

## Picos, Eastern Massif - 2009



*Picture: Mancondiu by Phil Walker*

### Introduction

The Picos de Europa is a range of mountains 20km inland from the northern coast of Spain, forming part of the Cantabrian Mountains. It consists of three main areas, the Central, Eastern and Western Massifs. It was the Eastern Massif that drew the attention of Lancaster University Speleological Society (LUSS) in the early 1970s and subsequently started an invasion of cavers every summer.

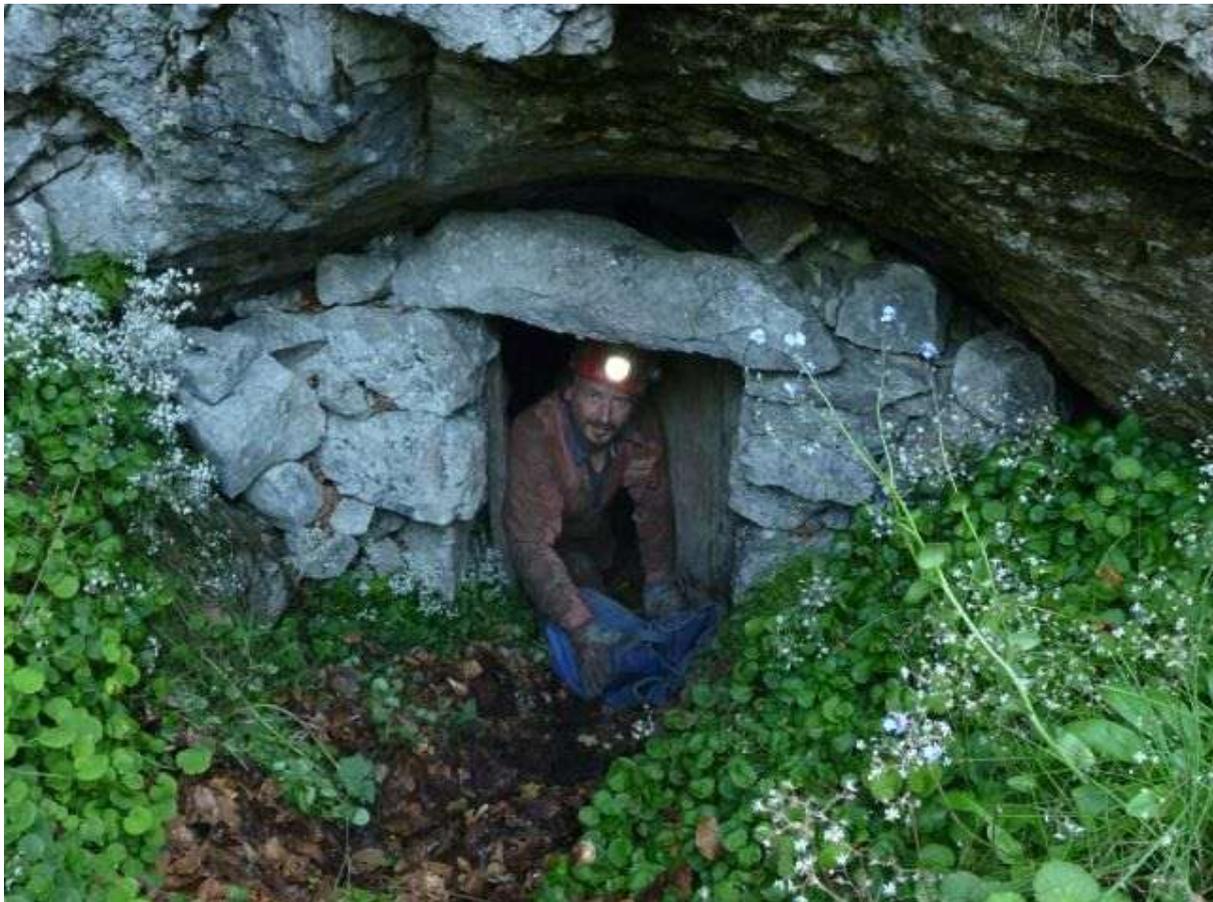
The early years were spent pushing the Cueva del Agua (also referred to as Cueva del Nacimiento) system; a wonderful resurgence system, located at the foot of the mountain along the Urdon Gorge. Over the years this was pushed to around the 11km mark but after several years the cave was abandoned as the major routes sumped and no continuation could be found. LUSS turned their attention to the Andara region further up the mountain range and sought caves that would drop into the Agua system and create a record-breaking 1500m through trip.

