WILLIAM PENGELLY CAVE STUDIES TRUST LIMITED

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MATIENZO - SPAIN

Matienzo is a tiny, straggling farming community in the Province of Santander in Northern Spain. Set some twenty miles inland it is ringed by limestone hills and mountains up to 3000m high. L Mills of the Manchester University Speleological Society must take the credit for bringing Matienzo to prominence as a caving region. One morning some ten years ago, while returning from the MUSS expedition to the Picos de Europa, he came upon the depression and realised that the morning mist that filled the valley was completely ringed by limestone hills. Any drainage for the valley had to be underground.

As the sun cleared the mist it became clear that the extent of the valley was greater than first thought and now it is known that the drainage area for the four valleys system covers some 80 square km - approximately the size of the Ingleborough section of the Northern dales. In the ten years of exploration which has followed more length of passage has been discovered than the total length in the Ingleborough region!

The day we arrived, the party underground found a further 2 km of passage, not an everyday event certainly but a typical annual event which, combined with smaller discoveries usually leads to an expedition discovering up to 10km of cave passages.

The first trip was to Cueva Arenal, by Spanish standards quite small. Its strategic importance is that it will provide an entrance to a longer more arduous system, and avoid a long entrance pitch. There is no proof that the connection can be made but the distance is not too great and there is the most enormous draught issuing from the entrance. It will flicker a carbide lamp flame a full fifty feet outside! Considering the size of draughts issuing from other known large cave systems Arenal ought to provide a very large cave indeed.

The entrance is in a cliff face and consists of a high fissure which narrows down quickly to a sloping 5' x 5' passage, a wade across a pool, where the draught actually causes ripples 2" high, leads to a junction. The main passage continues much as before but a low crawl to the side follows into a side rift. A little more climbing and crawling leads to some broken section of boulders and the draught becomes more elusive. Our objective was to break through this boulder choke where the draught went between some rocks. We were armed with a handy little lump hammer, and about an hour's hammering saw us through having demolished a 5 cubic feet rock. More wriggling between boulders led after perhaps 30ft to a stand-up sized passage which ascended and widened.

We were through, here I was, my first caving trip abroad and new passage underfoot. The discovery was not what our leader Barry was looking for but was quite impressive for me. We were in a large wide chamber but every exit was in broken rock and the draught, positively felt at the bottom of the climb, was now totally dispersed. The chamber was perhaps 100ft across and up to 50ft wide. The walls were of a particularly fractured limestone. When I tried

to investigate a hole in the ceiling both handholds and footholds fell away leaving me without support or dignity.

After investigating every nook and cranny we returned to the lower passage, again there was no clue as to where to search. Slowly, we made our way back to the surface, looking at the other side passages on the way for any hopeful leads. We emerged after some six hours into slight drizzle, made our way back to the car, changed, and went back to camp.

As it was a holiday, and there was also the beach, sea, sun, sand and wine to consider, we went on alternate days to the beach at Noja. Just to whet the appetite, the small cliffs surrounding the beach were also of limestone and also had caves in them. One of these was close to our 'spot' so I needs must collect a lamp from the car and pad off in there. It felt surprisingly cold in just a swimming costume and extended for a surprising one hundred and fifty feet, getting lower and rockier as it went.

There is quite a scope for exploration at the coast here for those interested in sea caves, raised beaches etc etc.

The Secondvisit was to Cueva Uzueka whose entrance was in an adjacent valley. This is one of the big caves which was, in fact, the one which had yielded two kilometres prior to our arrival. We were not aiming to go to the end of the cave - this would have been a little optimistic for me considering a lack of expedition experience. Our target was over half way in, where a high level inlet needed investigating.

