

MCG NEWS

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PICOS DE EUROPA 1996 - the other bits!

by Yvonne Rowe

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The two cars (Martin's and Joe's) met at Dover on the evening of Friday 26th July ready for the 10:30pm ferry to Calais and the long drive to Tresviso in the Asturia region of the Cantabrian mountains, Picos de Europa, Northern Spain. We booked in and were directed towards the ferry but Martin's car (Martin, Yvonne and Joan) was then re-directed for a security check. Fortunately, they only asked a lot of questions rather than making us unload the car (apart from taking an age to pack everything in, we had a rocket tube of carbide!!!). We spent most of our journey to Calais searching the ferry for Joe, Tim and Julie - we even got the ferry staff to phone the dock to see if they knew of their whereabouts. We arrived in Calais to find them waiting for us (much to our relief) - they had managed to catch an earlier, faster ferry.

We set off on the long drive arriving at Arenas de Cabrales in the Picos at about midnight on the Saturday (about one and a half hours drive from Tresviso). Jim, an English caver friend of Tim and Julie's, has an 'Adventure' business and apartment in Arenas and had invited us to call in for a chat about Cueva del Agua and to sleep on his floor overnight. The next morning we awoke refreshed and did a big food shop - well, as much as we could cram into already overloaded cars. As this is the nearest town with any shops we would not want to do the trip back to Arenas more than necessary. We set off on the picturesque trip to Tresviso. The road took us to the spectacular Cares Gorge (more of that later) where the 21 kilometre, very windy, barely two-way road starts its steep climb up the mountain to Tresviso at the top.

In the (only) bar/restaurant in Tresviso we were introduced to the owners by Tim and Julie who met them there in February this year. One of them, Miguel (what else!) showed us to a small plateau (if you could call it that) on top of the mountain where we could pitch our tents. It was a bit rough, with no toilets or water, but it was free! The only hazards here were the moles which insisted on coming up under the tents even though they had a whole mountain to tunnel in; the pseudo bees which took a fancy to (only) Julie's tent which she found quite disturbing (we dragged her tent to three different places and still they came); and the electric wire around two sides of our site which Julie discovered was live (but with baling twine on the other sides it kept the cows out). Joe and Joan bloused out and stayed in the almost completed new bunkhouse under the bar. The rest of us negotiated a price with Miguel to enable us to use the bunkhouse showers and toilets for the fortnight. We were all set, the weather was fine and we were eager to go to Cueva del Agua the next morning, even though it meant a 2000ft steep and winding descent on foot into the Urdon Gorge to reach the entrance. (*Tim's article on the caving activities will follow in a future newsletter.*)

Joan and I didn't do as much caving as the others - we did Crustie things instead like walking, 'mining', and flora and fauna spotting. There are supposed to be bears, mountain cat-like animals called Genets (related to the Civet), golden eagles and wolves in the area but we didn't see any (although Joe was sure he saw a Genet chasing a goat one day). We often saw what I was convinced were golden eagles but they turned out to be more common vultures. On misty evenings we would see yellow and black striped salamanders plodding about (9 were seen one very wet evening). There were also many beautiful butterflies and bugs, lizards, and the not so beautiful 6-8ins long, fat, black slugs - ugh!

Continued on page 4

PICOS DE EUROPA 1996 - the other bits!

Continued from page 1

The flora interested Joan and I a great deal with many species peculiar to northern Spain. We saw (to name but a few) large yellow Soft Antirrhinums, along with other, smaller yellow and purple varieties, something called *Digitalis Parviflora* which is a small, yellow/brown Foxglove, many varieties of *Campanula*, Broomrape, various *Dianthus* (Pinks), Maidenhair Ferns, *Gypsophila*, various wild *Geraniums*, pink and blue Flax, *Hypericum*, an unusual, large-flowered Bell Heather, various *Saxifrages* and *Stonecrops* (one yellow with an orange centre), a low-cover plant with pretty deep blue flowers called *Anagallis Monelli*, lots of Mints, Herbs and wild Onions, a red Helleborine, lots of *Eryngium* (like Sea Holly), carpets of *Merendera Montana* (like a small Autumn Crocus), *Aquilegia* (Columbine), Wolfsbane, Nottingham Catchfly (a wispy type of *Campion*), a 'local' Candytuft, and a strange maroon thistle that we have not yet identified. The strangest plant was tall-ish with the innocent-sounding name of Swallow-wort which had tiny white flowers followed by huge pods, and it was extremely poisonous! There were many, many more flowers but these were the more interesting and unusual ones.

