

30 DAYS IN THE LIFE OF A

'WHIRLING DERVISH'

Part 2.

Day 8. Friday 19th September - Weather hot.

The next day, Saturday, had been set aside for the big trip so I had an easy day with Sue touring the local villages and sampling such delicacies as churros, cactus figs and coffee.

Day 9/Day 10. Saturday 20th/Sunday 21st September - Weather hot.

The BIG trip.

For the foreseeable future, no-one can know which or where the deepest pothole in the world is and the exciting possibility of discovering yet a deeper system exists for any keen potholer who explores abroad. In the meantime, plumbing the depths of a big one is satisfying enough. Sima GESM in the mountains east of Ronda, discovered in 1975, is currently one of the deepest at 4,300ft. The system is predominantly vertical with some awkward narrow rifts. It also sports a couple of big drops the best of which is over 200m, situated near the bottom.

Having checked and double checked our kit, those of us descending the Sima GESM accompanied by nearly everyone else staying at the villa set off in two cars and Gary's van for the mountains. Fortunately there is now a driveable rough mountain track which takes the caver to no more than an hour's walk from the Sima GESM's entrance, whereas before the nearest road was a day's walk in distance. Our Spanish leader for this trip was Pepe and thanks to his local knowledge we were able to walk more or less straight to our goal; without him we might not have found our entrance too easily in a terrain consisting of barren scrubland, limestone outcrops and shallow dry valleys, all of which have speleological potential.

In these situations, once I have changed I can breath a sigh of relief knowing that I have not forgotten some vital item. We were to descend in three separate groups. I was with Pepe, Neil and Ian and after the customary photographs and farewells we commenced our descent at 14.00hrs. Our intention was to travel light and move quickly to the bottom and out again without camping or bivouacking.

Pepe led at first. The entrance, more a steep slope than a pitch, was rigged with a Spanish style ladder and I hoped that there would be no more of these in the cave. I always find that within a short distance into a cave all apprehension ebbs away and my mind can focus on the task of moving safely along. Soon Pepe was struggling in a narrow section and I wondered if this was typical because if so we were in for a long trip. We arrived at the first pitch, only a small one of about 10ft but without rope or ladder. It was easily free climbed but for the sake of a few anchors and rope it was not worth the risk and again I felt a little doubt about our undertaking. Short sections of passages were broken by small pitches with the occasional deeper ones, but all roped although rigging and ropes were not of the best standard. Perhaps good judgment should have dictated an early exit but after months of training and waiting we were hyped up for this big trip and we forged ahead. The pitches then became deeper, up to 100m and more, followed by narrow difficult rifts. By this time we had taken the lead from Pepe who had passed his previous depth in this system. We made adjustments to some of the belays. One had the very real feeling of depth in this cave, and with every move we gained depth.

I arrived at a pitch head as Neil was going down, clipped myself to the traverse line and made ready to descend. I waited for the signal and as I watched Neil's light become more and more distant I knew this was the big one. Eventually a faint signal told me the rope was free. I checked it for slack, loaded the descender and carefully swung over to hang on to the main rope. I started the descent and looked all around me as far as my light would reach to take in the feel of this huge pitch of about 700ft. I passed a rebelay and continued the descent when I felt something wrong about the rope passing through my right hand. I stopped immediately and to my horror only inches away from the descender the rope was badly damaged. Before you could blink there was a

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jammer on the rope above and I was ready to Prussik. The others were too remote for communication and there was a conflict of descision in my mind. My first reaction was to abort and make good my return to the surface but then I felt I had to effect a repair to the rig for the sake of my friends below. I hung there for a while sorting things out in my mind and then prussiked up to the last rebelay to rearrange it with some spare slack, then abseiled down close to the damaged rope and tied it off with a figure of eight. Having made safe the rope I passed the knot and continued the descent at a steady gentle rate. My left hand got tired of holding the brake in and the bottom was nowhere in sight. but I went on, observing a trail of steam coming off the damp rope generated by my very hot descender. Eventually the pitch bottom was discernible but even so it seemed an eternity before my feet touched down, much to my relief. There are times in life when words are inadequate for the expression of one's feelings. This was such a time.

In due course Pepe joined us and we pressed on down the system. At a pitch head near the bottom we were held up for some time by a Spanish team on their way out. However despite this and other difficulties we were making good time and our goal was within our grasp.

The rest of the descent and ascent was uneventful except when a Spaniard dropped a tackle bag from the top of the big pitch. Neil, who was on the rope, saw it pass by and thought it was a body. I can only leave his thoughts to your imagination. At the time I was prussiking up a lower pitch and the noise of the high velocity bag landing on the pitch bottom was amplified by the echoing walls and to me it sounded like a mass of falling rocks. I had visions of boulders severing the rope and cascading about me, so I swung into the nearby pitch wall and pretended to be a limpet. After a few seconds all was quiet again and my feelings began to improve so I continued my ascent with a little trepidation. It then fell upon me to carry the bag up the big pitch for the Spaniard.

For hour after hour we plodded up and up and at times resting briefly and occasionally eating a little food to restore our energy. We had been informed that the water in the cave was potable but we saw evidence to negate this; however we did risk a few mouthfuls whereit seemed to be safe. Nevertheless, on the exit run I felt a great thirst. Then finally after a total of twenty-five hours I climbed the last pitch into full daylight, there to be greeted by Sue capturing the moment with the camera and offering what I most wanted; a kiss and a drink.

About three hours later on our return to the villa there was a champagne celebration with a splendid meal and an evening of reminiscing. I was also volunteered to lead tomorrow's trip through Gato.

Day 11. Monday 22nd September - Weather hot.

Lesley R, Martin R, Yvonne W, Paddy N, Linda Gates and me.

The Gato through trip was regarded by most members as the highlight of the Spanish holiday; they were however limited by equipment and the need for a leader. It would have been unfair for Genaro to lead every time so after the first trip a member from a previous trip would lead. This duty fell upon me today.

Route finding is not a major problem in Gato but as I had not anticipated returning to the system I was unprepared for leading and on one or two occasions I was unsure of the way on. Neither was I fully recovered from the previous two days events so I was not feeling on top form. Nevertheless I would not have missed this second trip and I enjoyed it enormously as indeed all the others did.

Day 12. Tuesday 23rd September - Weather very hot.

Louise C, Adrian D, Alan M, Sue and me.

We were up before dawn. I remember gazing into the heavens and admiring the spectacle of a myriad stars and felt the cool, still night air about me interrupted only by the sound of nocturnal creatures in the background. A twenty minute walk saw us to the railway station where we caught the local commuter which slowly churned its way southward, stopping at every station and eventually reaching Algeciras. There we boarded a coach to La Linea. The border formalities completed we walked across the aircraft landing strip into Gibraltar where we spent the day doing the top of the Rock, the Mediterranean Steps, St. Michael's Cave, the monkeys and Marks ans Spencers, amongst others. Sadly the cave, after my namesake, is the most spoiled underground system I have ever seen. It has been turned into a theatre with stage, piped music and coloured lights. The visit to Gib was worthwhile but I would not rate it highly nor would I wish to visit there again. Part three will be in the next exiting issue.