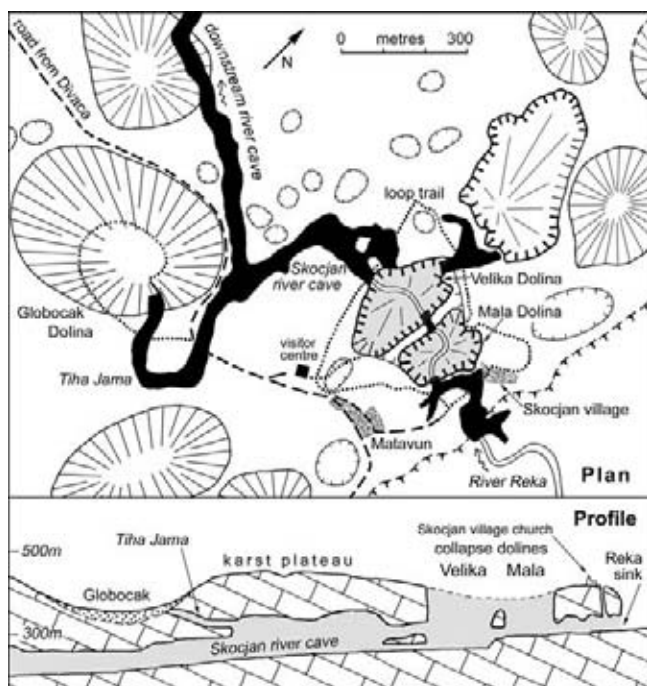


Skocjanske Jame, Slovenia

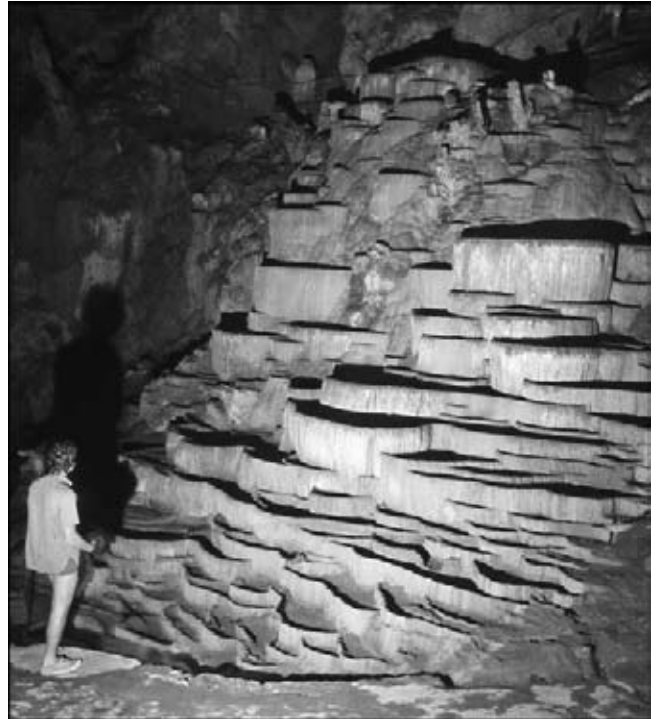
The swathe of limestone that reaches down the Dinaride Mountains of what used to be Yugoslavia gave its name to karst - the landscape of limestone - from the local word *kras*, meaning stony ground. Now the Dinarides are in two parts. The white islands and rocky coasts of Dalmatia lie within Croatia, while Slovenia has the best of the inland karst - including the best of the caves that are the arteries of the underground drainage characteristic of karst.

Postojna has the best-known tourist cave. Its huge visitor complex is a major local industry, swallowing thousands of visitors who take a train ride into the caves and then walk around huge stalagmite chambers in groups designated by half a dozen languages. Postojna is magnificent, and well worth a visit, but the *cognoscenti* head for Skocjan - one of the world's great caves, and maybe the finest show cave anywhere.

It's not so easy to find the Skocjan Caves (Skocjanske Jame), because all the advertising and most of the signs have been taken over by Postojna - who have the local economic clout. Head for Divaca, half-way along the motorway from Postojna to Trieste. A car is nearly essential, as there are no trains and few buses, and the coach trips all whiz past to Postojna. From Divaca it's just a few kilometres southeast to the tiny village of Matavun. Skocjan is a great tourist site without crowds of visitors.



Map and profile of the Skocjan Cave



Terraced calcite rimmed gour pools beside the tourist path.

The karst landscape is all cut into Cretaceous limestones that form the southeast sector of the Kras plateau. Draining in from flysch and shale outcrops further southeast, the River Reka sinks into the cave's grand entrance at the edge of the limestone. The water flows through the Skocjan river cave, and is then lost into flooded passages; it is next seen at the resurgence just above the coast near Monfalcone, 32 km away, and 20 km northwest of Trieste.

From the small visitor centre, the cave tour starts with a walk back along the road and then down a country lane, to a steep descent into a giant doline; this is Globocak, 500m across and 90m deep. Near its floor, a short tunnel passes through the breakdown and fallen rock that lines the doline slopes, and leads straight into the end of a very old cave passage - Tiha Jama. Comfortably large, and liberally decorated with stalactites and stalagmites, this could constitute a delightful show cave on its own. But it is just a high-level tributary, abandoned when the river cut a newer and lower level. And it ends on a balcony - a viewpoint high above Skocjan's enormous river passage.

Far above the cave river, the tourist path has been engineered along a high ledge and across a bridge that spans the river far below. The underground canyon continues into darkness downstream; its exploration during the 1880s was a remarkable feat. Today's path turns upstream on various ledges until it descends to the banks of the cascading cave river. This part of the river passage is over 50m high and wide. Few others in the world match its size. There are just enough lights to see around, and there is a lot of space. Visitors cannot fail to be struck by the huge powers of erosion that have carved out the massive tunnel.

The tourist trail then rises into a high-level passage, passes a splendid set of terraced gourd pools dammed by walls of calcite, and emerges into the huge Velika doline. Cliffs and rock crags give this a more rugged profile than the smooth Globocak - because Velika is a collapse doline. It formed by roof collapse into the river passage and then expanded by progressive cliff retreat; more than 150m deep and wide, it is large enough to be known as a tiankeng (a term from China's karst). The long steps back up to plateau level are now being replaced by the comfort of a cable car, which ends just behind the visitor centre.

Don't leave straight after the cave tour, but take a walk round the loop trail from the visitor centre. This circles the Velika doline and the adjacent Mala doline, and offers a pleasant stroll back through Skocjan village. If time is short, just go clockwise to the viewpoint above the western cliff of Velika. This offers a spectacular view across both giant dolines, and clear down to the cascading river. It's a very dramatic demonstration of the large-scale collapse processes that occur in a karst landscape.

Anyone with any interest in geology and the natural world, who is driving down to the Croatian holiday coast, should make the short diversion to take in Skocjan. It is unforgettable geology-in-action.

Tony Waltham



The river passage just inside from Velika Dolina.

The view eastwards across the Velika and Mala collapse dolines, with Skocjan village church on the cliff above the upstream segment of the Skocjan cave.



The tourist trail bridge over the underground canyon.

