

# TRAGEDY OF VERYOVKINA CAVE

## INTRO

Hidden between two mountains lies the gate to the deepest cave known to man. The journey to the heart of this cave was a huge milestone. It took around 50 years of exploration to get to the record breaking depth. A depth, whose 5% is equivalent to the Empire State Building.

This cave is called Veryovkina Cave. It is home to the deepest underground water pool, large underground chambers, and rare species of centipedes, shrimp, and scorpions. Not only that, its shining blue-green walls and crystalline water droplets continue to draw cavers to its footsteps.

But Veryovkina Cave is no saint. Although it's magnificent, two tragic incidents have happened in the hollows of the cave.

Would you blame the cave or blame the victims of the dangerous evil that abounds in the cave?

## BODY

### Chapter One: THE VERYOVKINA CAVE

The deepest cave in the world is located in the Arabika Massif, Abkhazia, which is a region separated from Georgia and supported by the largest country by geographical area, Russia. One of the most remarkable pieces of this underground chamber is that it contains a large amount of both stalagmites and stalactites. Now you would be thinking, What are they?

Stalagmites and stalactites are geologically formed from the minerals deposited in the cave by droplets of water seeping into the cave for thousands of years. Stalagmites are formed up from the floor of the cave, while stalactites are formed on the ceiling of the cave.

Not only that, within Veryovkina cave lie more than 30 rock formations, canyons, and sheer mountain walls; you name it and you can find it there. All these discoveries were unknown until 55 years ago, in 1968, when 377 feet were mapped out during an expedition when cavers from Krasnoyarsk saw Veryovkina when they were searching for a different underground cavern close by. This was when the cave's first name was given, S-115 which stands for 115 meters deep.

Now, this first depth marked at 377 feet was just 5% of the Veryovkina Cave, and this depth could be equal to the height of the Empire State Building.

And since then, various expeditions have led to a further increase in the charted depth of Veryovkina Cave, surpassing the once title holder and most dangerous cave of all, the Krubera Cave, also found in Abkhazia. Four of the deepest caves in the world reside in this same region.

It was not until 18 years later, in 1982, that another group of cavers called the Perovo Speleo club, Moscow found Veryovkina and changed its name from S-115 to P1-7

Seeking to know more about this newly found cave, cavers from the second team from Moscow, the Perovo Speleo Team, known as PST, explored to a depth of 1440 feet from 1983 to 1986. In the first year of the exploration, they lost a fellow caver, Alexander Verëvkin, who died while exploring the Su-Akan cave in Russia.

For more than a decade, Veryovkina sat pretty with zero exploration until the beginning of a new century, when work resumed in the cave. The ever resilient PST fought tooth and nail for 15 years to reach new depths in the cave, but it was futile.

In 2016, another expedition team called PSC, the Perovo Speleo Club, joined the exploration, and with additional manpower, they were able to reach a new depth of 1,010 meters below. The combo continued, and more depth was reached.

In August 2017, the longest team in the expedition, PST, was able to heave a sigh of relief when they discovered, explored, and broke the world depth record after reaching a depth of 2,204 meters. As of August 2023, a depth of 2,223 meters had been discovered in the Veryovkina Caves.

A round trip to the deepest cave takes about a week. This cave sits in the center of two mountains: Fortress and Umbrella, serving as gatekeepers to the great unknown underworld. The entrance of this cave alone is about 1.4 miles above sea level, which is almost the same depth as the world's deepest underground water pool ever known, which is 1.39 miles below sea level and also found in Veryovkina cave. And speaking of water, a huge cave flood nearly drowned an 8 man expedition team, including two National Geographic photographers, in 2018.

## **Chapter Two: DROWNED WITH FEAR OR FLOOD**

Robbie Shone and his assistant photographer Jeff Wade joined the Perovo Speleo caving team to take, create, and document the still images of the entire cave.

It took the team four days to reach Veryovkina's lowest camp, which is 2,200 meters below the surface. The journey wasn't an easy one either. They had to descend thousands of feet with ropes, crawling their way through mud and water siphons. But that wasn't all.

There were some paths in the cave where the team had to squeeze themselves and heavy bags loaded with their respective expedition equipment through nearly impossible cracks. Still, this was incomparable to what they would face when the biggest cave flood they would ever experience hit them.

For three days, everything in the lowest camp in the cave went smoothly. The team was exploring new corners of the cave, keeping invertebrate specimens collected, and taking photographs of different areas of the cave. Everything was going according to plan until a warning came from above.

The fate of the six members of the eight man expedition team could have been lost if not for two of its members who had to leave early. Roman Zverev and Natalia Sizikova had to catch a flight home, and halfway out, they reached a camp that was 1,300 meters below the surface of the cave. There, they saw the flood pulse. The flood pulse is caused when there is heavy rain. This comes together, and because of the high volume of water, it creates a strong force that bursts through the openings of the cave. This is a sign that the water level in the cave has tremendously increased compared to before, and everyone needs to evacuate the cave.

