

# Daren Cilau – HRC and St David’s Sump

This is definitely not a trip for novices or anyone unpractised in endurance caving, but fit competent cavers should be able to achieve this as a long day-trip. Trip times vary depending on group size and familiarity with the cave system, but it’s advisable to allow at least 10 hours for this trip.

**For simplicity this route description is from Daren Entrance to Hard Rock Café and St David’s Sump only – see companion printable description ‘Bonsai Streamway High Level Passages’ for optional detours and alternative return routes along the way.**

**Tackle:** Karabiners for lifelining the 20m ladder climb. Cowstails for use on the safety lines at the top of the ladder and the fixed traverse.

**Location – NGR:** SO 20521 15301 - **what3words:** ///taster.slam.deferring

From Whitewalls head towards the road then take the right-hand concrete track uphill past the neighbouring properties. Staying on the left, continue upwards on the grassy track to meet a flat path. Ignore this and continue straight on over a tiny stream and up a vague track through bracken to reach a flat grassy tramroad following the line of the cliffs. Turn left, then take the second grassy gully between spoil heaps heading towards the cliffs (the one with rocks in it), to reach the cave entrance at the foot of the cliff face.

**Entrance to the ladder** – The entrance series has something of a reputation, but don’t let this put you off a trip in this splendid cave. Also, don’t let anyone persuade you that entering via Ogof Cnwc is an easier option – it will add at least an hour to your journey. The entrance series carries a small stream but is passable even in very wet weather. There is not really any route finding difficulty in the entrance series. The junction boxes on the telephone line act as a guide to how far you’ve got. The entrance is box 0 and the end of the entrance series is box 8. The passage starts as a flat-out crawl, usually wet, and after the first bend the height of the passage increases. After a couple more bends The Vice (a sideways thrutch for several metres) is soon reached, and shortly beyond this are a couple of short canals. Two inlets are passed, both on the right. Second Inlet is at a small chamber (box 5), after which the going becomes easier until the final obstacle, the Calcite Squeezes are reached.

At the end of the entrance series turn left and climb into the second oxbow on the left to reach a breakdown passage. Follow the obvious route through boulders until you enter Old Rift Passage. Going left soon leads to a dry crystal pool and formations, while right is the route to Old Main Chamber. The way on is straight across, where a flat-out crawl (with junction box 9 at the start) leads to a descending boulder choke. The final drop lands on the top of a calcited ramp of boulders at the start of Jigsaw Passage. From here on, please keep to the taped route. Jigsaw is mainly walking but about half way along is a short squeeze called The Wriggle. Towards the end of Jigsaw Passage is a taped junction with Misfit Passage heading off on the right. Keep left here, then up over boulders to enter Big Chamber Nowhere Near The Entrance, where the log book is located. For ‘time in’ and ‘time out’ please record your times at Big Chamber.

Climb up the boulder pile beyond the log book, don’t take the route through boulders on the left at the top (this leads to Epocalypse Way, The Antlers and the through-trip to Ogof Cnwc) instead stick to the main route, contouring to the right. When the passage starts to drop, don’t be tempted by

the vast open passage ahead (this leads to the Loop Route, a multi-level circuit with no other way on), instead follow the path heading up slope on the right. Aim for the top left corner of this boulder slope to reach Eglwys Passage (Man in the Roof, an alternative route to Antler Passage is located on the top right of this same boulder slope). Eglwys Passage is mostly crawling, with pocketed amber coloured walls and a compacted sand floor. Ignore the hole on the right at the start (this is just an awkward connection to Man in the Roof) and follow the well-worn route. After a traverse and a couple of short flat-out crawls you will reach a junction. Straight ahead often has a line of stones across to indicate it is not the way. Go left here, and you will reach the small Fiveways chamber. The way on is a small round hole in the wall ahead slightly to the left, and doesn't look obvious. This immediately drops down, then back up into an area of green shale to reach the slope down into Valentine's Chamber.

Descend this and follow the path down to the lowest point on the left, where large boulders obscure the view of the climb down to Preliminary Passage at the far wall. A wriggle through smoothed boulders and a short drop down reaches large open passage once more. Descend the boulder slope to reach easy walking passage leading very soon to the 20m fixed ladder to Higher Things. Just before the ladder look for a collection of bottles collecting drip water on the right-hand wall. This is a convenient place to have a drink.

**Higher Things to Bonsai Streamway** – There are two ropes at the ladder pitch – make sure you use the lifeline (the one closest to the ladder) and not the hauling line, which is attached some distance away from the ladder at the top. The first part of the ladder climb is straight, leading to a balcony, after which it has a middle section at an awkward angle before the next straight climb to the top. The easiest method to climb this is to get off the ladder at the balcony then on again after the kink. Be sure to clip into the safety lines at the top with cows-tails before detaching from the life-line and use the chain loop to assist getting off at the top. Any tackle can then be pulled up using the hauling line on the other side of the pitch; cross behind the boulder to get there and clip into the safety line before hauling.

