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A note to customers: only copies of the new novel, and the Penguin edition of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* will be signed at this event.

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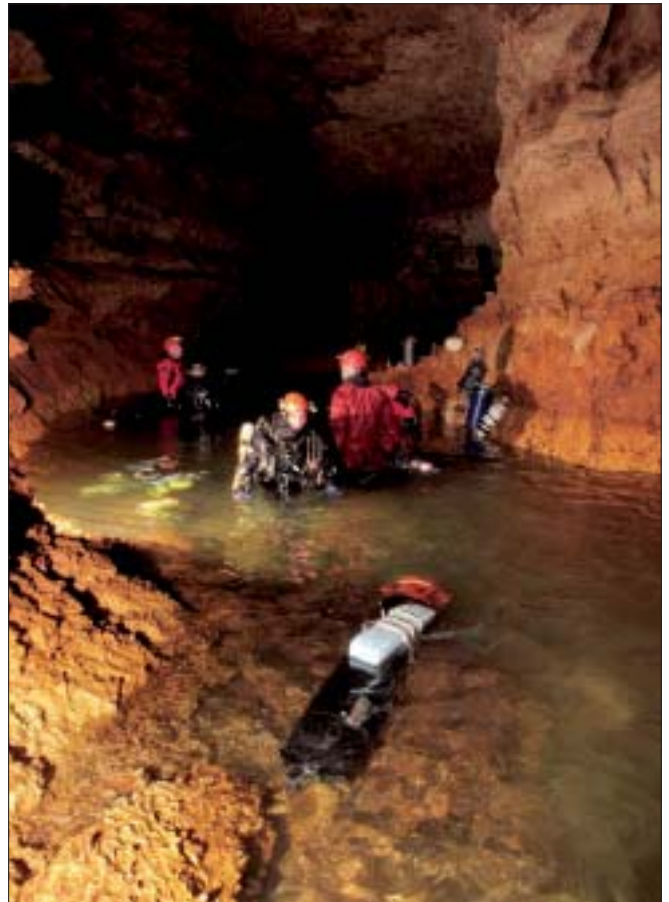


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Checks: Mr Houben prepares his scooter for another ride into the deep



Base camp: Jason Mallinson (front) and the group prepare their gear



Triumphant: Rick Stanton, Rene Houben, John Volanthen and Jason Mallinson emerge into the sunlight as record-holders on Monday



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# British divers who hit a record rock bottom

By **Joel Taylor**

A BRITISH-LED team of divers have surfaced after diving a world record-breaking 8.8km (5.5 miles) into an unexplored cave system.

Explorers Jason Mallinson, Rick Stanton and John Volanthen, along with Dutch caver Rene Houben, charted new territory in a 50-hour voyage which saw them spend two nights camped deep underground.

'It's an incredible buzz to explore further than anyone has been ever before,' said Mr Mallinson, from Huddersfield. 'There was no wildlife down there, just a tunnel of crystal blue clear water stretching on and on.'

The team could only go as far as their safety line would allow before they had to turn back.

Mr Mallinson, 43, added: 'The adrenaline builds when you realise you are looking at something nobody has ever seen before. It's that which drives you forward.'

'You don't get scared. But you are permanently conscious of your equipment. If the slightest thing goes wrong then you are in a position where you might never be coming back.'

The team began their two-and-a-half day foray into the Pozo Azul caves in Covenera, northern Spain, on Saturday. They used 'scooters' to pull them through three sumps – or underwater passages.

After sump two they emerged in a small dry cave area nicknamed Tipperary. It was there they spent two nights resting and replenishing their underwater breathing mixtures.

Measuring equipment told them exactly how much time they had before they used up the oxygen in the chamber.

They beat the 7.8km (4.8-mile) world record for the longest cave dive penetration, set last year at Wakulla Springs in Florida.

Support diver Martyn Farr, 59, said: 'This exploration is akin to the first conquest of Mount Everest in 1953.'



**Drag:** Rene Houben is pulled through the midnight murk of sump two, a 5km (three-mile) underwater tunnel, on a 'scooter' propulsion unit to conserve energy Pictures: Martyn Farr/Barcroft



**Jaws:** Support diver Rob Dalby from Huddersfield carries equipment down through the cave opening

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