



MCG News

Newsletter of the Mendip Caving Group

Number 320
May 2004

www.m-c-g.org.uk

Founded 1954

Jackpot! Argentina Report 2004

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This was the MCG's 5th visit to Argentina and probably the most successful so far. This year's expedition team was Peat Bennett, Tim Francis and myself. I had already been in Argentina for five months so had done some groundwork and some general exploration of the 5^h largest country in the world but that will require another article in itself. This time we explored Las Salinillas, finished off Poti Malal, visited Caverna de las Brujas and discovered a whole new gypsum area at Las Leñas. At least 12 new caves and 900m of survey. Oh, and Tim and Rubén were held hostage by the police.

We had arranged to meet up for the New year this time and I met Peat and Tim at Mendoza airport with my faithful Renault 12 and drove the 250 miles back to Malargüe. A quick shower and then off to meet our old friends to see in the New Year with barbecued goat. We had not thought of doing much the first day to let the travellers recover from their jet lag, (It's 14 hours from London to Buenos Aires with another 1000 miles to Malargüe.) but we decided to start with something gentle so we went and collected Rubén Cepeda and drove off to visit Las Salinillas, recently rediscovered by INAE. The first 25 miles are on tarmac roads and then we turned off onto a dirt track towards the cave. The track becomes impassable and the last mile or so has to be walked. 40 minutes of walking in the summer sun saw us at the entrance and we found some interesting cave paintings, they didn't look like much at first glance but were very evident when photographed. A general rummage was had exploring every nook and cranny with Peat even sticking his camera into a pool to see if it would go.

Next day and we went shopping for our expedition food to Poti Malal. Last year's discovery, Miranda Cave, was to be surveyed. It had received a lot of press coverage "the longest gypsum cave in South America" so expectations were high. Rubén had already surveyed Las Salinillas and Tim went round to argue his case that it was not grade 6 just because they used a theodolite. We moved north by 180° and everyone was happy.

Saturday and we loaded up the car to go to Poti Malal with the INAE en masse. Hector had borrowed a car so it was we; Rubén Cepeda, Ariel Benedetto, Hector Sevillano, Matias and Lucas Oliva from Córdoba formed a mini convoy. The road from Bardas Blancas has improved and we were soon at the border control point. 15 minutes of checking paperwork finally saw us on the road to Poti Malal. We set up camp and then Tim and I began the survey whilst Peat and Ariel went exploring in Miranda Cave. Rubén took the others to San Agustín. 4 hours of surveying got us to the first junction. Peat and Ariel pushed on to the chamber previously discovered by Rubén back in August and found a couple of desperate crawls although this looked like the end of the cave. Ariel was under-kneepadded and suffering so they exited the cave. Sausage stew and pasta followed by fruit salad and off to bed.

Sunday is not a rest day. We were awoken at 6.45am by one of the locals looking for help with his car. I feigned ignorance and allowed Hector to do the honours. Breakfast of porridge and biscuits and off to battle. Ariel didn't want to play today so it was Rubén and Peat to explore leads while Tim and I continued the survey.

This leg of the survey was (I hope) the hardest part and despite the agonies of lying in liquid mud we got to the aven we found last year passing through an impressive keyhole passage. We bumped into Peat and Rubén who had been exploring the streamway but my sense of humour was seriously on the wane as my lights were fading and my knees didn't like me anymore. We had done 6½ hours for 120m. Peat had done a bit of digging at the junction to reveal an airbell but decided that it would be a long term effort so went off to push the streamway and despite sterling efforts bashing away at the rock it too became too tight to continue.

We decided to give our knees a rest and went for a bumble around the area to look for new sites. It was a typically scorching day. While Tim and Ariel were rummaging in some cracks in the gypsum and Peat went for a huge hike I followed a stream up-valley and lo and behold a resurgence. The entrance was very low but I could hear water cascading down inside. I managed to force my way in and found a small chamber with the water coming in through a small hole in the roof. Big disappointment. I named it Cueva Scorchio. Ariel and Tim then caught me up and duly went in for a look. Peat then arrived and took the GPS co-ordinates. We had a rummage to see if we could find a fossil passage but to no avail. There are a lot of small pots but are all choked. Oh well, back to camp.

