



ILLUSTRATION: LINDA HESLOP



PRESERVATIONIST Marc Jasinski

By Sean Holland

Marc Jasinski excavated treasure from a Spanish galleon, extended Belgium's largest cave and penetrated centuries-old labyrinths under the streets of Brussels. But the charming and down-to-earth Belgian considers his greatest diving achievement to be land-based: the creation of Belgium's only underwater archeological society, the Centre de Recherches Archéologiques Fluviales.

CRAF unites divers, archeologists and government entities in understanding and preserving the past. Volunteer divers explore and excavate underwater sites, especially in rivers (or fluviales as they are known in Belgium). Professional archeologists offer expertise, while the southern Belgian government provides financial and technical support, including heavy equipment, access and archives for research.

"It has always been a goal of mine to have sport divers cooperate with official archeologists. Until 1997, there wasn't a single archeologist trained to dive in Bel-

gium, and surface archeologists traditionally did not attempt to understand an artifact's significance underwater," says Marc. "Now we have three young professional archeologists in our organization."

Even a little waterway like the Ourthe River in southern Belgium can turn into a big project. "A Roman road ran between two imperial cities for 105 kilometers [65 miles]. About midway, the road crossed this small river," says Marc. Archeologists excavated the road to within 30 feet / 10 meters of the river, and CRAF is picking up where they left off. It has also been asked to explore a well that had been





sealed for 150 years to prevent tampering with waters said to be used by a saint in performing miracles. One can only imagine what this sacred time capsule may yield. "We have more projects than we can handle," he adds.

Last fall, CRAF took advantage of engineering work that lowered southern Belgium's main river, the Meuse, by 10 feet / 3 meters (*Immersed*, Summer 1999). For three weeks, Marc led 130 volunteers to survey 56 miles / 90 kilometers of riverbank. A major transportation link between France, Belgium, Holland and the North Sea, the Meuse has attracted commerce and industry for 3,000 years. Clues to a medieval harbor were among the discoveries that have survived the heavy modifications of dredges and dams during the last 150 years.

"We discovered hundreds of logs that created a structure several hundred meters long and might well have been a fishery. We didn't have enough time to finish the work before the authorities raised the water level again," says Marc. Next steps include mapping and excavating the fish traps. "It will be difficult, as visibility in this river is quite poor—seldom more than a foot, sometimes even less."

CRAF formally organized in 1987, though its roots go back to a 1959 exploration of the Lesse River into the subterranean passages and galleries of the Han cave. Some 75 miles / 110 kilometers south of Brussels in the village of Han-sur-Lesse, the 9-mile- / 15-kilometer-long Han is Belgium's largest cave system. "It took us 25 years and two deaths to explore," says Marc, but in extending the cave a trove of objects spanning 3,000 years was found. "We recovered over two tons of pottery, gold, jewels and metal artifacts from the cave and river, including some fantastic discoveries from the late Bronze Age, which date from 1,150-650 B.C."

Easy finds were made years ago, so CRAF divers must push deeper into the system's crevices to learn more about the site. Swift currents, nearly zero viz and cold water tax researchers. "The excavation involves working in narrow confines



Marc's curiosity about the subterranean world began as young boy. The Han cave was just 2 miles / 3 kilometers from his grandfather's farm, where he spent much time during World War II. The cave gave the young Marc a chance to forget the war.

Exhausted diver André Fassotte donning his gear before crossing a siphon on his way back to the diving base.

PHOTO: MARC JASINSKI

6 Marc Jasinski's first wife, Annette, holds an artifact recovered from the river Meuse in the Han cave.

A 1959 map of the Han-sur-Lesse caves.

7 Stephane, Marc's oldest son, finds a 3,000-year-old bronze knife sharp enough to peel an orange.



PHOTOS: MARC JASINSKI



under fallen rocks caught and supported by other rocks. Naturally, it is an unstable and potentially dangerous environment," says Marc. The cave draws about 450,000 visitors a year, and the work cannot disturb tourism. Adding this to the already difficult working conditions heightens the importance of maintaining good relations with the cave's owners. "That's why our society needs a wise old man like me to handle these matters," quips the 66-year-old Marc.

