

# Speleology

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# Expedition Report: Matienzo, Spain 2001

Juan Corrin reports on the ongoing exploration in northern Spain.

With the Foot & Mouth outbreak in the UK in 2001 it was expected that a large group of cavers would converge on Matienzo to enjoy unrestricted access to the hills and caves over Easter. More than 60 people turned up, including 40 cavers. There were a number of first-timers, and the campsite was crowded. The weather was cloudy and cold for most of the time with a couple of days' rain over the fortnight. More than 1.6km of passages were surveyed, the longest length of nearly 500m in site 1332, Cueva de Juan Lombro. Martin Holroyd extended the upstream sump in Cueva Vallina by 200m and another 192m of higher level passage were also surveyed.

Fewer cavers came out for the very dry summer, but another 1.8km was newly explored. The highlights of the July / August visit included linking site 1338 with Coteron, the opening up of Hidden Hole to over 700m and the still-going explorations in site 408, Cueva de los Helechaes – all on the south side of La Vega.

The number of sites of speleological interest increased at the end of the year by 108, giving a total of 1715 with over 227km of cave passage explored.

**A summary of our 31st year in Matienzo follows, classified by the various caving areas. A map will appear in the 2002 report<sup>1</sup>.**

## Four Valleys System

At Easter, the sump in *Ovlov Passage* in **Cueva Carcavueso** was dived into a descending 15m-long rift chamber with a narrow squeeze. This was pushed through in August into a wide passage with smooth walls, gravel bottom and zero belay points. Mark Stretton was only on one bottle so, after about 30m, he returned with the passage still wide open. The passage takes a good flow of water in flood and is further into the hill than the **Cueva Bollón** passages, and is still heading west.

At the eastern end of Carcavueso, small passages were surveyed below *Rhinoceros Passage*, near Andy Quin's Foot.

In **Cueva Bollón**, entered through the **Hole in the Road** (site 1452), the passage heading west near the base of the 1452 slope was explored during a very dry period in the summer. A descent of about 10m lands at the edge of a shallow pool and solid passage can be followed for only 10m before the route is filled with unstable boulders. The next 50 or so metres

requires weaving between boulders and ends at a draughty dig.

Bits and pieces were looked at around the *Mushroom Field* above Cueva Carcavueso. Site **1671**, is a draughty, wet weather resurgence and this was dug out but requires further work to proceed. The draughty sites **1680**, **1681** and **1682** were documented for future investigation.

Some resurveying was carried out in **Hoyuca** to better show the depths in and beyond the entrance series.

The surface was investigated above the passages that lead to the *Astradome* in **Cueva Hoyuca**, revealing water sinking in a high level depression and a number of interesting sites. The sink (site **1618**) was cleared of a couple of boulders to expose a short crawl into 30m of walking size passage that choked in two directions. The water feeding the depression comes from two caves: site **1617** is hands-and-knees for 20m to a split where the passage continues beyond a diggable section; site **1666** has been explored for 30m and continues. Sites **1667**, **1670**, **1672** are all draughting holes that may yield to further digging.

In Riaño, a few metres southeast of the entrance to **Cueva Riaño**, the **Mad Axe Woman Cave** (site 1630) was dug out at Easter, Whit and summer and an arch can be seen ahead. The 30m long cave still holds some promise as a quicker route to the inner reaches of Riaño. Site **1496**, 100m up the hill from the main **Hoyuca** entrance, was dug further but much more is required.

The length of the Four Valleys System (Cuevas Hoyuca, Riaño, Lluva and Carcavueso) is now 42951m.

Above **Hoyuca**, at Fuente las Varas, the sink at the road side (**Fuente las Varas Cave**, site 104) was tested to a small resurgence (**1614**) some 30m below. It had been thought that the sink might have been the source of the water for the *Astradome* in **Hoyuca** or the water flowing from **Cueva de la Canal** (101). When it was clear that the water in Canal had an unknown source, that cave was re-explored and surveyed but no further progress was made at the aqueous, flat-out end. The water flowing out of the Fuente las Varas Cave resurgence was followed down the hillside to an open, wet pitch and possible passage (site **1615**) that turned out to be a wet dig in a rift.

Above *Trident Passages* in **Hoyuca**, on the hillsides north and east of the **Carcavueso** sink, a number of sites were discovered or re-visited. For example, site

**348** was rediscovered after a fire and the nearby small rift caves **1610**, **1611**, **1612** and **1613** documented; site **869** was surveyed and, a surprise, site **1623** – an 18m fragment of walking-sized phreatic passage – was discovered. Sites **1636**, **1637**, **1638**, **1639**, **1646**, **1647**, **1648**, **1649** and site **1650** – all along the base of a thin sandstone bed – remain to be explored.

