

Systema Sierra Forcada

Easily mistaken as bedraggled new age travellers, the yearly pilgrimage of cavers from Oxford University Cave Club to the spectacular karst of Northern Spain dates back to the early years of the sixties when the likes of John Wilcock and Michael Walker first voyaged South for the sake of speleology. Last year organising this crusade became my responsibility.

When it comes to guaranteeing the unknown, that there is cave to be found, you can't choose a much better place than the Picos de Europa. The discovery of Xitu, and its subsequent exploration to sumped passageway at -1142m (making it the world's third deepest then known cave) in the early eighties proved only to be the beginning of many successful years of caving in a plot that has become ours to explore.

Rather than finding ourselves working this area out of new finds, we are increasingly made aware of still how little we know. As many as half of the mountainsides haven't been thoroughly searched, and dozens of entrances are awaiting a year when snow plugs have melted sufficiently to allow exploration.

The 1992 expedition had drawn a blank with progress downstream in the >800m deep Pozu Jultayu, with the logistics of 1 hour at the sharp end (a massive loose boulder choke) for every 24 hours of caving not assisting. However, a number of interesting small caves were discovered, and it was one of these that our 1993. project decided to focus effort on.

8/11, or Pozu Cabeza Julagua as it was then known, had been pushed to a depth of 140m and a length of a little over a kilometre. It seemed that it might drop into Pozu Cabeza Muxa, nudging it over the magic kilometre depth, and as the cave had been left in a large strongly draughting passage, the omens were good. 8/11 also had the advantage of a relatively short walk in, only 800m from camp and 400m from the refugio.

However, it did have an annoying habit of being small and rifty in places, in particular at the head of the third pitch where combined tactics of SRT with your right hand and ladder with your left was the only way most of us could escape this charmer's clutches.

Other projects we hoped to engage in ranged from the re-exploration of a large squeeze in the previously illusive Pozu Optimisto (now that we had about 15 sightings to help us locate the entrance), to the investigation of the highest peaks in the area. We also had a wager about the identity of the original Pozu Cabeza Julagua. It was

By Paul Mann, leader of the OUCC's 1993 Julagua Expedition.

Photographs by Tim Guilford.

conceivable that it and 8/11 were one and the same, grid references and topographic descriptions for the two matched, but other things caused doubt. The surveys were similar if you skewed them a bit, and the compass was wrong, and had the Spaniards (SIE) really surveyed using an old imperial tape measure without realising it? Furthermore, they had apparently negotiated the third pitch head but then not found the way on. All in all there seemed to be enough for any expedition to be getting on with.

Our Pozu Cabeza Julagua unfortunately had a disappointing end. I neglected to mention that our large ongoing passage was a sump bypass, and distinctly phreatic. The sump, which was a rather beautiful looking sump, was only short, and the continuing passages met in rather convoluted ways beyond it. These passages continued on for a couple of hundred metres in a rather comfortable horizontal way before degenerating into a series of mud sumps and chokes.

A surface survey confirmed our worst fears: this cave was not going deep, but was heading straight towards some springs. A redeeming feature was that we found a second entrance into the cave only metres from its end, making the chores of surveying, photographing and derigging much easier. Now we had a superbly sporting through-trip, with eight pitches, two large chambers (even well decorated), a scary meander traverse in Wet Cheeks Rift, and excellent scenery in the lower streamway of Rio de Los Enfermos.

Not content to let a good thing lie, those demons of tight spaces, Tim Guilford, Jim Ramsden, Steve Phipps and Tony Seddon had to find another entrance, Entrada del Raptor. This cave was distinct in that itsentire first half was dangerously loose, and its second half by contrast was dangerously tight (particularly a wet three point turn which came to be known as 'P Max'). Settling the score, I joined the team of Hungarian cavers who were caving with us, and

pushed what proved to be the easiest route into the cave, with well formed rifts, nice free-hangs, and no tight bits to speak of.

When we finished piecing together this cave, with its four entrances and all its inlets and high levels, we had added a total of a kilometre of cave to the survey, but only added about 10m to the depth. Nevertheless, the resulting Sytema Sierra Forcada marked a significant advance in our determination to complete the total exploration of individual systems in the Western Picos.