Marc's curiosity about the subterranean world began as young boy. The Han cave was just 2 miles / 3 kilometers from his grandfather's farm. "I was practically raised on the farm and covered in manure most of the time, too," he laughs. Marc spent much time at the farm during World War II. "German anti-aircraft guns surrounded our home in Brussels. Allied air raids occurred almost nightly. Neighborhood boys spent the mornings picking up the spent shells that fell all over our property," he says. Han-sur-Lesse and its famous cave gave the young Marc a chance to forget the war.

Lights were restricted by the war on his first visit to the cave, so nine-year-old Marc used just a simple flashlight to see the cave. "It was amazing to feel the enormity of the cave without fully seeing it." His fascination brought him back nearly every weekend. "After the first few visits, the guards stopped asking me for a ticket. I became part of the team at the grotto and even received tips from visitors," he says.

Marc's interest in caving grew while he was a student at the University of Brussels. There, he teamed up with Pierre Brichard and Suzanne Tobback to explore a small sinkhole on his grandfather's farm in 1954. "They were like me and had already explored many of Belgium's caves. We wanted something new." The three started excavating the sinkhole, hoping that its stream of water would lead to a gallery. Digging with shovels and picks took too long, prompting Marc and Pierre to use homemade explosives to blast away at the sinkhole's bottom. Although this helped move mud

and rocks, "we were very lucky that those nasty things did not explode when we were hammering them in," he says. After six months of weekend efforts, the explorers broke through to a cave system some 264 feet / 80 meters deep.

Many cavers learn to dive to further their exploration of dry caves beyond water-filled sumps, but not Marc. In 1959, he finally finished his university courses and his Belgian military obligation and realized that chemistry didn't hold his interest as a life's work. So Marc repaired to a Club Med in Corsica to do some soul-searching. A spearfishing enthusiast from the age of 14, he tried the resort's diving class. "During my first dive, I realized scuba diving was made for me," he says. "My skin diving experience was fantastic preparation for actual scuba diving. I knew then that scuba diving was going to be my life. It was a fabulous revelation."

During his checkout dive, Marc even found a piece of a Roman amphora. "The instructors wanted to find pottery for themselves. It was silly how jealous they became," he says. As the overseer of many underwater archeological sites in Belgium, he now laments taking the shard. "It might have been the only visible piece of a lost sailing vessel. This is part of the problem with people picking up artifacts."

Marc pursued his new-found love by skin diving in flooded quarries back home in Belgium, a sharp contrast to the warm and sunny Mediterranean. Yet, he remained enthusiastic. "Quarries offered absolutely clear water with 130 feet / 40 meters of visibility," he says. Reading Graham Balcombe's *British Caving: An Introduction to Speleology by the Cave Research Group* fueled his imagination. "In the 1930s, this great man and his buddy Jack Sheppard actually invented cave diving and created from scratch all their diving equipment. Soon, I was thinking about Han-sur-Lesse."

Joined by his first wife, Annette, Marc snorkeled the grotto. "We had no lights, no visibility and there was lots of underwater junk, including rolls of barbed wire. We didn't even have scuba tanks at first since there were no dive shops in Bel-

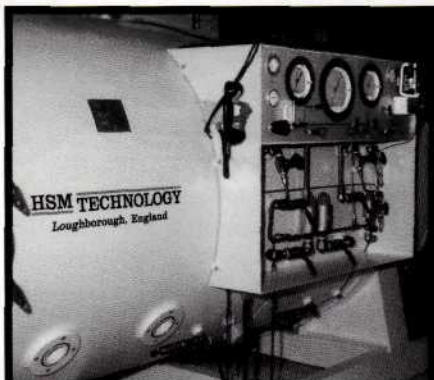
gium. All we could use was just simple snorkeling gear," he says. Once they obtained tanks, the young adventurers pushed past one sump after another, making the first major extension of the Han in more than a century. "That's when we started finding artifacts," he adds. "We found pottery from the 14th and 16th centuries, even from the time of the Romans."

