

MCG NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDIP CAVING GROUP

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MCG in Mallorca, 1996

by *Tim Francis*

On this year's trip to Mallorca we intended to visit a few of the more unusual sites, investigate potential sites for a diving expedition next year, and obtain background information for a forthcoming journal.

Cueva Tancada This trip provided an excellent light introduction to the week. The entrance overlooks the sea and has fantastic views of the Badia D'Alcudia and the Serres de Llevant. The cave essentially consists of a short section of ancient passage. It is extremely well decorated and is definitely worth a visit, if only for a spot of photography. We noticed plenty of used candles throughout the cave so it would appear that the cave is used as a 'wild' showcave. Typically, every muddy hole in the floor was investigated but none could be followed for very far as most were blocked by a choke of calcited boulders. At the deepest point of the cave we could clearly hear a pulsing draught, although not feel it, which must have been caused by the waves crashing against the cliff face.

Avenc de Fra Rafel This was to be the main objective of the trip this year, and therefore we had set aside a couple of days in case the entrance was difficult to find. In fact the search took about two hours after we got a little confused in a wooded doline. The first impression you get of the cave is that it is an extremely deep pothole. The entrance shaft is in fact a 61m pitch leading to a cone of a rubble. However a window in the shaft at -18m gives access to a well decorated series of galleries and the final 117m pitch, the "Gran Pou".

From the surface we were able to scramble down a steep, scrubby slope. A traverse was rigged from two trees leading to a single bolt rebelay. A short abseil and pendulum from this bolt and we landed in the beautifully decorated Sala de l'Orgasme. This is a large section of yomping sized passage and well worth a special trip just for the photography. The walking/scrambling section is divided in two by an awkward climb around the side of Pou del Foradi. No rope is required and it is probably easier to tackle the climb on the left. A huge calcite boss dominates the chamber with some fine stalactites at the top.

Beyond this chamber the passage becomes more rubbly before ending at the Gran Pou. This starts as a steep slope rather than a pitch and care needs to be taken as much of the rock at the top is loose. A short calcite slope leads to a rubble ledge and the start of the real pitch. Descent of the left hand wall leads to a y-hang from two 8mm spits. This gives a fantastic airy descent past some impressive formations. I was unable to locate a deviation so opted to continue the descent to a large calcite ledge: Galeria de les Girgoles. Unable to find another free hang I used a couple of stal naturals to shimmy down a well decorated gully off to the left: Galeria de les Finestres. Unfortunately I had to call it a day about 30ft from the bottom as there were no further naturals available. A bolt or 11mm rope would have done the trick!

Cueva Sa Forodada This was an intriguing little site for which we had very little information. The cave is located in a delightful gorge downstream of the Cuba Reservoir near Soller. The gorge is also used for gorge running with an excellent pool swim. The small entrance is about 30ft above the stream but the upper levels are not associated with the current hydrology. However in the further reaches two small streamways are met, an extremely rare site on Mallorca.

The entrance passageways consist of low crawls in conglomerate with evidence of bats and small mammals in the earlier sections. A squeeze over a stalagmite boss (handline useful) and a muddy climb are entertaining obstacles on the return. A muddy traverse over a hole in the floor leads eventually to a tight duck. A small trickle of water continually flows over a gour cascade with the final gour creating the duck. This can be bailed forward to make the squeeze relatively dry. Beyond, a slippery climb drops into the tight streamway. Unfortunately we ran out of time to investigate further but a return is planned in 1997. There are supposedly a couple of undived sumps at the end, and I would suspect that the inlets have not been forced to a conclusion upstream.

Descending the Angel's Staircase

by Pete Hollings

The presence of Christmas decorations throughout the neighbourhood meant that it was once again time to dig up the caving gear from the basement and head for Mexico. I flew down to Austin where I joined a convoy of folks heading for the Purificacion karst, arriving in Conrado Castillo late in the afternoon of the 21st of December. This year our group included a few Canadians as well as a large contingent of Americans.

While the principal goal of the trip was the exploration of the Angel's Staircase we spent the first couple of days working on some smaller local projects. These included continuing the blasting open of a lead at the bottom of Cueva de Cuchilla. Despite a couple of trips, the low crawl still needs further mining, although the passage is supposed to get a little bigger around the corner and it may not be necessary to blast for a whole six feet! While this was going on, I returned to Cueva Nadolig, which was dug open during the 1995 Xmas expedition. We had left the cave at a drafting crawlway that we thought would need blasting. However, we hadn't reckoned on Charley Savvas who, during the Easter expedition, had hammered his way past the constriction but generously explored no further. On our first trip to Nadolig, Marcus Berksdale, Cyndie Walck, Scott Scheibner and I surveyed and hammered our way through the low crawl to the top of the first pitch, with the 11 shot, 30 metre survey taking over two hours. We returned the following day with vertical gear and were able to descend three relatively short pitches of six, seven and eight metres respectively, turning back at the top of the fourth drop. The lowest point of Nadolig is now below the level of the entrance to Cuchilla and has excellent potential for going deep, as well as possibly connecting with the Dragon River area of Purificacion.

