

بعد 45 سنة من تاريخ اكتشافها قام عدد من المستغورين في النادي اللبناني للتنقيب في المغاور في سنة 2005 بإعادة اكتشاف وتصوير وتخطيط منطقة في وسط مغارة جعينا تسمى القاعة البيضاء تيمنا لبياضها الناصع. هذه المقالة تتطرق لتاريخ اكتشاف هذه المنطقة سنة 1960 الى سنة 2005 لحين إعادة اكتشافها وتفصل جميع المحاولات ما بين هذين التاريخين.

45 ans après sa découverte, la Salle Blanche a été de nouveau accédée par des spéléologues en 2005. Cette galerie d'un blanc pur extraordinaire, avec son grand nombre de formations exceptionnelles, de larges cônes de tailles différentes (qui n'ont pas été documentés auparavant au Liban) a été revisitée, topographiée et photographiée. Cet article reflète l'histoire de la Salle Blanche depuis sa découverte en 1960 jusqu'à sa redécouverte en l'an 2005; incluant les tentatives intermédiaires infructueuses.

THE SALLE BLANCHE EXPEDITION

The Salle Blanche (White Gallery) was a legend of Lebanese speleology until its rediscovery in 2005.

It was discovered in the early 60's during the Jiita cave expeditions conducted by SCL. Ever since then attempts to access the gallery were unsuccessful due to a treacherous climb in its approach.

The archives of the Speleo Club du Liban had no survey of this gallery and the final Jiita cave survey only showed the location of its entrance. There were also a few tantalizing photographs taken by Mr. Sami Karkabi in the 60's.

After 45 years an expedition in the summer of 2005 made the breakthrough and Salle Blanche was once again accessed by cavers. This amazingly pure white gallery with its large number of special speleothems, mainly large cave cones of various sizes (that have not been documented in Lebanon before) was revisited, mapped and photographed (Fig. 1).

This article will glance into the history of Salle Blanche, from its discovery in the 1960 until its rediscovery in the year 2005; including the unsuccessful attempts inbetween.

ATTEMPTS TO REACH SALLE BLANCHE

The Salle Blanche was discovered by Mr. Sami Karkabi and his mapping crew in early 1962 as they were surveying the main axis passage of Jiita cave using the theodolite.

When they got to the Chaos Gallery they wanted to measure the height of the ceiling, which appeared very high to them. So they assembled a long stick with a kerosene lamp and raised it to light the roof. This is how they came to define the 80 m height of the ceiling.

During this endeavor and at the height of approximately 70m, they noticed an opening on the right side close to the beginning of the Chaos Gallery. This opening was the entrance of the gallery to be named Salle Blanche (Personal Communication with Sami Karkabi). During that trip they did not have time to climb and explore the cavity so they left it for another expedition.

Fig. 1
The White Gallery showing cave domes, columns and speleothems.
(Photo by Issam Bou Jaoude)

On September 12, 1963 Sami Karkabi accompanied by Raymond Khawam, Robert Kasparian and Emile Ghanem free climbed the 70 m with very limited equipment, discovered the gallery and named it the Salle Blanche due to its marvelous and pure white surfaces (Personal Communication with Sami Karkabi).

Sami Karkabi took a dozen of pictures, two of which are present in the Al-Ouat'Oaute magazine issue number one published year 1986. A number of other pictures are also present in the archives of Sami Karkabi (Fig. 2 and 4).

Even though the location of the Salle Blanche is clearly shown on the Jiita cave map drawn in the year 1962 (Fig. 5), it was not mapped for 45 years and attempts to reach it failed until 2005.

After the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990 SCL members were reminded by Sami Karkabi of the presence of the gallery, however no attempts were made to access it during that period until 2003 when an attempt was made to reach the gallery. It was unfortunately unsuccessful due to shortage of equipment.

That attempt saw seven members of SCL access Jiita cave from its lower entrance. This meant working their way against the water current for 3 km where the Salle Blanche was located. The trip upstream was difficult as the water current was strong. One of the dinghies got a puncture and after about 4 hours the team finally reached the Salle du Domes. They ascended a 45 degrees slope and rigged a rope at about 60m up on a large white concretion.

