

## **PIERRE SAINT MARTIN INFORMATION**

Overall System Length: 80.2km.

Elevation System: -1,410m.

Tête Sauvage-Verna Height Gain / Loss: 842m.

Tête Sauvage-Verna route: 8.6km.

Approximate crossing time 10 to 24 hours

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The PSM has several entrances on both Spanish and French Territory.

All the traverses are possible with the exit by the Verna, although only the SC.3 and the Tête Sauvage are equipped for pull trough. In addition, these two entrances are perfectly equipped with P Hangers and chains. The Tête-Verna crossing is undoubtedly the most repeated of the system and the one that is described in more detail.

### **2. SOMETHING OF THE HISTORY**

In 1951, a team of European cavers met in the French Pyrenees to explore a doline discovered the previous year by one of them, Georges Lépineux. He had been looking for caves in this limestone area when he saw a crow flying out of what looked like a smooth rock wall. More closely, Lépineux found an entrance to a shaft that didn't seem to have a bottom. He contacted his friend Max Cosyns, a Belgian scientist and veteran caver, who organized the expedition. Among the men on the expedition were the French volcanologist Haroun Tazieff and Marcel Loubens. That year the tremendous shaft was lowered for the first time, opening in its last 50 meters to a huge chamber. The following summer the explorations resumed, discovering several chambers and the river that circulates through the system. Unfortunately, a fatal accident in which Marcel Loubens lost his life ended the explorations of that year. Two years later his body was taken outside and the explorations continued. The work done in the PSM, although overshadowed by the death of Loubens, marked a triumph in the annals of caving. The expeditions showed the merits of the organization, promoted the technique of vertical descent and reached an unprecedented depth. Other groups went to the Pierre St Martín in the 1960s and 1970s and discovered new ways beyond the last exploration carried out by Casteret.

### **3. WHY THE NAME**

From time immemorial, French cattle grazed in the Spanish Roncal Valley. This generated a conflict that was solved with the "tribute of the three cows" - year 1375-, which were delivered by the French municipalities to that of Isaba. Every year, on the day of Saint Martín -13 July-, the mayor of Isaba meets with the mayor of the French border towns, in an act that is now a party, next to the border No. 262. There, and putting all their hands on the "Stone of Saint Martín" (Stone in French is Pierre) they repeat in chorus: "Pax avant !, Pax avant !, Pax avant!" (Peace onwards!)

### **4. PERMITS**

On the web ARSIP -[www.arsip.fr](http://www.arsip.fr)-, coordinators of all the speleological activity of the Massif Pierre Saint Martin there is a section for the online request - via email - of permits for visits and speleological explorations. The conditions and procedure are the usual ones, that if they are met, the permit is automatic. This permit system works for the commitment of all, so you must respect the indications given by ARSIP as much as possible with the granting of such permits (where to park cars, use the keys of the Verna, leave the door closed, do not turn on the show cave lights of the Verna).

## 6. TRIP TIMINGS (Tête Sauvage-Verna)

The timings will depend a lot on the characteristics of the group. The times indicated here correspond to a group of four people, with experience in similar trips and several years as active caving. The times vary greatly between groups. If the route is well known it could take up to 12 hours off the time given below. The times shown are an indication only and should be used as a guide to indicate the duration of each sector, with respect to the total time of the trip.

Tête Sauvage Entrance to Salle Cosyns 6 hours  
Salle Cosyns to start of Grand Canyon 4 hours  
Start of Grand Canyon to Shunt de Hidalgo 3 hours  
Shunt de Hidalgo to Tunnel du Vent 4 hours  
Tunnel du Vent to Exit via Verna Tunnel 7hours  
Total: 24h

## 7. ACCESS

### Tête Sauvage

Drive to the ski resort of PSM, where you take the first detour to the right. Taking this you climb by car to a large esplanade where the Pescamou chairlift ends. Here we can park the car (if not 4X4) and continue on foot. If we have the appropriate vehicle (essential 4x4) you can continue up the track, and pass a large shepherd's cabin, after climbing a steep slope. Above, at a point where the track marks a sharp curve to the left, find a right access in a large limestone gap. There, and off the track, park the vehicle. On the left hand side of the parking climb a small slope to where you can see the lapiaz . At just 50 meters and marked with a red stake you will find the entrance of the Tête Sauvage.

The coordinates using Garmin GPS:

<p><b>Tête Sauvage</b> (WGS 84) 30T 0684045 4759111</p> <p><b>Parking Tete Sauvage</b> (WGS 84) 30T 0684031 4759177</p>
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## 8. Tunnel of the Verna

To access the Tunnel of the Verna, you have to reach the French town of St. Engrace, after passing in front of the 11th-century Romanesque church, we descend the road to the river. We cross the bridge and take a good track. After approx. 5 km of ascent, park on the high point the just before the track descends to the Arphidia Ravine at the site indicated by ARSIP ( UTM WGS84 30T 679.455E 4761.557N). Make sure you leave a copy of the permit on display.

Follow the track for 1km by a concrete track and we will find the entrance of the Tunnel leading to La Verna, next to the building that regulates the tourist visits of the cave.

