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Speleology

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BCRA

Expedition Report: Matienzo, Spain 2005

Juan Corrin summarises a difficult year of exploration in northern Spain.

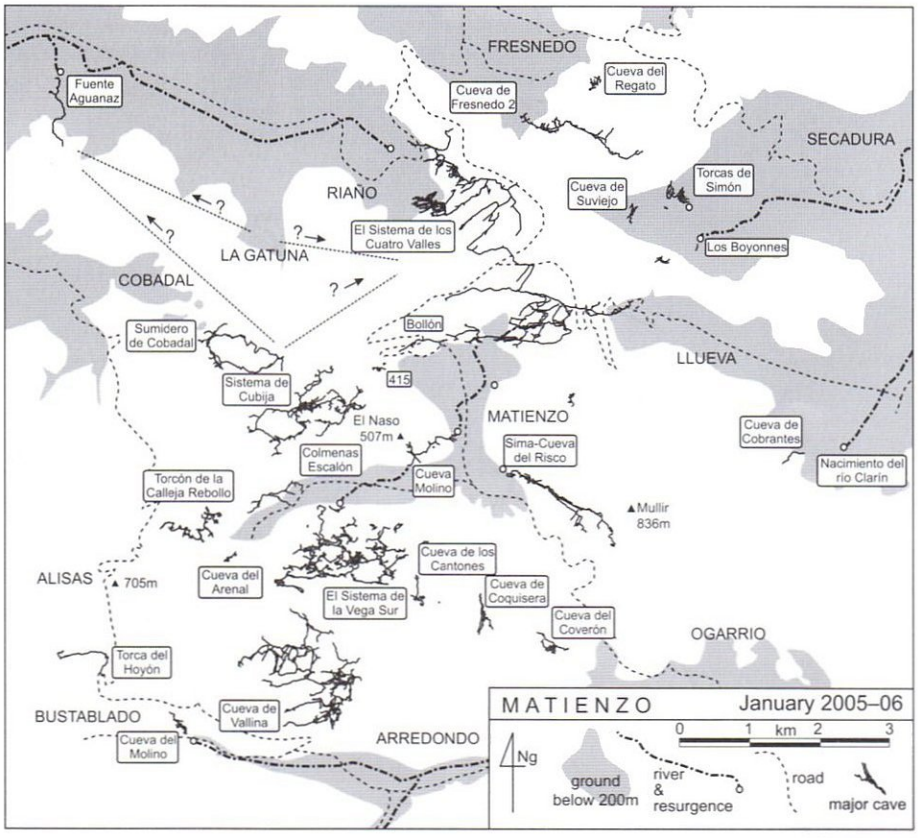
By the end of summer 2004, twelve months of exploration had produced over 10.2km of new cave passage, most of it in the newly discovered Sumidero de Cobadal. In contrast, by September 2005, twelve months of 'exploration' had yielded only 2.7km.

Permit Problems

The reason for the dearth was a lack of permission from the authorities – in fact we were sent a document stating we were temporarily refused permission to cave. After a supposed policy review, the Consejería de Cultura, Turismo y Deportes would not issue permits for caving in Cantabria without a Cantabrian cave rescue group in place, on the advice of the Servicio Protección Civil. A rescue company was finally formed to the satisfaction of the authorities at the beginning of August, which is when the permit was finally issued. A number of visits to the offices in Santander from January onwards did not seem to have any effect on speeding up the process, although everyone appeared sympathetic. The result of all this was a lot of digging and adventurous walking during the first half of the year, resulting in 224 new sites of speleological interest, only some of which were explored in the summer, and only a few are mentioned below.

Andy Pringle admiring the formations in Ann Summers, Cubio de La Gatuna. Photo: Peter T Eagan.

Because of the uncertainty surrounding the permit, the number of people who came to Matienzo was in the low teens compared with the hordes of 2004, but they enjoyed an Easter and summer that were both dry. Water levels in the summer were the lowest we'd seen for a long time.