They eventually found a number of deep caves around this 'top camp' area. Sara, Tere, Flowerpot and the -1169m deep Sima 56 (at the time the deepest in Spain) were all pushed to respectable depths.

Many years were spent pushing the top camp systems but the way through remained elusive. In 1986 and 1987 SWCC also ventured out to the area with a diving trip into Agua and pushed an intimidating climb, 'The Teeth of Satan', at the back end of the system (see SWCC special newsletter, 'Agua '86 and '87').

Interest in the area began to dwindle; the old LUSS members went on to bigger and better things. However a few stuck around and would tell tales to prospective new members back in Lancaster. I was one such new member joining LUSS in 1995 and at the time expeditions were still being run, although on a much smaller basis. By now they had shifted their attention to the 'Middle Camp' area, around the Sierra del a Corta, the theory being the quickest way to find the through trip was from the middle, then work down towards Agua and up toward Sima 56.

Three expeditions in 1994, 1995 and 1996 were concentrated on the Cheese Cave (Cueva del Quesos and previously called Cave of the Dug-out entrance, Cueva de Entre Cuetos). This was a drafting cave, used for maturing the local Cabrales cheese, that had been pushed through some tortuous squeezes, down some pitches and was now at a constriction that required hammering.



**Picture: Bob Clay in Cheese Cave by Arwel Roberts**

The final trip in 1996 was rather disappointing; the area had recently become a national park and park rangers were everywhere stopping us doing anything and constantly moving the camp along. However, once back in the UK, I didn't forget the grand tales or the potential of the area and the

constriction in the Cheese Cave just seemed to require a bit more mechanical persuasion than a lump hammer.

In 2005 I convinced a couple more SWCC members, Rhys Williams and Alan Braybrooke, to take a break from some Cantabria caving and come on a quick diversion to the Picos. Unfortunately, we got the seasonal timings slightly wrong and the snow had not yet melted, this made exploration very hard, but it was still an exciting area to visit and the exploration bug was still there (*see SWCC newsletter 125*).

In 2009 I finally convinced a big enough group to come out to Spain on the promise of passing an easy constriction and finding new cave. Following a few drop outs from SWCC members, the group was made up of myself and members of my other club, the South Bristol Speleological Society (SBSS).

## Brief History

The following is a brief outline of the major events in the exploration of the Eastern Massif area over the past 40 years.

Club	Year	Main Events
LUSS	1970-71	Recce to Cueva del Piscarciano and Hoz de Arreba
LUSS	1972	Los Corrales de Buelna
LUSS	1974	Cares Corge – first hear about Tresviso
LUSS	1975	Tresviso, exploration of Cueva del Agua (Nacimiento)
LUSS	1976	Cueva del Agua exploration continued, first visit to Andara region, higher up the mountain
LUSS	1977	Underground camps in Agua, Top Camp - Sara Tera, RCA6 "3 Second hole" - Sima 56 discovered
LUSS	1978	Cueva del Agua pushed to 'Colin's Climax' Top Camp - Sara, Boulderosa, Sima 56 entered explored
LUSS	1979	Cueva del Agua pushed to Grand Circle (11km total)
		Boulderosa to -313m
		Tere to -487m
		Sima 56 to -494m
		Sara to -635m
LUSS	1980	Marniossa to 3.5km Tere, Flower Pot, Dossers' Delight explored Sima 56 pushed Death Wish pitch
LUSS	1981	Tere to -792m
		Flowerpot to -720m Dossers Delight to -294m
LUSS	1982	Sima 56 camps, pushed to -820m
LUSS	1983	Sima 56 pushed to -1169m, remains deepest cave in Picos for a few years
LUSS	1984	Dossers Delight -500m
		Cueva del Agua - Road to Certain Death sump dived but not passed
LUSS	1985	Sima 56 concluded, still at -1169m
		Dossers Delight pushed to -831m
LUSS	1986	Dossers Delight remains at -831m
SWCC	1986	Road to Certain Death sump dived to -64m in Cueva del Agua
		Teeth of Satan +200m ramp found in Cueva del Agua
		Belgians find 'Rio Mancondiu' in Sara
LUSS	1987	Sara revisited
SWCC	1987	Cueva del Agua, 'Teeth of Satan' pushed. Cowshead Cavern pushed to 1km
LSD	1987	French group explore Valdominguero area
	1988-1993	LUSS activity dwindles
OJE	1993	Spanish clubs push Torca de Branarredonda to -420m (previously called Fallen Bear Hole by LUSS)
LUSS	1994	Middle Entrance. Cheese Cave to -90m, with constriction (previously called Cave of the Dug Out entrance)
OJE	1994	Torca de Branarredonda to -470m ongoing
OJE	1995	Cowshead Cavern pushed to 3km long
LUSS	1995	Cheese cave - constriction pushed to further constriction -100m
SWCC	1995	Sara exploration
LUSS	1996	Cheese cave hammering, no progress, still at -100m
AD KAMI	2000	Torca Jou Sin Tierre discovered
SWCC	2005	Winter recce, AL2 found and descended to -30m still ongoing
AD KAMI	2005	Torca Jou Sin Tierre pushed to -730m
AD KAMI	2005	Torca Jou Sin Tierre pushed to -852m
SWCC / SBSS	2009	Cheese Cave, constriction passed and cave pushed to -126m. Leads on Sierra del a Corta established

