

MCG NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDIP CAVING GROUP

NUMBER 264

SEPTEMBER 1997

More MATIENZO '97 by Kerry Howard

Cueva de Cordisera

A steep walk up a hill was rewarded by an entrance, some 20m x 20m. This huge passageway continued straight into the hillside. We descended into the bottom of an empty lake, which would have been impressive had it been filled, as the water mark was some 4m high and 20m across. It must have had a very quick drainage system, as it had been raining heavily the day before, and in fact all throughout the week, yet it was only slightly damp.

We had planned to go down the 50m pitch at the end of the cave, but the bolt holes were hard to find, and the walls were very loose, it almost looked as if the pitch head was collapsing! Meanwhile, a short way back in the main passage, Phill had found another continuation in the roof. We therefore abandoned the idea of descending the pitch, and went to explore the upper series. A 3m climb up to the left opened out into a fair sized well decorated chamber. This continued through more large passage, ending in a squeeze and drop via a handline through a boulder choke. The other side of this was a HUGE chasm, with an aven going straight up, even Malcom's spotlight could not reach the roof! Below was a seemingly endless black pit. Rocks dropped and timed gave us an estimated distance of well over 100m. The chasm was passed using a fixed traverse line on the right hand wall, nice and easy, which was just as well considering the void below us! Once passed the traverse, a large passage with some pretties ended at a large flowstone, and one cute bat which was roosting only a foot above our heads.

On the way out, just past the boulder choke on the right, a tight, meandering inlet was followed. This opened out into daylight, where two huge shafts stretched up to the sky - potential for a 40m pull through trip. All in all, an impressive (large) cave.

Simas del Picon, Cubija VN50129686 Alt: 300m by Sonya Cotter

Party: Reg Pain, Big Tim (Royal Holloway), Lee Hawkswell, Norma, Malcolm and Sonya Cotter.

Picon is a cave known since the 1970's and originally visited by the Spanish. It has been revisited and pushed by the Matienzo Expedition, with new discoveries in 1993 (see Caves and Caving No. 63/ Spring '94) and in 1994 some small leads were finished off and the terminal choke examined. The side passages that may have by-passed the terminal choke were pushed but found to be too tight at that time.

Picon is part of the Sistema de Cubija, the cave entrance is on the opposite side of the valley to Mostajo (See Kerry Howard's write-up in the August newsletter). The entrance pitches are at the same altitude.

The short entrance pitch is hidden by vegetation and a bolt-hole can be seen on the rock outcrop on the right-hand side. The quickest descent would be by ladder. The short pitch is in two sections: the top slope is less than six metres, followed by a re-belay point at the top of the remaining vertical element. It hardly seemed worth rigging for SRT! The pitch is at one end of a large open boulder-strewn entrance, slippery underfoot with vegetation. A short way in the roof lowered to a slippery calcited squeeze, which was entertaining, opening into a chamber strewn with blocks of limestone. We clambered up the rock-strewn slope and into a lower passage, with some formations, and finally up through a hole in the boulder choke into a huge chamber where blocks of stone lay precariously perched in layers all around. Just as Reg came through into the main chamber, Big Tim in front had used the loose wall to lean on and a humungous boulder came hurtling downslope. Reg performed a Herculean boulder pushing trick, so avoiding being squished and the possibility of the boulder trapping everyone inside the chamber. Masses of smaller rocks came raining down. After this little incident, which left us feeling somewhat shaken, we continued, following the blue route arrows, which were hidden in places where rocks had fallen! The passage here was wide and high, eventually narrowing down to a choke. On the right-hand wall was a crack decorated with stall which followed the remaining length of the existing passage. A climb down to the passage parallel to the choked one was spotted by Reg and we clambered down and into a nicely decorated section of lower but walking-size passage, with a sandy floor and black, degrading stalagmites and columns. This took us to a vast underground canyon, where scree slopes rested on other scree slopes everywhere. This began about 10 to 15 metres wide and widened to 40 metres or so across. One by one we clambered up the moving slope, the other members of the party waiting at the foot of the slope behind the safety of a house-sized boulder which had evidently fallen from the roof. Above The Scree Run, the chamber reached its widest extent, and there were two routes on. Reg and Lee explored the narrow passage at the top, and said it was quite loose in the roof and narrowed down considerably. We were running short of time, and decided it was time to slide back down the scree and out. On the way, Malcolm reassuringly told us, "I think this is probably the most unstable cave I have ever been in!" filling us with confidence as we picked our way through the choke where Reg's boulder had fallen.

continued on page 8

Even More Matienzo '97

Cueva del Agua

Aggy, Andrew, Andy, Phill, Reg, and Kerry decided to do Cueva del Agua, while the rest did Toad in the Hole. Phill (who had been there before) explained that there was very little water in the entrance, and that everything would be fine. Hmm. There was lots and lots of water rushing into the cave, but we decided to do it anyway (we abandoned the dingy due to a fast acting puncture). After a scramble over some boulders, we dropped into the streamway. Almost immediately Phill was swept off his feet, and would have got washed away, had he not been cows tailed to Aggy. We all therefore clipped onto each other for safety, and made slow progress down the river. Some excellent formations were passed on the ceiling and walls, with huge flowstones dropping into the river. However, we only got a short way into the cave, as the river got too torrential, and we ran out of rock ledges to walk on. We made our way out, and spent some time imitating white water rafting on the punctured dingy, before Big Tim came to pick us up.

