



Mendip Caving Group Newsletter

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MALARGÜE 2000  
 1ST NATIONAL ARGENTINE CAVING CONFERENCE  
 MENDOZA PROVINCE, ARGENTINA  
 Larva tubes, gypsum and limestone caves.

I was reading the Caver's Digest (available on email) and I noticed an article on this conference. I pursued its web links and decided that it would be interesting to go caving in South America. I mentioned it to other members of the club and an initial large interest was expressed. However due to the expense and the enormous distance involved it was Tim Francis and myself who arrived at Gatwick Airport on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2000 ready to embark on what was to become a very satisfying adventure indeed. We arrived three hours early on the basis that we would get a choice of seats only to discover that we were the last to arrive took the last two seats on the plane. The seats we occupied were next to a bulkhead and would scarcely recline so 13 hours later when we arrived in Buenos Aires we were fairly tired and our journey was only halfway over. We still had a 1,000 miles to go. Internal flights in Argentina do not go from the international airport at Ezeira and we had to get a taxi to travel the 30k to Jorge Newbery Airport. On our return we found that there is a link bus between the airports which represented a saving of some \$20. We had travelled by British Airways (the only direct flight from the UK) and they demand a 3-hour gap between international flights so we had a 3-hour wait to take our onward flight to Mendoza. We just hung around at the airport. 2½ hours later we were standing in Mendoza Airport. We took a taxi to the bus station and things began to fall into place. The only information I had managed to glean from the Internet was that there was one bus a day to Malargüe and we would have another 3-hour wait. Mendoza has the biggest bus station I have ever seen with over 60 stands. We made enquiries and found that a bus was leaving in 5 minutes if we would care to hurry. 6 hours later we were in Malargüe. I had thought we would arrive at midnight so we had booked a hotel for the first night and the coach dropped us right outside the door. So, 26 hours after our departure we had finally arrived. We had dinner at the hotel and then went for a walk. We noticed the Tourist Information Office still had people inside at 11pm so we tried the door. Apparently they don't close until midnight. They told us where the conference was being held to my immense relief, as we had had no reply either from my emails or the faxes we had sent to register at the conference.

We woke up to a beautiful morning, had breakfast and packed our stuff. We paid our bill, which was rather expensive, since a misunderstanding had caused us to order fillet steak rather than chorizo sausage. We then set out to find the conference, which was being held in a local school. I need to say that at this point the only conference I have been to before was at Bristol some 5 or 6 years ago and I was amazed when we found that there were only about 40 people there. We were met by Aída Galán, conference secretary and member of the INAE. (The Argentine National Institute of Argentine Speleology) and then by Carlos Benedetto. (President) who asked if we had come especially to be at the conference to which we naturally replied yes. They had not received our faxes and had not expected us. Despite this grandiose title it turns out that there are more members in the MCG than there are cavers in the whole of Argentina. We were immediately bombarded with offers of accommodation: we could stay in the school; we could stay in the local police station, the police had been recruited along with the local army to participate in the conference (under orders from the local provincial governor) or we could stay with Aída at her house which we accepted. We paid our \$70 inscription and started with a lecture on surveying. All Hi-Tec stuff although the laser sighted compass seemed quite interesting. There were also lectures about their access problems and it seems that contrary to what has happened over here the interest in caving has coincided with the explosion of adventure tourism. They had been banned from a cave that they had discovered mapped etc because it had been designated as a National Park and controlled by the Park Rangers who charge \$25 for entry.

Two days of the conference had been set aside for visits to caves and for rescue practices, hence the involvement of the police and army as they had the communication equipment. We all chipped in for fuel and the entire conference climbed onto the back of trucks and pickups and we headed off into the back of beyond. Once outside of the towns and off the main routes the roads are not metalled and we were treated to a roller coaster of a ride. The Argentinians were a little offended by my description of being in the middle of nowhere but once I had explained our situation on the Mendips they understood. Our 1<sup>st</sup> visit was to a larva tube called Doña Otilla. We had no idea as to what to expect. We appeared to be on a pretty barren plain when all of a sudden there was a small depression with an entrance. They find these tubes by guesswork and explosives. A short crawl and we were in a large horizontal walking passage with a sandy floor. This passage led on for some 800m before ending in a collapse. There were some formations which considering these caves are in basalt it is quite unusual. Tim as usual wasn't going to let a mere choke stop him and pushed on all the leads but this time to no avail.