At this level the mud traverse was found but it was dangerous to continue without any aid. However, one of the team members made his way across and climbed up 10m and reached the entrance. Obviously the location of the Salle Blanche and its possible course were located on this trip but it was a risky situation and the exploration and mapping of this gallery was left for another trip.

2005 SALLE BLANCHE EXPEDITION

The trip was scheduled to start on the 5th of August. The plan was to enter the cave by descending into the Daraya tunnel at 7:00 am. Delays in caving trips are always expected and after approximately 2 hours we started our descent into the tunnel at 9:15am.

Daraya's tunnel is a man made tunnel measuring approximately 600m, descending at a slope of 45 degrees from the northern side of the valley of Nahr el Kalib to the terminal siphon of the cave. The tunnel can be accessed through a meandering road that descends from the Ballounneh village on top of the mountain to nearly the river level. The tunnel was a government project made primarily for the exploitation of the underground water that emerges from that terminal siphon.



Fig. 2
The cavers who first entered the Salle Blanche.
(Photo by Sami Karkabi)



Fig. 3
The cavers of the 2005 Salle Blanche Expedition.
(Photo by Issam Bou Jaoude)

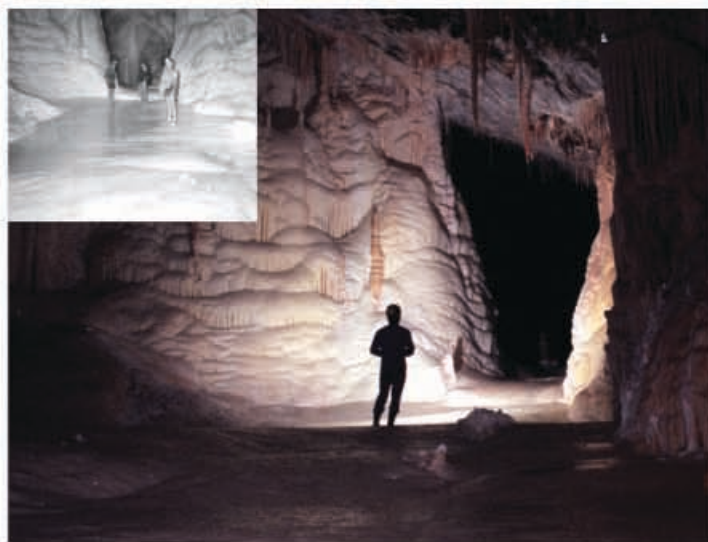


Fig. 4
The entrance of the Salle Blanche photographed from the inside to outside.
Inset is the same location from the first exploration in the 60's.
(Photo by Issam Bou Jaoude)