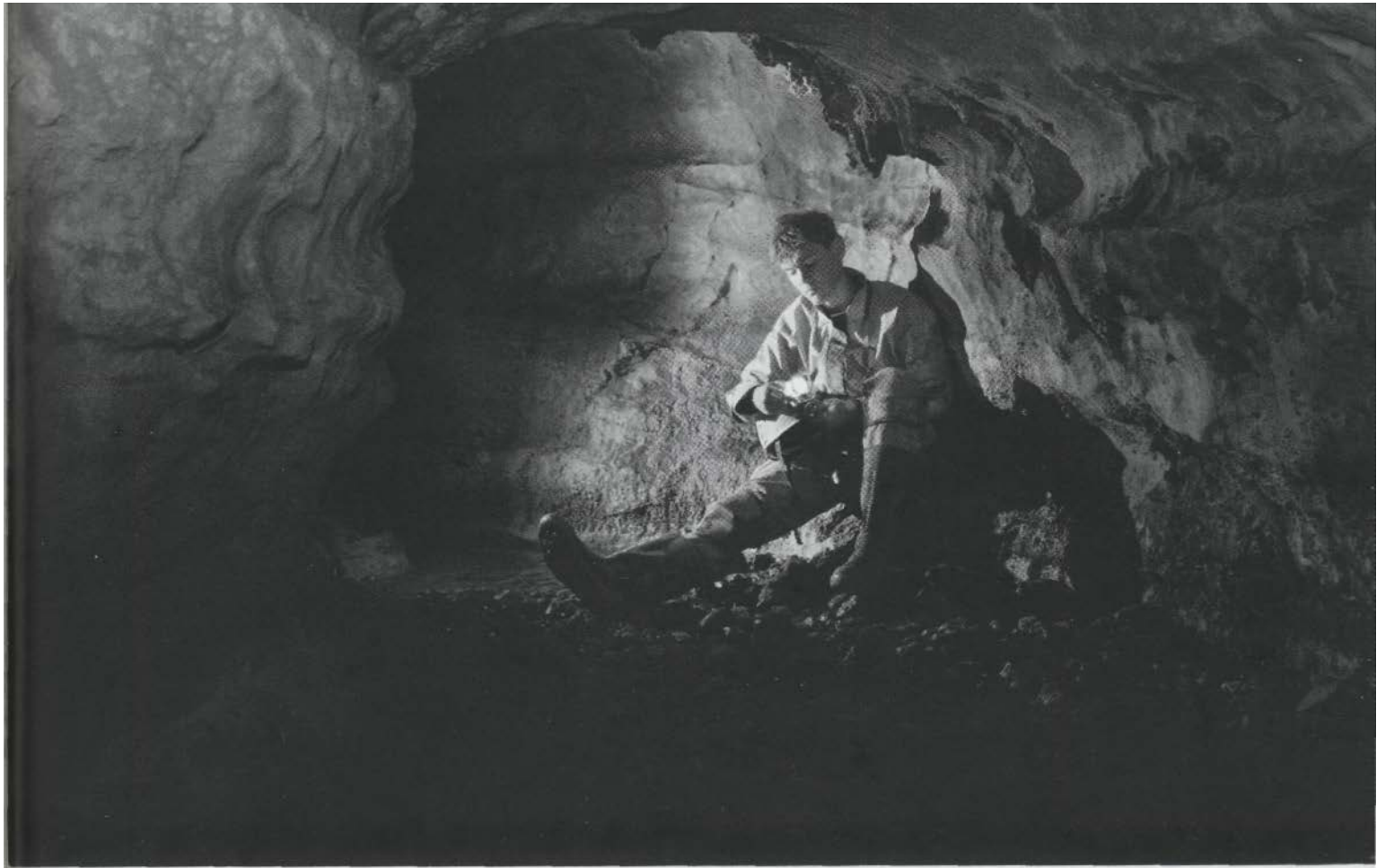
At much the same time, Pozu Optimisto received attention. Its final squeeze was pushed, and several metres of passage found... leading to a sump. Annoying as this was to us, the sumps we found at this relatively high level (around 1400m) were quite unexpected and a significant hydrological feature that needs explaining.

Our Hungarian guests, Mo,ha, Pivo, Andi and Kutya, made more wet finds in one of our oldest haunts. Pozu Xitu's first 300m were rigged for a number of reasons, one of these being the search for new high level passages that might cross into adjacent systems.

Not only were they able to find a few new loops off the entrance series, but they made progress along an oversuit hungry rift to reach a new streamway. The water in Budapestalenta Series could only be followed for a short way in either direction. However the find did vindicate William Stead's years of faith in William's Bit, the scrofulous piece of cave from which this extension sprouted. Alas, it was discovered on one of the few trips into the cave without him.

By the end of expedition, we were on the hunt for new and potentially deep leads in the high karst around Verdelluenga. Gavin Lowe, Steve Roberts and Gerhard Niklasch all played major roles in establishing a Top Camp for the first time in several years. Low snow levels revealed numerous new entrances and made access to other caves easier.