This would be a long-term dig although much cleaner than Pinetree Pot. Next to come was the rescue practice. André Slagmollen, rescue expert of the UIE had come all the way from Belgium to help out with their rescue practice, so this was now a truly international affair. Unfortunately some of the participants refused to take part in the rescue until they had visited the entire cave so they were obviously not taking the rescue very seriously. Whilst the "Indians" were very willing the "Chiefs" didn't really have a clue of what they were doing. Tim assisted inside the cave whilst I remained outside to watch what was going on. This turned out to be a bad mistake because despite the apparent cold from the wind I got quite badly sunburnt. They did not even have a list of who was in the cave until I suggested it and the Surface Controller got bored and decided to go into the cave to see what was going on. Even so I think a valuable lesson was learnt by all. Next we went to La Cueva del Tigre, another larva tube. This one was a bit deeper and had a fixed steel ladder to enable entry, which had been installed by some adventure tourism company. The local cavers are somewhat offended by this fixed aid since people are being taken underground without lights or helmets. They have the permission of the landowner to remove the ladder although it will need a tow truck to remove it. The passage is large and walking size and despite one end of the cave being used as a toilet offers 200m of large passageway ending in the traditional collapse. However this time there was a howling gale and Tim pointed out that this was an obvious digging site. One of them stayed all night and pushed on a further 5m.

The second field trip took two forms, the first to a limestone area, to the Caverna de las Brujas, this is the one controlled by the National Park. As this was a National Conference we had been given permission to enter without paying although we had to stick to the tourist route. There are no lights but some metal walkways have been provided and the little of the cave we saw was impressively decorated. Next we got back into the trucks and headed off to near the border with Chile to visit La Cueva de San Agustín. This cave is formed in gypsum and consists of a steep scree entrance slope with a huge chamber and a steep slope on the other side. Time for rescue practice number 2. Whilst this was going on some of the non participants went for a wander and found another new cave. It was also in gypsum and after an initial crawl encountered a large chamber. The Argentinians appear not to like bending down and it was assumed that there were no further leads. Enter Tim: Tim immediately discovered a way on although it did involve some crawling much to the discomfort of the Argentinian lads who were with him, who everytime it looked like it was closing down wanted to give up. A further 80m was discovered and is still going. As this conference was to discuss the formation of a national caving body it was unimaginatively called La Cueva de la Federación. Well, it's their country so they can call it what they like.

The lectures followed a format of holiday snaps and there were some quite impressive videos although I don't believe Sid Peru need worry just yet. As for the people they are the friendliest I have ever met. We had our evening meal with them at the conference most evenings and we believe was included in the price of the subscription. Beef was the order of the day. This is no place for vegetarians although fruit is very plentiful. There was no animosity whatsoever over the Falklands and they are positively embarrassed by Maradona's "Hand of God". This is caving in its infancy, there are no hard trips and there are caves just waiting to be discovered. Argentina is a long way away but really is worth the visit and with a few refinements to the travel arrangements (hindsight and experience are wonderful and will take 4 hours less). We propose a return next year for a bit more winter sun and plan to take in Buenos Aires as well. Estimated cost of flights will be about £650.

Agradecimientos especiales a (Special thanks to) Aída Galán (por su hospitalidad) for her tremendous hospitality, to Carlos Benedetto, INAE, for the marvellous welcome (por su gran bienvenido) and to the Grupo Espeleológica de Rincón de los Sauces for the rollercoaster ride (las montañas rusas), the Grupo Espeleológico de Neuquen, Centro Espeleológico Córdoba, Organización de Investigaciones Espeleológicas not forgetting Luis Carabelli of the Cuerpo de Espeleología, Rescate y Montañismo de Argentina and Gabriel Redonte of the Grupo Espeleológica de Argentina of course to the local police and army.

¡Volveremos!

*by Richard Carey*