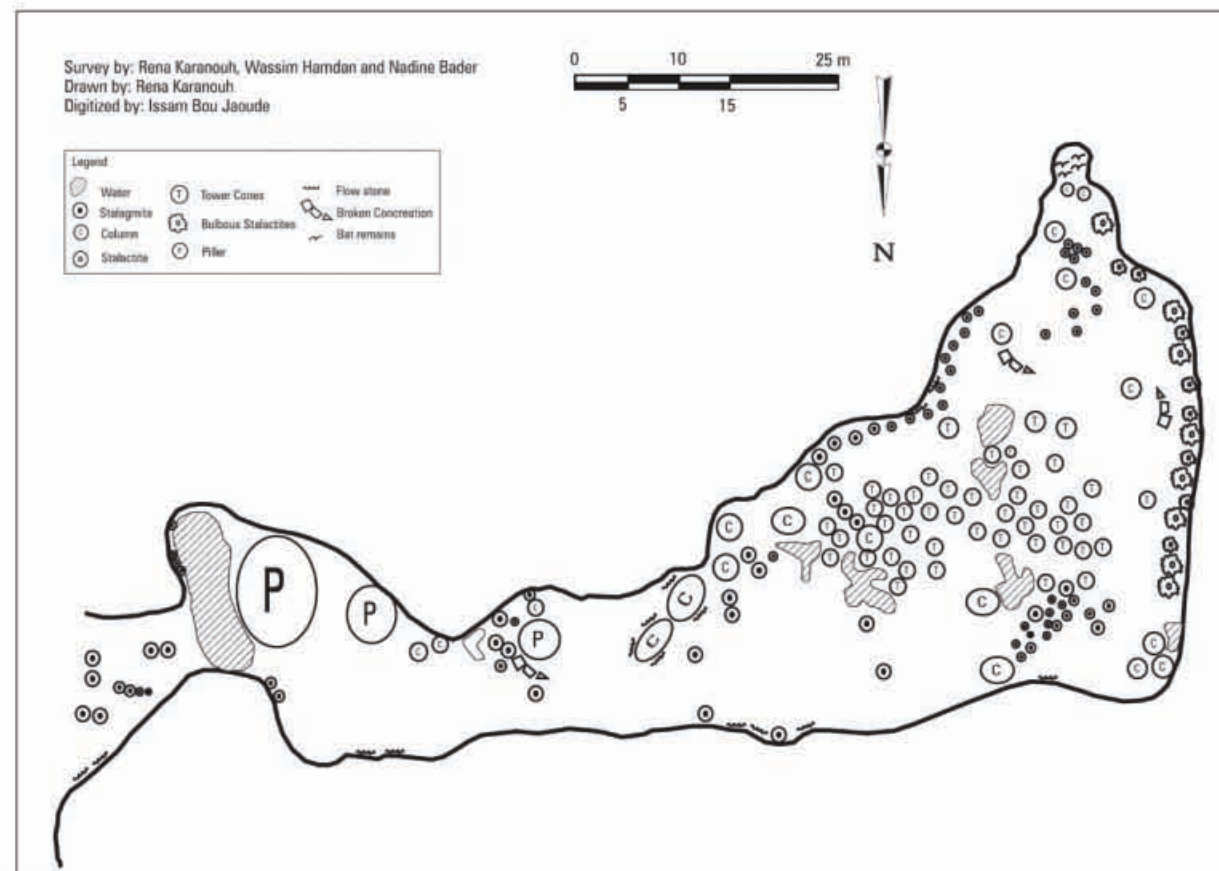


Fig. 5
The survey of Salle Blanche.

EXTRACT FROM TRIP REPORT BY ISSAM BOU JAOUDE:

At the terminal siphon we wore our wet suits and began the 6 hour trek to reach the 1951 camp site.

A small incident delayed us further during the first 100 m of the wet section. One of the group members blew his inner tube and according to him managed to dislocate his shoulder. However, after a break of few minutes all was back to normal and we were on our way again. Stress builds up at the early stages of the expedition and one must be careful.

This section of the cave before the allocated camp site is mostly a wet section interrupted by short dry walk-able portages, mostly walking on rocks in the shallow depth of the water ways.

Two short rope sections were required before reaching the camp site at 5:30pm the same day. The first rope is located before passage Zoughbi and the other close to Palais des Milles et une Nuit.

Located almost in the center of the cave, the camp site was chosen in a dry spot at the end of the huge gallery called the Chaos Gallery. Its name is quite indicative for it is large and one can easily get lost there. In the middle of Salle du Domes, 20 minutes before reaching the camp site, a muddy slippery 30m-decent was encountered. At this location and after 8 hours of nonstop activities, exhaust and fatigue can easily promote



Fig. 6
Map showing the location of the Salle Blanche on the Jiita Cave map.

lack of concentration while descending this particular slope.

At the camp site tasks that were assigned previously were carried out, with some members collecting water and purifying it and others cooking dinner.

The next day we woke up at 7:00 am; five of us were assigned the task of trying to reach the Salle Blanche while the other two volunteered to remain at the camp site. The cliff where the Salle Blanche is located (70m above the level of the river) is fifteen minutes from the camp site towards the west.

The climb has already started. A rope was rigged at a muddy steep slope from a previous expedition. At an elevation of 60 meters the tricky 30m horizontal slippery traverse had to be rigged. Rena belayed me and I planted 5 bolts to complete the traverse. With a final vertical climb of 15m I reached the entrance of the gallery at around 11:30am. I called on everyone to follow. Even the guys at the camp were called upon by Johnny to join in the exploration, topography and photography of this gallery. Dirty cloths and boots were removed at the entrance in order to protect the fragile white environment in Salle Blanche (Fig. 3 and 4).

We regrouped at 3:00 pm in the camp site, ate a small snack, packed our gear in dry bags, wore our neoprene, and headed towards the exit at around 4:30 pm.