Christmas Eve was spent making a supply run for the camp in the World Beyond. Large quantities of rope, survey gear and bolting equipment were divided into 17 equal piles and loaded into custom cave packs, designed so that they would just fit through the Crack of Doom. By the time I'd added in some personal gear my pack weighed in at 32lbs, which was about average. The 17 of us made our way into the cave at a fairly leisurely pace. A number of obstacles, notably Flowstone Falls and the X-rated climb, were rigged to make life easier with cave duffs. We arrived at our camp site next to The Cube in about seven hours and spent a little while selecting and flattening out sleeping areas. With everyone feeling confident that they knew the route out, we split into smaller groups and made it out of the cave in between three and six hours (my group only got lost a couple of times!).

Not surprisingly, Xmas Day saw very little underground activity with the majority of people spending the day alternately eating and sleeping. By noon on Boxing Day, the first group (Bill Nasby, Cyndie, Charley, John and I) were once again at the Brinco entrance to Sistema Purificacion loaded down with 30lb camp duffs. We made it to camp in four hours and settled down to await the arrival of everyone else; within a couple of hours 17 people were settled into what is the seventh camp in the system.

The next day we made the first big push into the Angels' Staircase. Our plan was for small teams to systematically check side leads off the main route, particularly a going lead that had been partially explored in 1995. A number of ropes that had been left in the cave the previous year had been washed away, whereas others were looking distinctly frayed. This meant that we had to start using our new supply of rope sooner than we had planned. Myself, Cyndie and Kevin Stafford were assigned to one of the lower leads, which almost immediately went vertical with a 10 metre drop. From there we had two choices, the first went to another small drop which was rigged off a thin piece of poorly cemented breccia backed up by a body belay (it's amazing what you'll do to get into virgin passage). At the base of this was a longer drop, but as our rope did not reach the bottom we headed back to tackle the other route. We proceeded to map around 200 metres of passage down two more drops before connecting back into the main survey. We eventually got back to camp at 1am after a 14 hour trip. The teams mapping the lead from the previous year had descended approximately 100m before reaching a lake with leads going off in two directions, at which point they stopped the survey. Another team (Peter Sprouse, Bill Nasby, Maria Tehrany and Susie Lasko) had managed to map some 250m of horizontal walking passage in a lead near the Canal of Ulysses.

While most of us spent the next day recovering, Charley, Taco and Joe Ivy went to examine a lead about ten minutes from camp. This lead was within a few feet of the main trail through the World Beyond, but had gone unnoticed for 15 years until Taco spotted it. The lead was pushed for ~100m and had incredible air producing delicate formations which were to give the passage its name - Batwing Passage. That evening, five more cavers made it into camp, but we also lost two through illness, leaving an amazing 20 people in camp.

On December 29 we made the final push down the Angels' Staircase. I joined Peter, Cyndie and Susie on a trip to examine the leads near the sumps at the bottom of the Staircase. As we made our way down the series of ropes we gathered all the spare pieces available and even cut off some of the longer tails on rigged drops. It was just as well we did because we used our last rope on the final drop. It took a total of 17 ropes to make it to the bottom of the Staircase, although the original survey crew used only seven - God alone knows how! Our first task was to survey the ~4 metre high lead that had been so tantalisingly obvious on the survey.

This led us into a large room with a gravel sump at one end. We were able to wriggle through this and map walking passage to the base of a flowstone climb. Peter climbed this and numerous other pits until he was stopped by a five metre pit that he was unable to climb. Amazingly, he heard the voices of the crew surveying a lead above, who returned with rope and mapped their way down. Meanwhile we returned to the area of the sumps and did some clean up survey before heading out, getting back to camp after some 15 hours. Other teams had mapped over 400 metres of passage in one side passage with many leads still going, but without making the connection to Satan's Lovenest. This was only 30m away according to the survey, and would have offered another potential connection to the lower Infiernillo trunk level. The lake lead had ended after only 80 metres at a constriction that would probably yield to some serious persuasion, whereas Batwing Passage was surveyed for 80m before getting too tight.

The following day, Charley and Taco returned to Batwing Passage and discovered an alternative way on leading to the base of a small climb. They returned for rope and survey crews and managed to get a fair way before stopping. This lead is heading into a blank area of the survey with the strong air offering potential for an eventual surface connection. While a number of people decided to head out of the cave, I spent the day helping Susie take photographs of the World Beyond.

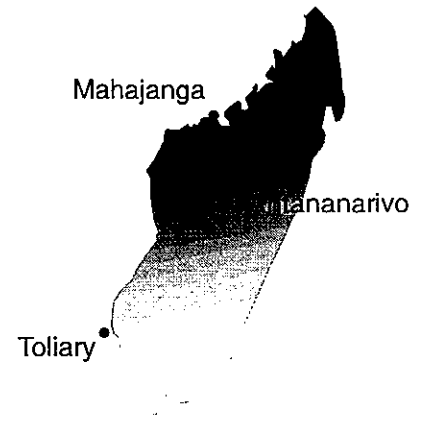
On New Years Eve, the last of us exited the cave, surfacing to blue skies and beer as we welcomed in the New Year. A total of 2300m was surveyed during the camp pushing the system to over 87 km.

