

Mendip Caving Group

NEWS

NUMBER 245

APRIL 1995

Underground in Mallorca

Timothy Francis

It's wet and cold on Mendip so it must be that Mallorcan time of year again! This year's schedule was dictated by a court summons to appear as a witness in Manacor on the 21st February. Last year we had caught two car thieves red-handed, so this year we did our bit for justice. Whilst the rest of us hung around the courts Joe went for a ramble on the scrubby hills between Ca'n Fresquet and Manacor.

Cova Sa Campana

This year we finally got to do Campana, the deepest cave on the island. As is usual for Mallorcan caves Campana is easy to find once you know where it is. Descriptions of how to find the cave are commonplace but the cave entrance is accurately marked on the new version of a 1:25 000 map (Sa Calobra 643-IV). We picked up a copy in the bookshop in Soller.

Apart from the final 60m pitch (which we did not bother with) the cave is relatively straight forward. Once inside the entrance we noticed that the temperature was not as hot as most other caves on Mallorca which makes a pleasant change. The first pitch consists of a steep free-climb which is best assisted by a 20m handline belayed to a large stal boss. This lands in a large, dry chamber. The formations at this point are already quite impressive but are nothing compared to those beyond. From the entrance chamber the way on is downslope and to the right, and enters the huge Sal des Gegants. We wandered around this chamber for a good twenty minutes or so, taking in the sights. The cave continues to the left down a narrow gully, pitch two. This is broken up into two sections: 15m and 20m, although we used a single 45m rope which was ample. The first section has plenty of solid naturals and one 8mm spit. A sloping gully leads to the head of the second section. We rigged from a large stal on the left and then abseiled diagonally across the pitch to land on a hidden ledge. From here it is an easy climb down the huge slope, and avoids the use of a massive rope.

At the bottom things close down a bit at a boulder choke. Look out for the plastic nativity scene on the left! At the choke we rigged a small pitch with a deviation (3 spits) but have since read of a bypass to the left. At this point the passage narrows enough for the unusual draught pattern to be felt. The chamber contains some excellent formations including some fine helictites. Wandering through these galleries we arrived at the next 'pitch'. Joe volunteered his chest harness, tied to a stal blob, as a handline for this one as we had no more gear left. This protects a slippery start to a relatively easy free-climb once you're past the first two metres. Another huge chamber follows with a fine stal boss and gour pool. This point is the site for a digging camp but is remarkably clear of cavers litter. We called it a day at this point but noted the start of the final pitch. I'd recommend a spot of bolting here as belays seemed a little hard to come by.

Cova des Diners

We chose this cave more for its proximity to the villa than for its popularity. Take the road from Puerto Cristo which heads towards Son Carrio. Turn right at the signposted crossroads and

drive up to the shoulder of the hill. Turn left at a large green house and continue up the hill until a sharp right hand bend is reached. Park here. Walk up the road for 15m where a small footpath leaves on the left (by a small gap in the low wall). Two entrances, one with a dry stone wall, will quickly be found.

The description we had of this cave was a complete load of rubbish; so bad in fact that I doubt whether the author has ever even visited the cave. Both entrances join up close to the surface and several ways lead on down. The locals have marked the through trip with lengths of twine, for all the ways down eventually unite. Much of the cave is covered in a fine black silt which gives the place a rather gloomy feel. The entrance complex of passages ends at the head of a steep rift (a 5m handline belayed to stal is useful in places), but there is no way at the bottom. The main way on is best found by entering the cave downslope of the unwallled entrance and keeping left. Crawl past a couple of gour pools to enter an impressive chamber. This is well decorated especially with large columns. The way on ends abruptly at a steep rift, and a boulder choke in the floor. The rift would appear to be a continuation of that seen in the entrance series. We nosed around the chokes but could find no further way on.

Cova de les Rodes

This is another interesting cave that has been much underestimated by previous visitors. We found it to be an excellent trip which only takes a few hours. Take the C710 from Puerto Pollensa and turn right to Cala San Vincente. Park at the car park above the beach rather than in the woods which are a bit thief-friendly. Walk back up the road past a villa with an impressive garden. Take the first track on the right, following it around a left hand bend to a gate. Do not walk through the gate but keep left, crossing over a line of earth barriers erected to prevent vehicle access. Continue down the track keeping the area of fly tipping to your right. The cave is located in a shakehole at the far end of the tip, forty feet from the track on the right side.