## Objectives

As we only had a week in the field the objectives were kept fairly small.

- Push the Cheese Cave, by capping the constriction and exploring any discovery from there;
- Push AI2, found in 2005 by SWCC; and
- Locate and if possible explore some old LUSS leads on the Sierra del a Corta.

## Report

### **Day 1 (Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> September) - Sotres**

After what can only be described as possibly the worst cabaret singer in the world, followed by the worst pub quiz ever, the 24-hour Portsmouth to Santander ferry transported Mike, Arwel, myself and all the equipment into Spain. The usual talk of ‘caverns measureless to man’ had started well before the beer started flowing, but I spent most of the crossing worrying whether I could remember where the cave was after 13 years and whether the ‘howling draft’ and ‘booming echo’ was a figment of my imagination.

The weather was really pleasant on arrival and we had a nice leisurely (albeit noisy) drive up to the Picos in Mike’s white transit. I had hoped to drop in and see ex-SWCC member Jim Thompson while passing through Arenas de Cabrales, but thanks to the wonders of a well-known social media site discovered he was actually in France!

We arrived at the bunkhouse in Sotres and I set about trying to sort out accommodation, in a very similar vein to the 2005 trip (*see SWCC newsletter 125*). Namely my inability to speak coherent Spanish and the owners’ inability to speak English. Luckily, a pre-trip phone call from a Spanish speaker had paved the way for us and we were expected.



*Picture: Sotres by Phil Walker*

Shortly after arriving, the second team of Bob, Lisa, 'Bucket' Dave and Conor also turned up at the bunkhouse. They had flown from Bristol to Biarritz and then driven down across the Pyrennes.

As it was still late afternoon I was keen to go and locate the Cheese Cave and perhaps take some rope to the entrance ready for the next day.

The drive to the 'Crossroads' is only about 5 minutes from Sotres. Previously this was no more than a dirt turning circle marking the point where the tracks diverged, one way going to Tresviso and one to Beges via the White House (Caseton de Andara) an old miners hut, now a refugio. However, nowadays it's a tarmac car park with numerous warning signs about the dangers of mountains, caves and bears. We parked up and armed with some directions jotted down from memory by an ex-LUSS member, we set off up the track. I was pretty sure that a more direct route was possibly to the cave, but following the longer directions seemed more prudent as I had spent a very cold night in 1996 lost in the same mountains, after losing the track, in fog, only 100m from the camp.

It only took about 30 minutes to find the cave and get an accurate GPS location for it. Once found we then took the direct route back to the van, which proved to be far easier than the initial route. It was starting to get late but Bob and Arwel and I decided to take the rope and rigging gear over to the cave entrance ready for the next day, and hopefully avoid the joys of having to move it all over in the expected sunshine.

**Day 2 (Friday 11<sup>th</sup> September) - The Cheese Cave**

A rather pathetic breakfast of toast and jam was not enough to dampen spirits and a true South Bristolian late start saw the rigging team of Bob and Arwel and myself at the cave entrance for 12pm. It now suddenly dawned on me that I wasn't quite sure of the way through the cave, I just remembered some squeezes and then pitches, how difficult could it be?