It is hard to describe in detail large caves as the difficult sections seem to be much greater obstacles and the easy sections are bypassed so quickly that one misses the detail. The entrance to Uzueka is near the bottom of a wooded valley adjacent to a maize field. A small, muddy holeleads across a smallawkward rift rather like the entrance passages to Dog Hole. A narrow walking-sized rift is soon met which zigzags following the joints until a narrowing meeds a transfer to a parallel rift. This was a tight, awkward little rift where one had to keep the feet and body up at roof level, as the bottom was too tight. This was very similar to Buckingham's Rift, in the rift and crawl series of Baker's Pit. If anything, it was tighter and Lenny, who is quite barrel chested, had quite a struggle getting through. Beyond the rift shape, sandy floored passages became bigger and bigger; we passed junctions, passages joined until we were walking easily three and four abreast.

After half a kilometre or so, the character changed to a wider, lower passage until we had to stoop and then kneel and crawl. A short, very low crawl was the next obstacle, a little baling was necessary and to get through it was necessary to sweep fine sand and gravel to one side and breathe out fully, not easy when trying to exert oneself. We had to spend some time here, digging and struggling. The next passages were through a maze of cross rifts and interconnecting scalloped phreatic chambers. The route through

was marked and it was fairly easy walking. We then met three short squeezes where the floor between interconnecting sandy chambers had been dug, leaving 'U' shaped tubes. Again, we had to dig, for perhaps an hour at one of these to get Len through.

Soon after this, we came to a crawl and squeeze down through some boulders (once the end of the cave) led to a low bedding plane with a trickle of water flowing on the floor. Barry had surveyed up to this point and been on a rest day at the beach, when a fellow member of MUSS lifted one or two boulders out of the way to discover the next two or three kilometres the following trip.

The low bedding plane crawl soon lifted to a hands and knees crawl and then joined the main river for this part of the cave. This was a real psychological barrier. A full kilometre unable to stand, sometimes stooping, sometimes on hands and knees in knee deep water. This took a little time and was quite tiring, to say the least. We were carrying a little tackle and the bag I had became an object of hate as it kept filling with water and seemed to snag on every underwater projection. Eventually we reached the end and things became impressive.

The vocabulary of cavers in naming parts of caves often defies the imagination - take Steve Poole naming the passages in the Baker's Pit extension for example - Bakerloor Tunnel, Kariba Dam etc etc. Consider the mockery we make of the Wookey Hole 'Bacon Rind Grotto', Witch Stalagmite, etc. The next section was known simply as the 'Stomps' - this translates as being large, obstacle free and such that one can march, heavy footed, at high speed. It was big. I held back deliberately to gain more of the impression of size as the other's lights advanced into the distance. Travelling like this one misses details, particularly in my spectacle-less state, but I caught glimpses of stalactites, white and spear-like ten, fifteeen feet long suspended in the gloom.

Soon we were to leave this and, using a cross passage of crawling, walking stooping join a similar sized passage running parallel but a few hundred metres away. This too was enormous. We were reaching our objective, a distinctive large sharp bend, where there was an inlet pouring down from the roof, invisible in the gloom. On the outside of the bend there was a steep upwards slope and we were to try to scale this. We had a rope, a ladder, and a bolting kit. Now, bolting is tedious, one hits a bolt and turns it, and hit and turn, and a special drill bit gradually eats its way into the rock and a trickle of white powdered limestone is a measure of success. This is not too bad when stood and one can get a decent swing of the hammer. Once a height has been reached and one is sitting in a harness attached to a ladder swinging about the process is less successful and tiresome.

We were forty feet up the slope using the rope, climbed a further fifteen feet to a large ledge using the ladder, and had bolted up perhaps ten feet, by the time that we decided to call it a day. We had been there perhaps three hours, I certainly was feeling tired. We could not yet discern the top of

the ledge where the waterfall was issuing, nor could we see the ceiling. It was very, very big. We ate the remnants of our chocolate, recharged the carbide lamps, and set off.

The obstacles did seem big for the exit but one by one they were passed the Kilometre long Gorilla Walk I found much easier "a la sealion", lying out flat, floating, and pulling myself forward with my front flippers. After a half-way recharge of Carbide lamps we carried on, virtually non-stop to the entrance. The rift-squeeze near the entrance delayed us slightly but eventually we came to the night air, and the croaking of night time frogs. We had been underground for nearly 12 hours and I for one was glad of a rest.