The entrance passage ways have a fine, sculptured roof and have not suffered too badly from graffiti. The first pitch is soon reached. This is free-climbable but I would recommend 15m rope rigged to two large naturals as an alternative. Below the nature of the passage changes with some good walking sized stuff over rocks. This ends in a sump, but a bypass can be found by climbing up the mud bank to the left and squeezing through an eyehole. A short section of crawling leads to the second pitch. This can also be freeclimbed but a 6m rope is also easily rigged from several naturals. Below a low crawl follows to where an active streamway is met. The way on, however, is to the right past some slippery muddy climbs and crawls which lead to the final pitch. A 30m rope is required rigged to large naturals with a bolt rebelay half way down. The pitch is free-climbable to this point but considering the state of the bolts at the rebelay ledge I would back it up well. At the bottom swing across to the left to avoid landing in the sump pool which has some fine floating calcite. A further high level passage can be found by climbing upslope. This leads to a pleasant section of passage with gour pools and a terminal sump.

The Tequila Expedition 1995 - Quest for the Golden Giraffe.

by Pete Hollings

For two weeks during March/April '95 I joined an expedition to Tequila, Veracruz, led by Peter Sprouse and Pat Kambesis. In total some 25 cavers from North America and 6 from Mexico were involved in the trip at one time or another. For me the trip began in Austin, Texas, where I joined Peter Sprouse in order to travel down through Mexico in his 1954 4WD Power Wagon school bus. There were six of us in the bus including Bernhard Koppen who'd travelled from Germany (and whose airfare was considerably less than mine from Saskatoon !!). Now while the bus is without doubt a great expedition vehicle, its age means that it is prone to mechanical problems. By the end of the trip we'd replaced a battery, the alternator, one of the main leaf springs on the front suspension and finished the trip on front wheel drive after the rear end went !!

We arrived at our base camp on the Monday setting up our tents in the 'Penthouse suite' of our multi level campsite, with 'Doggy Heaven' and the 'Swamp' below us. Within minutes we were surrounded by kids and cringe dogs from the village of Tlaquilpa (we were later to become a stopping point for tours from the local school), they were all very curious but we soon learnt that the kids would flee at the site of a camera, the dogs however proved more difficult to get rid of. Much of the initial groundwork had been done by the Mexican cavers of the SpeleoVer group and as a result we already had the permission of the local Presidente to explore for caves in the area. In fact some of the early arrivals had even explored a number of blind pits and even a going cave.

The following day we split in to small groups and began investigating pits located by the Mexican cavers. Despite being camped at over 2500m we soon found that all the caves were uphill, and up very steep hills at that. Our first attempt to locate a cave was thwarted by a landowner who knew nothing about permission from the Presidente and turned us back. Ivan, our Mexican liason, led us around by a circuitous, and to us very strenuous route and we were soon rigging the entrance drop. At this point another group came down the hill somewhat irate as they had just paid 20 pesos for lifetime rights to the pit, which we later named Sotano de Pago Pago (Paid and Paid Pit), they left in good humour for another pit only to find that they had been beaten to that one as well !! While I dropped the entrance pit and set about placing a bolt for the second drop, the rest of the group chatted with the landowner. Having already received some money he then went on to ask for a watch as a souvenir and when this was refused, for a car ! I came out and Mike and Andrea Futrell, my regular caving partners throughout the trip, surveyed the blind pit to -70m. Back at camp the other groups had not found much, except Charlie Savass's team which had returned to the going lead of the day before. This had become known as

Scary Man Cave as Charlie's willingness to free climb pitches that mere mortals would have used ropes on had somewhat unnerved his Mexican companions. Unfortunately the cave bottomed out at -200m.

The next day we headed back up the hill to investigate more leads located by the SpeleoVer cavers. These turned out to be fairly small, the deepest pit being only 40m. However we were later to learn that one of the local kids who'd been watching us so curiously, reported that we had removed a golden giraffe from one of the caves (well a Jumar does kind of look like a giraffe if you squint a bit !). Back at camp things were starting to get unpleasant as a local drunk had begun to hassle people. We also found out that we were in the middle of a feud between the farmers in the hills and the townspeople. The only good news was that one group had discovered a 100m deep pit that was still going.

