

“BENEATH VEGA HUERTA”

Y.U.C.P.C. PICOS '89 EXPEDITION



Top camp at Cares Gorge (to the right of the col). Photo: P. Thorlby

INTRODUCTION

York University Cave and Pothole Club (YUCPC) returned to the Picos de Europe National Park in Northern Spain during the summer of 1989 for its seventh year. The team this year consisted of 8 YUCPC veterans of the area, two members of Salford University Cave and Pothole Club and 4 newcomers.

BACKGROUND

Following the discovery of a sump (traced to Caul de Cgrozo in the Cares Gorge) in M2 (Pozo de Cuetalbo) in 1987 (-986m; Senior; 1987) the 1988 expedition, under the leadership of Bruce Grieve, returned to pursue a lead in B3 (then at -240m) in addition to ongoing shaft bashing. The expedition saw the arrival of the SEG (Seccin Espeleologa Geologicas) working alongside our established partners the SEII (Seccin Espeleologa Ingenieros Industriales). After a slow start, Steve Harrop and Dave Hetherington whilst shaft bashing in the far reaches of the B area discovered an entrance which they labelled B47 (Pozo de la Garita Cimera). B47 was pushed in a very short space of time to an estimated (un-descended) pitch of 50m at -360m. This cave was not looked at in 1989 although it still warrants serious attention. Whilst B47 was being pushed, B3 was also being explored.

Pozo del Llastral (83), first discovered in 1984 and marked bottomed in 1985 (effectively snow plugged at -30m) was looked at again in 1987. It lies on the same fault lines as M2 (about 250m west) although the entrance is 50m lower. Snow plugged shafts also on the same fault, may provide higher entrances. The amount of snow around Vega Huerta, changes from year to year and in 1987 the snow in the entrance of B3 had melted sufficiently to allow progress.

The cave was pushed down an 80m snow ramp - an entertaining descent combining abseiling and glissading, to a short section of narrow rift (with more than its fair share of oversuits to answer for), a 7m pitch followed shortly by a 36m pitch a ramp, a 7m pitch, another ramp which you drop down through to land on a large block wedged across the top of a 23m pitch. A trickle of water enters here down an aven.

A short section of rift and a 14m pitch is followed by another ramp and a narrow meandering rift. The rift is passable by a 30m descending body-sized tube in the top of the rift, made awkward by two constricted bends, finally emerging over a 20m pitch. This tube is gained by traversing high up the ramp preceding, and passing a U shaped pitch (abseil to the V in the rope and prussic up the other side). Meander of the Elephants, or more simply "The Squeeze" represents the only major obstacle in the cave and would pose a serious problem if ever an injured person needed to be evacuated from beyond it. Following the squeeze, another set of straight forward pitches (and a trickle of water) leads to the 1987 limit at -240m.