We weekend saw the arrival of my cousin who is also an MUSS member, and now lives with his wife in Santander, working as an English Teacher. Peter & Carmen, Julie and I and a group of MUSS members had a fantastic reunion meal at a village Bodega (bar-restaurant) up in the hills.

The last trip was a tourist one, tourist in the caving sense that is, just for the pure sport of a good thrash underground. This was to Cueva Agua, which translates fairly easily as Water Cave, and is an apt name. It is approximately three kilometres long. It consists of virtually one passage. In brilliant sunlight the four of us donned wetsuits and walked the short distance to the cave entrance. It has a big entrance, perhaps twenty feet high and thirty feet wide. Certainly it is bigger than Pridhamsleigh Cavern entrance. The floor was strewn with water rounded pebbles, in high water this is the flood entrance. What makes the story really impressive is that the passage does not get smaller inside the entrance, it gets bigger and bigger.

After a few hundred feet we met pools of water, and then flowing water between sandbanks, and soon we were walking along sometimes paddling, sometimes on sandbanks in a huge river passage. The water gradually deepened. In places where there was no silting up the pools became deeper, and the walls fantastically scalloped. Where the flow was fast and steeper the scalloping had left fluted pinnacles of rock ten twenty feet high in places. We passed the odd tree left wedged in corners. We spotted the odd clump of stalagmite in the distance on the roof. Occasionally it was easier to swim than wade.

One or two of the short waterfalls led down into shutes and into pools with eddys at the bottom which may have proved awkward to negotiate so we had to climb up the wall and traverse around them. The last half kilometre to the sump was mainly all swimming with the odd 'island' The size of passage here was enormous possible eighty feet high and wide. Before we reached the sump we left the river and climbed up on the right hand wall where a wide ledge gradually left the river below. This lead to a large wide passage which forked. One side led to a round chamber with some flowstone in it.

the other led for a fair distance around about 7 feet high to a sort of shrine. We had to stoop to avoid straws on the ceiling. The shrine consisted of a little stone wall built in a semi-circle surrounding a single stalagmite in the middle.

The return journey was made more interesting by the fact that now we were swimming against the current, and getting up one or two of the water shutes was fun. We emerged into the bright sunshine after just three hours after a very enjoyable splash about.

When we left Matienzo the following day it was with regret, and we thought that it would be nice to return. We drove back along the coast and then south to Burgos. At one point the road descends into the Ebro gorge, and this is all limestone and we saw hundreds of tantalising cave entrances. On South and the West, to Cuidad Rodrigo, over the border into Portugal and we had left limestone country completely. It was not until we reached Ribadeo in Galicia, North West Spain some two thousand miles after leaving Matienzo that we found sea caves once more. On our last evening, when we were ready to go back to Santander the next day I was invited on a trip to visit a Cave with paintings near Mondoneo, regretfully we had to decline.

On the last section of drive along the north coast of Spain we began to see flood damage of the enormous storm that had swept Cantabria, Vasque Burgos and part of France. The Pico de Europa limestone mountains west of Santander look impressive. The caves there are a little vertical for me. Afterwards we found that floods in Matienzo had reached a depth of forty feet, and that the river in Agua at the entrance had been fifteen feet deep!

We vowed that we would return to Northern Spain and Matienzo. In fact Julie rang Barry's wife to check on joint visits to the beach while Barry and I go caving, and we find that the MUSS Matienzo Expedition '84 has us arriving within 24 hours of Barry, an ex-MUSS flat mate of mine from University days. Oh dear, more sand, sea, sun, wine.....

Bob Cawthorne

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WANTED Alkaline 'Nife' type lighting sets - bulbs, spares or complete sets, especially

2 cell Nife type NC10
3 cell CEAG, smooth case type with large double filament bulb (bayonet fitting).

Contact - Brian Cubbon, 6 West Avenue, Barnstaple, Devon. Telephone 0271 72876 (evenings).