Annette recalls the fascination of the finds. "It was hard to believe that there were so many objects in the cave. Each weekend we found pieces from different periods starting with prehistoric times to the Romans and the medieval age right up to modern times," she says. "Plus all the newspapers and photographers came to see our finds. I was probably the only woman in Belgium at the time scuba diving in a cave."

Not everyone was enthusiastic. "I took my finds to various institutions in Belgium, but all the archeologists turned me away," Marc says. "No one believed in underwater archeology." One senior archeologist finally showed interest, but never attempted to understand why the objects were there. "He just wanted us to dredge objects up to the surface as quickly as possible," he adds.

After discovering the huge complex of new galleries called Le Réseau Sud (the southern system of galleries), Marc and the others learned a painful lesson about the price of discovery. In September 1959, Pierre died while penetrating this new leg. "We really don't know what happened. He kept asking for more line and the tender was giving it to him. Suddenly, we saw his lights just a few meters from us." Fully suited as the safety diver, Marc jumped in to help. "I tried to resuscitate him but he was already dead. He even had air in the tanks," he says. "We were destroyed. Pierre was like a brother to me. It was dreadful. After Pierre's death, I lost my interest in cave

Machinery in a submerged quarry in Southern Belgium. This photograph, won Marc the 1970 Stella d'Oro (Golden Star) in Maurizio Sarra, an Italian photography prize. It was taken with a Seven Seas Optics fisheye lens on a Nikonos III.



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Marc prepares for a surface-fed dive in a Phoque, a French-made forerunner of a drysuit



PHOTO: ANNETTE JASINSKI

diving and had no desire to go back to that damned cave."

Marc abandoned caves, but not diving. In the 1960s, researchers exploring the 14th century wall that once surrounded medieval Brussels turned to Marc to complete underwater portion of their survey. Annette was then seven months pregnant with their first son, Stéphane, so Marc teamed up with René Thierry, a Belgian television personality, to penetrate the flooded remains of the fortress walls and galleries some 33 feet / 10 meters beneath the streets of modern Brussels.

"It was very successful but rather dangerous," says Marc. Time and old tree roots weakened tunnel walls and roofs. "The ceiling was crumbling down. Roofs collapsed under several sections. We could have been buried alive if anything happened. It was frightening. We even found human remains. Eventually we stopped when the ceiling became too low, making it impossible for us to squeeze through."

Fellow Belgian and cave diving buddy Robert Sténuit brought Marc and Annette to northern Ireland in his 1967 search for the *Girona*, a Spanish vessel lost during the Spanish Armada (*Immersed*, Spring 1999). The two met during Marc's expeditions at Han-sur-Lesse. "Marc could do everything from underwater video to still photography," Robert says. "He is very careful in preparing for a dive and getting the necessary equipment together. He's quite a lens builder, too. In fact, I'm still using one of his homemade 17-millimeter lens, which is over 30 years old!"

The two-year probe of the *Girona* gave Marc, a freelance photographer, time to transfer his topside skills to the underwater world, where primitive equipment prevailed. "When I first started, I lost two expensive Leica cameras in supposedly watertight camera housings," he says. He became one of the first owners of a Calypso, the predecessor of the Nikonos camera. "Its serial number is 93," he adds.

For the *Girona*, he modified a 17-millimeter fisheye lens, then developed a lens port to greatly reduce the circular deformation associated with ultra-wide-angle photos. Wide open at f/4, the lens was able to capture action with available light on the most advanced film of the time, high-speed Ektachrome rated at ASA 160. "Today, we have excellent ASA 1600 film. What a change!" Marc says. His *Girona* still photos, along with Robert's narrative, were widely published, and footage shot with his experimental 16-mm underwater movie camera was featured on "Chronicle," an archeology program on BBC television.

The *Girona* was but one of many adventures of Marc and Robert, who have searched around the world for treasure wrecks lost during the 16th to 18th centuries. "Treasure diving was tremendously exciting," says Marc. "My fellow divers were bright and full of fun. Many people just dream of finding gold. I'm happy I did it." Though Marc would gladly join another expedition, he feels that "everything has become so complicated now, with legal problems as states and countries try to get control of these sites."

