



Looking across the Cares from Top Camp

Expedition to the Picos de Europa 1984

by York University Cave and Pothole Club and Seccion Espeleologia de Ingenieros Industriales Madrid

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During the summer of 1983 YUCPC spent seven weeks in the Western massif of the Picos de Europa exploring an area a few kilometers square to the north of Los Moledizos and Altos de Verde. Unfortunately we left no going holes there, and because of permission problems we decided to go elsewhere in '84. This year the problems of permission and location were handled by our friends and caving partners, the SEII of Madrid. Our destination was to be the Horcadura del Canto ridge and Brana de Huesa plateau a few kilometres further north, in the north-eastern part of the central massif, near Tresviso and Robriguero.

We set up our first camp on La Mesa, a sandstone block forming a high, flat meadow breaking the steep and grassy southern dip slope of the Horcadura del Canto. The northern side of the ridge is almost vertical and drops several hundred metres into the valley of San Esteban.

Unfortunately entrances were rare. The first morning's reconnaissance whilst the main group were being collected after an enforced overnight stay at a bar in Unquera, produced little more than sunburn and stomach-ache due to a breakfast of that Asturian 'delicacy', Fabada! A concerted effort searching the slope eventually produced 10

entrances. To those of us used to the profusion of entrances in the high, bare limestones of the western massif, this didn't seem like Spanish caving. Within a week the area was worked out. Most of the holes were goat caves, though one went down to -70m with a fine 55m pitch, and another to -85m in dolomite, with a dead sheep for a fetid companion at one deviation. A group set off to the Brana de Huesa to see if that was a better area. It became apparent that there was much greater potential there but that our present camp was unsuitable as a base for exploration. Therefore we moved at the end of our first week. Our

new base camp was to be near Robriguero in an area of old mine workings, top camp on the Brana de Huesa plateau. Before we could set up camp we had to deal with a minor problem - the track to the deserted mineworkings had not been designed for Land Rovers and years of neglect had made things worse. YUCPC quickly learned how to build a road!

The mines around base camp provided plenty to occupy us to begin with. Many were driven only a few metres into the rock, often following natural cave features. The longest (614m) and most recent, Mina Magdalena, intersected major natural passage in three places. Unfortunately spoil dumped from the mine into these passages blocked any way on. They were some of the best decorated that we have found, with an excellently decorated grotto and whole walls covered by cup-like formations.

Top camp, on the Brana de

Huesa was in a very confusing area of grassy closed depressions. Many obvious shake holes were choked with earth. There were few distinctive landmarks or paths so finding camp in the mist was an interesting experience until the route was waymarked. There were a few open shafts, but even here a lot of legwork was necessary. By now a group of nine Dutch cavers had joined us in exploring the top camp area. Within a couple of days we had a going cave. This was No. 52, Pozu Brana de Huesa.

A 45m entrance shaft was blocked at the bottom by the usual boulder and dead horse choke. However, a window lead down a constricted and sharp 30m pitch with a ridiculous squeeze to the top of a spacious 100m shaft. Below this the going got smaller. A couple more short pots lead to a narrow rift passage, well decorated, which eventually got too small at -218m. We tried to lycopodium test the trickle of water at the bottom to the large resurgence of Los Molinos in the Cares gorge, but here was no trace after a week.

After nearly three weeks we were again in the position of having worked out the area - much walking producing no holes. Another move had to be made, this time around 100km back to our old area in the Western Massif.