## North Vega and El Naso

In **Simas del Picon**, a climb up an aven closed in.

In cave **415**, an old series of "lost" pitches near the end of the cave were finally revisited and polished off. The four awkward and muddy drops descended some 60m, with a 15m free climb at the end to finish at –69m, the deepest section of the cave at an altitude of 197m.

The intriguing "415 corner" (an area that may provide a link between the Four Valleys System and the North Vega network) received attention with various digs being attacked, some to a conclusion: **Preying Mantis Pot** reached a depth of 27m with two pitches ending at a 30mm slot; site **1483** became too tight after one body length; Pants (site **1655**) was worked at over four days with more excavating required and the draughty Victor's Dig (site **1697**) was left as a mess of boulders against a possible solid wall.

The water trough shakehole dig on El Naso was pushed into a 6m chamber. Small shafts towards Cruz Llorada **1633**, **1634** and **1635** were explored.

In **Fuente Aguanaz**, the major resurgence some 5km away to the northwest, "the inlet on the left" after the second sump was pushed at Easter. The passage continues tight through a few short climbs. A small chamber leads to a larger one with mud and boulder walls and a stream enters through the ceiling. The third sump was pushed through small passage to an airbell and another small hole that could be passable with smaller bottles. This was pushed for 5m in the summer, where it became too tight, although "running water could be heard from the rock fall above".

Spanish archaeologists have permission to excavate in **Cueva Cofresedo**. The cave is revealing Neolithic animal bones, human remains and artefacts at a number of places. The archaeologists are concentrating at spots within sight of daylight. Even picking into thin layers of sediment from the walls at the entrance has revealed mussel shells.

<sup>1</sup> To be published in *Speleology* 3





The Archaeological Dig in Cueva Cofresnedo.  
Photo: Juan Corrin



The Iron Age Pot from La Cuvia de la Vega.  
Photo: Peter Smith

Pieces of a large, Iron Age pottery container were removed from **La Cuvia de la Vega** (site 360) after being discovered in March.

### Ozana & Mullir / Muela

A few holes on Muela (sites **807**, **808**, **809** and **810**) were "ticked off" at Easter but nothing exciting or promising was discovered. In the summer, site **858** was excavated for a number of days in an attempt to dig out the entrance. In the Ozana area, site **1640** was dug to reveal 20m of filled phreatic passage and, nearer to Codisera, site **1641** was descended 7m to a choke.

### South Vega, Seldesuto and the Trillos area

**Sima de la Piluca** (site 472) was re-explored, surveyed and extended in the small streamway. Various draughting sites in the cave could be dug. The system is now 314m long and 141m deep.

During Easter, Whit and the summer, **Cueva Cefrales** (site 42) was resurveyed and extended down a 16m deep pit. This 500m long fragment could be the key to opening up an area relatively devoid of passage.

The passages above water in the resurgence **Comellantes** were resurveyed and the documented length increased from 440 to 672m. This included an extension at the western end where an enlarged rift entered 5m high chambers and passages. Interesting features included a stony choke just below the surface and Spanish names on the walls, dated 2001! Some ancient pottery has been found on the sloping wall of the entrance passage.

More tying up of loose ends occurred in **Reñada** where passages between Ghost Lake and sump one were resurveyed to obtain the Z coordinates. Coincidentally, 135m of 'new' passage was surveyed and more passage was pushed and surveyed beyond Ghost Lake in October and at the end of the year.

Martin Holroyd continued his dive in upstream **Cueva Vallina**, pushing through smaller rifts and silty passage for 200 extra metres. The route continues in similar fashion. A high level extension – *Climb on Big Junction Series* – was explored through small passage for some 190m, and a nearby draughting boulder choke was declared a major project for the future. In the summer a small extension was made between boulders near *Who Knows Where* chamber that appears to continue up.

In **Cueva de Juan Lombrero**, the western end of the cave was pushed, near the start of the final chamber, down a 126m broken pitch. At the base, water entered a tight 3m high rift that could be seen to enlarge but became smaller again. At the top of the 126m pitch, new passage headed east into the *Good Friday the 13th Extensions*. The passage is varied going over some undescended holes and muddy climbs to a small phreatic 'Sanatogen-type' passage. The original end was excavated and the passage entered required digging in two more places until *Stop and Go Series* finally ended at a bedding some 5–6cm high. This would appear to be very close to **Hammered** and **Hidden Holes**.

