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Madefaction*, meanderings and Mahon – Darkest Mallorca 2003

by Tim Francis

It does increasingly seem that the Mallorcan jottings get written up just as we are off on the next trip. Not ideal I know but at least they do finally get recorded. The 2003 jaunt did not differ radically from previous visits except that we did attempt to try and do some new caves plus we made contact with a local caving club. Quite appalling really as this was our 8th trip (the MCG's 12th) with the usual logistics: aeroplane, hire car, food shopping, villa, restaurant.

The first trip was a gentle stroll down an old favourite, Cova de Les Rodes, which was first done by the MCG way back in 1984. The cave is a doddle to find as it's only 10 minutes walk back from the sea front at Cala Sa Vicente, and there is a good description in the 1995 write up so I won't go in to details. The main feature on our visit this year was that the air quality was horrendous almost as soon as we got inside the entrance. We had experienced this before but we almost had to curtail our visit this time. At the bottom there was also quite a large streamway flowing which made a pleasant change. Later in the week Tony Merino mentioned that what seems to happen is that the draught in the cave switches, and the best time to visit the cave is at the end of the winter (not the beginning) when the air current flows out. I'll remember that next time because it was quite an uncomfortable experience caving in such poor air.

On Friday we thought we'd go and do a spot of prospecting over on the top of the hill just to the North of Can Sion in area marked on the map as Tosses del Llamp. To get to the start of the walk involves a tricky drive South West from Pollensa along classic Mallorcan lanes with high dry stone walls. This was real finca** territory complete with large dogs. The walk started in a delightful valley head at L'Assarelleta, which is just a couple of houses. We walked and scabbled our way through the tough scrub that is prevalent across most of the island. But unfortunately just as we were climbing up on to the top of the hill and scouring for caves the weather came in. We were not kitted out for Snowdonia conditions at all so after only forty minutes of driving rain we decided to call it a day and head back down to the car. So as is usual for Mallorca we had been thwarted in locating a cave on the first attempt.

The next day was a guaranteed cave as we're going to be meeting up with Tony Merino, a local caver who lives in Palma. He was going to take us to an area of wooded hills above Palma that we hadn't visited before plus hopefully help us out with some new cave info. Some of you will probably have seen his photography at the BCRA or in Caves and Caving. We met up outside the Soller railway station in Palma and drove around the city to the town of Génova just off the ring road to the East of Palma. Above Génova is a huge statue of Jesus and our walk in was to start from there. The area is owned by the forestry commission of the Balearics government so is extremely popular with ramblers and locals. En route to the entrance Tony pointed out sites of interest and it seems that the whole area is riddled with caves. This is definitely an area we will visit again.

The cave we were heading for was Avenc de S'Embut which was a pleasant SRT drop to chambers with fine formations. The entrance is a simple 20m pitch and with a straightforward rebelay at the top. We fluffed a bit though, mainly as we were a descender down so we had to pass bits of kit around to get everyone down. Below leads to a steep loose slope so we slung an 80m rope down this as well to make the descent safer. At the bottom Tony showed us around an extremely well decorated chamber which pinches out in a slope of boulders jammed up against a back wall. A squeeze through boulders pops out in a small decorated chamber in which Peat reeled off a load of photos. And so back to Palma for a rack of beers in a converted abattoir....

Next up was a return to Cova de Cornavaques, a cave that we had visited in 2001

* Madefaction. The act of madefying, or making wet; the state of that which is made wet.

** Finca. In Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries, a property in the country, especially a large farm or a ranch

and got badly benighted on the walk back. This year we set off earlier to allow ourselves more time to walk back. But we still parked at the same place at the layby by the 3km marker on the Cala Sa Vicente road. The walk in from here is definitely the shortest way up the mountain but it does involve thrashing through a few hundred metres of pine trees and scrub before you hit the open hillside. It takes about 2 hours to reach the entrance so you need plenty of daylight hours for a visit. You don't need much in the way of kit except that the entrance section requires an 8m rope and a bold climber to pass a flowstone barrier. Beyond are some typically fine Mallorcan columns with the best bit being a fine group of calcified roots, some more than 3m long.

This year we took another rope to descend the final pitch. This is an unusual looking funnel at the top of a flowstone barrier at the far end of the cave. The pitch is a bit like an egg timer as it widens out again below the flowstone. I rigged a sneaky rebelay off some flowstone to assist the hang to the bottom (2 x 8mm bolts, 1 natural rebelay, 18m rope). Immediately at the bottom of the pitch is a rather pleasant gour pool that overflows down a delightful cascade. Upslope it all gets muddy and scrubby but right at the end we came across an excellent section of helictites and straws. These are definitely worth a visit if you can be bothered to carry your kit up the hill. As in 2001 we shouldn't really have tarried so long underground and it was a real rush back out and down the mountain to the car. We made it back with 15-20 minutes of daylight remaining.