It actually proved easier than I thought, the simple rule was to follow the most miserable and constricted passage. The first main obstacle was the rather grandiose named 'Constriction of Doom'. The constriction entails lying on your side and then wriggling like a worm for about 3 metres, not too difficult in the end, but as we were carrying a good few tackle bags between us, I had to turn round beyond the crawl and go back into it as Arwel passed bags to a prostrate Bob, lying at an acute right angle, who passed them onto me, before I dragged them back into a small chamber.

A rather dangerous looking chamber full of loose rock follows the constriction and this then leads to the 'Corkscrew'. This is a contorted crawl that requires you to lie either face down or on your back and squeeze down and then under a low arch. Again this did not seem as difficult or as intimidating as I remembered from years back and we passed through this with minimal fuss.

Finally we arrived at the first pitch. Previously a lot of the cave had been rigged with a fair proportion of natural belays. However, as we had some new spits and the existing placed ones are of dubious quality, Bob placed a new one at the pitch head. As this was going on, Arwel returned to the constriction of doom to try and enlarge it as we had some concerns that a few of the others might not be able to make it through.



***Picture: Phil Walker on 1st Pitch by Bob Clay***

Once the bolt was placed, I took over the rigging and rigged down the first two pitches, which can be rigged as one. A short climb down leads to the main 33m pitch. The first part of the pitch is in rather fractured rock and has always needed to be rigged with a rope protector over the edge, due to the lack of suitable placements. A rebelay about 20ft down lessens the worry factor for descending cavers, but it still remains a rather daunting pitch.

The pitch itself is a huge aven, which continues a considerable distance above the pitch head (a lesser objective of climbing this was never achieved). In addition there is a large unexplored passage entering the aven about 40ft up above the ledge leading to the next pitch.



***Picture: Arwel Roberts on 3<sup>rd</sup> (Big) Pitch by Bob Clay***

The remaining three pitches were rigged without much problem, despite not doing up the maillon on one section of a y-hang, which could have been quite embarrassing. Where possible, Bob followed behind with a few well-placed spits to back up the more 'alpine' style rigging.

The final pitch lands in 'The Waiting Room', a small sandy chamber that serves as a nice resting point before the crawls leading to the 'digging' face. The tight crawl begins at the far end of the chamber, similar to the constriction at the start of the cave and then a flat out section emerges into another just as tight fossil stream way. It is here the draught becomes more noticeable and finally the keyhole-shaped restriction is encountered. This was the limit of the exploration in 1996.

I was quite relieved upon arriving at the constriction that the draught was as strong as I remembered, however, the booming echo was not so booming! By this time it was 6pm and the three of us had not had any lunch. Luckily, we knew the second team were bringing the drill and our lunch with them, so with this in mind we started heading out to meet them. We bumped into Bucket and Mike quite quickly, they had the drill, but no-one seemed to want to own up to having the lunch! We continued out and met up with Lisa at the top of the big pitch, who revealed what the others had been hiding, lunch was at the entrance!

The exit was pretty swift and the 'Constriction of Doom' was noticeably less constricted. It later transpired Mike had been practising his capping.

Later in the evening back at the bunkhouse, Mike and Bucket reported that they had capped the keyhole constriction and got through to the new pitch head. Great news, and this meant we could get on with hopefully rigging and pushing down the next pitch. Everything from here on was new ground!

### **Day 3 (Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> September) – Cheese Cave**

Bob, Arwel and I woke up early, quickly packed and arrived at the 'Crossroads' ready for the next trip. We quickly got down to the 'Waiting Room' and learning from our lesson the previous day, ate some lunch. Not the greatest lunch I've ever had but cheese and bread seems to be a staple round this area of the Picos.

We re-rigged the 6<sup>th</sup> pitch to free up a longer rope and attacked the new pitch. Bob took the honours and rigged down the new 7m pitch. The pitch head itself is rather constricted and requires you to squeeze over the top of the pitch and drop onto your descender. All being well you drop into enough space to actually operate the descender or spend a few minutes thrashing around until you force yourself back up and are able to try again.



***Picture: Phil Walker on 7<sup>th</sup> Pitch by Arwel Roberts***

The pitch landed on a platform that turned off to the right to reveal a rather large void and some further pitches. There was a lot of loose rock and calcite round the pitch head, so a well-placed kick saw this to the bottom.



***Picture: Bob Clay on 8<sup>th</sup> Pitch by Arwel Roberts***

At this point it was discovered that the wrong sized drill bit had been brought for the spits, so we had to revert to hand drilling again. Due to the nature of the rock this was quite problematic, but three spits were placed and Bob descended down the next pitch of 8m. We were all getting suitably cold by now so a quick retreat was the order of the day.

