

MCG NEWS

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CUEVA DEL AGUA '96 by Timothy Francis

After some well lubricated discussions in the bar at the SUICRO conference in Derrygonnelly, Fermanagh and a quick slide show, myself and Julie Hesketh found ourselves volunteering to carry diving kit up and down a 500m deep gorge. Our regular winter jaunt to Mallorca was cancelled in favour of a trip to the Picos mountains in mainland Spain. The rest of the team consisted of Gavin Newman, Dominic Wade, Pat Hall (all SWCC) and the MCG's linguist Richard Carey.

The aim of the trip was to dive the sump at the end of The Road to Wigan Pier in Cueva del Agua (El Nacimiento del Canal). This sump has thwarted previous attempts because of high water levels in the streamway below. The theory of a winter trip was that water would be 'locked' out of the cave system by being stored on the hillsides in the form of snow. Unfortunately the sump lies at the top of a 5m waterfall pitch, Parting Friends, and had only been reached on one previous occasion. The first attempt to climb it was made by Colin Boothroyd on the '87 expedition who fell whilst attempting a free climb. "Somehow he had caught his little finger on a jagged projection and had practically ripped the top centimetre off". We were to be armed with a Bosch drill and a bag of spits.

So it was late in the evening of Saturday 3rd February that we found ourselves arriving at the small village of Tresviso, Picos de Europa. We were to be staying in the somewhat civilised surroundings of the local bar which doubles up as a small hotel. We had all prepacked our kit to allow an early start on the first day. This was vital as we only had five days in the field to play with. The walk into Agua takes about 30 minutes and is entirely downhill with the descent from Tresviso about 500m. In the back of our minds was the long slog back up the Urdon Gorge after the trip. A canal has been constructed along the side of the Urdon gorge which provides the head of water for an hydro electric power station. The water from this canal is obtained from cave resurgences higher up the gorge, one of which is Cueva del Agua. Therefore the cave entrance is concealed by a concrete dam which diverts the water into the canal.

The cave is entered by rigging up a tyrolean with the wet suit clad member of the team (Gavin) swimming across the entrance pool to affix the rope on the far side. Immediately beyond a further traverse is required to pass a flooded pothole. In drier weather the draught causes the pool to evaporate away, and hence its presence gave us an early indication that water levels could be high. A fixed handline then assists a climb down a moonmilk clad rock lip before the main streamway is met. The force of water is too great to walk against and progress can only be made by clinging to the edges and jumping across at the narrower sections. A series of crawls leads off on the left, just before sump one, but the big yomping stuff is soon reached. This has that real sumpy feel which is reinforced by the Black Hole. This passage bores through an extremely dark section of rock which seems to absorb all the light shone on it.

On our first trip we followed the way off to the right and headed upstream. A tricky climb over moonmilk is required to enter the sump bypass. This is a well decorated section with some nice inlets which may provide scope for a further sump bypass. We investigated most of these but none could be pushed for more than a few feet. Another pool soaked the bits of our furies that were still dry before the streamway was rejoined. One look at the huge volume of water flowing past and it soon became apparent that we would be unable to get as far as the sump. A hot chocolate brew was started whilst we took it in turns to splash about in the torrent. I went for an interesting detour up a high level oxbow which rejoins the stream passage high above a meander.

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We decided to head back to Tresviso to discuss tactics. We were given our first taster of the long slog back up the hill. This is no fun especially when it's raining but the walk supposedly gets easier once you get used to it. An excellent meal awaited us back at the bar and we were soon refreshed. It was decided to go for a photo and tourist trip down Agua as the main diving push was obviously not possible. So on the second trip we turned left at the Black Hole and ascended the Ramp. This consists of a series of steep slopes protected by handlines. At the top of the climbs the passage descends gently passing the route to the further reaches of the cave on the right and Bone Passage on the left. The main route, the Road to Certain Death, continues as a series of traverses over the top of a streamway and eventually ends at the base of an imposing waterfall. At the top of this lies a deep sump which has yet to be passed.

From here the group split into two: Gavin, Pat and Dom did the photographs whilst Tim, Julie and Richard went for a wander back down the ramp. I was keen to investigate Bone Passage which heads off into a blank area of the survey so I left the other two to start a brew. Bone Passage begins as a gently ascending passage floored with sand. A large continuation heads off down a hole in the floor to the right. At this point I could clearly hear the streamway rumbling below so chose to traverse around the hole to the left. The ledge appeared quite fragile so caution is required. Beyond this point the walking sized stuff was briefly interrupted by a low sandy crawl. It was in this section that I noticed a low crawl to the left. This had obviously been entered but as I did not recall it on the survey it was worth a look. Amazingly the previous explorers had turned back at a small decorated chamber; no footprints were evident in the passage beyond this point. A low crawl opened up into walking sized passage. I followed this uphill past some excellent mud cracks. The passage turned to the right and began to descend steeply. Alternative tactics were required to attempt the descent of a steep rift. I had to take extreme care as all the sides of the rift were decorated with stal with some particularly fine helictites in the roof. I belayed my hand jammer and footloop to a blob of stal to assist the descent of the first awkward bit. My chest harness was used for the next climb but I was finally beaten about 8m from the bottom. The gradient of the rift appears to shallow out just out of site, and stones dropped down roll for quite a way. Anyone returning would be advised to take a length of rope to continue the exploration.

I returned to the end of the extension and continued to the end of Bone Passage. The passage takes its name from some unusually shaped pebbles encrusted with calcite which litter the floor. The end of Bone Passage terminates at a boulder choke and I was unable to find a route through. The way on would appear to be down in the floor to the left. An extremely fine red flowstone climb can be entered on the left. This can be followed for about 20m until the calcite meets the roof. Back at the ramp we all met up for a quick brew before going for a wander down towards Boulder Hall and Brian Baru's Place. This is the beginning of the route to the further reaches of the system starting at a 22m pitch. The cave was then derigged and all the kit dragged back up that horrendous walk.

Our final few days in Tresviso were spent battling with the weather. The snow fell on most days and we were rather concerned that the minibus would not make it out of the pass. One day was spent fruitlessly hunting for a 'going' cave on the wooded slopes below Tresviso. The cave supposedly contains three or four undescended shafts that LUSS did not have the time to descend. A local villager was unable to find the entrance with the rain not aiding our search. We decided to head out of Tresviso on the Thursday. The minibus was kitted out with a set of snow chains and we were towed by a 4 x 4 on the icy bits.

The last day was spent lounging around Arenas de Cabrales. Dom and Gavin went for a dive in a large resurgence next to a petrol station just outside the town. A return is planned to check out a climb which is believed to lie beyond three sumps. The rest of us went for a walk on the hillsides above Arenas and descended a small pothole. This choked at 13m but was well decorated with stal, two black and yellow lizards, and a toad. Another large shakehole was investigated nearby but we would have needed a hammer and chisel to descend into a narrow meander. We all regrouped in town for a slide show before beginning the long drive back through France. We left the Picos with the feeling that Cueva del Agua is begging for a dedicated expedition as we were barely able to look around. The leads, both above and below water level, are considerable. How about it?