

Eurokarst 2016: Travel Bursary Report 2016

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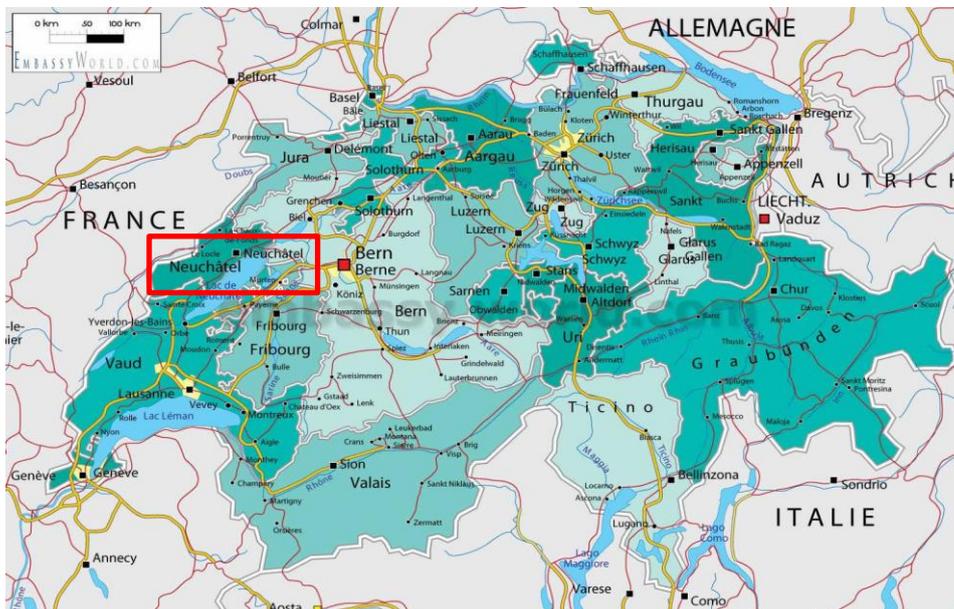


Figure 1 Location Map of Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

As a PhD student you are given the exciting opportunity to present your work at conferences nationally and internationally. September 2016 provided me with one of those opportunities. My research concerns itself with geothermal energy, specifically the energy that can be extracted from waters flowing through deep limestone dissolution features that we, as geologists, refer to as 'karst'. Therefore, when I discovered that there was a conference in Switzerland dedicated to this very topic, I swiftly informed my supervisor and began the preparations for my journey.

Elegantly entitled "Eurokarst 2016", the conference venue was situated at the University of Neuchâtel in north-western Switzerland, approximately 1hr 30 minutes from Geneva by train (Fig. 1). This was the first conference that I had attended entirely on my own – no supervisors, no colleagues.

The conference took place from 5th-7th September; however, I arrived early in order to attend a karst modelling workshop on 4th September. On the first day of the conference I was due to present an A0 poster of my research. Prior to the poster session, all presenters were given 1 minute to pitch their research in a sizeable lecture theatre filled with a combination of PhD students, academics, geological institution representatives and members of companies with a focus on karst. The concise, succinct introductory statements I gave in my pitch set me apart from the other presenters. I know this because several audience members remarked on my pitch throughout the conference. Additionally, I am sure I saw one or two audience members shake themselves awake (however, this could also have been because I was speaking in English and though many were able to communicate well in English, it was



Figure 2 Presenting my research poster to interested conference attendees following my 1 minute pitch to an audience.

not the first language of several attendees). I was delighted by the amount of interest in my poster – it was unexpected as many attendees had worked on shallow karst and I am researching deep, buried karst (**Fig. 2**). I encountered two other attendees originally from the UK, who have now turned out to be very useful contacts for my research.



Figure 3 Lake Neuchâtel. Just one part of the lake was captured on my final evening in Switzerland.

The conference community was very diverse with participants from France, US, Mexico, Switzerland, Hungary, Germany, Belgium and Brazil, to name a few. The talks given throughout the duration of the conference were not limited to geothermal energy but covered topics that included providing clean water supplies. Lunch was provided each day and a conference dinner on a boat out on Lake Neuchâtel, the largest lake enclosed within the borders of Switzerland, allowed for further networking in a more relaxed setting (**Fig. 3**).

Following the end of the conference I opted to embark on a field trip organised by the Eurokarst committee (**Fig. 4**). The group was introduced to the glacier-karst system of Tsanfleuron in the Western Alps. On 8th September, we hiked to our accommodation which was a mountain hut near the Tsanfleuron glacier. On the way, our field trip leader pointed out relevant karstic features and gave a commentary on them. Upon reaching the mountain hut at 2555m, we were astounded by the view with many familiar mountain peaks presenting themselves in the distance – including the well-known Mont Blanc. The next day involved trekking across the retreating Tsanfleuron glacier which sits on a karst aquifer system that connects to the Glarey Spring, a water supply for the local area at 1540m. Observing the geological and geomorphological features that I am studying in a field setting such as this, alongside karst experts, has enriched my understanding of karst landscapes and their importance – especially concerning access to clean water (providing a different perspective on karst that the one I am researching).



Figure 4 Top left: Prarochet Mountain Hut situated at 2555m. Top right: Karren fields below the retreating Tsanfleuron glacier. Photo credit goes to Philippe Renard (Chair of the Eurokarst Committee). Bottom left: The party hiking carefully across the glacier in single file, avoiding areas with possible void space underneath. Photo credit goes to Phillippe Renard (Chair of the Eurokarst Committee).

Overall, I remained in Switzerland for 9 nights. The travel bursary helped to subsidise the costs which are otherwise part funded by my PhD research grant. The total cost of the trip was in the range of £1800-£1900 with the £500 bursary from St. Mary's college covering flights, train journeys, taxi journeys and partial payment of the conference fees (conference fees totalled £680.59 and included payment for the modelling workshop and the fieldtrip). The remainder of these fees and the cost of accommodation are covered by my research grant. Without the travel grant, I would have pursued other opportunities as research funding is limited, yet the cost of conducting research is expensive. The grant has been most valuable in contributing to a trip that has broadened my network, increased my confidence and furthered my education on karst systems. I have also enjoyed the additional benefit of being able to practice my French speaking and listening skills in the French-speaking canton of Neuchâtel.



Eurokarst 2016!