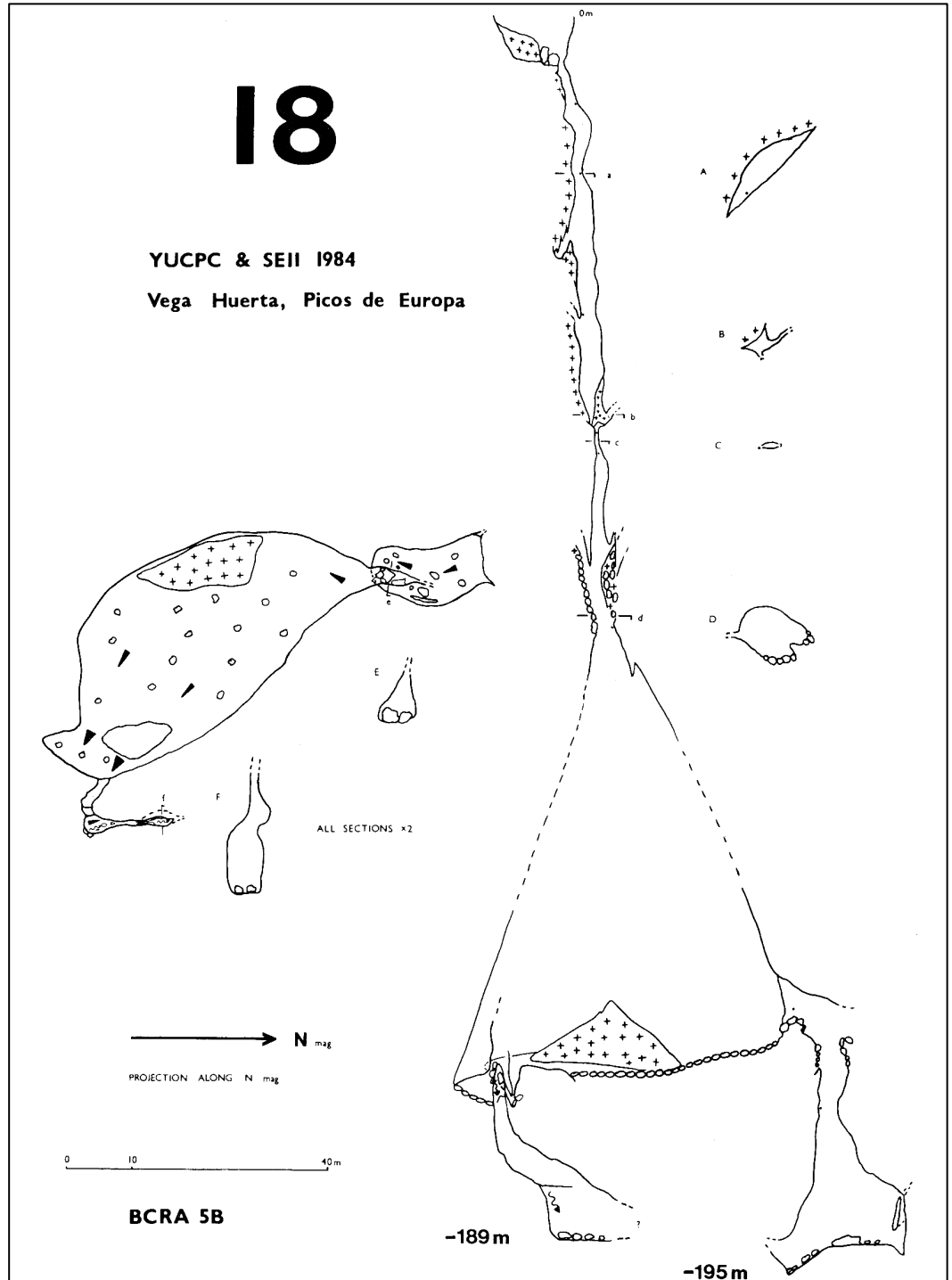
Returning to the Valedon Massif was like going home. When we walked into the bar at Soto de Sajambre we were greeted as old friends, drinks on the house for 'los locos ingleses'. We retained our base camp at Vegabano with its tent - eating cows. Top camp was set up at Vega Huerta, a 2000m high grassy col separating the Dobra and Cares gorges. The sheer 500m wall of the southern face of Pena Santa and the view over the Cares to the Central Massif made it an impressive campsite. The whole process of moving and setting up camp took about four days. New holes were found immediately and within a week we had four caves going past 100m depth. Two blocked off with boulders but two, prosaically named M2 and B, continued. These systems proved to be our most important finds this

summer.