The last kilometer of the cave is a river passage (including the show cave section); therefore, it was necessary to make use of scuba diving fins to aid in swimming this section.

At around 8:30 pm on the 6th of August we exited the cave.

SALLE BLANCHE

The Salle Blanche represents a large dry L-shaped gallery that extends in the E-W direction. It measures more than 2250 m² (Fig. 5 and 6).

The entrance of Salle Blanche is rectangular in shape (Fig. 7) with a pool of water acting as a gate that separates the outer section which is a balcony overlooking the main gallery of Salles du Domes.

The walls, floor and roof of this gallery are all decorated with pure white calcite speleothems. The calcite is in the form of stalactites, stalagmites, war-club bulbous stalactites, columns, flow stones, rafts, popcorn, and moonmilk. All of those speleothems in the gallery are purely white in color from which the name "Salle Blanche" was derived.

After passing the entrance (Fig. 7) there is a descent into a dry pool with white calcite covering the floor. Moonmilk covers this calcite and it is sometimes so thick that it forms a soft spongy-like feeling under the feet. Large columns with diameters of more than 3 m are present (Fig. 8). The ceiling of this gallery is filled with white stalactites and soda straws.

Several bat skeletons were discovered in the southern end of Salle Blanche (Fig. 5). These skeletons were covered with a few millimeters of calcite coating.

At the end of this gallery war club like bulbous stalactites dangle from the roof. It is believed that these are features that form under water in cave pools. This is a clear indication that this gallery was under water for an extended period of time and later dried out due to unknown reasons. However, some small water-filled pools of various sizes are still present. The most important feature in this gallery is the large number of cave cones and tower cones scattered on the floor (Fig. 1). These vary in height and diameter, up to 2m and 1m, respectively. Cave cones of that size and number have never been documented in Lebanon before.

Most of the speleothems in this gallery are decorated with coralloids and covered with moonmilk (Fig. 8).

Salle Blanche proved rewarding in terms of its scientific value and beauty. We cannot but end this article by pointing out that care should be taken while visiting this gallery. It is important that cavers remove their caving shoes and their muddy gear before entering into this fragile environment. 🦇

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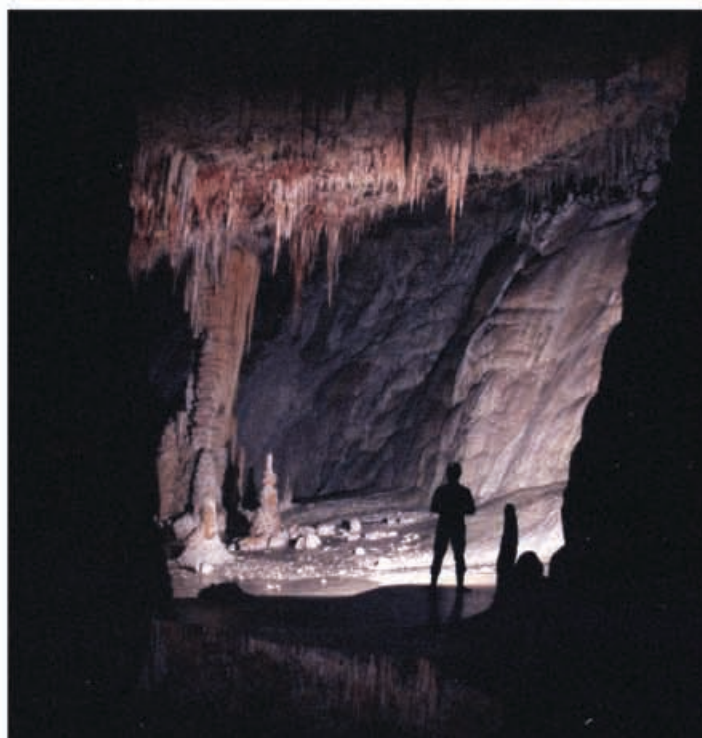


Fig. 7
A general view of Salle Blanche from the entrance showing one of the columns to the left.
(Photo by Issam Bou Jaoude)



Fig. 8
A general view of Salle Blanche showing large columns.
(Photo by Issam Bou Jaoude)