

Mendip Caving Group

NEWS

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SNIPPETS FROM SPAIN

by Yvonne Ward

As we approached the checkout, I realised we might have a Houston, as Lesley would say. Between us we had filled six very large Asda trolleys with tinned food. At a rough estimate, it would cost £200. "Er, did anyone bring the cash?" I asked. "Ahhh... no, not as such," replied Lesley "but I can pay by cheque." "£201.25," said the checkout girl. Lesley handed her a cheque. "Do you have any ID?" We looked at each other, and knew we had a Houston - Lesley had no ID. The Manager was called. "You do know your cheque card has a £50 limit? Did you intend to buy this much when you came in?" he asked. "No" I replied, as Lesley replied "Yes," in unison. "Look," said Andy, "do you want to put it all back on the shelves?" The Manager ignored this remark. "Going somewhere are we?" "To Spain for two weeks" said Lesley. "They do have supermarkets in Spain" the Manager said, knowingly. "Yes," I said, "but are they Asdas?"

You may be wondering why we were buying £200 of groceries to take to Spain. The reason was the 1988 Sima GESM Expedition. We had decided that it would be impractical and too time consuming to keep driving up and down steep, winding mountain tracks to go shopping every day so Pat Newman offered to purchase a Land Rover to transport food for 14 days for six people, as well as all the tackle and personal gear.

After a fast and hot journey Lesley, Andy, Yvonne and Martin arrived at the Refugio Rodrigues de la Fuente, alt. 1200m in the Serrania de Ronda, on the Saturday to find the Haselden family and the Northern cavers already encamped. The Land Rover, with Pat and Neil, arrived on the Sunday a day earlier than planned. Our mountain campsite met with their approval - the previous night they camped after dark in a ditch and awoke in the morning covered in slugs, 10m from a green field! The Refugio consisted of a three-sided whitewashed concrete shelter with three taps and wood-burning cooking areas. The water came from a nearby spring and although it looked like milk due to dissolved lime and the pressure, it was uncontaminated, drinkable, and reliable. There was an open area for camping but we chose the trees for shade. At first, the shower was set up on the side wall of the Refugio using an up-side-down plastic water container which Mike Haselden volunteered to demonstrate. He stripped down to his white Y-fronts which became transparent when he stood under the water so he promptly took them off and carried on showering. Neil and Andy followed suit - for photographs please send plain brown SAE! We girls decided we needed a bit more privacy so the next day Mike fixed the shower in the trees with a pulley system, and made a modesty curtain with a flysheet - we even had a shower mat and towel rail made from a spare tent pole. To make sure the water was warm we would fill the carriers in the morning and leave them in the sun all day.

Lesley, Martin and myself had worked out menus, and all the the incidentals needed for our camp - everything from cereal to carbide, from Krisprolls to toilet rolls. The cost was £250, divided between the six of us. All the food had to be tinned or packeted as we expected the heat to be quite intense with little respite even in the shade. It was the first time we had organised food in this way so we expected it to be pretty unpalatable. Thanks to Andy the meals turned out to be superb and plentiful which was amazing when you think it all came out of tins or packets. *continued on p5*

SNIPPETS FROM SPAIN

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The most popular items were packets of Long Life Devon custard, which we discovered we could barter with hard Northern cavers no longer able to stomach mountains of Meusli. A pint of custard could be exchanged for 1kg of Meusli or half a packet of Bourbon biscuits. We miscalculated with only a few things - we had an abundance of tinned sardines, toilet rolls, branston pickle and powdered milk. We missed out on treats to take underground - the Northern lads had tins of Coke to leave at the top of pitches for their return (when consumed, they can be flattened and deposited in a tackle sack), chewing-gum (short pitch = 1 Hubba-Bubba, long pitch = 2 Hubba-Bubba), and boiled sweets.

To get to the cave we went by Land Rover to 1700m then had a long walk to the entrance. On clear mornings, we could see Gibraltar, the Med, and the mountains of northern Africa. If you exited earlier than the others as Lesley and I did on a couple of occasions, it was possible to walk back to the camp via a steep, wooded gorge. The walk from the cave across open limestone terrain was almost unbearably hot so after dumping our caving gear at the Land Rover we found the one and a half hour walk down through the trees quite a cool relief.