I8, now renamed Pozu de Vega Huerta, is down to -195m maximum depth with the going route at -189m. It is situated in an area of bare limestone between top camp and the southern wall of Peña Santa. The entrance is in the corner of a snow filled shaft about 15m by 8m on the surface. Entry is through a small slot overhung by some large, loose boulders; there is a strong, cold draught. Ten feet down, the shaft becomes bigger, about 3m by 1m, dropping not quite vertically but hanging against a wall of snow and ice with a rock wall above. Several rebelay are necessary as the first 100m of the pitch continue like this with the snow and embedded boulders getting looser further down. Until about -100m the descent appears to be down the side of a very large snow-plugged shaft. Then after the last particularly gruesome section of hanging death the pot gets bigger, the final rebelay being 60m above the floor of a conical chamber 50m by 100m at the base. 160m down from the surface you finally leave the rope and climb off onto the top of a 10m high snow pile! This snow patch caused unforeseen difficulties when the rope froze into it and the next party down were faced with a tensioned rope solidly connected at the bottom! Luckily it came free after a lot of tugging - the thought of prusiking down a wet and freezing 60m drop didn't appeal! From the highest point in the chamber a loose climb up leads to another 30m pot, but this goes into a small, solidly boulder-choked chamber.

The "going route" is at the lower end of the main chamber. The sound of copious amounts of water invites you up an interesting climb. Dropping down the other side a rift is entered and a large (by Yorkshire standards!) stream appears as a spout from a small hole. The rift goes on a few more metres before a 8m pitch is encountered, where exploration stopped this year for lack of time.

Pozu de Cuetalbo, as M2 came to be known, was our best find. Down to its present depth it's a sporting trip, managing to fit in several superb pitches, some tight, gear-wrecking passage, and enough loose boulders to cause several headaches! The entrance is through an 5m by 3m hole with a small loose fissure at the bottom end. This drops 8m into a small passage at right angles which connects to a



