

A person wearing a red wetsuit and a red helmet stands in the center of a cave stream. The cave walls are dark and wet, with water dripping from the ceiling. The stream flows over a bed of smooth, rounded stones. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the rock and the person's gear.

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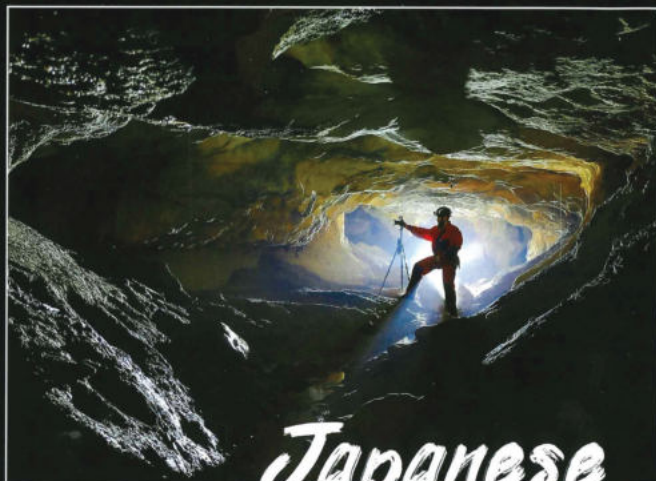
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Descent

Celebrating 50 Years in Print

Japanese karst is not generally considered a major caver destination – and in truth, the island doesn't sport huge cave systems. To write it off as unsuited to sport caving would be a mistake, however – as Chris Howes reports, cavers found this out when they attended the latest International Meeting of Cave Photographers from 17 to 24 March.



Japanese caves and karst

S cave photography at the core of a universal language? Perhaps so, perhaps not ... but nevertheless it has, for the fifth time, brought cavers from around the world to join in a week of working underground, helped by some of the friendliest hosts imaginable, the ever-courteous Japanese.

The organisers were led by the president of the Speleological Society of Japan, cave photographer Satoshi Goto (who is also an adjunct secretary of the UIS), backed by Takashi Murakami, Yukiko Nakagomi and Sota Tabu. Caving is not a huge sport in Japan (for example, there are currently no active cave divers in the country), but the thirty-plus students from university clubs more than made up for any lack of numbers, leading trips and acting as models to support the 27 'foreigners'. That's

16 photographers plus their assistants from nine countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Lebanon, Russia, Switzerland, Turkey, the UK and the USA, who again were able to forge continuing friendships with people of a common interest, no matter any language barrier.

The meeting was held in an 'international art village' – essentially, a modern conference centre with accommodation and cafeteria set in a rural location at Akiyoshidai in Yamaguchi prefecture. The food provided was superb both in quality and volume, offering what seemed to be an exotic menu every night. Despite Japan having a reputation for being expensive, here in the south and far away from major cities, things were very affordable and most participants tacked on sightseeing days after the meeting to experience some more Japanese culture.

Although patches of limestone are found scattered across the islands, the most significant karst is found at Akiyoshidai – a spectacular plateau region of about 130km², of which 45km² is protected as a 'quasi-national park'. The karst cover is regularly burned to keep the vegetation at bay and thus reveal the clints and grikes and pinnacles. The caves – over 400 sites of interest have been recorded – are not major in terms of extensive systems, but they are varied and of these thirteen were offered for visits. This enabled photographers to make an informed choice for the five days of shooting images, as some contained shafts and others formations, some were rich in speleothems and others in extensive sculptured walls of scallops. The main cave is Akiyoshi-dō with over 1km of showcave passages and, away from the tourist trail, a river leading to a large, blue or green depending how you lit it, sump pool.