I decided that another day of walking was due so I went with Rubén, Hector, Matias and Lucas to the kiosco and walked up the valley that runs behind the Poti Malal river. Rubén, Hector and Matias kept to the same side while Lucas and I continued up the valley. It was very scenic but we only managed to find a few choked pots high up in the gypsum. Rubén says he found a going pot but would need to return with kit to carry on the exploration. Meanwhile Tim and Peat surveyed to the final chamber in Miranda.

By now everyone was feeling pretty knackered so we decided not to complete the streamway survey and went for a wander up the Miranda valley. We then packed up and returned to Malargüe. We debriefed Carlos Benedetto and headed off to the Goat festival and gorged ourselves at an "all you can eat" restaurant.

Time for a bit of tourism and Peat, Tim, Rubén and I drove off to Las Leñas to visit Valle Hermoso. A spectacular valley on the border with Chile. We spotted a few resurgences on the way up and these were duly investigated. We also spotted a cave entrance close to Las Leñas. We asked the local farmer's wife if it was alright to visit and crossing a small river we climbed up to what seems to have once been a tourist cave complete with fixed ladders. Cueva de los Tunduques was duly explored but it was only about 30m long. Returning to the farm we sent Rubén off to enquire if there were any more caves around and was told to follow upstream. We would return. On the way back to Malargüe we were stopped by the Gendarmeria and asked for our papers. Unfortunately Peat had left his passport back at my house. So holding Tim and Rubén as hostages and retaining all my papers I went with Peat to get his passport. This being shown soon secured the release of the hostages and it was back home with a warning to carry all our papers all the time.

Off to Las Leñas only stopping to check the weather from the gendarmeria, 15 minutes later after all documents checked and being informed that I only had 5 days left on my visa we arrived at the farm. We duly marched up-stream and we spotted the first of many resurgences. Tim was elected to make the first enquiries and reported that it was very low and that the water was very cold. We were quite close to the snow line so it was undoubtedly meltwater. As Peat was taking the GPS co-ordinates a group of pony trekkers came by and told us that there were more caves higher up. We continued up valley and spotted yet another resurgence, but this time it was issuing from beneath a huge boulder pile. We looked above for a fossil entrance but although one was spotted it would be impossible to reach without specialist climbing gear. Meanwhile Peat had dug open a short cave nearby that was draughting nicely. Could yield some results with a bit of digging. Continuing up-valley we spotted another collapse feature and this time we were able to enter a cave. Formed on a bedding it appeared to be a bit unstable

so after a brief look around we exited for lunch. After lunch we continued up-valley and spotted a resurgence high up absolutely gushing water. This was more like it. We climbed up and entered the cave. Unfortunately the roof lowered after about 10 metres and although it was draughting the water was again very cold and we declined to continue. We discovered a fossil entrance over the top and in we went. This cave had a large entrance chamber complete with a guano stal. Pushing on through a small passage revealed more passage with crystals, banded gypsum and pure orange ochre. We named it Orange Cave. There is a good draught at the end and might reward a bit of digging. We continued a bit further but as time was getting on we decided to turn back and follow a pony track back to the car. There are a lot of sinkholes up on the top of this gypsum but unfortunately all are choked. We separated at this point and I returned alone along the pony track whilst Peat, Tim and Rubén continued looking for more caves. They discovered a couple more caves but decided to save them for another day.