Cobadal & Possible Links with Matienzo or Fuente Aguanaz

The main aim for the year was to investigate any feeders to, or outlets from the Sumidero de Cobadal. The water at the end of Cobadal cave sinks in the floor at the base of an 11m pitch, a kilometre to the south-east of the entrance and some 75m deeper. There are two possible resurgences, Los Boyones, 6.3km to the north-east of the disappearing water, and Fuente Aguanaz, some 4.3km to the north-west. The passages in Cobadal are progressing nicely towards the Matienzo depression before the water soaks away. If the water resurges to the north-east, it must feed the 43km-long Four Valleys System, the nearest passages of which are about 2.5km away. If Cobadal feeds Fuente Aguanaz the water in the Cobadal passages will need to reverse direction. The water in the cave system sinks at 125m altitude; both resurgences sit at 50m altitude.

A dig at the bottom of Cobadal was not attempted but the boulder choke above was revisited and further upwards progress was made, following the draught. In the higher, southern Cobadal passages, the small Evidence Oxbow Series Extensions produced over 200m, leaving the Sumidero de Cobadal with a 6,267m length.

In the low, wet and draughting bedding called Wessex Inlet, protracted hammer and chisel work gained a few metres of 0.5m-high passage to where the cold explorer on a small calcite boss is surrounded by water. The draught is

coming through small gaps and further work now requires wet suits.

The 17km North Vega System (which includes Torca de Regaton) may feed into Cobadal and a few trips pushed a number of passages in the north-west section of the cave. A resurvey also cleared up the mess surrounding the 50m Error Passage. In all, 647m of new passage were surveyed: one passage paralleled the 50m Error Passage and one headed east under Cueva Morenuca. About 70m were surveyed to BCRA Grade 1 through a tight squeeze into bigger passages and chambers vaguely heading towards Cobadal.

With the notion that Cobadal water may come east, picking up water from the North Vega System on its way to the Four Valleys System, the draughting caves and digs off the first bend near site 415 have even more significance. The Pants Dig (site 1655) was attacked with some enthusiasm throughout the year and Boil in the Bag (site 868) was similarly enlarged where the whole draughting hole may be sitting on a boulder choke into the back end of Cueva Bollón.

When the water in the Sumidero was seen to disappear into gravel four and six kilometres from possible resurgences, it was obvious that a water trace needed to be carried out. Unfortunately, both possible springs are public water supplies. This year we made contact with the Dirección General de Obras Hidráulicas y Ciclo Integral del Agua in Santander where a very useful exchange of information took place along with discussions as to the best way to determine the Cobadal water resurgence. A detailed written proposal has been made, possibly utilising the water board's resources.

One interesting set of data showed average water flows at surface sites. For example, Carcavueso is shown with 295 l/s sinking in the Matienzo depression and 650 l/s resurging at Los Boyones. Most of the 'missing' water must come from Cuevas Riaño and Hoyuca. Fuente Aguanaz is shown as having 951 l/s average flow and only a single 1.7km passage known, with no surface inputs.

