“How do we know how long Mgharet Afqa is if there is no complete survey of the cave?”

It all started with this simple question.
As the survey progressed through the months we discovered that it was better to have the same team surveying and the same person drawing. This enabled us to 'learn' the cave and thus reduce the mistakes. Most other cavers who came with us were put to the task of exploring the connections of the many tunnels. It was found that sometimes up to four explorers were needed at the same time to understand how the maze connects together. So with 'natural selection', 'I am bored of this cave', and 'knee' issues, cavers dropped out to leave the core four surveyors who were: Rena, drawing (Hadi always knew the glazed look I get when I had over-surveyed and he would declare the end of the sortie, or maybe it was my asking the same question over and over again 'Where does this tunnel lead? 'where'?... 'WHERE'?); Hadi, compass measurements (cracker of wise-ass statements but at least he has a great sense of direction and with him we never got lost); Fadi, meter placement (goats will never be the same again to me (sorry private joke, but you can ask me in person); Wassim, exploration ('I will change my clothes a kilometer away from all of you because I am like that!) and 'I do not mind wearing a helmet that has fungi growing inside it...').

An excerpt from a report written by Karen Mousarkesh reads: Rena was the leader, and Alain and I were new to Afqa, we had no other choice but to follow Rena's 'shortcut'. "The Rena, it was really fast and easy to make 12 new bruises on my body". So we were all following Rena, crossing from tunnel to tunnel from a narrow passage to a narrower one, from a squeeze to a squeezed squeeze! Till we reached the opening we were going to survey.

At the end of the tunnel, one can feel a wind current at a narrow opening. It took me some time to cross through this opening trying to go head first or legs first just to check where was this wind coming and expecting a big room, don't know why I imagined this. But unfortunately, this narrow opening ended to the left in a bit wider room and to the right in a small passage locked by equall rocks.

At the end of the long surveying day Alain and I followed Hadi to go outside the cave where the others were to follow us when done. So we followed Hadi and I was thinking to myself after each tunnel ending "Now comes the ugly squeezed squeeze" but no... the tunnels were getting wider and the ceiling was higher, where is it? Ahhhh, Renaaaaaaaaaaa!!!" She had taken us on a deadly ramping adventure when Hadi and Wassim had passed by a much easier larger tunnels route. We should have guessed there was an initiation to Afqa! And what is an outing without a group meal at the end of it to compare bruises and knee conditions?

Over a period of six months the team worked inside the cave. A survey of the cave was drawn and for the first time the true length of Mgharet Afqa was measured. The survey of 2004-2005 was performed using a Recta 'geological' compass and a 50m nylon meter. The water and mud in different locations put a strain on this compass and a week after finishing the survey the compass broke into two pieces (Alain and Wassim still have not told me who really broke it). We went through five separate meters after mud had completely obliterated and worn out the numbers printed on them.

Some sections's names need to be explained. Alain's Room is thus named because according to Alain the ramping tunnel he was crawling through 'Does not continue and it stops as the tunnel is too tight to pass through'. Wassim did not believe him and went to investigate discovering what is now known as Alain's Room.

Salle Moussa has a huge gaping lower channel passing through it and as Hadi said when we first saw it 'Wow, it looks like Moussa (Moses) parting the sea! Well, what else could we call the room?'
Salle Nayla is named after Tony Comaty's then girlfriend (His wife's name is... well shall we just say... is not Nayla).

At Room X the conversation all of a sudden turned X-rated and pornographic for some weird reason.

But the story of Salle Cognac will forever remain. I had asked Wassim before we entered if he had brought his flask of Cognac with him and he said no. So, later, we were exploring the tunnels, Wassim was the last person in the tunnels... we waited for him in Salle X and it took him a long time to join us. We didn't ask why but thought it was weird at the time. On the way out... on passing through the Salle Cognac (not thus called at the time) we were surrounded by an overwhelming smell of alcohol... Wassim had decided to consume the full content of the flask on the way in. The telltale smell had let his secret out and Salle Cognac was born.

Some assumptions were made for this survey:
- The entrance was considered part of the cave thus making the entrance of the cave the big gaping opening.
- Tunnels were considered separate if they had a complete wall separating them although they ended in the same location as other tunnels. They were considered one tunnel if they were separated by an overhang or a short wall.
- The tunnel is considered one if it is separated laterally or vertically by fallen roof blocks or water carried blocks or boulders.
- A room is considered as such even when rock blocks separate different parts of it.

A collapse of its ceiling in 2006, and consequent cliff collapse in 2007 has led us to believe that this cave has some unstable aspects to it. The ceiling collapse of 2006 was exactly over the location of our campsite.

It took a group of four very devoted cavers over six months to finally obtain the much coveted number. The cave was found to measure in development 5260m making it 1660m longer than previously thought (3600m). It is currently ranked as the second longest cave in Lebanon (although this might change in our next publication depending on Mgharet Roueiss, our current survey obsession).

Mgharet Afqa needs to be approached with care. Love it and it reveals its secrets kindly. Irritate it and it will break you down. Literally.
Ask our knees.

This article acknowledges Hadi K., Wassim H. and Fadi T., without your fanatical dedication (almost bordering on insane) we would never have finished the survey. Thank you... it was a blast.

And to Isam, thank you for your long distance support, you were with us on every trip.