**Day 4 (Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September) – Cheese Cave**

The plan today was for Arwel, Bob and myself to continue pushing the cave with Mike and Bucket surveying the new extensions before catching us up.

The 9<sup>th</sup> pitch of 10m was quickly dropped by Arwel using some climbing techniques, while Bob tried to make the pitch head safer with some spits. I dropped down the pitch and caught up with Arwel. The pitch lands at the bottom of the previously noted void. This is a chamber approx. 50m high, with evidence of a lot of water having flowed through the area at some point. The 'passage' continues in what seems to be a water worn tube forced through the mud and pebbles. One well-placed cough looked like it would bring the whole thing down on us. It was such a traumatic area that, following one members call of nature, the area was christened 'Poodunnit'. At the end of this passage there is a short drop down into an immature stream way, and a trickle of water disappears off down a rather tight tube.

As I had my nice new shiny bolting hammer, it seemed a waste not to have a go trying to widen the stream way, until more powerful means of widening the gap appeared. Arwel returned to the pitch in order to try and traverse round a ledge at the top of the pitch head.

Shortly Mike arrived and with the aid of a nice well-placed cap I was able to get round the first corner and stick my head round the next. It continued! A short drop led to a continuation of the stream way. We decided that we would set off early the next day, and try and cap our way round this next corner, we set a time of 2pm and then we would start to de-rig and exit.

In the meantime Arwel had successfully traversed around the ledge and explored a platform leading to a descending tube. As the area was quite well decorated and seemed to be leading to the same area of the lower stream way it was left untouched.