Photographs submitted in advance had been printed to poster size to display in Yamaguchi railway station and in the nearby city of Mine, which had sponsored the event. Such sponsors are

Facing page

- ◀ Akiyoshi-dō. Photo: Mü Widmer
- ▼ Inset: Kanekiyo-ana. Photo: Benjamin Gischer

Formations

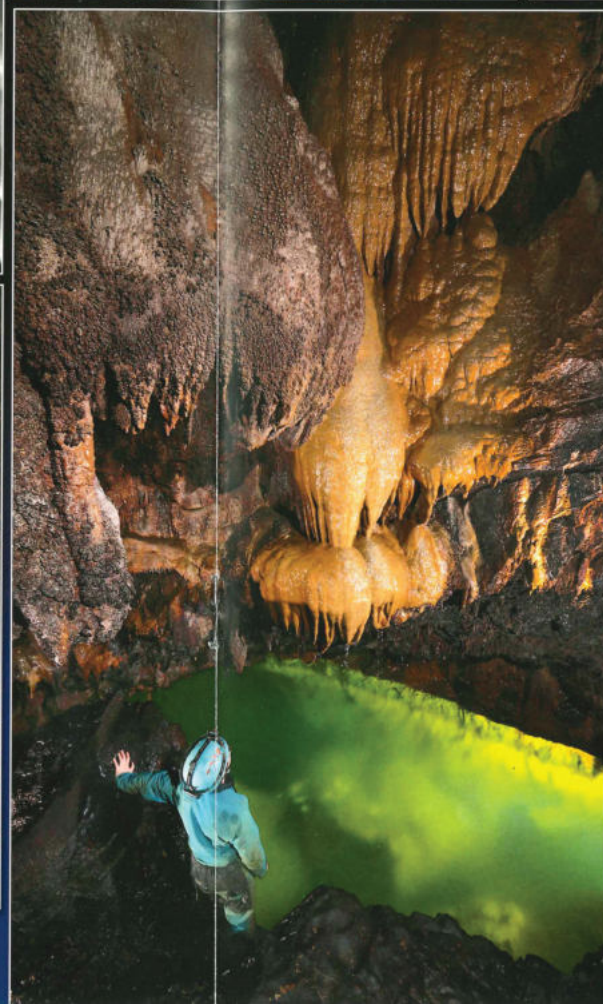
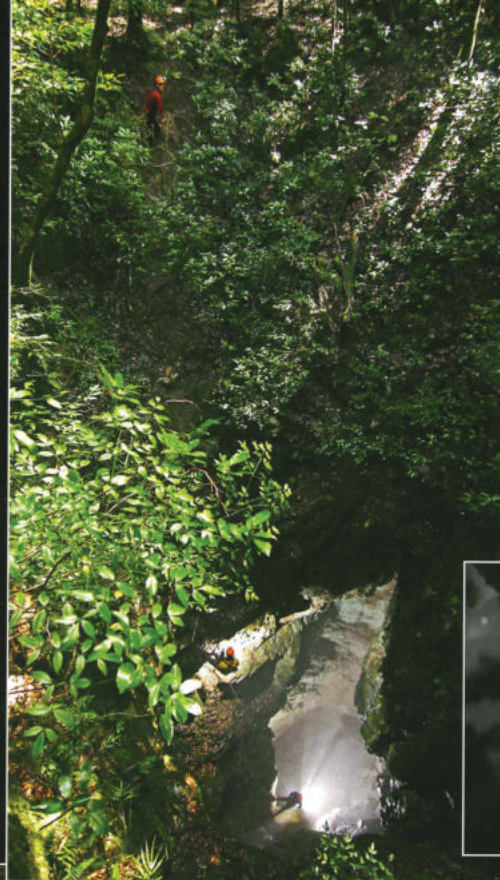
- ▲ Nakao-dō. Photo: Benjamin Gischer
- ▲ Maburoshi-no-syonyudo. Photo: Chris Howes
- ▲ Lava tube formations near Mount Fuji. Photo: Philippe Crochet



incredibly valued, from those offering support through cash donations to supplying minibuses, and even hugely popular oranges-by-the-bucket-load from a local farmer-caver. Following the usual format of the meetings, the photographers selected three images and at the end of the week made brief presentations (with translations on the fly) to a public gathering in Mine Civic Hall, a fitting finale to the formalities.

Photographers essentially worked independently of each other once underground, but back at the art village there were plenty of opportunities for sharing techniques and talking through how to obtain better images – those assembled comprised not only old hands, but also newcomers intent on learning the craft (though no matter how many years you take photos underground, you are always learning). Neither was everyone capturing stills – variously, you might find someone shooting stereo photos or video and everyone was able to learn other disciplines. Some caves were visited by virtually all the photographers and, as expected, some locations within them proved attractive to every camera; given the different 'eyes' involved, it is always fascinating to see how the final images differ from each other. It is, perhaps, proof that it is not the camera that is important, but the brain behind it.

