



ARGENTINA 2001 THREE WHEELS ON MY WAGON

We seemed doomed straight from the beginning. We arrived at Gatwick in good time to discover that the BA computer had broken down and that all check-ins were being done manually. We joined a huge queue and finally there was Tim Francis, Pete Bennett and myself waiting to get on the plane to Buenos Aires. It was only two hours late when we eventually took off. After the usual uncomfortable flight we arrived at Ezeiza Airport on Saturday morning, changed some money at the bank and got a taxi to take us to the GEA (Grupo Espeleologico Argentino) headquarters where they had been expecting us several hours earlier. Once the taxi driver had asked several times for directions, we turned up. We discussed our plan of action whilst we were going to be in Malargue and went out to a restaurant to have lunch. We were left pretty much to our own devices and went into the centre in the evening for a look around the centre. We spent Sunday doing the usual touristy things, checking out the sites of interest, monuments, tango dancing etc.

On Monday we went to the government map shop to buy maps of the area we were going to look at. We got to the airport in plenty of time to take the internal flight to San Rafael where we would be picking up the hire car. So far so good. We arrived in San Rafael on time and found the car hire guy waiting for us. We sorted out the paperwork loaded up the car and headed off towards Malargue. We stopped to get some fuel and within moments whilst I was driving down the road I spotted a lorry that was obviously having difficulties. There were sparks coming from the rear axle. It was only then that I noticed that it had lost a wheel and that it was heading straight towards us. There was nothing I could have done to avoid it and it hit us fair and square. It had taken out the radiator. Fortunately the wheel rebounded and did not go over the car (apparently this is not such an unusual event). The police had been called.

We finally sorted out the documents and got the car towed away. Then we called the owner of the car and everything went pear shaped. The damage waiver I had signed apparently allows the owner of the car to take money for the damages regardless of whose fault it is. I would then be reimbursed by the insurance company. I asked for our money back but was told that he hadn't yet received it from the agency we had booked through. The owner told me that he didn't have another car to replace it and we would have to wait for it to be repaired. We managed to find a hostel to stay in and bedded down for the night.

The next morning we set off for the police station to make a statement regarding the accident. By the time we found the right one it was too late and we were told to come back in the evening. I phoned several times to find out the progress of the car. We had not come so far to waste time in San Rafael. We returned to the police station in the evening to be told that they don't take traffic statements in the evening. This was becoming silly. As we stood outside the police station trying to work out what to do, Carlos Benedetto, president of the INAE (Instituto Nacional Argentino de Espeleologia), turned up. He explained that he just happened to be passing. I was feeling particularly stressed by this time and wondered who was this man staring at me. Well it was Argentina to the rescue. They got on the phone to the car hirer. Finally it transpired that he had tried to get money on my credit card for the damages but that it had been refused (fortunately I did not have sufficient credit). He then washed his hands of the whole situation and refused to hire us another car. We went back the hostel and arranged to hire another car and 20 minutes later it arrived. Tim dealt with the credit card damage waiver, which this time was only \$500 instead of the \$1500 I had signed for. Hooray, and we set off for Malargue. We were only one day late.

The journey only took a couple of hours and soon we were reunited with all our friends from the year before. After dinner we went to Ariel Benedetto's house and crashed out. We had finally arrived, we thought. It hadn't rained for 5 months and then it rained non-stop for 3 days. Only the main roads between cities in Argentina have tarmac and it would be impossible to get to Cueva de la Federacion, which had been discovered only last year during the Congress. This was the main reason for our return as there were unpushed leads (caverns measureless to discover) and a survey to make. Transport is a real problem here and the locals hadn't visited it since March last year. There was nothing to do but wait. We made several attempts to visit places. We tried going up into the mountains but could not get through the pass because of snow. The next day we managed to get through and went to see some hot springs and visit Las Lenas (Argentina's equivalent of St Moritz). There was some Gypsum that looked promising. On the 3rd day we attempted to go to Castillos de Pincheira but a dry riverbed had turned into a raging torrent and we felt it was unwise to try and cross.

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Argentina 2001 - continued from page 1**Dusty roads**

