

WILLIAM PENGELLY CAVE STUDIES TRUST LIMITED



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We vowed to return to Matienzo almost as soon as we left in 1983. Sure enough, late July 1984 saw a heavily laden Austin Princess struggle up the pass which led to the limestone depression we were to camp in for the next ten days. Only a few Manchester University ex-members were present this year, the main contingent were still fairly local, the Derbyshire Caving Club having perhaps the strongest contingent.

Our first visit was to Cueva Renada - Cave of the Fox. This was most impressive. A short slope led into a sandy floored walking sized wide passage which continued through a series of large chambers. We were heading some way in to investigate some side passages. Apparently they led to 'Aircraft Hangers in the Sky' which in northern parlance refers to an enormous passage above floor level, which is too big to discern the roof or walls.

We came to a large chamber which led to an upper entrance, a slope took us down to a low narrow trench, out of which came a howling gale. This was sufficient to extinguish with ease a carbide lamp flame. Being electrically lit, I was sent through first. A high rift passage led us through mainly walking passages, the odd muddy squeeze, a few short climbs till we came to the - wet bit.

Now no-one had told me about the wet-bit, and I had opted for dry gear. With typical fortitude, we all moaned and whined as we waded through, wet to the chest in a three feet high passage. From here on, we were in a very large passage with some spectacular formations. After walking along well decorated galleries for some distance, we came to our junction. This side passage descended on a gentle gradient, passing many stalactites, and and was some three feet wide and ten feet high.

At the far end of this section was our objective, a series of passages leading in from the left hand wall. We had lost a fair bit of time in route finding, so we were unable to do much beyond a preliminary investigation. It did become apparent that there were passages to explore and that we might well need more tackle than we had brought in ourselves. Eventually, it was evident that time was against us, so we stacked the ladders and ropes in a convenient corner and set on out.

It was our custom (for the more sedate) to spend alternate days beaching, so we did not return for a couple of days. The weather was much improved on last year so the sun, the sea and the wine were particularly attractive. A larger party assembled for the return visit, carrying more tackle and hoping for great things. We even carried some simple surveying gear.

The first junction led into a chamber, some twenty feet by forty. It was soon clear that discoveries would be elusive. The rock was quite fractured

and in places razor sharp, so we had to climb with great care. To the left the passages narrowed into an impenetrable sharp maze. In the floor was a forty feet deep rift which, at the bottom, was blocked in all directions. To the right, the way on was over a huge jammed rock. This led to a ledge level with where we were on the other side. We had to stop here as we patently did not have enough tackle. Neither the roof nor the floor were visible in a ten feet wide passage. We estimated that we had to find some way of getting down a one hundred foot deep pitch.

The next junction led into another large chamber with no way on, the third led into another. This did have a squeeze which was soon demolished and we were then scurrying along on hands and knees through a tortuous passage which took us, alas, back to the main passage. There was still some discovery to be made here, but with possibly only a few hundred feet of unimportant discovery behind us, we had to depart. On the way out we had a look at 'Blood Alley' a large passage with some very impressive red formations. We emerged after some six hours into a slight drizzle, changed, climbed back into the van and went back for a beer.

The next trip was to 'El Biggo' which was the nickname for one of the huge caves. The entrance was only discovered following aerial photography. The depression in which it is located is surrounded by vegetation and trees of a fairly impenetrable nature. The depression is huge and a veritable cliff lines one side.

The entrance passages are straight and low and lead through a fairly tight blowhole type squeeze to the 45 ft pitch. The roof continues at the level of the slope above the top of the pitch. From the bottom of the pitch the floor slopes away down a pile of boulders. When stood at the bottom of the pitch it was only just possible to see the far wall, or the bottom of the slope. It was huge! The party of ten, strung out along this passage really gave it a fantastic impression of size. A series of by-pass oxbows and limbs led to a continuation of this passage and down to water level. Here, an awkward climb above a razor sharp flake, led to a round scalloped passage which was a by-pass to the deep water.

At the far end of this, a climb down led once more to the deep water. A small group were to do some diving. We watched them kit up before setting off back. We were to investigate some side passages. Only one of these went any distance, following a small stream which carried a lot of 'moonmilk'. This led eventually to an earth-filled sloping rift above and a canal which sumped straight on. We were possibly the first to find this sump, which was quite warm, and hence probably a dead end.

As there was going to be quite a queue laddering out with all the tackle, we decided to set off for the entrance and emerged some 5 hours later into brilliant warm sunshine.

The fourth trip was a return to Arenal, where we had dug the previous year. Again, we were looking for a route through the boulders following the elusive draught. We found perhaps another 20 ft in one chamber but, eventually, after passing the right spot several times we found the breeze again emerging from a narrow gap between some boulders and earth. We dug for a couple of hours before leaving it for another day.

This was the end of our time in Matienzo for another year. When we left, we went to have a look at the entrance to Cueva Agua and to take a couple of pictures. We did not drive so far this year, only to the Asturias province. We found a nice camp site on the coast, just past the Picos de Europa range of mountains. There were a few nice sea caves to stroll around in.

In the town of Ribadesella we found a nice show cave. This turned out to be quite impressive. An excavated entrance passage led to a gallery a full half kilometre long, filled with many stalagmites and stalactites. At the far end were some bones but we could not determine how old these were. What impressed us most was our first ever view of cave paintings. Bison, ox, deer; there they were, a silent tribute to a long vanished culture.

Bob Cawthorne

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BAT NEWS

A note by Bob Stebbings in "Batchat" (Bat Newsletter) No 4 of January 1985, gives some details of a ringed Greater horseshoe bat, found by Peter Chapman and John Hooper in Rock House Cave in December 1984. This bat had been ringed by Bob in a 'nursery' site at Blandford, Dorset, in September 1983. The distance between this site and Rock Farm Quarry is about 123 km and this is thus a new record movement for a Greater horseshoe bat in Britain. The previous record, of 64 km, was for a Greater horseshoe bat which flew from the Beer tunnels to the Blandford site. It is nice to report that the Buckfastleigh colony of Greater horseshoe bats continues to thrive, the population now comfortably exceeding the 300 mark.

As on previous occasions, the author (John Hooper) would be very grateful indeed for news of any sightings, by DSS members, of Greater or Lesser horseshoe bats in Devon caves or mines, (i.e. location, date and number of bats). Also, any information about tunnels likely to be put at risk by blocking of entrances, tipping, etc should be notified to the Editor, so that the Nature Conservancy Council can be advised.

(Reprinted from Devon Spelaeological Society's Journal 130 (new series) March 1985) John Hooper