**Túnel de la Verna**  
(WGS 84)  
30T 0679515 4760778



## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

The traverse is a demanding trip, which will test the team that decides to venture, so that the first thing, before considering it, is to think if you are prepared for it. You must consider, first and foremost, the experience of cavers and their physical and psychological capacity, with a journey that can take between 10 hours to almost 40 hours (if you choose to sleep inside, or if the journey is complicated, something that has happened to groups of expert cavers before). It requires hours of caving in flooded canyons and all kinds of obstacles to overcome!

The cave is generally well marked throughout and with a compass, copy of the survey and notes to hand the route finding is relatively straightforward, apart from a couple of places where care is required (these are identified in the notes). Those of us that have done the trip a few times can and have got temporarily misplaced, but not for too long. The average timings for our trips were between 10 to 15 hours for a group of three to Four.

### Points to note:

- 1. Tete Sauvage Rigging:** We will be hard rigging the Tete Sauvage entrance down to its connection passage to the Salle Cosyns. The rest of the cave has in-situ equipment but, as always, please be careful on any rigging encountered.
- 2. Tunnel du Vent:** We will be carrying boats and other items (first aid, bothy bag etc) in to the Tunnel du Vent from the Verna entrance. The boat will be fitted with a rope line to enable access from either side of the Tunnel (although it can get stuck and will then need a 'volunteer' to wade in and free it). In normal conditions the Tunnel is only out of depth in the middle section and there is a handline through should you have a wetsuit and are crazy enough to wade / swim through.
- 3. Through Trip:** It is a WCC requirement that anyone attempting the through trip from Tete Sauvage for the first time must have been at least as far as the Tunnel du Vent from the Verna entrance, to aid in route finding and to better understand the temperature and conditions within the cave, which is around 5deg c ! This route finding trip will take the average fit caver 8hours or so. This trip will take you through the biggest passages in the cave and is well worth doing in its own right, even if you are not contemplating the traverse.
- 4. Weight of Bags:** Each gram of weight you carry will weigh you down after several hours of caving, so keep equipment to a minimum. Obviously, we must not eliminate the essential safety elements (first aid kit, thermal blankets etc) but we must control to the maximum "the extras" such as flashes, tripods, food, warm clothes and spare parts ... A good measure is to carry a bag per person, distribute the collective team to the fullest, and let everyone know that they will have to carry their own personal equipment they want during the trip. As a reference: a bag of more than 10kg will start to be heavy.
- 5. Food :** You should be aware of your own needs for a trip of this nature and duration. Allow plenty and plan to keep snacking on the go ( as it is too cold to stop for long until after the Tunnel du Vent) so keep your snacks available and not in your main bag) Things like nuts and raisins, high calorie bars etc. together with some form of sugar based treat for anyone having a low sugar moment!
- 6. Weather :** This system has a danger point, the Tunnel du Vent, which can sump. We will monitor weather and advise accordingly on the expected conditions and weather the traverse is viable or not.

**8. Team and strategy:** There are many options for this trip and below we suggest a few which, from our experience, worked:

**Group size:**

- For visiting La Verna and exploring up to the Tunnel du Vent: No real limit as you don't get wet and there are not too many obstacles to overcome.
- Tete Sauvage to La Verna: We would suggest the ideal size for the traverse would be 4 to 5 maximum due to the cold environment of the system. With the number of obstacles encountered en-route each extra person adds hours onto the trip. It also makes the car shuffle much easier.

**Cave Clothing :**

- For visiting La Verna and exploring up to the Tunnel du Vent: A good oversuit and fleece will be adequate as you don't get wet. ( it's always worth carrying a balaclava with you)
- Tete Sauvage to La Verna: You are going to get very wet on the route to the far side of the Tunnel du Vent – at least up to your neck, or worse. From experience we have found a combination of Long wetsocks, Neoprene / Fourth Element / Lavacore type shorts under a fleece and good oversuit (newish heavy AV type or PVC ) together with Neoprene gloves and a balaclava works well. We do move fairly quickly though and were a small group of only 3. Maybe the addition of a neoprene vest or the use of a Neofleece instead would suit those of you that normally get cold. Once on the far side of the Tunnel du vent you can always take the neoprene off as you tend to warm up on all the ups and downs to follow. We would suggest that you also carry a spare thermal top (or maybe leave one near the Tunnel du vent on your recce trip.

**Group Equipment:**

- For visiting La Verna and exploring up to the Tunnel du Vent: It is always worth having one blizzard exposure type bag and first aid kit with your group, in case someone gets hurt and can't get out.
- Tete Sauvage to La Verna: At least one cooker / lighter of some sort in case someone needs hot food / drink.
- One blizzard bag and maybe a bothy bag would be invaluable in the event of an injury or impassable Tunnel du Vent.
- A first Aid kit
- A short length of rope (say 10 - 15mtrs of 9mm) to get over any difficult climbs or replace broken in situ rope)

**9. Camping in the Cave**

- Camping in the cave isn't recommended due to the low temperatures and the added weight of kit to be carried. The best place would be the bivouac next to the Kuley tributary, after passing the Tunnel du Vent. Please make sure you are versed in procedures or you will get cold !