A nice late start and it was Carlos, Peat Tim, Rubén and myself heading off to Las Brujas. This cave has always presented us with problems of a bureaucratic nature and this year was no exception. We duly arrived at about 11am and showed our permit to the Park Rangers. They said that we weren't allowed in between the hours of 9am and 5pm. The reasoning behind this was that we couldn't interfere with the tourists. Well, Carlos went ballistic and there were all sorts of threats of denunciation and so forth because we hadn't been informed of this new change of the rules. The Park Ranger eventually relented and allowed us in as long as he came with us. The plan was to descend a pitch that we had spotted last year. After a bit of messing around finding our way we entered a rifty passage where unfortunately Carlos decided to stay high rather than descend like the rest of us. The stal he was standing on gave way and he fell 2 metres with a crash, whoomph, and in plain view of the Ranger. Not good. Fortunately he was only shocked and bruised but decided to leave the cave with Rubén. We carried on but mistook our route and came to a pitch but we could hear tourists being guided round the cave. We decided that it was pointless to continue and the Ranger warned the guides by radio that he would be descending into the tourist route. He took our tackle sack and left us to return the way we came. We found the junction where we had gone wrong and Tim sped off for a quick recce of the pitch, realised that it must have been descended and exited the cave. The survey, although good, does have a few errors and will need some more work. At 2.5k it is beyond the time we could allow for us to do it.

This day it was just Peat, Tim and myself off to Miranda to finish off the survey. Because of the festival we decided to let Rubén get some rest. He was partying till 5 in the morning and then going caving at 9am. I declined the kind offer to help and left them to finish off the streamway and went for a wander. Señor Miranda had been promised a radio and I duly delivered it. Unfortunately it didn't work but he held on to it anyway. I am sure he will be able to exchange it for one that does. I thought I spotted a cave near the entrance to Miranda valley but it only turned out to be a small shelter (an occlusion I believe). Entry was very dangerous as the goats were returning and raining stones down on us. On returning home we fed the survey data into Survex and it yielded the grand total of 560m. Not the longest but at least its ours.

Back to Las Leñas to explore the new finds. Peat and Rubén went in to explore while Tim and I started the survey. A resurgence cave with a wide low entrance, which led to a boulder collapse where the route divided in two. We elected to survey the dry overflow passage first and soon rejoined the survey. Peat and Rubén had been ages so we were beginning to think they must have found something major. Back in the streamway I spotted a window from which I could hear Peat and Rubén. I looked through and saw that they were in a large passageway 8m wide 60m long and about 5m. Basically I abandoned the survey temporarily and went racing off down the passage. This was big but it soon closed down to chokes at the end of the passage. We surveyed to the end and explored all the leads. As we left I spotted something moving in the streamway. It was a crayfish (cangrejo). There is already a Cueva de los Cangrejos so we called it Cueva Langosta (well lobster is near enough.)

January is holiday time in Malargüe and hardly had the Goat festival finished when they held Malargüe Rock. Ariel had organised this and there were bands from as far as Buenos Aires, so we went off to support it. Mostly covers but with some good old Argentinian rock it went down well.

Back again to Las Leñas this time for a resurgence that we had spotted high up the mountain. It was a bit of a struggle to get there and the only reward was a low crawl in freezing water so we declined. The next day we returned to survey Orange Cave (Cueva Naranja) and Peat and Rubén went off to explore a collapse feature. With the survey complete we exited the cave to find that there was a thunderstorm with lightning. We decided to get off the hill as soon as possible. We soon encountered Peat who was trying to keep as far away from Rubén as possible because he was carrying a metal crowbar. They had found a cave, Snow Cave (Cueva de la Nieve), which was basically 30m of pure white gypsum. Beaten by the weather we returned home via the café at Las Leñas.

An extremely active and rewarding expedition with the exploration of Poti Malal completed. It was a shame that Miranda didn't break the record but the papers now say that there is 560m surveyed so far. If someone wants to dig in the terminal collapse they might yet make it the longest. The real jewel in the crown though was Las Leñas with 12 sites so far and we haven't even finished the valley yet. We had been told that there were some small caves that weren't really worth the effort. How wrong they were!