The way on is straight ahead from the top of the ladder (the passage heading off on the other side ends at a choke), the passage meanders briefly before reaching a short drop down with a fixed handline to a roped traverse around the head of the 22 metre pitch above White Passage. Descending this was once the only route to the rest of the cave, but now we traverse along the right-hand wall (cows-tails recommended) then continue on as the passage lowers to a crawl over boulders. Look for a crawl through a low tube on the left-hand wall (there's a vague line of stones just beyond), this is the way on as continuing further leads to a choke. After the crawl, a short climb down leads on to the rope climbs. The first is in 2 stages, with fixed ropes in place to assist the first drop down to a ledge, and knotted ropes for the short climb down the wall below. This is closely followed by the next short rope climb down to White Passage. Note carefully the location of the rope climbs as you enter White Passage – it is easy to walk past them on the way out!

From here on it's all easy walking and boulder-hopping in huge cave passage. Follow the stream down the passage (the other direction ends at the huge boulder choke bypassed by the 20m fixed ladder). Climb over the large boulder pile and continue along with the passage becoming increasingly larger until, after another boulder pile, it meets the Time Machine with red and yellow arrows at the entry point. The yellow arrow pointing left is the way on, while the red arrow would take you to the Source of Time and the ongoing dig at the end. Reflectors are put to good use throughout The Time Machine to denote the optimum route through this wide, boulder strewn

passage with fine gypsum crystals throughout. Follow these reflectors for the easiest journey through this part of the cave. Eventually, at the lowest point of the passage, you'll notice a sandy balcony reached by a short climb on the left-hand wall. This is one of the routes to The Meeting Room and the high-level passages to the left of Bonsai Streamway. Continuing down The Time Machine soon leads to a narrow path on the left-hand side of the passage and shortly after the climb down to Bonsai Streamway is reached. This is also marked with arrows, with yellow pointing to the descent to Bonsai on the right while red indicates the route to Beyond Time.

**Bonsai Streamway to St David's Sump** – Climb down the boulder ramp on the right to join Bonsai Streamway, and take note of the huge boulder in the streamway below as this is a good marker to prevent you walking past the climb up on your return. There are no navigational difficulties in Bonsai Streamway and the route is very straightforward from here on. The first section of this passage has a number of helictite formations and areas of flowstone which are quite pleasant. The best formations are the Crown Jewels, which are located on a shelf accessed by a short climb up on the left at a point where you are passing through boulders. The red and white conservation tape is visible from below, so you can spot where they are. Further along the streamway the Bonsai Tree formation is located on a ledge on the left-hand side.

The first major junction along the route is at the 'Daren Cilau Services' sign, where Crystal Oxbow heads off on the left. This is where the water for campers staying at Hard Rock Café is collected, flowing out of a plastic pipe from Crystal Inlet, a short distance up the oxbow on the right. This is the place to top up water supplies if going further into the system. This junction also leads to one of the alternative routes back to the Time Machine (detailed in Daren Cilau – Bonsai Streamway High-Level Passages route description), though this is a more time consuming and complicated route than simply returning through Bonsai Streamway. Beyond this junction, Bonsai Streamway widens and the passage is well-decorated with straws on the walls. An ascent up a boulder pile a short distance further passes a rope climb on the right to Western Flyover and a fixed ladder on the left to Eastern Flyover.

Further along Bonsai Streamway the next optional deviations from the main route are located up a short chain ladder on the left, which gains a balcony overlooking the streamway. A second chain ladder from the balcony gives access to Frig and Frag Street, while continuing past the ladder leads to Forgotten Passage (see 'Bonsai Streamway High Level Passages' for more information on both this and The Flyovers).

Continuing along Bonsai Streamway there are no more major passages heading off so simply follow the streamway which becomes narrower and more bouldery as it approaches the camp. In normal conditions the water level is very low on the approach to Hard Rock Café, but in very wet weather one section can rise up to chest-deep. If this is the case then it's a sure sign that water levels will be too high to travel beyond The Micron in the further reaches of the cave. The first sign of the Hard Rock camp is where the streamway flows into a narrow rift; this is the Hard Rock Café naturally flushing toilet. Upslope from here and turning left leads to the Hard Rock camp, and the passage becomes King's Road. Though not on our route, it's worth noting the oxbow heading off on the right just before the main camp area – the Hard Rock Extensions head off from here, leading to the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, Psychatronic Strangeways and beyond. This is the only non-diving route to the further reaches of the cave.

Straight ahead soon leads to the main part of the camp where all the cooking and socialising takes place with stone-built benches and shelving surrounding a handy natural platform. Please refrain

from tampering with Daren drums and personal supplies stored here as these belong to the Daren digging team who are still actively using the site. Beyond this is the changing area with washing lines and the route down to the terminal sump at St David's Streamway. King's Road is wide easy travelling throughout with only a couple of sections of stooping. This reaches the streamway at a T junction which in normal water conditions can be travelled along in either direction to reach sumps, though the going is very slippery and has little except the view of a sump to recommend it. Left leads to Terminal Sump, from which divers entering from Pwll y Cwm enter the cave, while right leads to St David's Sump, the divers' route to Psychatronic Strangeways.

You've travelled roughly 3 miles into the cave and now it's time to head back out the way you came, or use one of the alternative return routes detailed in the 'Bonsai Streamway High-Level Routes' description – but be aware that these are longer and more strenuous alternatives that should done only if you have time and energy in hand.

Spotted an error in this route description or want to leave feedback?  
Contact the Webmaster (see contacts page on CSS website <https://chelseaspelaeo.org>)

(Version 1 - April 2023)

