

EXPEDITIONS 1986

York University - Vega Huerta, Picos de Europa *Dave Ashley*

On returning to England after last year in the Picos, thoughts soon returned to M2 and dreams of hitting the kilometre depth mark. But reality soon hit us when we remembered that pushing trips at the end had lasted up to 24 hours and more. Obviously camping was the solution and so we had to overcome a whole new set of problems both physical and mental. None of the club had ever camped underground before, and much valuable assistance was given by veterans of 56.

A basic set of gear was obtained by various means to enable a camp of four people to be set up. However, a major problem that couldn't be solved whilst in England was where to place the camp. The problem was that after the dry ramp (depth approx. 350m) water, an obvious necessity for camping, was not found in the cave until "Blind Pot" near the previous limit of exploration. However this, an ideal site in terms of depth, was totally unsuitable due to an amazing proliferation of mud. This would have made conditions very sordid indeed. Hence the decision was made to carry on pushing trips initially from the surface with the hope of finding a suitable campsite quickly.

Time rolled on and York's ranks were swelled by a few outside members to form our largest expedition so far. On the 6th of July the land rover duly set off from York and base camp was set up two days later. A basic top camp was set up the following day and caving started. The usual early expedition enthusiasm then saw M2 rigged to the previous limit in a week enabling the first pushing trips to start.

Gareth and Mark were the lucky pair to wearily talk of their finds after the first 26 hour pushing trip. This had gone better than any of us could have dreamed of back in England. "The Undescended Pitch" was

descended! and the cave suddenly changed its dimensions incredibly. So far all the passage in M2 had been fairly small and all movement in the cave, apart from a few odd exceptions, was awkward and tedious. Suddenly we were faced with huge passage and boulder strewn chambers. The very downward direction was followed through meandering stream passage that was wide enough to walk through rather than squeezing and thrutching in the normal Picos manner.

An ideal campsite had been found in a large chamber with a running stream way a matter of feet around the corner. This was at about 750m depth, and being a fairly easy day's caving from the surface, was in just the right place. No time was lost in setting up the camp which was done in one large trip. Due to the sheer number of bags of gear, a portering service was used to take most of it down to about 300m and through "Play the White Man." This is a notoriously nasty, slippery rift passage which is negotiated with great difficulty especially with tackle bags. A traverse line to aid the passage of bags was added early on and proved to be a great help throughout the expedition. In this way most of the gear was taken half way down the cave. This was then picked up by the first camping team, and taken a



Highway Star (S.H. Foster)

further 350m down the cave with each person having to handle three tackle bags. The trip was obviously arduous, but the camp was finally put in, yielding a further 100m of depth on the first camp.

However not everything survived the trip to the camp, for both stoves were damaged whilst negotiating some of the tortuous passage. This meant that the first camping trip had to be cut short to two days long, compared to the average length of four days.

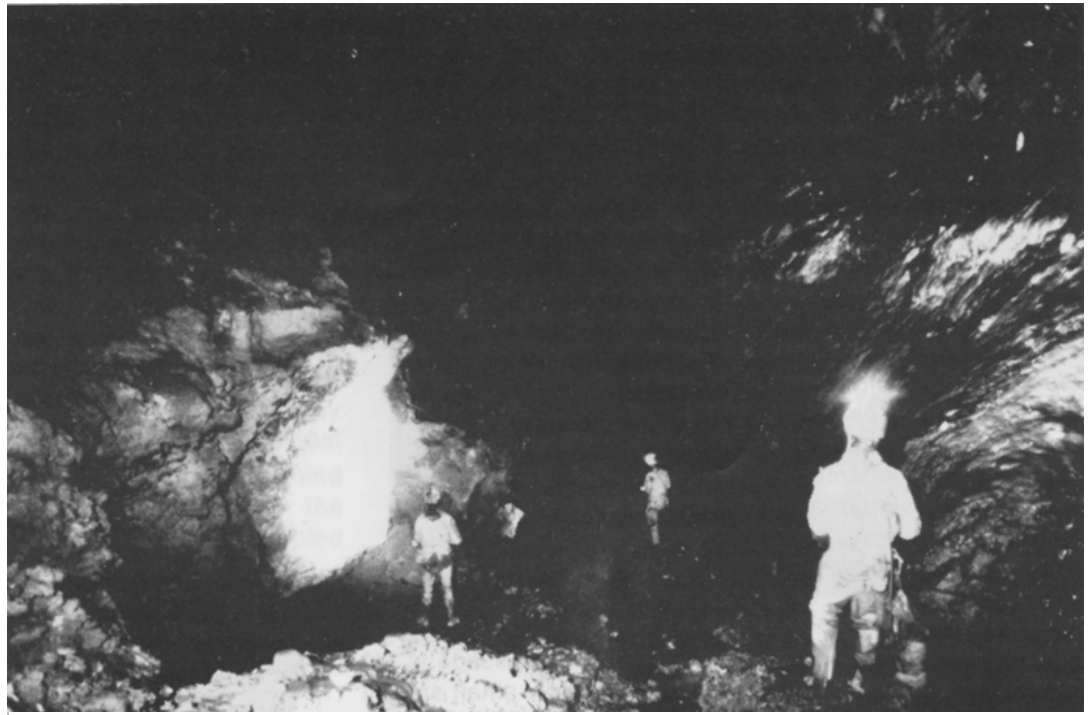
We had learnt a valuable lesson about packing, and so the next trip down took borrowed stoves packaged inside a rocket tube which provided ample protection. A solid fuel back up to the two petrol stoves was also taken down for emergencies so that no future trips would have to be cut short.