On New Years Day we packed up camp and headed over to the Yerba Buena area, where Peter was very keen to try and open up a new entrance to Cueva del Rio Corona. This had been surveyed to the base of a trash pile from within the cave the previous year, but we had been unable to identify the appropriate sink on the surface. As soon as the trucks came to a halt, Peter was leading a crew on a surface survey to help identify the sink. He was helped by a lap top computer which allowed him to direct the survey in the appropriate direction.

No sooner had the general area been found, than three teams were digging in various sinks and within an hour or so Charley's team had made the connection. This new entrance meant that the 10 hour round trip to leads in the back of the cave was reduced to 20 minutes and we were able to take advantage of this in the next couple of days. A number of dome climbs were tackled in an attempt to get a connection with the nearby Sotano de las Calenturas, but with no success. Numerous groups scoured the hillsides for other leads, however the only notable find was a new entrance to Calenturas (the eighth!).

We left the mountain on January 4, after what had been two weeks of very enjoyable caving. I eventually made my way back to frigid Saskatoon, only to find that my bags had disappeared. Being separated from my caving gear was somewhat traumatic, however my fiancée was not particularly sympathetic to the suggestion that we scale down our wedding plans so that I could afford to replace it! Fortunately the gear turned up after 48 hours, having decided to take a separate holiday to Cranbrook, B.C., of all places. Now all I've got to do is mend it all in time for the next PEP trip in March.

MCG: Madagascar 1998



This is a short note to provide some initial information on the proposed expedition to Madagascar in summer 1998, prior to the AGM discussion on whether the MCG should go. It is somewhat difficult to condense to 1 A4 page, but here goes. The island is up to 1600 x 650 km and exports have included coffee and uranium. Habitats range from heathland to rainforest. There aren't any unpleasant snakes. French & Malagasy is spoken. Over 33,000 km² of Karst has been recorded - together with caves containing river passages over 30m wide and 5km long...

- Objective:** The planning is in the embryonic stages but we anticipate a lightweight expedition to investigate the caving potential of the little explored north-western part of the country, around the coastal area of Mahajanga. It can be done. We aim to have an enjoyable visit and to get some serious work done. The final logistics will define the scope further.
- Duration:** Approximately 6 weeks from July to September 1998. It is appreciated that not all would be able to commit themselves for this length of time so it may be possible to join the expedition for shorter periods of time - perhaps three weeks.
- Environment:** We could be in remote areas of rain forest for long periods time. Consequently, the expedition will be largely self reliant. We shall carry what is needed on our backs (or 4x4, donkey or zebu cart). Field food may be dehydrated, water obtained locally. The expedition is geared for cave exploration, however, not everyone can cave every day for six weeks so on the 'days off' activities such as wild life watching, 700 year old baobabs, cave spotting, data interpretation, stunning landscapes at *cirque rouge*, and even a cinema in Mahenjanga are available. As long as you are back to hold flashguns and survey tape.
- Personnel:** The expedition should consist of not less than 8 persons. It is recognised that while there is a great skill base in the MCG, further training will be required prior to departure. Training requirements will be discussed and appropriate events organised in due course. This will include navigation, surveying, medical, photography, fitness, team building & management, communications, etc. Each person should be multi-skilled - it is no good if your only expert in a particular area suddenly becomes dependent on ice-cold Andrex!
- Finance:** Without funding or sponsorship the trip may cost in the region of £1500 *excluding* personal equipment for the full six weeks duration. The majority of this is the return air fare. Additional personal expenditure may be required if persons do not already possess decent boots, Gore-Tex jackets etc. (Well, most of us have SRT kits). The expedition intends to open a bank account and to seek sponsorship once the objectives are finely honed. This could reduce the financial sacrifice.. Payments can be spread. It is likely that a substantial working deposit will be required shortly after the AGM.
- Transport:** Quite simply we intend to fly out, take road transport as far as possible, then yomp into the jungle. Each person will carry a fair share of the expedition kit plus their own personal equipment. For example 8-9mm rope is likely to be used. It might be possible to be based in a village and make forays to the field area.
- Communications:** Devices are yet to be decided but one possibility is to use Psion's, GPS (now cheap, similar in size to a mobile phone, and accurate to within 5 metres), and light weight satellite phones. You can wire the whole lot together too! Radio comms will require evaluation. Battery charging can be done via solar panels. There should be UK base station support in conjunction with the field units to download information.
- Publicity:** A short brochure (A3 folded) stating the aims of the expedition will be produced for potential sponsors. Upon return the aim is for a detailed illustrated publication and a presentation at the BCRA conference. Reports may be submitted to Caves & Caving, International Caver, & Descent for consideration.
- Contacts:** If you require any further information or even better have any information or ideas to contribute please contact Dave Tooke, Letti Patte on 01784 436237 or Charlie Allison on 0181 224 7591.