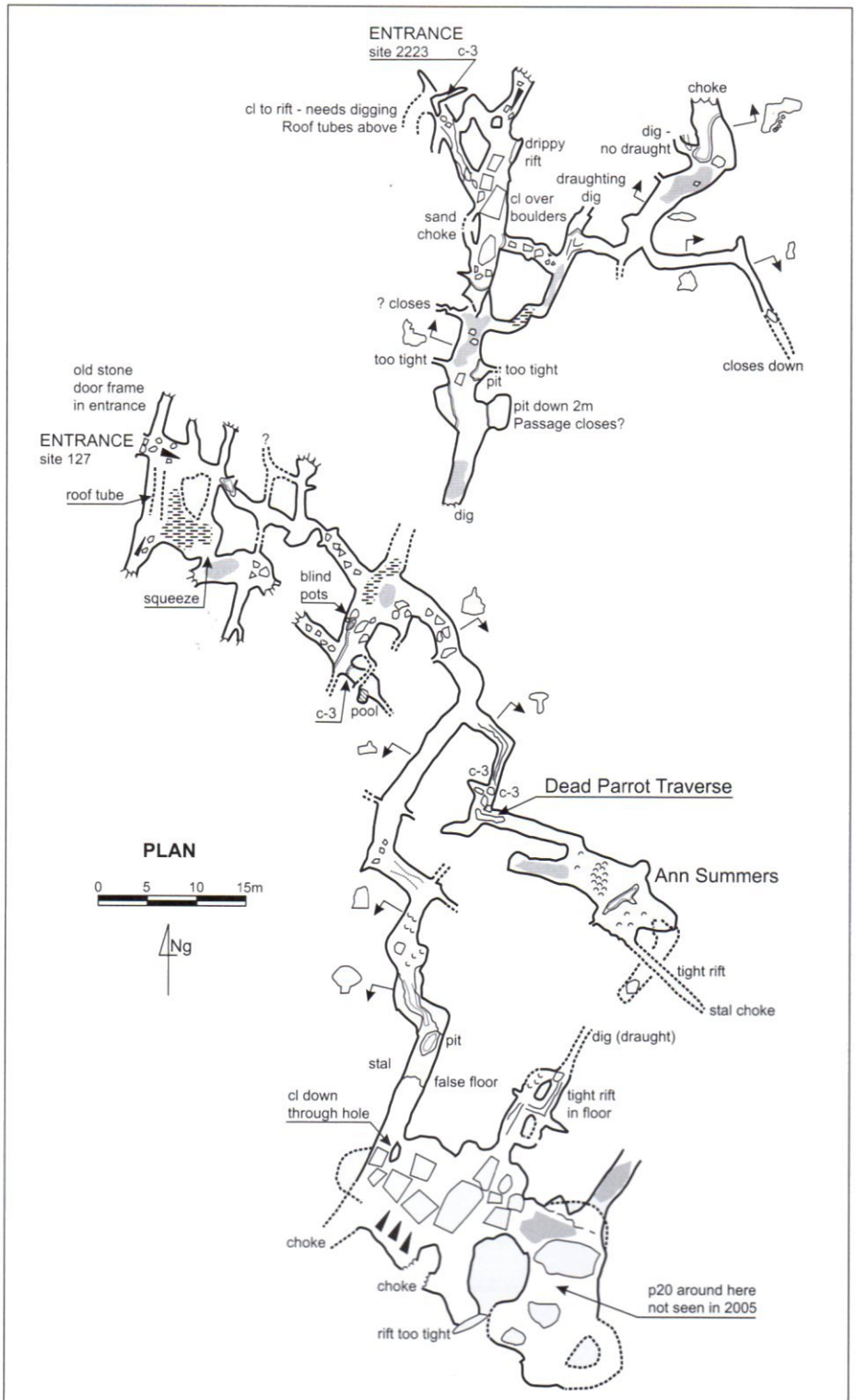
La Gatuna: Possible Feeder to Cobadal

The La Gatuna area to the north of Cobadal is an enclosed depression 1.3km north to south, about 0.5km wide at the widest point, and containing many other smaller depressions. The speleological interest lies in the number of draughting holes at low level and the fact that water from the depression may well drain to meet passages in Cobadal. What makes La Gatuna something of a challenge is the almost impenetrable jungle of brambles and other spiny vegetation, and the thick beds of sandstone.

The area was first investigated in 1979 when Cubio de la Gatuna (site 127) was explored and surveyed. In the spirit of re-exploring and pushing known sites, the cave was pushed this year into Ann Summers, a well decorated section, and extended by 120m to a length of 285m. A nearby draughting hole (site 2223) was opened up to provide a 3m climb into a 130m-long cave with some walking sections.

Of the 76 documented sites in La Gatuna, 34 are digs: many are draughting and some were dug. Among the more intriguing is site 2222, where a draughting crawl was dug and then abandoned only to discover another draughting hole just inside the entrance. The Fridge Dig (site 2227) is a brick and stone construction complete with a wooden door and shelves. It is cooled by a draught coming up through a grille-covered hole in the floor. Negotiations with the owners have yet to occur, but a small video camera lowered through the grille shows at least one tiny, draughting hole.