Emboldened by all this caving our last effort was to try and find a new cave Tony had told us about. The cave, Cueva 502 over on Pollensa, was so named because it was discovered just after the "501 Grutas del Término de Pollensa" book had been published. As is the case with Mallorcan caves the description we had was somewhat vague. We did have a map and Peat had punched in the co-ordinates into his GPS but this was all to no avail. The cave is somewhere on the hillside overlooking the sea and back from the old lighthouse on the Formentor peninsular. We spent half a day wandering around until light stopped play and losing Peat in the process. Mobile phone reception was no good either so we were unable to get into contact with Louisa who was back in Porto Pollensa sipping coffee in the harbour.

And that was it for 2003. Not the most amount of caving we've ever done but plenty of new locations to try next year...which I've already written up.

Team: Peat Bennett, Julie Hesketh, Duncan Horne, Louisa Minahan, Tony Merino

Mallorca 2004 - Old friends and new faces

by Tim Francis



It being only less than 12 months since our last visit this was a quick return to Mallorca for the MCG. It was a cheap trip as well: Easyscum flights came to less than the price of a bottle of Binusalem and we were a small group this time so only one hire car was needed. We didn't really have any plans this year apart from getting underground. Everyone had visited the island at least once previously although not of course necessarily for the caving. Over the last 20

years there have been quite a few changes on the island. Above ground there seems to have been more road building going on than ever, and below ground the more popular caves are showing signs of wear and tear. The weather this year was quite cold and blustery at the beginning of the week but improved later on. We even had the wood-burning stove lit on most evenings. So most of the caves were a bit wetter than normal and shrubs and grasses greener.



Entrance to Penja Rotja.
(photo: Cara Allison)

Penja Rotja This is of course a good starter on any Mallorcan itinerary so our first port of call in 2004. It was also a good opportunity for us to swap notes on what Penja Rotja has to offer. Martin had visited the cave quite recently with a different group of cavers. This confirmed our view that you can get to the large pretty chambers and the so-called Wedding Cake without doing a proper pitch. The walk across the Alcudia peninsular has fantastic views across the bay to Formentor. But today was even more dramatic than usual as an overnight storm was still blowing. Waves crashed over the car as we drove along the coast near Malpas, and walking along the cliff proved quite challenging in places.

We decided to do the 'free climbish' route to the bottom that the MCG had followed in 1992. This just requires a 15m rope for the rift that drops down in the floor of the entrance gallery, a handline for the final climb to the pretties at the bottom, and a few tape slings for the flowstone slope in the galleries. With hindsight a rope would also be useful in the Pierre's Pot type slot that bypasses the normal pitch route to the bottom, "Pou Negre". This again proved rather sporting for the less experience members of the party. As in previous years Penja Rotja was hot and humid in the lower levels so it is actually quite an energetic trip. So we were out after dark, which made for a stumbling walk back to the car.



The walk to Cova Sa Campana
(photo: Cara Allison)

Cova Sa Campana This cave needs no introduction, as being the largest cave on the island most people will have visited it. The walk in to the cave is now simpler than in previous years as the path is much more worn in and cairned for most of the route. Just park in the lay-by on the right hand side after the 9.5km post and follow your nose. We walked back in the dark (as usual) and the cairns proved to be very useful. We had planned to do the final two pitches but ran out of time.

The trip to the large chamber with the huge stalagmite boss is a straightforward affair and an ideal SRT introduction. Unfortunately Louisa had to cave in her usual clothes as she'd left her caving grotts in the villa, so she ended up with a trashed pair of jeans and a muddy fleece. A few changes to note - the first section of pitch two now has two permanent hangers so just take a couple of maillons and a sling for this bit, and the nativity scene before the old pitch three (now bypassed) has disappeared. There was quite a flow of water in the final chamber and all the gours were full and overflowing. We went for a good old scramble around and pointed out the highlights to those in the party who had not visited the cave before.

Covata des Puig Gros One of the only objectives of the trip was to revisit the area of pine forest hills above Génova near Palma. We had visited Avenc de S'Embut last year and were keen to locate some of the other caves that had been pointed out to us by Tony Merino. We knew where to park – underneath the huge statue of Jesus at Ca na Burgesa that overlooks Palma – but we were not that certain about the walk in. We had a couple of caves at Coll des Pastor, Cueva and Avenc, marked on our map of the island which initially we thought might be the same sites. We walked to these first more by accident than design. They were actually only a couple of minutes from a spot where we had taken lunch under a

tree last year. The cave turned out to be just a large overhang and the avenc a grubby slot in the floor of the woods.

We then headed off to the cave we were after in the S'Embut area on the slopes of Puig Gros de Bendinat. To find the cave follow the main forest track all the way from the statue for perhaps 25 minutes. No route finding problems at first except that just after the start of the walk there is one junction. Turn right here and around a corner the track passes some masts and secure fencing. After 25 minutes the track arrives at a flattish area with three tracks leading off. Turn left (right goes to Cueva and Avenc) and follow the track for another 10 minutes or so. The track passes a National Park sign and gate and continues uphill. Where the track bends right a small footpath heads off on the left. The cave is soon found just to the right of the path. If you miss the path there is wooden signpost on the main track that says Cueva. This allows tourists to peer over the edge.