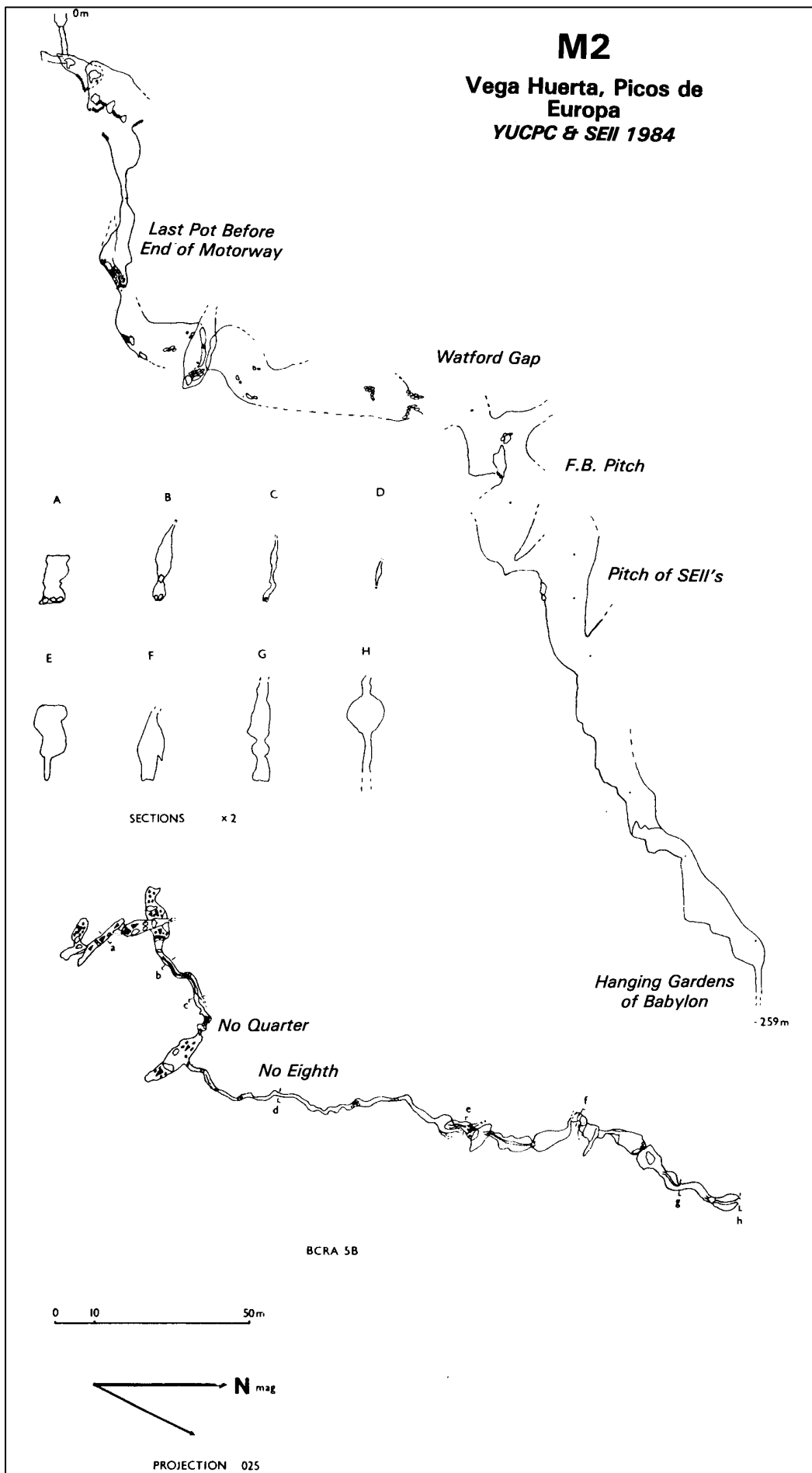
parallel rift. Another cross passage involves an up and down climb into a collapse choked rift with a hole over a boulder at the end. From here a 65m pitch drops down in two sections broken by a very loose and bouldery ledge where extreme care was needed - we have one Joe Brown helmet with a crater in the top to prove the need for caution! Below this pitch, the "Last Pot Before the End of the Motorway", there is a tall, winding rift passage. Down the 13m "Gates of Delerium" to

Grotto at the bottom of the Mina Magdalena



M2

Vega Huerta, Picos de Europa
YUCPC & SEII 1984



the tight 'No Quarter'; the bottom of the rift was the original route through to the 'Oasis' aven. This can now be bypassed by a traverse to a pitch leading into the 'Oasis'. Unfortunately the only route off from here is a rather tighter version of 'No Quarter', aptly named 'No Eighth'. There are several routes through this tall, tight rift at various levels. Greased racing snakes (Ivan) squirm along at the bottom, whilst the fatter members (everyone else) did a lot of traversing and getting lost higher up in the passage.

Beyond "No Eighth" things get bigger and better. Past 'Watford Gap' there is a good stream, but this soon disappears down an inviting and as yet unexplored wet route (attempts to dye test this and the other Vega Huerta stream ways to the Dobra and Cares gorges have so far been unsuccessful). The dry alternative looked more attractive to the first explorers, and so this is the one being pushed at present. Things now become much more pleasant and the cave gains depth quickly down several spacious shafts. Smaller climbs and pitches follow down to a squeeze, 'Ivan's Other Orifice'. Beyond are the 'Hanging Gardens of Babylon' where helictites sprout horizontally from the walls and then curve down to form vertical stal. Past this, a traverse in a vadose canyon is the way on; the floor drops away and there is the sound of water far below. This is the present limit of exploration. Stones dropped from here have a five second fall with a couple of bounces. We estimate the depth of this undescended pot to be about 50m.

With two systems with large stream ways continuing we have high hopes for our further exploration this summer. Hydrological work should establish the full depth potential of the area. Even if Pozu de Vega Huerta and Pozu Cuetalbo don't 'go' there are many other unexplored entrances to keep us occupied.

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