The work done in this remote area, where all water has to come from snow melt, was intended primarily to be a foundation for the 1994 expedition. All systems were go as most of the expedition members traded-in the relative luxuries of our main campsites, with their near-by springs and refugio, for the opportunity to camp on a scrawny patch of grass that barely disguised the underlying limestone. They were rewarded with some of the expedition's best caving. High holes and deep holes were found, some were explored, but plenty left. The most exciting of the finds was Cueva del Archo, a large



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hole at the base of a cliff where once there was only a snow field. Not surprisingly, this cave has a lot of snow in it. In fact, a snow slope extended 140m underground, reckoned by those who don't know the meaning of 'too much...' to be suitable for underground skiing! At the moment would-be skiers can be assured a broken nose at the bottom, as a solid rock wall is encountered; hopes remain high for a bypass however.

With all of the fun of Top Camp, it's easy to forget the ending of the Pozu Cabeza Julagua story. Could we find another cave high on Cabeza Julagua's northern slopes? Not likely. Or not until the mist came down upon Jim and myself once again. Then low and behold, we got lost, and before our very eyes as we walked a westerly bearing back to camp there appeared a hole. We knew we were somewhere on Cabeza Julagua, close to the summit, but to its south!

As return trip with full rigging gear helped us re-establish faith in Spanish cave surveys, and settle the bet. This was the real Pozu Cabeza Julagua! But we weren't satisfied yet, and whilst in the cave, myself and Tim couldn't resist furtling. We were rewarded: a few stones kicked out of a steeply descending tube, and we entered virgin passage. The walls were ceiling to floor with huge drapes of stalacite, meeting stocky stalagmites on flowstone floors to form great pillars.

Just where the passage appeared to close down, a hole through the flowstone revealed a 13m drop. An adjacent hole was suitably human sized, and a very Mendip-esque pitch took us down into another similarly adorned chamber, however this one with a rubble floor. Turning around at the bottom of the ladder to admire this chamber, the unthinkable happened.

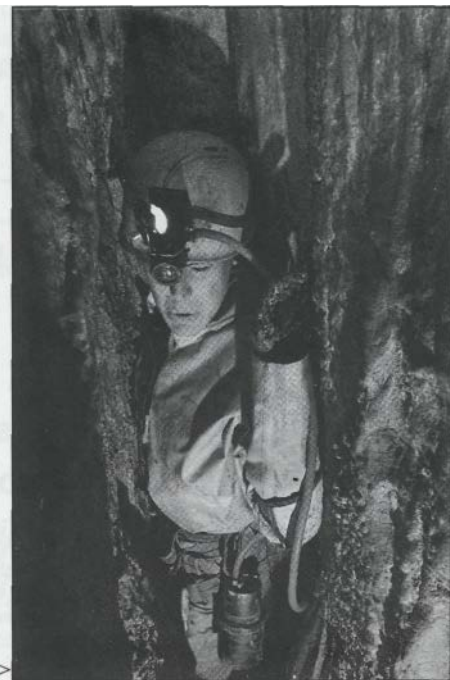
Scrawled on the wall in large soot letter was "SIE", the initials of the Spanish club who had explored the cave. How did they reach this chamber? They certainly hadn't followed our route, yet no other way was apparent. A collapse perhaps? More peculiar, why had this deepest section not been included on their survey?

We were disheartened, but not for long. We found a way down, joining the water leaving the chamber, and although we were unable to follow it far into a tight rift, the bottom was ours. Better fortune was to come on the way out. Examining a rift, Tim found a way past a stal blockage, through a couple of squeezes and a ducking into a cold pool of water, to end up in a large tall passage-way.

Wet Dreaming, the section that followed, was by far the prettiest piece of Picos cave I have seen. The stalagmites on the floor varied from translucent to clear, and the walls were brilliant white wash with calcite.

Richard Barnes resting in Sportive Gods, the lower streamway.

Richard Barnes in the tight 3rd Pitch head,



Sierra Forcada.

We were happy to find that this passage was a cul-de-sac, protecting this vulnerable piece of cave from the onslaught of passing boots and muddy hands.

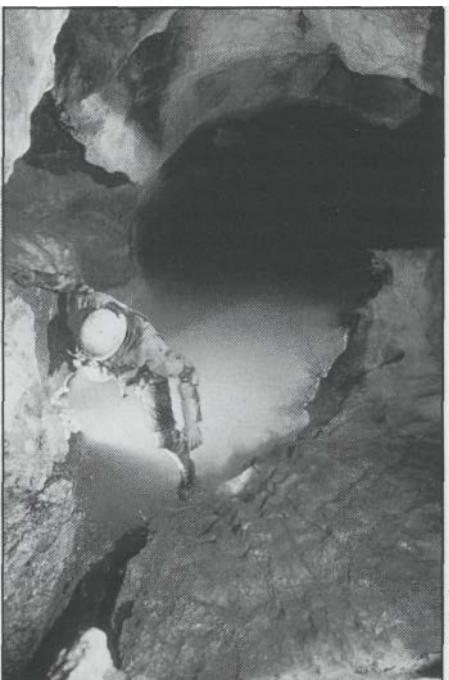
Some mysteries solved, others emerged. As for our problem with cave names; well our Pozu Cabeza Julagua changed its name a second time (it had originally been dubbed Tarpaulin Cave), becoming Pozu Sierra Forcada, highest entrance to the entertaining Systema Sierra Forcada.

