

Ogof Draenen – Gilwern Passage & Galeria Garimperios

Gilwern Passage is a superb introduction to the Draenen system and is a relatively easy trip through some remarkably pleasant cave passages. There are also far fewer boulders than other areas of the cave and a number of formations along the way. This trip ventures into the Galeria Garimpeiros Extensions to the end of the Hearts of Olden Glory streamway and includes a detour to Another World.

Location – NGR: SO 24644 11787 – **what3words:** ///locked.fillings.protest

If approaching from Blaenavon (along Abergavenny Road, B4246) take the turning on the left at Keepers Pond and continue past The Lamb and Fox pub (now closed) to park in one of the laybys further along. The walk to the cave is along the gravel path by the Pwll Du Adventure Centre then over a stile. Cross a small stream and continue downhill along a small track, over a fence and down the very steep hillside until you reach the gated entrance.

Entrance Series to Cairn Junction – The gated entrance requires a key for entry and is then openable from the inside for exit. The cave starts with a short, and sometimes muddy, gravel to a corkscrew descent through large boulders and a scaffolded climb to reach another short gravel through a puddle below. A small stream enters from the left just beyond, and this has the rather annoying habit of running down the back of your neck if you don't get through the rift descent quick enough. Below this is a scaffolded climb, and it's advisable to descend this one at a time to avoid dropping loose stones on those below. This leads to a small boulder chamber with two ways on, and here you should take the low passage to the right on the right, which is the quickest and easiest route (the passage straight ahead is Darling Rifts which eventually leads to the head of Big Bang Pitch, an alternative descent route requiring SRT kit).

Next up, is a wriggle down through the well-worn rift of Spare Rib, which can sometimes be drippy and has a dog-leg bend at the end, to reach the bedding plane below. Here you should follow the stream to a small waterfall with an easy climb down ledges. The simplest route from here is to continue following the stream all the way, or alternatively you can avoid some of the stooping and crawling sections by taking a slightly higher route when you get to some formations with orange conservation tape. Either way will soon take you to the top of the rope climb. This is free-climbable and has a fixed knotted handline in place, but you may prefer to bring a ladder along with you to rig for additional safety. This is particularly useful for cavers who may be tired on the return, and has the advantage of speeding things up when in a larger group. Then a short easy climb down and you're soon emerging into huge open passage at Cairn Junction, where you should record your name and destination in the logbook located on the cairn.

Cairn Junction to Gilwern Passage – From Cairn Junction, the route to Gilwern Passage (and the majority of the cave system) is to the right, while Waterfall Series and the passages beyond are located to the left. Though it is not part of the route, if you're interested to see where Big Bang Pitch joins this passage it's only a short distance away: simply head left at Cairn Junction towards the sound of water, then at about 50m beyond the inlet on the left Big Bang Pitch enters from a hole in the roof.

Continuing on our journey to Gilwern Passage, head right from Cairn Junction (away from the sound of water) for about 20m to meet another large junction. Follow the taped route on the left, which soon becomes a crawl on compacted sand. After a short distance of crawling look for an obvious hole dropping down on the right; this is Wonderbra Bypass, which is the most direct route

to the Gilwern Passage area, while the continuation of the crawl here is Beer Challenge, an alternative route to White Arch Passage.

The drop down through Wonderbra Bypass rejoins lofty passage once more, and glancing towards the ceiling here the huge wedged boulder named 'Wonderbra' is very easy to spot. The reason for the usual name is that no one knows what's actually holding it up! Head left beneath the Wonderbra and follow the streamway. Ignore the first taped route heading off to the right and continue following the streamway to reach Tea Junction, with a large passage heading off in both directions and a fine flat ceiling decorated with lines of straws. This is a significant junction, with White Arch Passage on the left leading to the many of the popular routes of the system including War of the Worlds, Dollimore Series and The Round Trip (if done in the usual clockwise direction), while the passage to the right is Beyond a Choke leading to the main streamway, Gilwern Passage and the many interesting places beyond.

Continuing on our journey, heading right at Tea Junction, the next junction is soon met when the streamway heads off to the left (leading to The Round Trip and Rifleman's Chamber, the current end of this 2.5km long streamway). Here you should leave the stream and take the route upslope to the right to the start of Gilwern Passage.