Which brings us to possibly the most important part of this story: on behalf of all the cavers who were welcomed to Japan, to sincerely say thank you to everyone involved. As well as the organisers (we know, setting up such a meeting can fully consume your life), our thanks go to those in support: Mine-Akiyoshidai Karst Plateau Geopark Promotion Council, Mine City and Mine City Tourism Association. Further assistance came from the Speleological Society of Japan, the Speleological Survey Group of Yamaguchi University, Yamaguchi CC, Tokyo SC and Ukigumo CC. In particular, thanks go to the students who, it seemed, suffered everything gladly ... though on the other hand, we had the impression that these relatively new-to-the-sport cavers had a blast and went away enthused not only with the concepts involved in cave photography, but with caving itself. We hope to meet again.



Maboroshi-no-syonyudo
Photo: Philippe Crochet

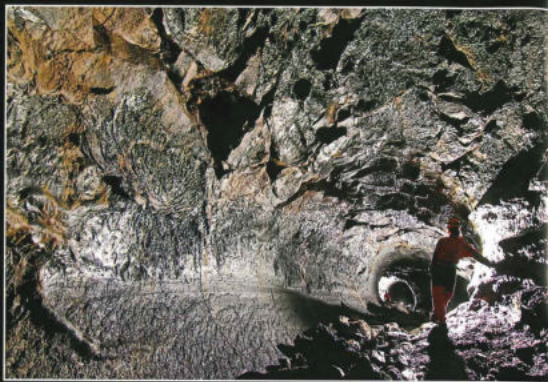
◀ Takaga-ana
Mumyo-ana (bottom left)
Maboroshi-no-syonyudo
(water droplet)
Photos: Danill Li

▶ Akiyoshi-dō
▶ Photos: Norm Thompson

Maboroshi-no-syonyudo ▶
Kagekiyo-ana
Photos: Chris Howes

Akiyoshi-dō
Photo: Philippe Crochet ▶





Lava tubes, Mount Fuji ▲

Top left: Philippe Crochet

Top: Danill LI

Above: Vincent Gerber

◀ Maboroshi-no-syonuydo

Photo: Norm Thompson

▼ Akiyoshi-dō

Photo: Chris Howes

Bats

Takaga-ana. Photo: Mü Widmer ▶

Kanekiyo-ana. Photo: Vincent Gerber ▶

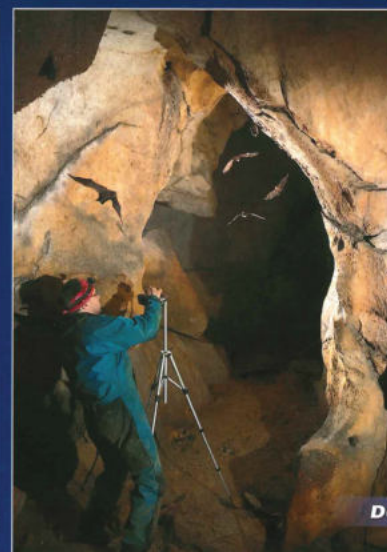
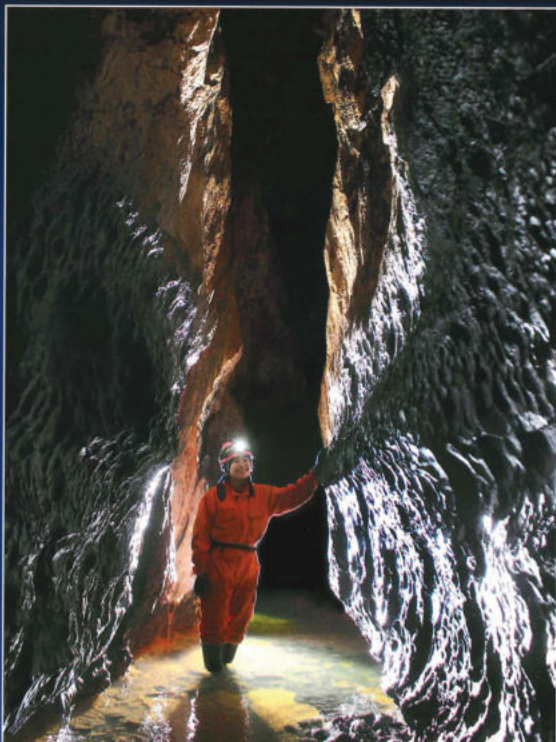
Bats in flight, Kanekiyo-ana ▶

