

Uzueka Discoveries - Easter 2008

Uzueka reccie and Gour Inlet extension discovery

Thu. 20 Mar. 2008

Footleg, Paul Dold, Nick Fincham

With the weather forecast for the coming week looking very wet, we decided to make a reccie trip into Uzueka before the weather broke, in order to familiarise ourselves with the system and maybe survey a bit of the known main passages for which the original data had been lost. I had been as far as the low wet crawl/duck just beyond Pig Trotter Hall before, but had not gone through as it was unexpectedly wet on that trip. So we quickly reached that point. The long duck was easily passed, and turned out to be the wettest of the obstacles leading to the big passages. This surprised me a little as the description of the cave implied that there were other wet and squalid sections to the route, but glosses over the fact that this section of passage is a low airspace crawl which makes for a 10m long duck best passed on your back with your face to the ceiling.

Once in the Gorilla Walk we made good progress along the variously stooping and crawling wide bedding passage half full of water. We were rather surprised when the main river unexpectedly sumped just after we thought we had passed the 2nd river inlet, and we spent some time in some crawls which are on the right side of the Gorilla Walk in this area. We started up a small inlet before realising this was the wrong way. These passages do not appear to have been surveyed. We realised that we had been fooled by the scale of the survey we had with us underground, and had only actually reached the start of the phreatic zone. We rejoined the main passage and investigated a big aven off to left of the main passage which looks like a fine bolting project. A fine second aven can be entered via a slot in the wall of the first aven. Again this is not on the survey. We then entered an exciting looking wide flat bedding plane under one wall of the first aven and found ourselves back in the main passage again, instead of the exciting new lead we thought we had found! We continued on up the main passage to the true 2nd river inlet which leads to Riaño. Here we noticed that the main flow of water actually comes out of a completely separate inlet just beyond the 2nd river inlet. We looked at this and the water comes out from a flat out low airspace tight crawl. Like most of our exciting 'new' discoveries, we later found out that Lank and Harry Long knew all about it as we talked to them in the bar about our trip. It just isn't marked on the survey!

We now continued along the Near Stomps, not really knowing where exactly we were due to the small scale of survey and lack of significant landmarks. Eventually we arrived at Gour Inlet which was the first positive feature we could identify, easily recognised by the cream coloured flowstone on the stream bed where it emerges into the main river passage. We took a look up this, crawling in water and found ourselves back in the main passage again! The inlet actually comes into this bedding oxbow crawl part way round, and we located it on a second lap. Initially flat out in the water it quickly gains height and we explored to an impressive aven at the end where a bolting project has been partially undertaken in the past. Using a laser gadget, we measured the aven ceiling height to be at least 35m above the floor when standing in the stream. While looking around this large final chamber Paul traversed along a ledge to enter a passage several metres up the back wall which appeared to have been entered before. Meanwhile Nick checked out the low airspace pool where the stream emerges into the aven and confirmed it sumped a few metres in. Paul returned after a while, having found a way on via a slot hidden in the wall behind a flake which led into new passage. This had clearly not been entered before, as the mud floor was untouched shiny sticky mud. He had followed this passage to a pitch down into a streamway. When he returned we could not be sure if this was the main Uzueka water or not as he did not take a compass with him. Needing to be out in time for birthday celebrations that evening we called it a day and after a quick look along the Far Stomps to see if Paul recognised the passage from what he had seen down his pitch, we set off out. We decided to take the 2nd river inlet to connect to Riaño and complete what we think is the first ever Uzueka to Riaño through trip. This inlet was confirmed to be awkward in places, having three tight sections near the Riaño end. The first is a squeeze between a solid limestone roof slab and flakes on the floor, followed by two flat out tight squeezes in the stream which we had to dig a bit of the gravel out of to pass.

Once in Riaño we were on familiar ground and made it to the entrance in around 2 hours. We were fairly clean until the final few metres exiting Riaño, where the rain had caused a liquid mud puddle to form in the flat out entrance crawl. We walked back to the car outside Riaño bar, giving several locals a good laugh as we passed them sat outside their houses watching us walk by covered in liquid mud.

Uzueka Gour Inlet survey trip and exploration of new streamway

Fri. 21 Mar. 2008

Footleg, Paul Dold, Nick Fincham

With the weather still holding for another day, we returned to Paul's discovery of the previous day to survey the new passage and descend the pitch at the end. Having worked through the entire Uzueka survey data file over the previous 2 months, I had determined that the original survey data for the whole of Gour Inlet was lost, so we started surveying from the junction in the Near Stomps. Once we reached the aven chamber at the end of the known inlet, Nick set up the stove we had brought in and we made some soup to warm us up. We rigged a ladder on the climb up into the start of the passage beyond to make it safer, and continued the survey through the muddy crawling passages to the pitch. Then while Paul started bolting and I finished sketching, Nick returned to fetch the ladder as Paul had forgotten we needed it to descend the pitch! By the time we were ready to descend, time was getting on, so we decided to have a quick look at the streamway below but finish the survey at the top of the pitch for today. We were already clear that this was new passage heading away from the known cave because we were trying out surveying using a Palm PDA and Auriga cave surveying software. This plotted the survey as we entered the data, and added it to the map of the existing cave I had already entered in advance. We were heading roughly due East away from any known passage in Uzueka.