**Day 5 (Monday 14<sup>th</sup> September) – Cheese Cave**

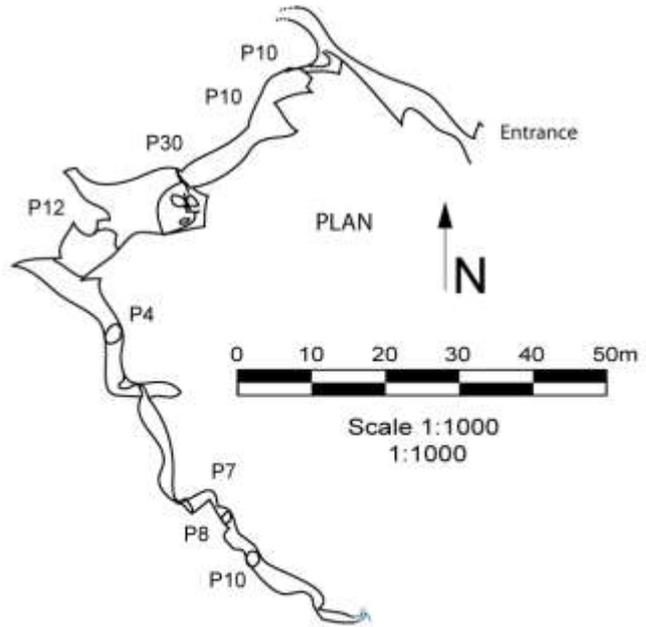
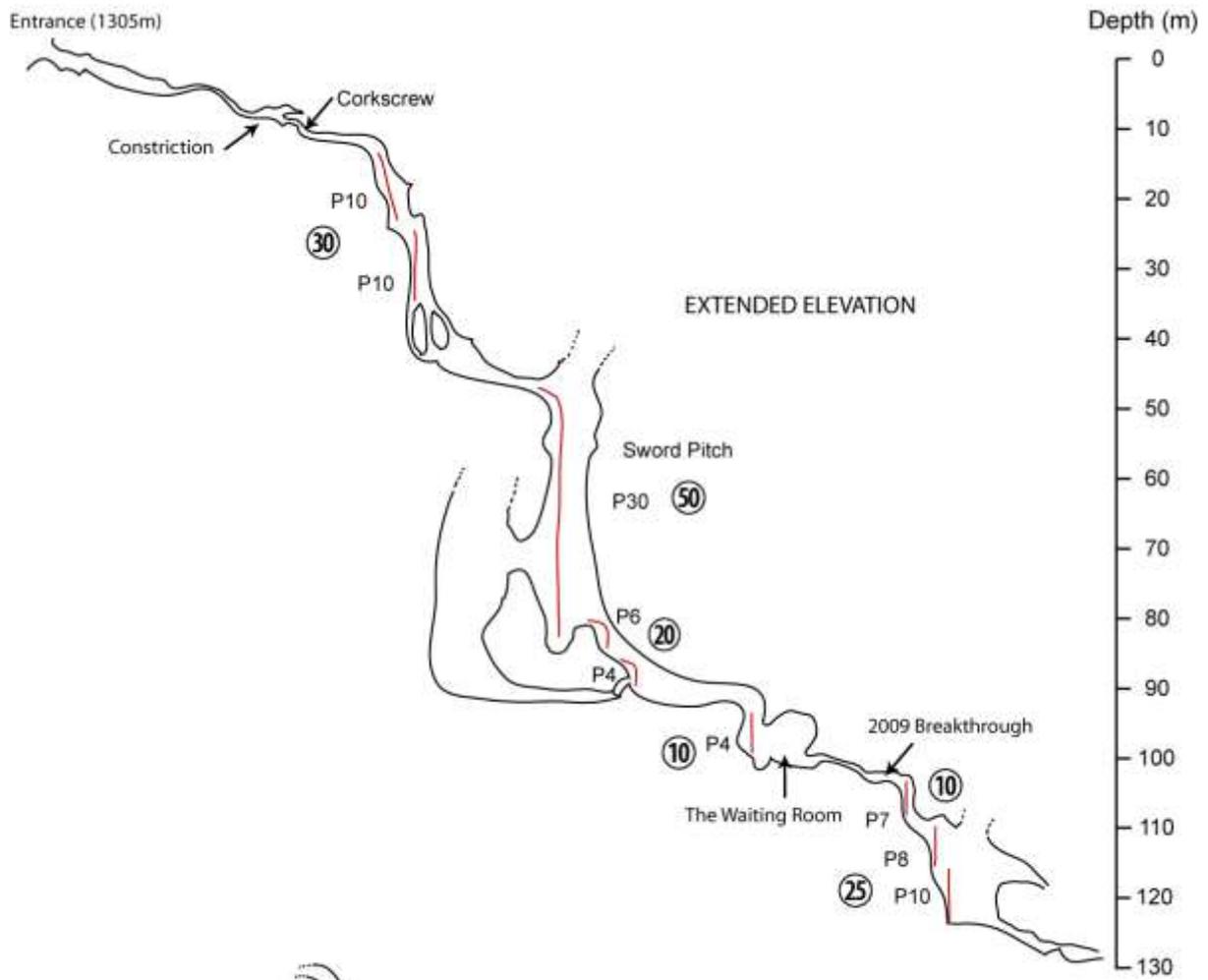
Mike and I quickly descended to the bottom once more. One well-placed cap took the corner off the constriction in the stream way and Mike forced himself onwards into the next bit of stream way. It continued but gradually got smaller. By now the draught had all but disappeared so the decision was made to start the de-rig and exit the cave.

We quickly got all the bags and drill from the lower three pitches into the crawl from the 'Waiting Room'. Just as it was getting to be rather laborious Arwel and Bob turned up and dragged the bags out to the 'Waiting Room'. The cave was quickly de-rigged, aided by Bob's new spits that greatly helped on some of the more awkward pitches.

All ropes, bags and equipment were dragged out and the Cheese Cave finished with for 2009. Four days of eight-hour trips had resulted in some new cave and some tired but happy cavers.



*Picture: Bob, Arwel, Mike, Phil by Arwel Roberts*



**Cueva de Entre Cuetos (Cave of the dug-out entrance)**  
*also referred to as Cueva del Quesos (Cheese Cave)*

Tresviso, Cantabria, Spain  
 WGS84 UTM N43:14.0142 W04:42.8062  
 Altitude 1305m  
 Depth 126m  
 Surveyed to BCRA Grade 5  
 by LUSS (1981, 1995) and SBSS (2009).

*Drawn by Dave Cundy, Phil Walker 2009*

## Other trips

The main objective of the trip was pushing the Cheese Cave but a few other days were spent re-visiting some old leads. The following is a brief summary of other activities.

Mike, Dave and Lisa explored some of the caves and shafts below the weather station (Caballar) near Sotres. The majority of these are well known, although some pre-date LUSS exploration and are not labelled. Some are likely to be old SUSS discoveries from the early 1970s.