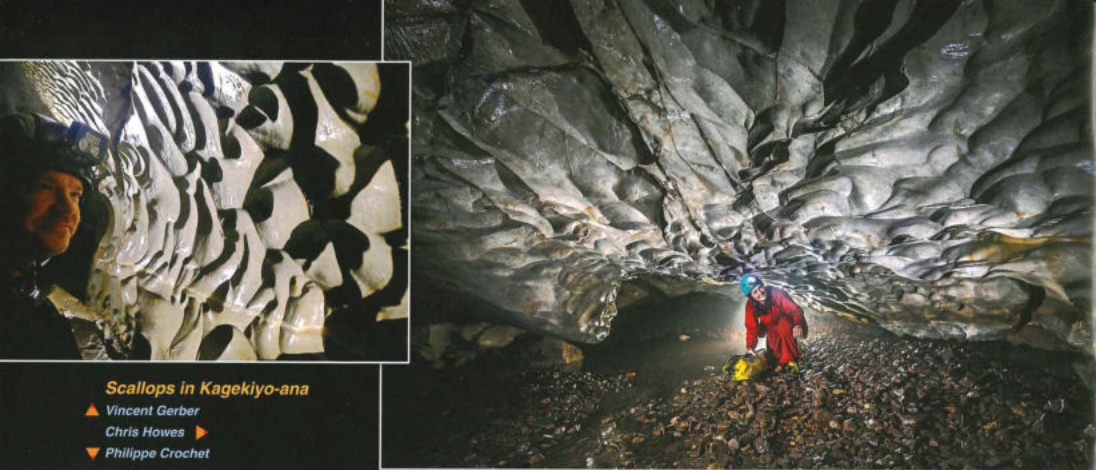
Photo: Benjamin Gischer

◀ Bat, centipede head and bat legs, Kanekiyo-ana. Photos: Chris Howes ▶

Photographing bats in flight, Kanekiyo-ana (see top right) ▶

Photo: Norm Thompson





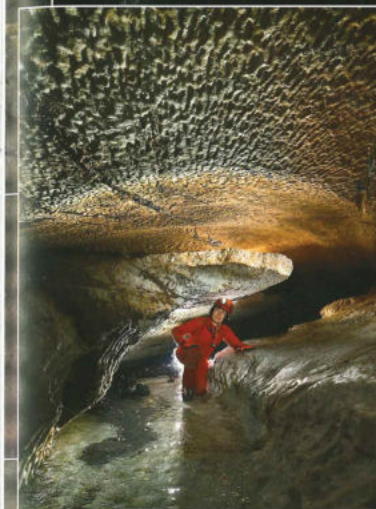
Scallops in Kagekiyo-ana

- ▲ Vincent Gerber
- ▶ Chris Howes
- ▼ Philippe Crochet



The choice of caves meant that each photographer could find his favourite subjects: shafts, chambers, galleries, spelothems or water. The green water of Akiyoshi-dō delighted us, as did the beautiful scallop-sculptured galleries in Kagekiyo-ana. *Annie Guiraud*

- Top row: Photographers at play. *Hiroya Kimura* ▲
- Seyryu-Kutsu*. Photo: *Philippe Crochet* ▶
- At the art village. Photo: *Satoshi Goto* ▶
- Akiyoshi-dō*. Photo: *Chris Howes* ▲
- Kagekiyo-ana*. Photo: *Mü Widmer* ▼
- Akiyoshi-dō*. Photo: *Vincent Gerber* ▲



The meeting series

THE first International Meeting of Cave Photographers was held in 2011 in Olargues, France, the brainchild of cavers keen to share their passion for photography in a spirit of cooperation. It was followed by a second gathering on the border of Italy and Slovenia in 2013, then Turkey in 2015 and New Mexico in 2018, and now the meeting has ventured as far afield as Japan. Numbers at each meeting are limited by the nature of the caves and the intensive work that is carried out, as well as factors such as accommodation and helpers. *Descent* has covered all the previous events with photo spreads in issues (223), (238), (247) and (266).