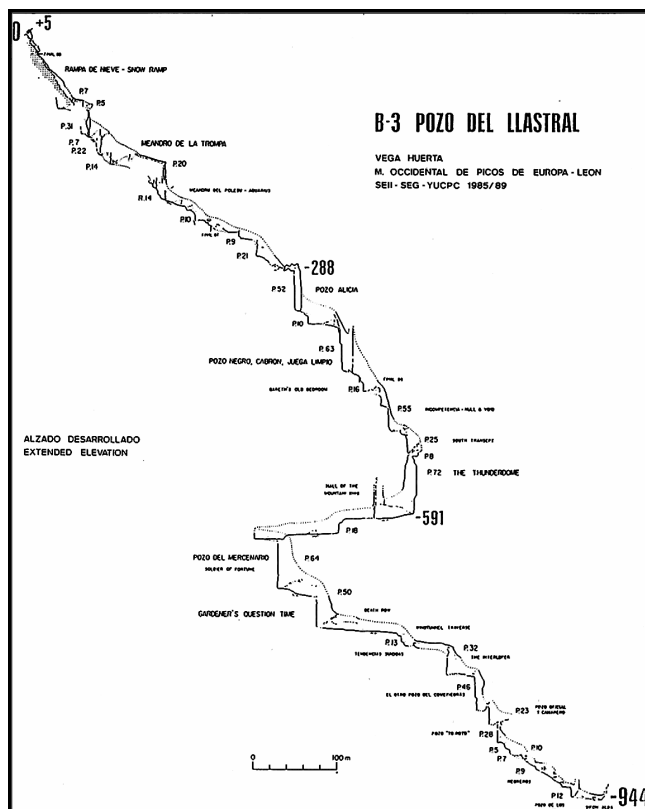
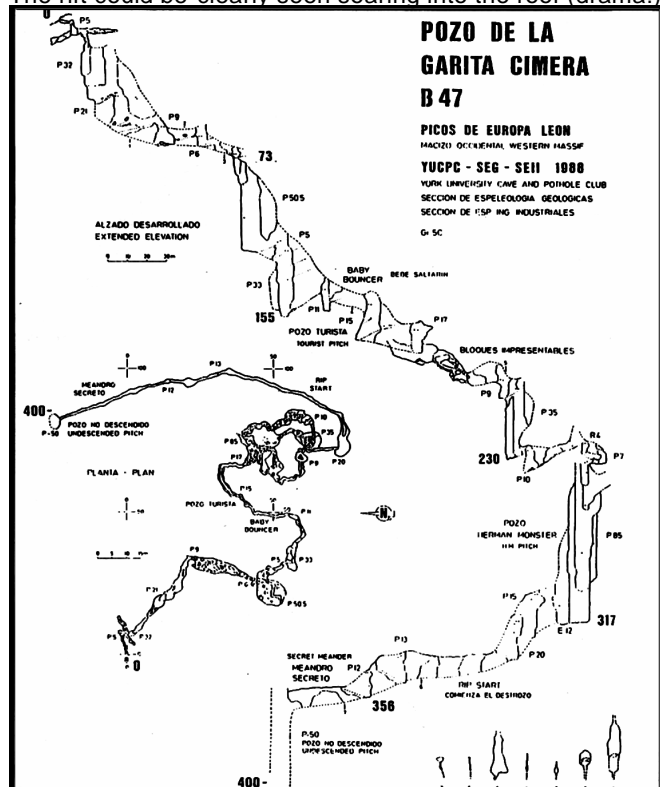
The story resumes in 1988 when the level of the snow ramp had changed which meant major re-rigging of the entrance series. The snow ramp was broken by a pretty ice chamber - Santa's Grotto. The cave was pushed from its previous limit down several more straight forward pitches to a superb 52m free hang in a circular shaft (Alicia) 10m in diameter. This marked the start of massive open rift (50-60m high, 10-15m wide). Continuing down a 10m pitch and a 63m pitch (Pozo Negro) descended initially against a sloping wall and three rebelayes. The bottom of Negro marked the end of work done in 1988 and is what we returned to in 1989.

Pozo del Llastral

Base Camp was established and a barbed wire fortress was erected to discourage marauding Vacas (who have a tendency to trample tents and leave steaming piles) which worked very well until the end when someone left the gate open!

The Spanish group carried up some substantial steel frame tents which served as cooking and communal tents. An attempt by these to blow away was foiled by two English covers hanging onto the steel frames, which were finally repaired using some bent cutlery (you have to improvise).

Dave B and Henry pushed a 55m pitch, Steve, Steve and Chris dropped a 7m pitch to the edge of a 'rather deep pool', beyond which all that could be seen was a large flake, 'beyond which lay caverns measureless to man'. Approaching the edge of the flake revealed a friendly but black hole (later named the "Thunderdome"). The rift could be clearly seen soaring into the roof (dramatic!)



Descending from the base of Thunderdome a narrow meandering rift is entered (reminiscent of Crab Walk in Giants Hole), with a small stream. This continues for 80m to a small pitch and small chamber, then a further 120m to a respectable 60m pitch pushed by Buitre, Javier and Miquel.

Steve B and Dave B established the first camp and pushed 'Gardeners Question Time', a 50m pitch with a lot of loose choss at the top. They exited after one night, Steve learning that sleep is impossible in the single point hammock. This was replaced in later camps by a camping mat placed on the only flat ground, on top of the large boulder in the centre, fine if you don't roll in your sleep!

Chris and Henry followed with a second camp, pushing Death Row, a traverse somewhere in the rift on loose blocks, with equally loose blocks above, required care. At the end of this Bob and Andrea caught up (having come in on a day trip without tackle), Bob pushed the short pitch Tendencias Suicidas but then he and Andrea ran out of time and exited.