There are 15 unexplored sites – including shafts and caves and a number of other holes which merit further investigation,



Sites 2223 and 127, Cubio de La Gatuna

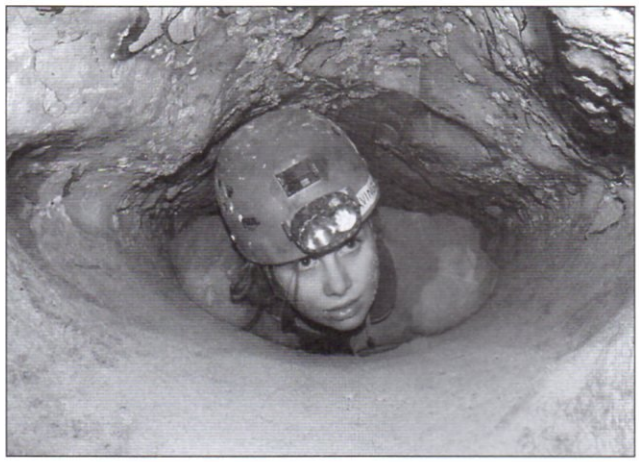
Site 127 at 30T 449794 4799954 Altitude 147 — Length 285m Depth 20m
Originally explored and surveyed 1979; extended and resurveyed 2005 to BCRA 5c

Site 2223 at 30T 449823 4799989 Altitude 157m — Length 130m Depth 6m
Surveyed 2005 to BCRA 5c — Drawn by Alasdair Neill

the main one being Cueva de Collada. Site 394 was first entered in 1982 and explored to a length of 294m over three days. The stooping-sized entrance takes a tiny stream at the southern end of the La Gatuna basin – the point in the depression closest to Cobadal. After about 50m, the strongly draughting flat-out crawl reaches the head of an 8m pitch with narrow passage beyond that ends at a 5m drop. The water then drains down a sinuous rift at –24m. The main interest in 1982 lay in a 7m-high, 2m-wide passage heading south-east. This entered smaller passage and draughting breakdown. This year, the sinuous rift was pushed in a narrow route to the head of an undescended 12m pitch and some significant inlet passages. The cave has been extended by 130m with excellent potential for further extension.

On the western side of the depression, at a higher level, a number of holes have been documented that need entering or digging out. Most of these lie under sandstone beds – the sandstone forming the roof of a dissolved joint or bedding in the limestone below. One wide shaft (site 2189) at the base of a shakehole was descended 7m onto sandstone blocks and a choked floor with gaps between.

As part of the wider look at the Cobadal depressions, more walking and underground exploration took place at the periphery. Of the 77 sites around Cobadal, 21 are documented as digs and 17 as unexplored. One explored in the summer was Woodcutter's Cave (site 2183). This is a resurgence near to Snottite Cave, where the water sinks almost immediately at a major dig. Inside the 4m-high resurgence entrance, the passage straight ahead is a fine phreatic tube with trench which immediately swings to the right behind two dams to the water source, a tiny passage with strange acoustics. To the left, just inside the entrance, a stooping passage decreases in size at a black mud inlet corner and then becomes a crawl between mud walls which collapse into the streamway trickle. This makes for a fairly clean inward journey but a very muddy exit. About 100m from the entrance, an excavated section enters a relatively impressive pair of 12m-high drippy avens. The streamway continues small beyond and requires some easy excavation in similar, mud-lined passage at 'station 0'.



Torca de Candenosa, above the Cobadal streamway, was pushed in November to a short length of impressive passage that closed down.

Alisas

The 'new area' from 2004, to the north of Alisas, could also drain to Fuente Aguanaz and a number of shafts were looked at this year. Twenty-five were documented at Easter and a number of these descended in the summer. Cueva Amarillo (site 2270) with a length of 28m was one such hole but more interesting was 2264. This had clearly been descended by another group down 18m and 14m pitches to the head of another bolted pitch. In the opposite direction the route continues beyond draughting 12m and 10m pitches.