Yippee! It's finally stopped raining and we, (plus Ariel and Carlos Benedetto) set off to go to Cueva de al Federacion. We got through the pass without any problems and stopped on the way to look at what appeared to be a promising location for caves. The bed was very thin and our walk in the midday heat went unrewarded. The entrance we thought we had seen was nothing more than a damp patch leaking out between the bedding planes. We arrived at Bardas Blancas and the end of the tarmac and headed off down the dirt road. Travelling down these sorts of roads creates an awful lot of dust. The valley runs along the Rio Grande and provides some very impressive views. We reported to the border post at Poti Malal and headed off down the track to where Federacion was. The rain had brought down a lot of rocks onto the track and our progress was delayed by having to clear them away. We arrived, parked the car and using a footbridge that had been built since last year, crossed the river. We spoke to the landowner who is apparently a bit miffed by the number of tourist visits to San Agustin; they feel they should get something if the guides are charging the tourists. It's on their land after all. We finally arrived and it was agreed that Tim and I would survey in whilst Pete and Ariel go exploring. Carlos would stay outside. After two hours Tim and I had surveyed up as far as we had explored last year (The T junction) I declined to follow the right hand passage to the very end as it was very tight and also very sharp in the gypsum. There were some small but spectacular crystal formations. We had thought that the left hand passage closed down almost straight away but Pete found a way through and another 200 metres of passage including a substantial chamber was found. We were running out of time as Ariel had to go to work and we agreed to return to complete the survey. We managed to get off the track before nightfall but although the main roads have tarmac, there are very many potholes that make for a very slow drive.

Mad dogs and Englishmen

As it was such a hard drive to Federacion we decided that we would have a look around the limestone area of Bardas Blancas. This is where Caverna de Las Brujas (the longest limestone cave in Argentina) is to be found. The cavers are not allowed to enter Brujas despite the fact that they discovered, explored and mapped it. Bureaucracy is a many-legged octopus in Argentina and it appears that we were only allowed last year because the then new governor didn't know what the score was. Unable to explore within the park itself we had to satisfy ourselves with looking around the outskirts. This area is a fossil-hunter's dream. The ground is absolutely laden with fossils and with a little bit of patience perfect ammonites could be found. Despite the midday heat we push on up valley towards Brujas and soon found some limestone. We quickly found a hole high up on a cliff face but were unable to climb up to it. Thus thwarted we carried on up valley and finally were rewarded by a huge entrance (about 5m wide X 3m high) high up the hillside very near the top. The sides were quite steep and although I could see it, it took a long time before I could actually reach it. Tim was there first, closely followed by Pete who both waited for me to arrive before entering. This cave still remains to be named and although it is probably not a new discovery we surveyed all 20 metres of it. It was becoming evident that outside of the park there would only be fragments such as this so we decided to call it a day. On our way back we spotted another entrance and duly climbed up to explore it. Once again Tim was the first there. This cave was formed on a bedding plane and was very narrow. Tim duly climbed up to enter it and reported that he could see light. A possible through trip! I walked round to the other side of the hill and could see the hole that Tim was trying to get through (about 10" X 4"). On the way back round I spotted a large descending passage. This was a through trip and after 20m exited onto the shaded side of the hill. We did not survey these two. We were told by the local shop owner that a man he knew, knew of a cave beyond Brujas and if we would like to hire some horses from him he would surely take us there. Unfortunately he wouldn't be around for 2 weeks.

Back down the dusty track to complete the survey of Federacion. Thankfully there weren't so many stones to clear this time although we did have to wait for the local gauchos while they brought their cattle down to pasture. We completed the survey and checked out all the leads but without digging in the boulder chokes we had found it was impossible to find any more cave. There are several other sites of interest near Federacion. There was Dona Palmyra, a short phreatic tube with a vadose trench complete with what looked like a passable sump at river level. A bit nearer Federacion a resurgence was found which apparently only runs in wet weather and an old resurgence under the entrance of Federacion was also found. This area is becoming increasingly interesting as it appears that there may well be a system waiting to be discovered.

The next day we went for a return visit to Cueva del Tigre to give Pete a taste of a larva tube. This time I fully explored it as last year I had only gone downslope. Tim checked out the end of the passage to see how much had been dug since last year. Tim and Pete returned the next day along with Gustavo to pursue the draught. This has now increased but still no breakthrough. I don't particularly like digging so I went to the local school to help out with their English classes. Our final caving visit was to Castillos de Pincheira.

The river was dry once again. This is an incredibly photogenic site with some very impressive cliffs. The caves were a bit further on in a gypsum quarry. These, although quite pretty, were fairly short and not desperately stable. Four of them were visited covering a total of 80 metres in length. We were told of a newly discovered larva tube in the vicinity of Tigre but the description and the map we had been given were conflicting and we were unable to find it. We had hoped it might be the continuation of Tigre we were looking for.

We were very well looked after by our Argentine friends and despite the setbacks of the car and weather it all went fairly well. Although it turned out to be desperately expensive, I am sure we will return as there is much work to be done in the Federacion area as well as the dig at Tigre. In terms of limestone caves, until the locals can sort out the bureaucracy I don't think there will be many major discoveries.

Many thanks to the GEA for putting us up during our stay in Buenos Aires and especially to Ariel Benedetto who looked after us during our stay in Malargue.

The Expedition members were Pedro Benedetto alias Pete Bennett, Tim Francis, Richard Carey - MCG, Ariel and Carlos Benedetto, Gustavo Cerdo, Diego and Ruben - INAE.

Richard M Carey