The pitch was a straight hang of around 8m into a widening rift. Landing in a thigh deep pool, the stream entered down a 2m cascade which was covered in the same cream coloured flowstone which is found all along Gour inlet. Downstream sumped round the first corner, but upstream led into a big hading rift where we could climb a long way up a precipitous slope to a point where we appeared to be below a large boulder choke. Climbs up into the boulders looked possible but precarious, and a lot of rubble had obviously come down into the chamber from this choke in the past. Continuing upstream at the base of this chamber, the stream soon sumped again, but an obvious dry oxbow provided a bypass and the stream was regained. Further crawling on cream coloured flowstone in the stream led to another sump, with another dry oxbow. But this time the oxbow led into a boulder choke and with no easy way on, we called it a day. With passage still needing to be surveyed, we decided to leave most of the equipment in the cave and made a fast exit via the Gorilla Walk and the Uzueka maize field entrance we had come in.

That evening we found out that the Giant Panda entrance which entered the Gorilla Walk at Windy Inlet had been fully opened and stabilised, so future trips would be possible via this faster way in. This entrance bypasses the most flood prone sections of the entrance series and Gorilla Walk, but the weather broke that evening and the river in the Matienzo depression the following morning was flooding over the fields. The main stream in Uzueka looked like it would be too wet even via this new entrance to be safe. The rain continued for several days and we wondered if we would be able to get back in before the end of our Easter visit.

Uzueka Gour Inlet follow up trip and further extension

Wed. 26 Mar. 2008

Footleg, Paul Dold

Finally with the rain easing off again, and water levels in the valleys noticeably lower, we decided to try and get back down Uzueka via the new Giant Panda entrance. There was a sizable stream sinking next to the entrance, but this water was not met in the cave until the last rope climb at the bottom of the pitches. The stream then conveniently sinks down another slot in the floor just before the first lower awkward section and is rejoined in the rift beyond. We were back in the Gorilla Walk in 30 minutes, with a substantial amount of water entering with us out of Windy Inlet. This had been completely dry on our previous trips. The Gorilla Walk had plenty of airspace from here onwards however, and we made quick progress to the head of the pitch into our new stream passage.

We surveyed as we went upstream, working quickly as a two man team with a laser measure and PDA to enter the data into. The only problem was hearing the measurements being shouted at me by Paul when in the hands and knees crawling sections of the new streamway. Once we had reached the final boulder choke we both found separate routes into it to investigate the potential for ways on. Paul went higher up, while I squeezed in horizontally at the bottom. I reached a place where a possible continuation was visible through a small hole, and the floor appeared to be mainly loose shale which had fallen in down the slope I was sat on. So I started digging with my hands, and the spoil kept disappearing into a void under a large boulder on the right side of the slope. A large solid boulder was blocking the way on, but I managed to excavate a way down under the boulder where all the spoil was vanishing. Squeezing down I was in a flat out wide space below the boulder, but the same chock stone was blocking the way onwards. I returned to the top of the slope and tried to fit through the triangular hole above the chock stone, but it was smaller than my pelvis. So I tried to chip away at the rock and the wall with another rock. Paul had joined me by this time, and I decided to go back to the ladder pitch to fetch a hammer and chisel.

Paul took over digging while I went back for the gear, and when I returned he told me there was good news and bad news. The bad news was that my trip to fetch the chisel had been a waste of time. The good news was that this was because the chock stone had been removed! Paul had been removing the shale fill around it and found it was not holding up the large boulder as I had thought. So it just dropped into the space under the boulder leaving the way open. We decided to survey as we explored, so we could return with useful data for everything we had explored. The route on

through the boulder choke was now completely open, and soon led into a large chamber with a damp sandy floor which climbed up to a summit in the middle of the room. We named this chamber the 'Soggy Sahara'. From the middle of the chamber the stream could be heard louder than ever, and was found entering the chamber down a 3m cascade at the far side and sinking into the floor. Upstream from here required some careful traversing over a deep pool with a low ceiling, before opening up into a fine tall walking rift passage. Passing some fine lone straws hanging right in the middle of the passage, a long straight section brought us to a right angle bend and more taller fine walking rift. A loud rumble was audible in the distance, and getting louder as we recorded each new survey leg.

Finally we reached the source of the sound, a 6m diameter circular chamber with water raining down from above into a deep pool. The rift just before this point was over 10m high, and the aven itself was impossible to measure due to the spray from above. The water was coming down all over the place, so either it was broken by a ledge as it fell, or it was coming from more than one passage above. I thought I could see a substantial amount of it emerging as a spout about 15m up, but it was so wet we could not be sure of anything. Finishing the sketch with water pouring across the page, we retreated from the spray, wind and noise to start heading out. The most appropriate name we thought of for this pitch at the end of our passage was 'Sensory Deprivation'.

Exiting via Giant Panda was entertaining as the water levels had risen noticeably. In the Gorilla Walk the airspace was lower but still around 50cm. The rift squeezes were wet but not too wet, but close to the pitches it was clear that a lot of water was coming in somewhere and I could not find the way on. Back tracking to a side passage which looked tight, I tried to push on, but found it too awkward. Then Paul had a go and concluded we had not come through anything that tight. So we headed back up to the wet rift I had reached before, and found a climb up just before the water came in, and the awkward section above which was still dry. Back at the bottom of the pitches, the first climb in the full water flow was very wet, but the main pitch was dry at the bottom. However some of the water was met part way up, disappearing behind a flake before the base of the pitch, and the top half of the pitch was rather sporting. Arriving completely clean at the pitch head, we then got completely muddied climbing up the last few metres to the surface. But the substantial stream allowed us to wash off on the surface before walking back to the car at around 1:30am.