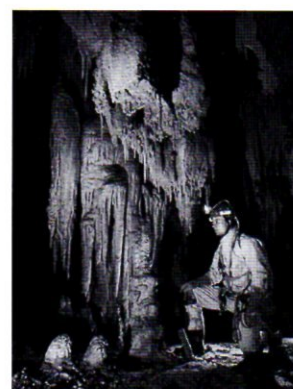
**Hidden Hole** (site 458) was finally opened up at a very narrow pitch head. The drop of 57m entered big passage that is well decorated in places. There are a number of spots still to push including 20m and 50m pitches and a good dig. **Hidden Hole** reached a length of 711m and 118m deep. The lower passages are at the same altitude as **Cefrales** but about 100m away.

In site **1338**, a couple of drops were descended in the *Sentinel Chamber* to take the depth to -172m. The cave was detackled early on at Easter, even though it was described as "wide open and still

going". This optimism was well founded as the second trip in the summer connected the cave into the South Vega System in **Torca de Coteron** at the *Edge of the Universe* and part way down the '81 Depths series.



The Sentinel in site 1338.  
Photo: Peter Eagan.



Torben Redder in Hidden Hole Grotto.  
Photo: Peter Eagan.

At Easter, in **Torca de Papá Noel**, a crawl at the end was pushed to a rift (*Polyp Passage*) and beyond, a 10m undescended draughty pitch with a high level visible across. The area around *BBQ at Saucepan Street* was looked at again where a possible way on involves a 20m bolt route. None of the pitches were descended but they appear clean-washed and narrow at the bottom. A dig in *Snow Bat Passage* was attempted but it appears to be a long-term effort.

### The South Vega System – present and potential links

Azpilicueta links with Reñada around the Pipecleaner, Zeppelin Hangers, Sanatogen areas  
 Azpilicueta links with Reñada 2 via Giga Hall and the Rub-a-Dub Dubs  
 Coteron links with Reñada down the Edge of the Universe  
 Coteron links with Reñada through Bootlace Passage  
 Cabaña links with Reñada via a 50m aven near Stuffed Monk  
 Site 388 should link with Cabaña adding 242m length  
 Papá Noel should link with Azpilicueta through Snow Bat Passage to the Coffin levels adding 2481m length  
 Papá Noel should link with Coteron and Reñada at the terminal Coteron boulder choke over the Reñada ramp  
 Site 1338 links to Coteron around the 81 Depths area adding 618m length  
 Juan Lombrero should link to Reñada around the Breakdown Chamber area adding 1393m  
 Juan Lombrero should link to Hammered & Hidden Holes adding around 70m to the length  
 Coteron could link to Cueva at Marvin's Marvels adding 441m to the length  
 Helechaes (408) should link to somewhere! perhaps Coteron  
 Hidden Hole should link to somewhere! perhaps Cefrales

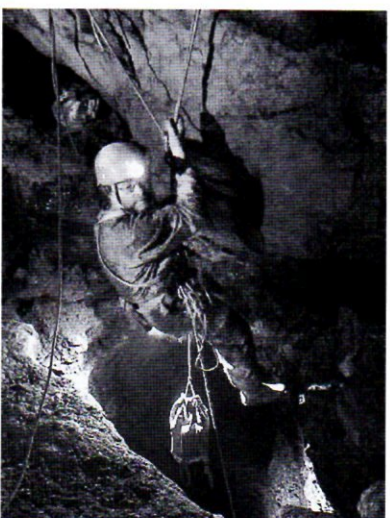




Entrance View at Cueva de los Helechaes.  
Photo: Peter Eagan.



Terry Whitaker in the Top Levels of  
Cueva de los Helechaes.  
Photo: Peter Eagan.



(Above and Below)  
Alistair Neill on Hoedown Shaft,  
Cueva de los Helechaes.  
Photo: Peter Eagan.