Things may not have worked out as we would have first expected, but I don't think that mattered to most of us.

My thanks must go to all of the two dozen expedition members who worked hard to make the expedition a productive and enjoyable one. I would like to also thank the Alex Pitcher Trust for making a grant to enable Richard Barnes to take part in the expedition, and to all our many sponsors: their support made life a little more comfortable for all of us.

The Alex Pitcher Award

In memory of Alex Pitcher, every year one or two awards of £100 to £200 are given out by the Char Parau Committee in February. These awards are given to young people to encourage them to develop their caving skills. Anyone can apply for anything from going on an expedition to learning SRT. Apply to Dave Judson at Hurst Farm Barn, Cutlers Lane, Castlenorton Common, Malvern, Worcs, WR13 6LF in December for a form. Last year's winner Richard Barnes tells his story of the Expedition he took part in, helped by the award.



Richard Barnes crossing the sump pool in Cabexa Julagau.

OUCC Julagua Expedition 1993

A personal view

"Damn! It just seems to end!" shouted Gavin.

I abseiled down to where Gavin was standing. Sure enough, our potential 'very deep cave' just seemed to end in a solid watt, 130m from the surface.

Gavin Lowe and I discovered 'Cueva del Arco' a couple of days previously. The enormous entrance and huge draught suggested a deep cave. Gavin and Steve Roberts had put in 100m of rope in the first trip. However here we were, two days later, at a solid watt with no obvious way on.

It was my fifth week on expedition to the Picos de Europa thanks to a grant awarded by the Alex Pitcher Trust. The Trust awards a grant to a young caver to travel on an expedition or to participate in a training course. Receiving the award meant I was able to stay for the whole expedition.

The expedition had started with high hopes for a cave discovered the previous year — Cabexa Julagua (8/11). Seeing the cave for the first time was enjoyable. Although only a two hour trip to the surveyed limit, it certainly had its fair share of squeezes, awkward rift, large walking passage and the obligatory boulder choke.

I took part in the early pushing trips from the previous year's limit. We were all hopeful of a big shaft series which would take the cave really deep. However, hope began to fade when we discovered an old sump now filled with mud. It didn't look promising! Subsequent trips failed to discover a way over the top and a surface survey seemed to suggest the cave was resurging close by.

So it was on a rare drizzly day for the Picos that Gavin, Rob Garret and I went to look at an entrance 50m above the resurgence. A quick look down and it seemed to be going. Gavin, who had his gear on, had a proper look down. After removing a large boulder he found himself wedged above a large drop¹. He extricated himself and we rigged a rope. The drop turned out to be about 30m deep. Shouts of jubilation came from Gavin as we followed

him down. We were standing a few metres from the mud sump we'd discovered a week before. 8/11 was now a system. This proved to be just the first of three more entrances into the cave.

All that was left to be done was tie up the few remaining leads in the cave, survey and take some pictures. During one of the more enjoyable evenings in the refugio I volunteered to help Tim Guilford on his photo trips down 8/11. Forty-eight hours later I was freezing to death, 8 hours into the first of two epic photo trips! However at least we managed to take some good pictures and avoid a massive thunderstorm which destroyed four tents.

The next week was spent at Top Camp which is situated high in the mountains. The area has received hardly any attention since 1986 when snow levels were a lot higher. It still amazed us though when we found a massive going cave so soon. Three days later however Cueva Del Arco seem to end. With time running out we didn't have time to give all the leads the attention they deserved. A return to the cave next year may prove worthwhile.

The rest of the week was spent 'shaft-bashing' — in many ways the type of caving I found most enjoyable and exciting. There is the buzz of pushing new cave and always the chance of finding something really big. A number of good leads were discovered which will give next year's expedition plenty to look at.

We were all needed down at Aria in the last week of expedition where there was a great deal of surveying and detackling to be done I had a couple of trips down Xitu — the cave where it all began — detackling and surveying the new bits that had been discovered. It was an enjoyable end to a fantastic trip which left me longing to return to the Picos and its caves next year.

Thanks must go the Alex Pitcher Fund and to all the cavers who took part in such a friendly and worthwhile expedition.

Richard Barnes