Gilwern Passage to Galeria Garimpeiros – There are no route finding difficulties to be had in Gilwern Passage, it's basically just a case of following the taped route throughout its length of over 700m, and unlike the vast majority of Ogof Draenen there is relatively little boulder hopping and much of this distance is easy walking. There are a number of formations along to the way, so care should be taken to stay within the taped route to preserve the gypsum crystals and pristine floor sediments as well as the more obvious calcite formations found in this part of the cave.

The passage fluctuates a bit at the start with short crawls connecting the larger sections, and has an interesting flat roof and a number of pleasant formations. Perhaps the best is the first flowstone cascade and calcite pool on the right, just before a short climb. The next section is perhaps the most impressive with large open passage and a sandy floor. Another interesting flowstone feature is passed on the right, and this one showcases a rather unusual conservation tactic of using expanding foam as a protective barrier. Beyond this the passage becomes rather more bouldery and canyon-like, with crystals on the walls until Gilwern ends with a junction and two routes onward. Downslope on the left is the way on, leading to Galeria Garimpeiros and all passages beyond, while heading upslope straight ahead leads to Morgannwg Passage. Though not technically part of the route, if you'd like to have a look at Morgannwg Passage for a short distance it doesn't take much time. To do this follow the taped route upslope and ignore the passage on the left soon after (this oxbows back to a tricky climb down and also a trickier climb up to Old Illtydian's Chamber with no further way on). About 20m beyond at a dog-leg bend you'll reach a taped off orange coloured passage. Here the floor is covered in calcite flakes, so please respect the tape and go no further.

To continue on our intended journey, take the passage downslope to the left at the junction. Here you may be disappointed to find that the low, wet crawl that looks more like a dig is actually the way on. However it's not as bad as it looks. Beyond is short section of boulders where a climb up above a scaffold bar reaches a tight squeeze to regain larger passage once more in Galeria Garimpeiros. Though only short, this squeeze can be a challenge for some, and cavers of above average build may have to turn back at this point.

Forever Changed to Hearts of Olden Glory and Another World – Galeria Garimpeiros starts with Forever Changed, a passage that starts off low, dropping to a crawl, but soon become lovely large open passage with pristine mud banks. The undisturbed nature of the floor in this passage is perhaps the most impressive aspect, with all but the taped route looking just as it would have done on first discovery. Please stay within the conservation tape in order to preserve this, even though it may result in wet feet in the sections with a stream. Beyond the small and somewhat slippery stream the passage becomes decorated with straws, and after this a large junction is met. Here the Y Gwter Fawr streamway meanders off on the left to St Giles Series, but as you cannot progress too far in this direction before an uninviting duck is reached ignore this and continue onwards in the excellent Hearts of Olden Glory Streamway. This is not only pleasant to look at but has amazing acoustics too. At a sharp switchback in the streamway the passage heading off straight ahead is Sons of the Pioneers, and this is well worth a detour. This passage soon drops to a crawl with a climb up into a chamber with some small column formations. The way on is to the right here, and following the taped route passes some nice formation galleries to reach a well-decorated chamber, Another World. The low passage passed on the left just before this is The Green Grovel, which is essentially a collection of very tight squeezes that doesn't go anywhere nice, while the large taped off passage on the right is also a dead end. Beyond Another World, a fork in the passage marks the end of the formations. Here the right hand fork ends at a narrow cross rift, while the left hand fork seemingly ends at a choke, but is actually the route to The Realm of Baron Von Carno. This is a much more arduous and complex part of the cave system, but if you'd like to locate the main connection to this part of the cave, it's through a crawl on the right near the end.

To continue on our journey to the end of the Hearts of Olden Glory, head back the way you came to the streamway junction then go left. This doesn't extend too much further before reaching another switchback heading left with a dry passage straight ahead. The streamway ends with a choke about 100m further along, while the dry passage ahead starts with a fine display of crystals on the walls, but there is perhaps little point continuing beyond as just a short distance further this becomes a crawl to a dead end. However if you do wish to see the end of this passage, continue along the crawl to what appears to be the end, where a hole in the roof gains a small boulder chamber with a drop back down the other side. The passage ends a short distance further.

This is the end of the Galeria Garimpeiros extensions, so unless you are also venturing into The Realm of Baron Von Carno, there's nothing more to see. From here, simply retrace your steps and head back the way you came.

Spotted an error in this route description or want to leave feedback?
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