On Thursday we took a truck out to the area of the 100m deep pit and while exploration continued there we investigated the surrounding hills. We were shown a small draughting entrance above a large choked, but draughting sink, unfortunately it didn't go. We named it Cueva de Craneo de Cabra after the goats skull found inside the entrance, the horned skull may also explain why the locals kept asking us if we had seen the Devil in the cave. We walked back to camp that night to find a note from Peter Sprouse saying that our permission to cave in the area had been withdrawn and we were leaving. He'd been given the OK to remove the ropes from Scary Man and had gone to do so. As people came back that night we sent a couple of people up to act as rope guards but they came down at dusk reporting that all was quiet. Meanwhile another group who'd gone further afield had had a long hike back when their truck was stranded behind a Mexican one with a broken axle, they'd left the driver to wait things out. The 100m deep pit, found the day before, had bottomed out at 150m, but interestingly had contained human bones and numerous candles that had apparently been thrown down as offerings. By dawn the derig party had not returned so two people went up to the entrance only to find them stranded at the bottom of the entrance pit, some aggrieved locals having untied the rope and dropped it down !! The trapped cavers were cold, tired and very pissed off and went as far as filing attempted murder charges with the local police, not that anything ever came of this. The final conclusion was that some local sub-jefe had acted independantly in order to humiliate the gringos and impress his constituents.

By noon we'd packed up and left town, leaving behind perhaps the best lead of the expedition, a draughting cave with walking sized passage that was left by the exploration team of Charlie Savvas and Susie Lasko at the first of a series of plunge pools. We relocated in the town of Atlahuilco, 500m lower, and wiled away the afternoon drowning our sorrows in 20 cent beer. Unfortunately the area we were now in had been

briefly examine by some Belgian cavers a few years earlier and it was their discoveries we were shown on our first day in the field. We did find 100m of low crawl further up the valley but that wasn't what we'd come to Mexico for. The other groups found a number of small pits and short caves in the surrounding hills with one team bottoming a 170m deep sotano.

On Sunday my group of regular cavers, along with Doug Strait and Ron Simmons, headed off to the small village of Zacamilola. The first cave we were shown turned out to be a 20m pit that we named Chivalry Pit. Now the male cavers state that this is because we gave Andrea the honour of the first descent, she tells it differently (something about male laziness !). We then checked another pit that turned out to be an 18m blind shaft, however Andrea noted a small draughting hole in the surrounding sinkhole. A brief spell of digging (I knew my Mendip training would come in useful one day !) opened the way for Mike, one of our smaller cavers, to descend to the first pitch. By the time we left two pitches had been descended to a squeeze that would require some hammering. The next day we returned and while the larger cavers, examined some neighbouring, but very small, leads, the small team continued exploration and began the survey. Beyond the squeeze was another drop with yet another squeeze below, however the draught was still strong and things looked promising.

Back at camp no one else had managed to find anything of note, a shallow sotano with a 500ft circumference being one of the more significant finds. As a result it was decided to call it quits and check out some previously explored river sinks nearby, however we agreed to give the small team one more chance at their lead. Unfortunately another squeeze was found that didn't yield to hammering but probably would surrender to some chemical persuasion.

Consequently we were on the road Tuesday evening heading for El Bocarron, a massive river sink. I remember little of the next two days having been struck down with a very bad case of Montezuma's Revenge ! However from what I heard the sink with it's 170m abseil off a natural bridge to reach the entrance, was spectacular. Even the dead rats seen floating upstream couldn't dampen peoples enthusiasm. The area had been used as the base camp for the British Black Holes expedition and consequently we were watched at all times by locals to ensure we didn't steal any golden frogs, as they believed the British had done. Just as well really as the bus would have started to resemble a zoo what with all the giraffes already on board !

By the end of the expedition over 50 caves had been mapped, the deepest some 200m. Of these two were still going when we left. The area has considerable potential particularly the higher areas although these are likely to be the areas where access will be most difficult.