri’s, no artefacts apart from a ring off a pigeon’s leg (how long does it take a dead pigeon to disappear completely?), and none of the usual speleo paint on the walls. In the absence of any evidence, it seems likely that we’re the first people here since the nineteenth century. At any rate, until the readers of Barga News tell me different, that’s what I’m going to say.

Finally then, as I trek down the hill, I glance at my watch then slap my forehead in annoyance. It’s 7.45pm. Understand that, following the serious business of the mornings at our Institute schools

and workshops, we like to organize various simultaneous group activities in the afternoon. The active athletic people we send to climb mountains and canyons and to explore caves and to do other healthy activities such as swordfighting. The unhealthy lazy people, by contrast, get driven to sunny swimming pools where they rub sun cream into each other's fat lazy arses whilst eating huge tubs of ice cream and drinking gallons of beer (at least I assume that's what they do). All the various groups then meet up in the evening at some restaurant to eat (again, in the case of the lazies). Today, as I realize we're going to be at least an hour late at the rather lovely *Mulino* in Fabbriche di Vallico, I also recall that my wife Sam is in the lazy group and that in our family lateness is punishable by death. I gulp, and as the sun begins to set on another adventure in the Apuan Alps, it becomes clear that the most dangerous part of the day is yet to come.