Even cave sites have their controversies, and Marc's dives stirred one at Han-sur-Lesse. His discoveries there challenged the accepted theory of land-trained archeologists that the cave was simply a place of refuge in time of war and strife, and Marc's finds were just the trash left by ancient visitors.

Eugene Warmenbol, a specialist in prehistoric Belgium archeology, now counters the trash theory, proposing that Han-sur-Lesse was a great sanctuary where offerings to the dead were left. Marc explains: "Water was often associated with death, and gold was never found outside the context of death. Most of the tools and weapons we found were new and probably intentionally tossed in the river. Even in Britain, they find brand-new but deliberately broken weapons and jewels thrown in the rivers." Finds from the explorations became so numerous that Marc helped start the nearby Musée du Monde Souterrain (Museum of the Subterranean World) to hold the enormous collection.

Documenting Han-sur-Lesse challenged Marc. Photography and video filming are rendered useless in the near-zero visibility, and excavating the muddy bottom frustrates many surveying techniques. "We needed to find a good way of using underwater topography to find how an artifact related to the context of the site," he says. "Otherwise, you can't understand the nature of the site."

Marc devised a system he calls trilateration. Similar to satellite-based Global Positioning System navigation, it requires only distance measurements, instead of the distances and angles used in conventional surveying. A simple measuring tape can be used to determine the distances between a target and a set of accurately surveyed fixed points. These measurements can pinpoint a target to within a few millimeters. A diver needs just a few inches of viz to read a tape measure. Using full face masks and underwater communications systems allows divers to give the readings to surface monitors, who plug the numbers into a laptop computer to perform the laborious geometrical calculations. "This team effort saves a lot of underwater time and reduces mistakes," he says.



Marc's expeditions with historian-treasure seeker Sténuît shapes his perspective on the accelerating tug-of-war between salvors and archeologists. "I have nothing against salvors, I just don't like how they do their job," he says. "The hiring of archeologists to oversee a salvage job, to do research and protect the historical integrity of the shipwreck, is more cosmetic than anything else. Usually the archeologists are young people who aren't up to fighting their bosses: the treasure hunters. It is a conflict of interest.

"But archeologists can also go too far. Is it always really important to know how a ship was built three or four hundred years ago? It certainly is for historical ships that mark the introduction of new building techniques or navigation methods. But I don't think it is always necessary to raise the wood and build a museum to preserve it."

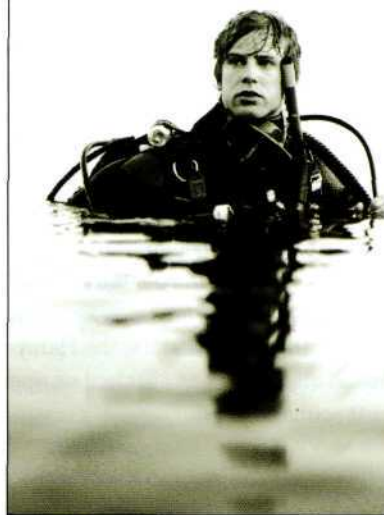
Marc has published seven books on caving and scuba diving in French, Dutch and English and has had photos and articles in magazines around the world, but underwater research projects and tending to the growth of CRAF have overtaken writing efforts of late. "It is easy to stay busy by making others busy. The hard part is recruiting the right people. People who are better than you. I have a good team that can handle the job, and we have so many good opportunities to explore. The organization can continue after I've stopped diving, too," he says.

Above all, Marc is especially proud of his four sons, all of whom are divers: Stéphane, Jérôme, Matthew and Sebastian. The eldest, Stéphane, often serves on Robert Sténuît's explorations as an underwater cameraman. Says Marc: "I consider myself lucky since I have a led a most interesting life, met great people and lived with great ladies who gave me great children. I'm a happy man." ■

Sean Holland is a member of the British Society of Underwater Photographers and the New York City Sea Gypsies dive club.



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