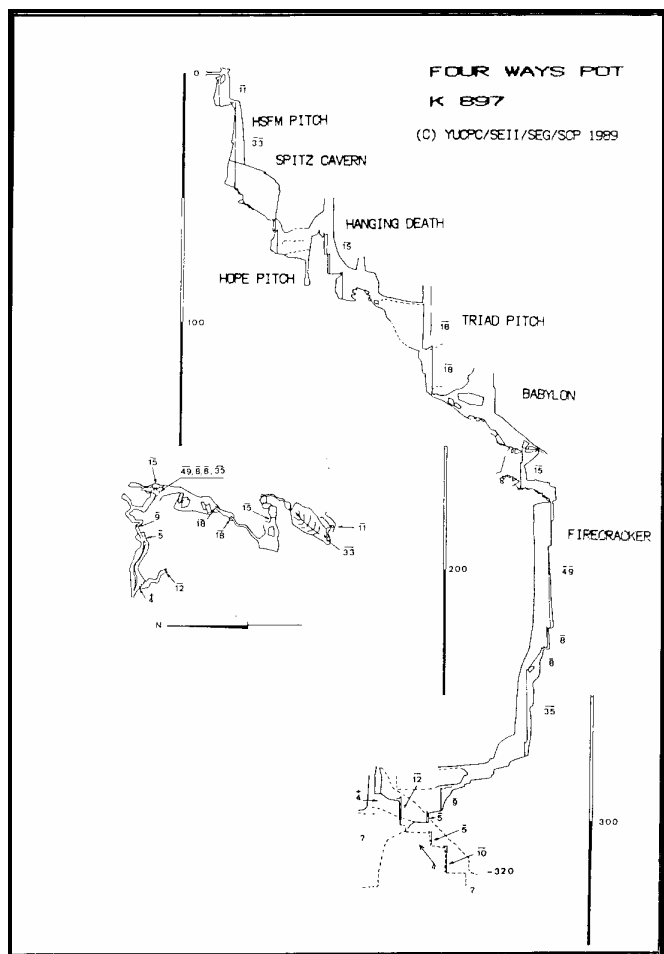
The pitch lands in a small chamber with a pool, opening out onto a large rift. The rift quickly doses down and after scrambling over flakes a rope is seen disappearing through a small draughting hole, landing 3m further on a large block wedged in a rift. It is easier to climb over a block than to follow the rope which was installed for tackle.

Pushing continued along a very draughty rift (wind tunnel traverse), along a ledge in the roof, climbing down easily to regain the stream and the head of a 32m pitch. This was rigged and they continued to the head of the next pitch.

Pete, not wanting the hassle of camping, pushed el Otro Pozo del Comepiedras on a solo trip.

The Spanish increased the capacity of camp to four men and two overlapping camps pushed down a series of small pitches to a siphon at -944m. The draughting phreatic passage above the last pitch was reported which although awkward to get to will probably provide a sump bypass. the expedition had run out of time by now and derigging had to start.

After surveying and photography the cave was derigged and top camp moved to base-camp over seven days (with only five members of the English team remaining), leaving time for a well earned day on the beach before catching the ferry home.



FOUR WAYS POT (K997/897)

B47 was not touched this year, we decided that with B3 going quite deep we would run out of rope.

While prospecting in the K area (the eastern end overlooking the Cares gorge) up on the ridge bordering the Pi area (see map) Angus Martin and Steve B found K997 and later K897 which proved to be an alternative and easier entrance to the same system.

The entrance to K997 is a hole 10' off the floor in the side of a cliff – a crawl leads to a rift opening onto a 7m pitch. A series of small pitches and ramps finally drops into Spitz cavern (15m pitch).

ENTRANCE LOCATION

Work was done by Carlos and the Spanish team locating entrances of the major caves with respect to peaks in the area. These have been plotted (see map). Also plans of B3, B47 and M2 have been superimposed onto a surface map.

CONCLUSION

Some good work has been done this year pushing B3 to -944m and K897 to -320m. Our knowledge of this caving area is slowly being pieced together. We have discovered two caves nearly 1000m deep and two are still going around -350m, demonstrating the importance of this caving area which will continue to provide a major challenge to cavers for a number of years to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the enthusiasm of the expedition members; Dave Binks (landrover); Steve Brooks; Mike Edgington (treasurer); Chris Gibson; Pete and Andrea Hartley; Steve Harrop; Angus Higgins; Henry Hill (membership) Simon Mann (equipment); Dave Middleton; Bob Riley; Paul Thorlby (leader); Martin Williams; Andrew Wilson.

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