There was a cable wire installed by the Russians for sending warnings to people below in this kind of scenario. So the initial thought was that it was nothing too serious. The caverns were used to dealing with the flood pulses whenever they came, but not this time.

One of the team members, Petr Lyubimov, noticed a bubbling sound that was coming from a small hole in the ground adjacent to where they had their tent. This raised Petr's curiosity since the flood pulse had been in full rage for two hours and showed no sign of slowing down. He notified the team lead, Pavel Demidov, about the noise, who in turn swung to action.

He rallied some team members to join him in checking a nearby siphon so as to know if the water level in the cave was too high for them to still be around. After they left, Petr looked at the small hole where he saw water bubbling from the ground. This time, the water was rising very fast. Looking back at the National Geographic photographer, Robbie Shone, his face was as white as death. They both knew the team had to leave or die trying.

### **Chapter Three: THE JOURNEY UPWARD**

The fear of drowning in the deepest cave ever was unfathomable in the minds of the cavers as they hurriedly scrambled their belongings to get the journey started. First, they needed to put on their gear, which Shane and his assistant, Wade, both helped each other wear in their latex waterproof suits. Shane knew that in order for them to move faster, he and Wade would need to drop all their cameras and gear worth thousands of dollars. Climbing ropes with heavy gear could cost them their lives, so they needed to choose which was pricey, their lives or their gear.

They chose their lives, left the cameras, but took the flash cards. This was where all the work they have done for the past 3 days was. Shane knew better than to leave that behind, and it was clearly not heavy to take along. Petr wanted to wait for the other team members who went to check the nearby siphon, so Shane and Wade began their journey up.

Shane took the lead, and as fast as he could, he moved quickly. This was a skill he had learned when photography was a side job and he was a high-rise window washer. Shane would go on to reach a part of the cave that was relatively dry, as the flood passed through a different path. Their eyes shone with so much joy that their last breath wouldn't be in a foreign land, in one of the deepest caves in the world—but their Russian comrades were nowhere to be found. Where could they be? Had they been lost to the flood?

The dry ground where Shane and Wade settled was 1900 meters below the surface, food and medical supplies were available if ever they needed them. They had to wait out the flood, which was still raging, and check if anyone else had survived.

Andrey Zyznikov was the first to arrive; he joined the worried, waiting photographers. But their worry was over because, in the next 15 minutes, the remaining Russians came to the camp, all safe. The next 16 hours were spent in the camp, waiting for the flood to subside. Shane, on the other hand, couldn't shake off what had just happened. When the flood couldn't drown him, he was now drowning in his own fear. After a few hours of ruminating in his thoughts and pacing from one end of the camp to the next, Shane was able to take a chill pill, remove his latex waterproof suits, and join his fellow cavers.

Finally, they were able to continue the journey to the mouth of the cave. What resulted in the rare flood they encountered was because of the rain that fell throughout the week. Which was unusual as the Russians had their Veryovkina exploration in the winters when they thought the cave won't be flooded.

This was an expensive mistake that could have cost them their lives, but it didn't.

Still, Veryovkina Cave took the life of a solo caver whose death was the payment for his ignorance.

#### **Chapter Four: SERGEI'S SOLO DEATH**

Two years after the near death experience of the eight cavers, the unfortunate death of a solo explorer happened in the cave.

Sergei Kozeev was a multitourist who was into a lot of sports—anything to pump the body and get the muscles moving. But the last activity he chose would be the one he would eternally regret.

Sergei didn't know what he was in for when he made the exploration of Veryovkina Cave his mission. He left Sochi, Russia, with the mindset that everything would go as planned. Yes, it did for the first week. Sergei's first resting camp was 600 meters below the surface of the cave. There, he stayed for a week before moving on to the hardest part of his exploration.

This was 1,100 meters below, and here the temperature was reading 3-4 Celsius. Sergei wasn't prepared for the freezing nature of the cave, and he would be the price. Slowly but surely, life sipped out of his veins, and he died of hypothermia.

It was only after a year and three months that Sergei's lifeless body was found dangling from a rope 1,100 meters below the cave. The Russian cavers who found the body notified the Ministry of Emergency Situations in Abkhazia. From there, photographs were found on the phone used by the deceased.

Sergei's wife asked for his body to be retrieved, and Abkhaz authorities granted permission for the 100 climbers who teamed up for the mission.

On the 17th of November, the team recovered Sergei's body after undergoing a complex recovery.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is never good to explore an unknown terrain with little knowledge or skill about survival. Shone, the photographer would have drowned if he didn't have the skill of climbing the ropes.

Sergei felt he had the experience to go to uncharted regions with no guidance and was dealt a devastating blow.

Next time you're preparing for hiking or going on an adventure, a guide will do you much good.

The exploration of Veryovkina Cave is far from over. More and more expeditions are still being carried out. And who knows what next will be found right in the deep?

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