Site 408, **Cueva de los Helechaes**, was a focus throughout the year. The cave had been quickly explored down 2 pitches in 1982. The entrance was 'rediscovered'

at Easter and a pile of 2000 – 3000 year old pottery found on a ledge to one side. The warm draught invited re-exploration and this was carried out at Whit giving a surveyed length of 99m and a depth of 22m. A floor-less tube over the top of the first 10m pitch was also bolted to, but choked. In the summer, apparent passage across the first pitch was entered by climbing part way down and then using the scaling pole to reach the opposite side. This lead immediately to a traverse over two pits, the base of the second was later entered through site **1679**. The walking passage then met pitches of 10m and 16m and finally a 4m pitch to the superb **Hoedown Shaft**, pitches of 30m and 58m. At the base of this, a tight section of meanders leads to an unexplored pitch of 40m. The cave is over the **Codisera Arm** in **Coteron** and is presently heading into the unknown. Other new sites in the area include **1657**, **1658** and **1659**.

In December, **Cueva Cumpleaños** (over the western side of the Renada entrance series, and entered once in 1983) was re-explored and photographed.

Newly explored smaller sites on the south side of La Vega include **1219**, **1624**, **1625**, **1629**, **1632**, **1651**, **1652**, **1656** (where old antlers were found), **1658**, **1659**, **1662**, **1663**, **1664**, **1675**, **1683**, **1687**, **1688**, **1691**, **1692**, **1693**, **1694**, **1698** and **1699**. A number of these are above the northern limit of **Vallina**.

In the hunt for yet more holes in this limestone cheese, an assortment of digs had various amounts of effort expended on them: **1386** was deemed long term and filled in again; site **1390** (the twin stream sink) was dug on a couple of occasions and is still worthwhile; the **Volcano** with its warm draught was attacked on at least five days in the year and was surveyed to 35m with depth of 11m; site **1392** was choked; **1685** requires more digging. At the end of the year, a walk round the Hoyo de Puchas area with a local farmer revealed a number of draughting holes and more open shafts to go at in 2002.

In the Seldesuto area, the left hand passages in **Cueva Arenal** were resurveyed at Whit. This showed that the digs at the southern end are worth pursuing despite the **Foam Dome** extensions.

At Trillos, site **1665** was explored down a 25m pitch to a choke; and a couple of other sites remain unexplored. At Alisas, a number of sites were positioned correctly with a GPS and the small sites **1083**, **1085** and **1086** explored.

The South Vega System should see a flurry of

connections as more caves are joined. The list in the box above summarises the present connections and the projected links that could increase the length from 26.1km

to over 30km, with 13 entrances. (All this is without the big one – a link through to Vallina would add at least 26.7km).

## Archaeology

In September 2001, *The Archaeology of the Matienzo Depression North Spain* was published as a British Archaeological Report (Cobo & Smith, 2001). This large volume details the mainly subterranean discoveries from the Upper Palaeolithic through to the Civil War, with many line drawings, photos and surveys. A number of Spanish experts have contributed to the work, putting many of the artefacts and other remains into a regional and international context. Chapters include reports on the excavated sites, e.g. **Cubío Redondo**: a Mesolithic land snail shell-midden and **Sima del Diente**: a Late Bronze Age Burial Cave. There are also thematic studies on Palaeolithic cave art, schematic-abstract art, ground stone implements, storage urns, pre-roman ard-shares and observations on protohistoric metal working in Cantabria.

## Conclusions

Once again, there were more questions raised for next year than were answered during 2001!

Frank Addis, who photographed a number of the Matienzo caves more than 20 years ago, has made his collection of about 450 colour slides available for scanning. These pictures are slowly being added to the cave description pages of the web site, e.g. helium ballooning in the Astradome and pictures from Solviejo.

The Matienzo web site contains updated information about all the sites, with photos and surveys. ■

## References

Cobo, Jesus Ruiz & Smith, Peter (2001), *The Archaeology of the Matienzo Depression*. British Archaeological Report BAR S975. Oxford: John and Erica Hedges Ltd. ISBN 1-84171-183-7.

(This book is in A4 format, 224 pages. British Archaeological Reports, 7 Longworth Road, Oxford OX2 6RA, England. Obtainable from Hadrian Books, 122 Banbury Road, OXFORD, OX2 7BP. £45 plus P&P. [bar@hadrianbooks.co.uk](mailto:bar@hadrianbooks.co.uk))

## Acknowledgements

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## A Report of Matienzo 2002 exploration will appear in Speleology 3.

www.matienzo.org.uk

Matienzo 2000: *Caves & Caving* **89**, Winter 00/01  
Matienzo 1999: *Caves & Caving* **87**, Spring 2000  
Matienzo 1998: *Caves & Caving* **83**, Spring 1999  
Matienzo 1997: *Caves & Caving* **79**, Spring 1998