Covata des Puig Gros turned out to be a really worthwhile trip. The highlights of the cave were some extremely unusual bright yellow stalagmites and a large colony of bats. The entrance shakehole is a nice scramble where the cave looks like it might just be blind. But on the bottom right hand side is a draughting squeeze through blocks into a roomy chamber. The way on was pretty obvious and we soon found ourselves at the top of a pitch. We had thought the cave needed no kit but we took a few ropes just in case. We rigged a 20m rope from some stal but actually most of us free climbed the pitch on the way up. Immediately at the bottom of the pitch there are three ways on. In the floor it's just a squeeze to a boulder choke. To the left drops down into a very large chamber with some fine stalactites high up in the roof. We had a good old rummage in the lowest point of the chamber and there does seem to be potential to work a way along the back wall through the boulders. The air is certainly quite fresh here. To the right Martin lead the way along a rifty, clambery section of passage to a few chambers. We were here at dusk so plenty of bats were whizzing around and getting ready for an evening of midge munching.

Afterwards we dashed further down the main track to try and re-find Avenc de S'Embut. The lie of the land looked familiar but we couldn't relocate the entrance. We have a few more caves marked on a map of the area so no doubt we'll be back here again.

Cova de Son Vila We were feeling confident after Puig Gros so decided to try and find another new cave. This time the challenge was to find Cova de Son Vila, a well-decorated cave near Pollensa. The cave is somewhere on the Pico de Son Vila hillside just after the 45km marker. After that things were a bit vague. The two line description we had talked about stone terraces and thrashing through vegetation and undergrowth. Our problem was where to park the car and start the climb up through the woods. Some, but not all of the tarmac tracks, were marked on our maps. We parked up on what we thought was the best road but after five minutes of climbing we popped out on another road. We continued to climb through the woods until we broke out above the tree line and onto the limestone slabs above. From here we spent three hours wandering around looking for the damn thing. The cave should have been at an altitude of 150m and vaguely opposite the smallest foothill of Puig de Maria. We could have been a bit too high but ultimately failed to find the entrance. We'll go back in the future with the co-ordinates punched into a GPS.

Avenc des Llorer This was a cave we had been unable to find on a particularly drizzly day in 2001. The MCG had located the entrance in the 1980s but not descended it. This year we were armed with the exact location of the cave on a map. This revealed that the text of the cave on the 1:50,000 maps is in the wrong place, which explains our problems in 2001. We got up extra early to allow ourselves time to find the cave but actually it proved pretty straightforward.

To find the cave park opposite the Mortix gates after the 11km marker on the C710 in the hills above Pollensa. The area is extremely popular with walkers, climbers and gorge runners so it's often difficult to find somewhere to park. Take the road through the gates, or over the stile if it's locked, walking past a couple of houses and a tennis court. Straight after are a small house and a gate on the

right. Go through this gate and walk around the field to a stile on the far side. Climb over the stile and then follow the farm track beyond. A government sign soon after confirms that you are on the right track. Turn right at a junction after 100m or so and then keep going until the track peters out at a small hut. From there follow a well cairned, and intermittently red paint splashed path for another 300m across the flat valley floor to dry stonewall. There is a small gate in the wall. Just through there and on the left is Avenc S'Aigo. To find Llorer walk down the path for another 80m or so, crossing right over a cave in the path, where a shallow descending valley heads off on the left. Head down this valley, not the main path, for 3-400m on a bearing of roughly 340°; we've started a series of cairns to help with navigation. The cave is situated underneath a sharp peak of rock, and the back wall is a flash of red/brown rock festooned with ivy. You can actually see the red back wall from the main footpath.



This was a great cave to end the holiday – just the right mix of vertical stuff for everyone to finish on. The entrance is extremely impressive and overlooks the sea. At first it seemed like there was already a group of cavers in the cave but it turned out that the cave is home to lots of pigeons. It was certainly a different experience to be buzzed by pigeons rather than bats. Llorer is a fine pothole. It's actually a pair of twin shafts and we decided to descend via the more devious route rather than the main hang. We rigged a small rope to descend into the shakehole but discovered later on that there is an easy scramble down. Quite where the first pitch starts was not obvious. We rigged it from the landside of the shaft using a tree backed up from a boulder and rock thread (25m). If we'd taken a larger rope sling we could have used the larger tree rather than the smaller tree. This lands on a wide verdant ledge with fine views down the main shaft. The next pitch on our route was off to the side – 3 bolts and bolt deviation to a sloping ledge. All the bolts were in good condition and filled with Vaseline. The next pitch starts straight away so we used up the 25m rope as the rigging for a natural belay for the next pitch. This is the main pitch (40m rope, 2 rebelays) and a fine descent into a large chamber. Llorer has great views looking back up the main shaft but not a lot else at the bottom to tarry the visitor.

Odds 'n' ends So ends yet another enjoyable sojourn in Mallorca. Everyone got to do some new caves, yet again we failed to find a cave and some old friends were revisited. We now have a considerable amount of caving experience and knowledge about Mallorca so perhaps I may eventually write up that journal. No promises though.

Team: Cara Alison, Tim Francis, Louisa Minahan, Martin Peck, Julie Hesketh