On a tourist/shopping day to Arenas de Cabrales we all went to see an old donkey bridge that spanned the Cares Gorge. It was unbearably hot and as we walked along the bottom of the gorge the water looked cool and inviting. Well, Joe was the first one in closely followed by Julie, both of whom had the sense to wear swimming things under their clothes. Although their screams and blue skin told us it was extremely cold, the rest of us stripped down to our grundies and joined them. It was too cold for all but Joe to stay in long and when he did finally come out he had small leaches on various parts of his body! It was lovely to cool down and the gorge was very picturesque, especially as if on cue a donkey passed over the bridge.

Joan and I did quite a few walks - a couple to do a zig-zag donkey path that was the original route to the village before the road was built, several down to the cave and back, and a couple to look at old mines. The first attempt at the 'zig-zags' was to see if Joan's lack of a head for heights could cope with it as it looked quite exposed in places. On the second, and actual attempt we started too late and ran out of time only a third of the way and one hour down (it took 3hrs to walk back up) - we never got a third chance due to low cloud and drizzle. On the way to the zig-zags we had seen spoil from old mines higher up so we went to investigate one day with Martin. Here we found one mine with a locked door not very far in and another which Martin managed a through trip in. This mine contained some old wooden benches that local goats cheeses had been fermenting (festering!) on but they had long since been abandoned. The locals produce goats cheese in the summer months which is allowed to mature slowly in caves and old mines (it has to be smelled to be believed!!). Cheeses produced by one of the bar owners came first in a world cheese competition. The purpose of the mines was to extract zinc-blende and in the spoil, as well as this, we found calamine, galena and traces of copper (a translated copy of a booklet on the mines, cheese and other aspects of Tresviso will be put in the library eventually).

Another abandoned mine Joan and I went to explore was at Andara, 8km from Tresviso. Here, one of the old mine buildings has been turned into a refuge called Caseton de Andara at 1730m (LUSS call it the White House but I'm not sure why as it isn't white!). It is very well kept (by wardens), has an outside shower rigged up next to the building and a toilet quite a distance away. The toilet pongs a bit as you approach it but once inside it smells of roses - literally, as it has one of those smelly things stuck up on the wall! Joan and I explored the area a bit and came across two old mines which we went in a little way, and in the spoil heaps around we found some good 'samples' to take as souvenirs.

We had all attempted a walk to this mine earlier in the holiday but Martin, Joan and I set off before the others, took the wrong path and ended up heading towards a village called Beges - pronounced gutturally 'Beckes'. We ended up having a delightful walk along a mountain track on the opposite side of the Urdon Gorge where at one point we could see our orange tent high on the other side. We came across a couple of caves which Joan and Martin explored with zooms while I watched our rucsacs outside. This side of the gorge was very different to the other with sharper, more fluted limestone, and a different fauna. Beges might possibly be next year's destination as the surrounding area has not been so well explored. There is still plenty to do in Cueva del Agua too and with the bunkhouse completed, the warm hospitality in the bar and the excellent food in the restaurant, I for one can't wait to go back.

We drove back to Dover for the 3:30pm ferry, allowing a good 24+hrs for the journey, but driving non-stop enabled us to get a much earlier ferry at 8:15am! We said our goodbyes at Dover and agreed that it had been an enjoyable and successful two weeks. I arrived home to find Marcus and Zoe fast asleep and the house in a tip. "We were going to blitz it before you came home, Mum, honest!!!" but it's as well he didn't as we trashed it anyway with all our mucky gear.