The caving began well, with the Northern lads rigging the first 250m. Neil, Mike, Ollie and Andy then took over and rigged the next section while Lesley, Pat, Yvonne and Martin acted as sherpas bringing more rope bags down to 250m. Progress continued in this leap-frog way until the cave was rigged to 800m. At this point the trips were becoming longer and more arduous, with the upper part of the system becoming repetitive. With 800m of pitches to de-rig and a further 200m of rope already in the cave at -800m, we realised that we would easily reach the bottom at -1000m in the next trip or two but that we had insufficient manpower to de-rig over 1km of rope in the time available. Defeated by time, rather than our own inability we decided to start de-rigging.

Meanwhile, events on the surface continued. Two days running there were brief tornado-like whirlwinds that whipped through the camp suddenly and forcibly. With spinning funnels of dirt and debris from ground level up as far as the eye could see, the first took a sleeping bag and deposited it further up the mountain in a tree. The second took Paddy's Karrimat so high it looked like a paper bag blowing around and deposited it fairly close to the camp but Lesley's postcards and my knickers were never seen again.

Although remote we were visited by the Civil Guard who arrived in time to see Lesley shaving her legs but they seemed more interested in our giant container of carbide. Then there was "Nigel", a huge black beetle who first attempted an ascent on Dave Elliot's leg and few days later appeared on the rim of my breakfast bowl. I froze in panic - it was easily twice the size of a stag beetle though quite harmless. Then there were the horses with cow bells round their necks who regularly visited the camp rubbish bins at three o'clock in the morning.

Our last and most memorable visitors were the Spanish couple who arrived weighed down with ruck-sacks, a tent and a huge ghetto blaster - and don't they like the sound of their own voices! One moment we were 1200m up a peaceful, beautiful mountain, the next we were at a very loud disco! Rather than say something straight away, we arranged our chairs to watch them and waited for Dave to arrive. When he did, he was less than impressed, and eventually said something!!! (see MCG Bulletin No.1) and things quietened down a bit. He had his revenge the next day by backing his van up to their tent at 6am, loudly. The girl changed and washed her clothes daily but the lad wore the same thick shirt and wool socks the whole 4 days they were there and the temperature was in the 90s. They were joined on their third by more Spaniards and spent most of their time cooking and eating. Although they had brought a gas cooker they insisted on using the wood-burning cooking area because "it was more aesthetic" which resulted in everyone getting smoked out and covered in ash, especially when

their unattended frying pan of oil caught fire. They must have wondered about us though with boxes of food everywhere, caving gear spread out and ropes hanging in the trees to dry. Not to mention the shower. Peace prevailed at last after they left so we continued to enjoy the last few days of sun, peace and beauty. Woodpeckers, deer, goats and if you were lucky, the odd ibex could be seen. This is a truly breathtaking part of the world.

To break the long journey home, we travelled first to Northern Spain to visit Sima de la Cueto, where we had arranged to meet Bob Marles. Bob knew that we would be in Arredondo on the 18th. As well as caving, Bob enjoys a little wind-surfing so he brought his sail-board along. When we didn't arrive on time, he wasn't too concerned - he just drove around the village checking out bars. When we didn't arrive on the 19th he still wasn't too concerned - he just drove around the countryside checking out cave entrances. When we didn't arrive on the 20th he began to get concerned - he had been driving around a mountain village for three days with a sail-board on his roof-rack, to the amusement of the locals, unable to speak a word of Spanish (he just manages English with a broad Welsh accent). Then he wrote off his front suspension saving a bottle of beer about to explode on his back seat. When we finally arrived, he was demented. The nearest Vauxhall dealer was in France. He had two good wheels, the spare on the third and the remains of a damaged wheel and tyre on the fourth. "Oh God, please let it fit, please let it have 4 wheelnuts," he prayed as he demolished Lesley's boot looking for her spare wheel to replace his patched up tyre, devouring any food he could find at the same time. "IT FITS!!!"

We actually managed some caving, too. Sima de la Cueto is 30km long and 600m deep, so is an expedition in itself. We only had time to explore the "ends" - the 302m entrance pitch and the resurgence which we followed as far as the third lake. Parts of the cave are 200m in diameter and others 300m high. At one point in the resurgence cave there is a boulder the size of the cottage precariously wedged about 20m up. Below it are many shattered boulders which threaten to puncture the boat - a little unnerving when there are only two lifejackets between three and one of those won't inflate properly. Other parts of the cave are well decorated especially Salle de Phantomes (explored by French cavers), a smaller version of the Hall of Thirty in Otter Hole.

As this cave is only 1hr's drive from the ferry at Santander, we may have to return next year...