

30 DAYS IN THE LIFE OF A 'WHIRLING DERVISH'

"How about a short article for the newsletter, Mike?" I asked. Anyone who knows Mike Haselden at all, knows he never stops moving, hence his nickname 'Whirling Dervish'. When it comes to writing an article it's the same - he can't stop! Here's part 1 of his abridged article.

Day 1. Friday 12th September - Weather fine.

With just enough miles on the clock to qualify for 'run in', Sue and I departed from home in our new VW Polo loaded with the requirements of a month's holiday in Spain. These included such essentials as 200m of potholing and climbing rope, six fruit cakes, a 12 volt soldering iron and a packet of toothpicks, as well as many others. Within half an hour of leaving home we were boarding the ferry at Portsmouth and six hours later were heading generally south west through France. France is a very well organised camping country and the traveller can choose to stop almost anywhere and find a well appointed pitch. We stopped at Nozay for the night having covered 202 miles by road.

Day 2. Saturday 13th September - weather overcast, better later.

782 miles by road in one day must rank as a marathon. By sharing the wheel Sue and I just kept going through the border past San Sebastian, Valladolid, Salamanca and at Plasencia we found a small campsite to pitch a tent and collapsed into our pits.

Day 3. Sunday 14th September - Weather fine and hot.

We needed a bit of a lie-in to recover from the last leg of our journey but soon we were on the move again with Sevilla our goal for the day. By now the climate and charm of Spain manifested themselves in many ways. The heat was overpowering and very few travellers braved the highway. We lunched for a couple of hours under the shade of a cork tree then ventured on down to reach Sevilla in the late afternoon.

Reported to be the most beautiful city in Europe, Sevilla also has traffic problems of matching proportions. After a couple of harrowing hours we abandoned hope of finding a secure parking place. We had been warned that a car with a GB plate is a target for all thieves in the city. We made for a campsite in the city outskirts and settled for the night having covered 271 miles.

Day 4. Monday 15th September - Weather fine and hot.

We made an early start and secured a place in a guarded car park in the city centre. We devoted the morning to viewing the famous sites of Sevilla followed by a traditional Spanish lunch before setting off for our rendezvous with the caving group in Benaojan near Ronda. For the next two weeks the group were to stay in a country holiday villa (Sue and I camped in the 'garden') from where about twenty cavers, friends and family, including our Spanish hosts Victoria and Genaro, would venture out on walking, exploration and caving trips.

Day 5. Tuesday 16th September - Weather fine and hot.

For a warm-up trip I joined the two Spaniards together with others of the group for a trip in 'Gato'. Half an hour from base this reurgence cave has a large impressive entrance with other cavities high in the limestone cliff, all of which resemble the face of a cat, hence 'Gato'. Even in high summer a plentiful flow fills a lake just outside the entrance which then flows on down to the valley and the Guadiaro river. Without boats and artificial climbing, low level progress is impossible. We followed Genaro up on a high level route where lakes and the river bed could be seen some 50 to 70 feet below. Various dubious wire traverses were passed until a floor-level route was reached further in the cave.

To a Mendip caver who is more used to intimate contact with the rock, walking along the 'Gato' was a rare treat. For hundreds of metres the passage was big enough to accommodate several double decker buses side by side. Progress along the cave was, however, potentially treacherous with polished slabs and massive boulders strewn about the floor. Generally the ceiling is very high, up to 100ft, with many ledges,

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hollows and hidden parts, all of which made one wonder what secrets awaited the explorer. Evidence of engineering of a former epoch is to be seen frequently on the high walls of the cave in the form of cantilever platforms and steel rope footbridges. I will mention these relics further on.

We had not seen many formations, Although this did not detract from the magnificance of the system, but then we reached 'Manhattan' where an unusual cluster of tall stalagmites on the far side of a lake resemble its namesake - with a bit of imagination, of course! Further on 'Dune Chamber' was aptly named. I have never seen such a vast mountain of sand in a cave before.

Still the passage went on in grand proportions until progress was impeded by deep pools. A previously installed tyrolean wire traverse across a deep lake seemed to dictate the end of exploration for the day, but Genaro confidently proved its security by traversing to the other side, so three of us followed. I wondered if the others had shared my feelings of mistrust for the thin wires which I feared might plunge me down into the deep. At this point the group split up into two. Andy, Ian, Neil and me continuing as far as the lakes would permit without total immersion. We made a slow return to the surface, exploring another side passage and taking in the unique ambience of 'Gato'. I concluded that 'Gato' merited far more attention.

Later that day I explored some roadside caverns in the cliffs opposite the villa with JR. (Jon Roberts).

