Expeditions ’84-’85

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Expedition to the Picos de Europa 1984

by York University Cave and Pothole Club and Seccion Espeleologia de Inginieros 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 feld 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 Magdelena, 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, Pozo 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 passages led 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 there 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 100m 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 road!

Looking across the Cares from Top Camp
Grotto at the bottom of the Mina Magdalena
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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