A number of these sites around Alisas have been descended by another group and some have been marked with "CA" and a number with a red square either empty, with one line or a cross presumably to show the state of exploration. All are being descended because, for example, site 2264 mentioned above (CA4 with red square and cross) appears to be undescended in parts.

South Vega & Cueva Vallina

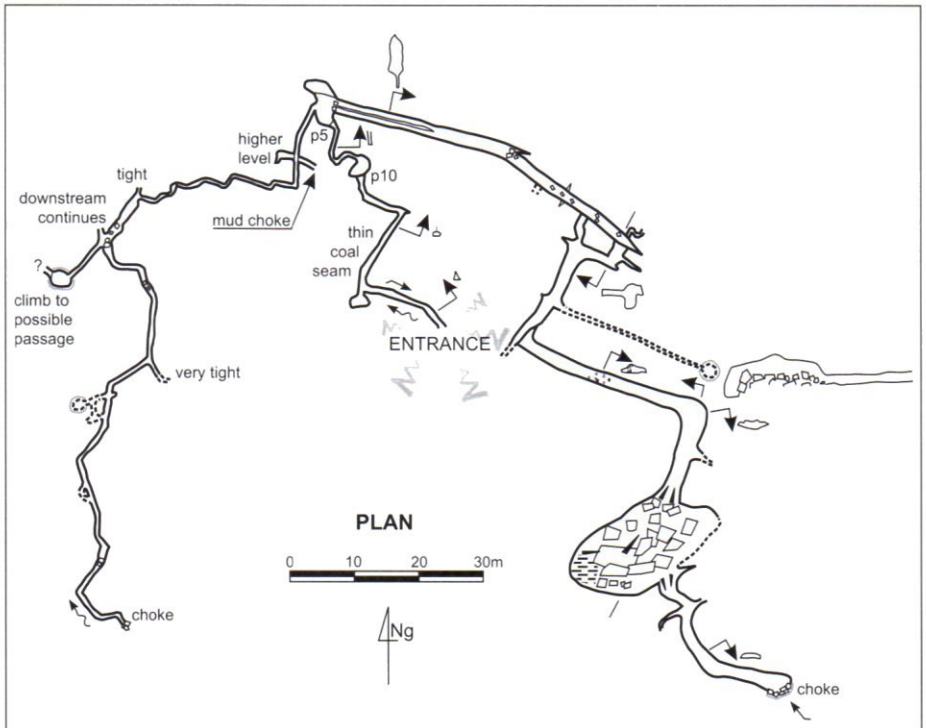
In more familiar territory, above the South Vega System, a Sunday morning visit was made to site 1219 where Tiano, who farms the area, pointed out a covered shaft which seemed to be 40 or 50m deep. This roomy shaft (site 2287) was uncovered and descended in the summer when it was found to choke. A double-barrelled shotgun without the woodwork was recovered.

Near to Sima Reguilon (site 46), site 2311 was uncovered and promised much at the bottom of a 13m entrance pitch. A chamber with a wide passage and calcite slope had a dry streamway which was followed to a bowl-shaped chamber where Sick Joke Pot finished as the water sinks away. Upstream the passage quickly divided into a series of inlets.

Other sites investigated included 2127, a 50m choked shaft left over from last year; 2097, a roomy shaft that descended 16m to narrow, choked rifts; site 2094, a 29m-deep choked shaft; the wide but shallow shaft at site 2352; and another 'sick joke' at site 2342 where a 15m drippy pitch dropped down a fine echoing shaft over an 8m-high calcite wall to a tiny outlet. Site 782 was finally hammered open (15 years after the initial discovery) to a tight squeeze that entered a 10m pitch to a slope and 5m of passage to an aven – another joke!

One of the sites still to be investigated lies in the middle of a pathway in a well trodden area over Cueva Vallina: site 2306 is a boulder-capped shaft of about 12m depth. This find shows that every square metre in our 156,000,000m² area needs to be investigated and no stone left unturned!