Mike and Dave went to the Sierra del a Corta to locate some old LUSS discoveries. Unfortunately, they forgot the notes detailing the location and specific caves to look for. Instead they explored a few entrances by the track.

In a torrential downpour on the Tuesday Bob, Lisa, Dave and I had a rather wet and cold walk up the Sierra del a Corta. Although no caves entered, a number of old LUSS shafts were located and accurate GPS co-ordinates taken. In particular T69 was located which would be a very good site to revisit. The 1980s description reads *"a rift leads off, this draughts strongly but is too tight"*.

Mike and I spent a few hours walking around the Lake Depression in the Andara region. Some more 'famous' LUSS discoveries were located and marked.

## Conclusion

Although only finding a modest amount of new cave, the trip was seen by all as a great success. The chances of the constriction being impassable and the subsequent pitch being too tight was a distinct possibility, but in the end we found three new pitches (7m, 8m, 10m) with the final pitch dropping through an impressive new chamber.

There is still an argument for continuing work in the Cheese Cave, in particular the aven above the main pitch. Although possibly close to the surface, going over the top of the pitches had proved very successful in the '70s and '80s LUSS expeditions for extending known caves and dropping below previous limits of exploration. In addition the lower stream way could be pushed, although it would require a sustained assault and some extensive capping.

Elsewhere, there are still a number of leads on the Sierra del a Corta, including AI2 (*see SWCC newsletter 125*) which we never got chance to re-visit, and also higher up in the Andara region. LUSS often documented but left unexplored a number of caves and shafts when they were not in line with that year's expedition objective. For example an old 1978 LUSS discovery (of approx -198m) was pushed to nearly -500m by a Spanish team in 1996, who (allegedly) simply removed a boulder at the limit of previous LUSS exploration.

It is tentatively suggested that another lightweight expedition will be planned for a similar time in 2010.

This winter I hope to more fully analyse the old LUSS information/journals that I have built up over the years and pinpoint caves definitely worth a revisit, but objectives are likely to include:

- Further exploration of shafts on the Sierra del a Corta. Although a lot of these shafts are choked there are a number that are described as "*drafting but too tight*" or referenced with the tantalising "*undescended*". With the success of the 2009 trip the 'too tight' should hopefully not prove too much of a problem with a little drill and cap persuasion. These would be the most obvious quick routes into the top end of the Cueva del Agua system.
- Caves around Caballar. This is a large area of sinkholes between Sotres and the Crossroads. That is easily accessible. Torca LaBarga was explored by SUSS and LUSS in the 1970s down to a sump and may be worth a revisit with more modern equipment.
- Caves around Andara. Although heavily explored by LUSS there are a few references still to undescended shafts and the cave, in the example above, of the Spanish team pushing to 500m, is located in the same area.

The whole area still has a lot of potential and with the improvements in lights, equipments, GPS's and the ease of getting to the area, the likelihood of some success is great. The 1500m through trip might not happen for a while, but it is there somewhere.



*Picture: Arwel Roberts 8<sup>th</sup> Pitch by Bob Clay*

**Expedition Members**

Phil Walker (SWCC, SBSS), Bob Clay (SBSS), Arwel Roberts (SBSS), Mike Broad (SBSS), Dave 'Bucket' Cundy (SBSS), Lisa Gunton (SBSS), Conor O'Neill (SBSS)

**Thanks to:**

SWCC for loan of drill.

Derek Cousins (ex-LUSS) for directions, rigging guide and general memory recall.

Shilan Patel for Spanish translation.

## **Further Reading**

**“Expeditions to Tresviso and the Picos De Europa in Northern Spain 1974 – 1977”**. LUSS, 1977.

**“Tresviso 79 – An Expedition to the Picos De Europa, Northern Spain”**. LUSS, 1979.

**“Tresviso 1980 - An Expedition to the Picos De Europa Northern Spain”**. LUSS, 1980.

**“Aqua '86 and '87. Two Expeditions to the Picos De Europa Northern Spain”**. SWCC, 1987.

**“LUSS 4 Vol 2 No 1”**. LUSS, 1987.

**“Picos 95: Sistema Sara”**. Joel Corrigan, Neil Weymouth, Dominic Wade, Julian Carter and Pat Hall, SWCC Newsletter No 116.

**“Grandes Cuevas y Simas De Espana”**. Carlos Puch, 1998.

**“An Impromptu Trip to Spain – Easter 2005”**. Rhys Williams, SWCC Newsletter No 125.