Day 6. Wednesday 17th September - Weather hot.

The Gato through trip - Genaro, Victoria, Grant Shephard, Loise Curley, Alan Melon and me. We set off by car over the mountain pass to a valley west of Gato. The cars were parked off the road to the side of a rough track from where a concrete dam can be seen connecting the high rock walls at the bottom of the valley. Apparently the early century dam builders overlooked the fact that limestone is liable to be porous. To this day the valley, despite its vast catchment area, has never filled and the dam remains as an epitaph to engineering cockups!

The Gato consists of a 4km master system with a river flowing from the Hundedero entrance at the west to the Gato resurgence at the east. In the dry season the water flow disappears below the boulder floor but can be heard. In winter the flow can reach the roof in places. The few known side passages are inconsistent with the size of the cave so there must be potential for further discoveries.

Loaded with bags of kit we walked down the steep hillside into the deep blind valley below the dam with limestone cliffs towering above us. We followed a dry river bed into a huge cave entrance and in the relative coolness of the cave, within daylight penetration, we changed into caving gear which, for the first time in my experience, included a life-jacket. A little further in, three inflatable dinghies were pumped up. Each would carry a pair of cavers, plus gear, and one by one they were lowered into a deep lake and boarded by climbing down an old traverse line and iron spikes left by the dam builders. I shared with Grant and we cast off and paddled gently across the lake to the far shore. This was just the first of seventeen lakes. Often the lakes were separated by wire traverses and others had to be asealed down to, so once started on this trip we were committed - there was no possible way back. At one stage the passage narrowed considerably and the increased air current was sufficient to push the dinghies along the lake, indeed underground sailing by means of holding the paddles rigid against the wind. After hours of launching and fording the boats we arrived at the 'Bull Ring', an enormous circular chamber where we stopped for a brief rest and lunch which included freshly brewed tea.

From the Bull Ring and other parts, side inlets are barred by massive concrete plugs which the dam engineers put there in an attempt to stem the subterranean water course but they deluded themselves, as would have been understood with present day Karst and hydrology knowledge. For access throughout the 4km main cave passage the engineers installed electric lighting, gangways, platforms and aerial ropeways, but these have now decayed beyond use. The remains are a sad reminder of their fruitless toil.

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After the lunch break we plodded on in the same way; lakes and dry passage - a slow process. Eventually the last of the lakes was passed and the dinghies could be deflated and bagged. From then on the pace was greatly increased and we recognised the passage from the last visit. A change in the cave atmosphere precluded the approach to the entrance even before the first telltale glint of daylight, then soon we were out in the full blaze of the searing sun. With the very satisfying feeling of a successful through trip under the mountains, we walked back to base.

Day 7. Thursday 13th September - Weather hot.

Did my limbs feel a slight twinge of stiffness following the long through trip of the day before? Well if they did I dismissed such feelings as imaginary. Today was set aside for Pilleta.

About 12km south west by road from the base on the side of a mountain there is a commercial cave with a difference. It is called 'Pilleta' (Little Fountain). It is hardly advertised, there is no electric lighting and very few manmade paths. It is owned by three brothers who live down in the valley and take it in turns to guide the visitors.

We stooped through the entrance and completed the formality of payment before being handed a Tilley lamp for group illumination. Our guide was proud to point out that our lamp was reliable, made in Birmingham.

At this point, I should explain to the reader that, having lived my first thirteen years in Spain, I am still fluent in the language which is, after all, my mother tongue. So I was the interpreter for the group consisting of Sue, Martin Rowe, Louise, Paddy Newman and Alan. Our guide, knowing that we were spelios and somewhat amused at my double talk, took a particular interest in showing us his magnificent cave which has a history of three separate occupations dating back to the Palaeolithic age. The wall paintings and hieroglyphics were the best specimens we had ever seen. The profusion of formations was quite delightful, some of very unusual shapes which seemed to defy the laws of nature. Our guide gave some very graphic (and rude) descriptions in Spanish of these and then waited with a leer on his face whilst the rest of the group awaited my translation! We came to some railings at the edge of a 100m chasm where human remains had been found but we were not permitted to go down.

On the return trip our guide allowed us a few privileges including a view across another deep rift to a daylight window in a cliff wall, but again this is a restricted part. Eventually we returned to daylight and all agreed that 'Pilleta' is a really worthwhile trip, and will remain fondly in the mind.

From the front of our villa across the valley, a 20m limestone cliff above the road appeared to have some midway holes associated with the caves which JR and I had explored before. Gary Pirraudeau, Martin and I spent the afternoon climbing down to explore these holes but all to no avail. Don't miss part 2 in the next issue.