In Cubio de la Reñada, a trip to the aqueous Squirrel's Passage and Moat of Doom area revealed deep blue pools



Site 394 Cueva Collada

La Gatuna 30T 0449920 4799053 Altitude 183m
Surveyed 1982, 2005 to BCRA 5c

Length 425m Depth 28m
Drawn by Juan Corriin, Torben Redder, Peter Smith

that require diving. The whole area needs people in neoprene.

The old Bolton Speleo Club dig, Cueva de los Tablons (site 242) first found in 1978, was opened up again and much progress was made down and into the hill along a hading bedding or joint. A strong, cold draught blows out between blocks and rubble at about 9m depth. This is in a prime spot that could 'go anywhere' to the east of the South Vega System.

In Torca de Papá Noel (site 1471), the area which links with Azpilicueta was revisited during a long trip but no significant finds made.

In Cueva Vallina, the major route discovered last year through the Barney Rubble crawl was finished off when most leads were pushed to a conclusion. Over 200m were added to the length of Galería de Germán. Passages off Swirl Chamber were also surveyed to a length of 172m. Cueva Vallina now has a length of 32,954m and is the 11th longest in Spain.

Cueva Risco

One surprise during the summer was the extension in the Cueva Risco System. The top entrance, Cueva Oñite was visited with the intention of extending Mavrino Inlet. Just inside this on the eastern side a calcite-floored passage sets off. This went for about 100m with signs of previous entry to a low point which was dug out to a small chamber and a 5m free climb to a bedding plane, ending at the top of a meander passage.

On a second visit a climb above the meander passage entered a crawl with boulders that continued past holes in the floor and entered walking size passage with stal and passages in the roof. The passage rose to near the surface with tree roots: Gulag Gallery had almost come full circle back to the Oñite entrance with a length of 446m.

On a third trip, 184m of extensions on the opposite side of Mavrino Inlet provided the Sala Carballo Pitch Bypass. The total length of the Risco System is now 9,676m.

Carcavuezo, Mullir & Muella

The mountains of Mullir and Muela provided a few holes with, as usual, a number still to descend. Site 2165, a wide shaft discovered in the snow in February, was descended in the summer to a possible dig in a rift. In site 2286, at the back of La Colina, a 12m roomy pitch dropped to a decorated rift and a low, 10m-long passage under a wall – a fairly rare event on Muela. This choked at a calcited run-in that would be a straightforward dig. Site 2338 dropped, more usually, 12m to a choke.

To the north of the main sink at Carcavuezo, about a dozen shafts and digs require attention. These are all in a line cutting across the hillside and are associated with sandstone. In site 2310, just inside the depression below Cruz Uzano, a tight entrance was excavated and a 6m pitch dropped to an impenetrable outlet.

Archaeology & DNA Testing

On El Naso, a couple of hours were spent in the 31m of site 2,153 where bear scratchings, crawling, tighter crawling, and fossilised breccia provided some interest. In Cueva Cofresnedo (site 65), some sediment samples were removed for possible future DNA testing.

Site 2139 with a human skull was discovered in October 2004 (see Speleology 6). With the arrival of the caving permit and an archaeology permit for Jesús Ruiz Cobo in the summer, the skull and all the pottery was removed from the shaft under the glare of 600W of video lights powered by a tiny portable generator. Preliminary investigations have shown that another bone recovered from the floor is also human and that the pottery comes from at least five objects.

Conclusion

2005 was a difficult but quite satisfying year. The lack of permit obviously dampened down the exploration fever but a lot of work was put into finding new sites and digs for future exploration.