Torcon de la Calleja Rebollo (Toad- In- The- Hole), Vega Valley. by Sonya Cotter

Party: Lee Hawkswell, Norma, Malcolm & Sonya Cotter.

"Toad" is located on the opposite side of the Vega Valley to the South Vega System and apparently got its name when a toad was rescued just prior to the breakthrough in 1981! It's a really interesting cave, with elements of everything- wide open chamber, pretty formations, water, phreatic tubes, sticky rift etc. so well worth a visit. A point to note is that the pitches are short, and so ladder is preferable to SRT if you want to save time. The shakehole is located up a very steep slope, and it's worth carrying caving gear up rather than wearing it, unless you want a sauna in your oversuit, which is what we got, because it was raining so we'd put our full kit on! The entrance was pointed out to us from the road by the rest of our group, some of whom had already gone down and had to spend a long time searching for the entrance. From the road, a rough path can be seen going across the slope and then about three hundred metres up a solitary tree could be seen directly above the line of fir trees- this was apparently our entrance site. That seemed fine, until you get higher and the area looks very different to what it had from a distance! We followed the path around and behind the farmhouse, trying to avoid the vicious dog, and then across the slope to where the fir trees began. At this point we split into two groups, to (hopefully) get the entrance pitch rigged in time for Norma and Malcolm's arrival and so give us more time in the cave. This was not to be! After climbing up the slope, it became apparent that Lee and I had climbed too high up. We were given a shout by Malcolm, who said they'd found the entrance about 50 metres lower than we expected!

The shakehole was very muddy and it had been raining, so it was very slippery! We heeded Phill's advice (he'd gone down with a party a few days earlier) and rigged a handline. We used a 47m rope and used the tree above the shakehole as a belay point. (Note: a 47m rope was used not because the entrance rift is deep, but because the shakehole in the wet weather needed it. In dry weather you'd get away with no rope.) The entrance shaft is a short, narrow rift, and the area immediately above was really loose, particularly after the rain. This opens into well decorated fossil passage, which connects in many different directions. This first part of the cave has a small stream, and there was a great deal of flowstone that could have made good photographs. This was my favourite part of the cave, worth a separate photographic trip. After exploring the side passages, Lee and I followed the small stream through the main passage, another case of the Matienzo yellow brick road, and went ahead to rig Maypole Pitch whilst the other two caught up.

Maypole is about 25 feet high, and has a rope in place. Someone in the party would need SRT kit to ascend and rig the ladder. We heard the others coming, and after regrouping, went on to rig the next pitch. Above Maypole, the passage winds and follows a phreatic style, passing over a rock bridge and around a pit, with smaller passages visible below. The second pitch began at a sandy sloping ledge, descending to a 20 foot vertical drop. As advised, we used about 3 metres of sling linked together as a tether on the huge stall boss above the slope. A line was attached to this and the ladder attached at the top of the vertical element, using the other rope.

At the foot of the pitch was a wide, gently sloping and well decorated chamber. There were signs of digging at the opposite end. On the left- hand wall was a low opening, shielded by stall. We had been told to expect this from the other group, and crawled through this, down a slope and into a small grotto. The crawl continued to the right and left. Lee had a look to the left, whilst I continued along the crawl, which was fairly wide but hands- and- knees and often flat- out with a few formations. After about 80 metres, the crawl opened into a rounded, muddy chamber, with a few nice formations. At this point I returned and told the others to follow, and we crawled under the low roof at the end of the muddy chamber and into another short length of crawl, which forked.

continued on next page

Matienzo '97 *continued*

The left fork led to a narrow, oval shaped chamber, with a fissure across the middle. Another club had rolled their initials in the clayey mud and put them on the wall, and waiting for the rest of the group gave me time to roll the MCG's. The rift we had heard about was beneath the chamber, and the entrance was marked by obvious carbide burns on the wall. A short scramble later, the main traverse line (in place) was met and we clambered round the sticky rift. The traverse had few good footings, some of them over deep pipes in the floor, and was really sticky.

Beyond the traverse the cave became a low, muddy phreatic tube, walking height in places. We were expecting another pitch to appear fairly soon, and investigated a hole on the right hand wall. Lee said he would descend, even though it appeared unlikely that this was our pitch. We were able to use some good naturals and Lee descended the ladder. He shouted up that he'd met a narrow ledge, but the pipe continued down to the bottom of our ladders after that and carried on going! We had a quick look around for the pitch proper, but we needed to start back if we were to arrive in time for the minibus. When we got back, Phill told us that they'd not reached the last pitch anyway, and had no idea how much further it was!

This mystery was solved at the BCRA conference, where Juan Corrin showed us the full survey and we realised we were only a short distance from the next pitch and the extensions where we hoped to end our trip. Never mind, we can always go again (yes please)!

We had an interesting time getting out of the shakehole when a wasp's nest underfoot started to rumble. We arrived back at the road fortunately unscathed as Big Tim pulled up in the minibus, having found a shorter path down and successfully avoided the vicious dog.

Update on Toad: This year's Matienzo Expedition (which arrived almost as we left) found a few more extensions and explored a new shaft above the cave which dropped 41 metres but failed to connect.

Other activities on the holiday included rigging a death slide in a swollen river, lots of games of table football in the bar, playing in some rapids, eating and visiting a local fiesta.

We would like to give thanks to Juan Corrin for providing us with much needed information, Pete Smith for showing us some good cave entrances, and lastly his nephew Phill Rice for organising the trip.