We now had a fairly serviceable camp at an ideal spot. The problem was which of the leads was the one to push? The situation was likened to dropping

into an Easgill system, but at 750m depth. Normally there is only one obvious way on with possibly a short side passage which is easily checked out. We now faced a huge number of leads (at one time over 15 were in fact counted!) each of which had to be pushed and was equally likely to produce results. Therefore it was important to get as many people underground as possible in the time available, so many of the underground camps went in the same day that the previous camp came out, just giving them time to relay their discoveries to give the next group an idea of which part of the cave to push.

So with a fast turn around, we managed to have 6 four day underground camps before detackling had to begin. This produced a large amount of very impressive passage including "Ken Hill Gallery." This was of such size that two groups independantly surveyed past "Fourteen Foot Inlet," a large walking passage leading out of the gallery, without seeing it. This was given its name from an impressive stalagmite found along it. Up "Ken Hill Gallery" a sandy pit was found which dropped into "Without a Bronica Chamber," an impressive Mulu-sized passage, down a 25m pitch. This was as its name suggests of fine dimension, and well worth some photographs. Down the chamber a 9m pitch was dropped and more sloping boulder passage was discovered. Further pitches were dropped and wide vadose passage was found. This was named "Meandro Enfermo" after the Spaniard who found it. Unfortunately, it was too tight downstream and boulder choked upstream giving a final depth of -823m.

By traversing around the sandy pit and going further up "Ken Hill Gallery" two similar bolt climbs were encountered, both of about 7m. These were tackled and after further climbing up a boulder filled passage, the "Tea Time Series" was found. This proved to be a fine series of easy pitches which eventually dropped back into known cave passage at "Meandro Enfermo". This made a large closed loop so that,



Tea Time Series (S. Foster)

surveying accuracies could be checked which turned out to be within a reasonable tolerance.

Although M2 was obviously the main objective of the expedition, only a limited number of people were involved with it at any time. Other projects were being carried out, the main ones being looking for further cave entrances and shaft bashing (or initial exploration) of known entrances, and exploration of some of the other going caves.

I8, a major find two years ago with a 160m entrance shaft was a priority. This was not pushed last year due to the entrance being blocked with snow. This year however there was very little snow around, causing major water shortages by the end of the expedition, but also leaving the entrance to I8 clear. The cave was rigged, and hopes were high for a good push. I8 however knew otherwise and did a "Ghar Parau" on us by continuing for another 8m before the rift was choked with boulders. This was very disappointing, but had little effect on morale due to M2 going very well.

Other caves pushed included ALPHA 30. This was a fine pothole consisting of large

pitches, enabling a depth of 300m to be reached without hardly getting off the ropes. BETA 10, a similar pothole mainly explored by our Spanish companions, was also given a good deal of attention. This was pushed last year to about 300m depth in large open shafts and boulder floors. Further exploration this year yielded little more easy passage due to a sudden change in character with tight meandering passage being the main continuation. A further 150m of depth was still added giving a final depth of 480m.

All of these caves had been partially explored in previous years, or at least the entrance noted. Further surface exploration this year produced many more entrances, of which the usual large amount were blocked or choked with boulders. Some remained blocked and PI 103 was one notable exception. This was found on top of a ridge meaning little debris had fallen into it. During the latter half of the expedition this was pushed to a depth of over 400m in just four trips over a period of about 1 week. An easy alternative to camping trips down M2, it was a popular cave and provided great enjoyment. This was most noticeable on one overnight trip

where six of us pushed, surveyed and photographed adding over 200m of depth in one trip.

Other scientific work carried out included a mapping of the major cave entrances to help with future entrance location. Continued Hydrologica work went on to try and discover where the M2 and Vega Huerta waters resurge. This was done using lycopodium spores placed in the streamways in nets placed in both the major gorges forming the boundary to the Western Massif of the Picos. Further work still has to be done on the samples obtained although a possible trace to the Canal de Capozo has been found. This resurgence is at the top end of the Cares gorge, and at an altitude of about 600m would give an entrance to resurgence depth of over 1350m for M2.

M2, or Pozo de Cuetalbo, was still the main concern and camping trips down it were going on continuously throughout the expedition. After "Tea Time Series" had been pushed to a conclusion, our main hopes again turned to the downstream route. This had been pushed initially down three impressive wet pitches to an impassable rift

passage. A route over the top of the last pitch had been noted earlier and was pushed up a ramp. This yielded a long stretch of impressive ramps tending downwards at a steady angle. Two trips later, a further 100m of depth had been added after dropping another few pitches in boulder floored passage.

However, time had now run out for the expedition and the long task of detackling had to begin. This was done by moving the camp up the cave to reduce the length of each trip. With each person taking two tackle bags, the endless prusiking began. A week later the last bag was brought out and M2 was left to

itself for another year.

So with the bottom of M2 surveyed to 948m, and still going well at the top of an estimated 20m pitch, perhaps the 1 kilometre mark will be reached with the first trip next year. With valuable underground camping lessons learnt, and one of the deepest caves in the Picos, (with still greater potential) this has been York's most successful year, building on solid previous years' work. Finally, I must thank all our sponsors, and ask for continued support to ensure that '87 is as successful for York as '86.

We would also like to thank our sponsors:-
Hoechst Uk (Turners Carbides), Mornflake, Lucyfoods (R.A. Bars), Ringtons (tea), Wilfred Smith (Lycotext), Tate & Lyle, Direct Foods (Protoveg), Rowntree Mackintosh, Lyon Equipment, Inglesport, St. Ivel, Sunwheel Foods, Phenoix Equipment, Saunders Tents, Terry's of York, Univ. of York, Sports Ccuncil.

Play the White Man (S. Fowler)