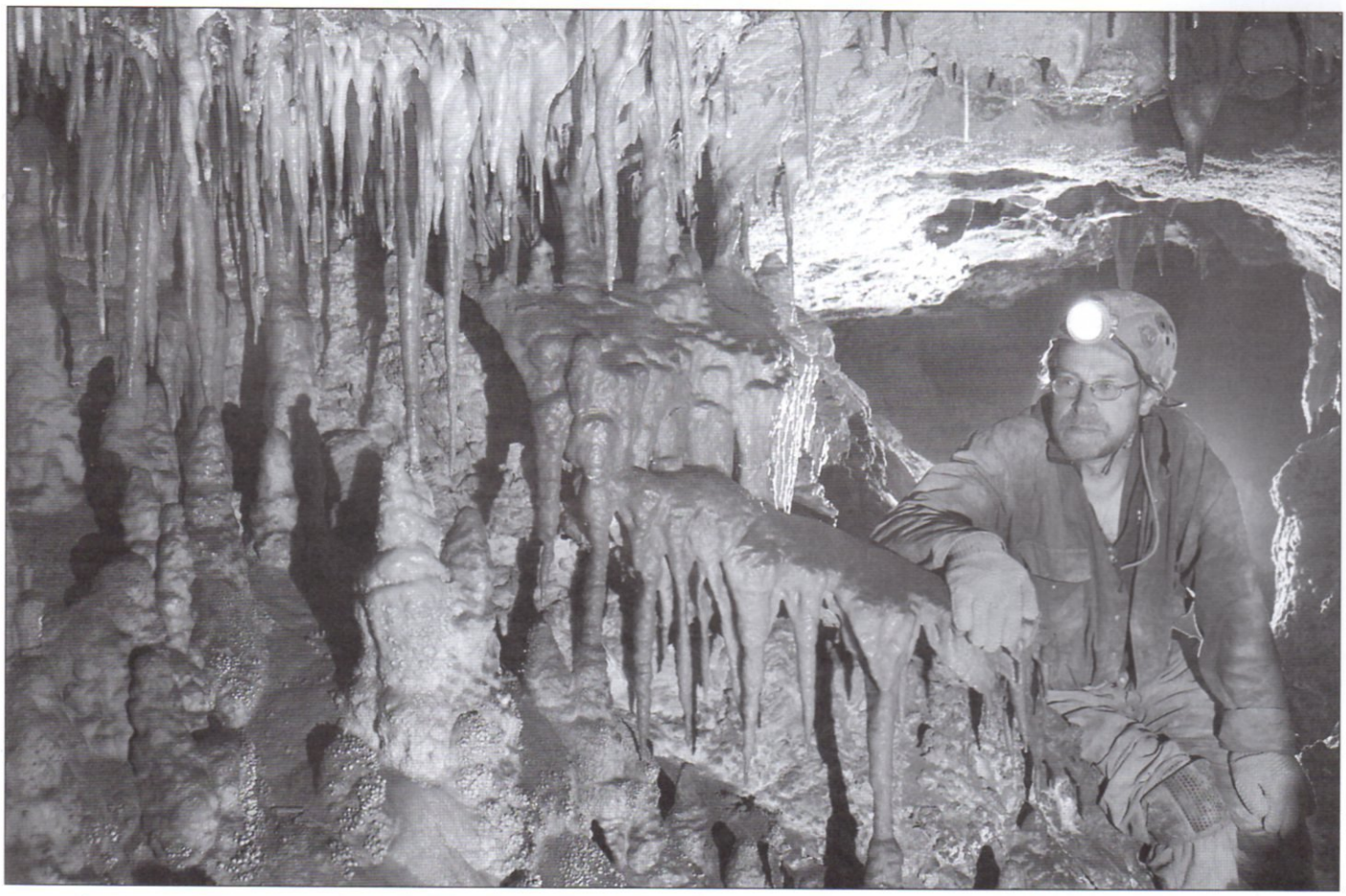
At the time of writing – late January 2006 – the permit has just been issued for this year. ■

Notes

Readers should note that exploration during 2006 has altered some of the descriptions and hypotheses. A more comprehensive account for 2005 and subsequent expeditions is found on the Matienzo website.

matienzo.org.uk

Matienzo 2004: *Speleology* **6**, April 2006.
Matienzo 2003: *Speleology* **5**, December 2005.
Matienzo 2002: *Speleology* **3**, September 2003.
Matienzo 2001: *Speleology* **2**, May 2003.



Opposite page: Tight crawling for Louise Korsgaard in Torca de Papá Noel. Photo: Torben Redder. Above: Ali Neill in Cubio de La Gatuna. Photo: Peter T Eagan.