

Systema Sara

The Exploration of Rio Mancondiu (1986 – 1987)

*Original translation by Jos Beyens (2020)
Edited for publication by Phil Walker (2020)*

Note on translation (2020): *The original Flemish article was published in Spelerpes '87. Jos Beyens translated the original from Flemish to English and Phil Walker has subsequently edited the translation further, mainly to add footnotes for context and amended some translations in line with UK caving terminology.*

Short history

Sara has two natural entrances (*Sara II* and *Sara III*), both entered via an abandoned mine-system¹.

In 1977 'Lancaster University Speleological Society' (L.U.S.S.) discovered the entrance of *Sara II* and explored to a depth of -210m the same year. The following year, they joined forces with 'La Seccion Espeleologica Ingenieros Industriales' (S.E.I.I.) of Madrid and they explored *Sara* to -635m², where they were halted by a sump.

In 1979 the Spanish club had an expedition of their own and discovered a second entrance, *Sara III*. This entrance leads directly to the top of the *Heinous Shaft* and the depth of the system became -648m². There were no further expeditions into *Sara*, until 1986.

Note: In 1987, after the V.V.S. expedition, L.U.S.S. returned to Sara and completed a Grade 5 survey, where the depth of Sara II was recalculated to -578m² deep.

The Exploration in 1986

Members: *Beyens Jos, Blommaert Patrick, Cuyvers Wim, De Clerck Frank, Keunen Rik, Mandonx Koen, Masschelein Jan, Sleurs André (V.V.S.³ members from SC Hades, SC Persephone, Spekul, W.T.S. and SC Orpheus)*

In 1986, most of us visited the Picos de Europa for the first time. We had the intention to explore *Sistema Sara* (-648m²), *Pozu Cebollada* (-580m) and *Pozu Jorcada Blanca* (-590m)⁴, but as it went, we had our hands full with *Sara*.

The first group arrived in Sotres (alt: 1080 m) on the 4th of August and the following day the rest of the team arrived. We brought our gear to the White House (alt: 1700m) with a rented land rover. From here, we continued on foot to *The Lake Depression* (alt: 1800m), where we made our camp for the following three weeks. *The Lake Depression* was the only source of running water (at 4°C).

The entrance of *Sistema Sara* lies at the end of a 45min walk, in the *Sara Depression*.

¹ As of 2020 *Sistema Sara* now has multiple entrances. The main mine entrance, labelled *Sara*. T82 Karen, T79, T80, T81, T84 and T92 all converge quickly and provide the most direct access to *Sara III*. AN-45 (M2) also connects to the main mine levels.

² In 1987 *Sara II* was resurveyed and the depth recalculated to -578m (-591m from the T82 Karen entrance). Tresviso 87, L.U.S.S. (1987)

³ Verbond van Vlaamse Speleologen (V.V.S.).

⁴ *Pozu Cebollada* and *Pozu Jorcada Blanca* are located in the Picos de Cornion, Western Massif.

The first team to descend *Sara* planned to rig ropes to the bottom of the *Heinous Shaft* (P281m), but they only got to a depth of -25m. It was clear we had to re-bolt every pitch and it took us almost a whole week to arrive at the bottom of the *Heinous Shaft*.

From here on, we inspected every possible passage leading off the main system. We were deceived a lot, but at a depth of -320m, Jan and Wim discovered, after a 10m climb, a narrow rift going up. The team decided to give it a try and almost every day a team of 2 or 3 cavers went into *Sara*.

In the beginning, this meander (*Wilfrieds Tunneltje*) gave us little hope, even if there were some nice decorated parts in it. However, the second team (Frank and Rik) came back with great news, after 250m they arrived at a sandy crawl with a lot of very cold blowing air. After digging a little bit they passed a squeeze and it started to go downhill again until they arrived at a very nice big shaft, which they thought it to be at least 100m deep.

After surveying the cave, it was only 41m deep! It quickly became the most dangerous pitch in the cave. The rope was so muddy and slippery after only a few days, it was very difficult to go down slowly. Not nice at all and that's why we called it *Franks Fantasie*.

After the pitch follows a very nasty 230m narrow rift. The first 30m are easy after which you have to find your way, sometimes at the top of the rift. It appeared endless and for Dré, who is a strong big caver, it was hell (the passage was called *Dré 's Miserie* for this reason).

After a little pitch (10m, *Anna's Pot*) and some crawling through long tunnels with a lot of protruding rocks and loose debris, we found a nice 22m deep shaft and a descending, bigger active system. Wim and Jan explored to the next small pitch (7m) and the survey was undertaken from this pitch back to *Anna's Pot*.

Note: Frank and Koen had to wait 10 hours at -310m because of a flood. We knew we had to be more careful and rig every pitch out of the water.

The Exploration in 1987

Members: *Beyens Jos, Blommaert Patrick, Cuyvers Wim, De Clerck Frank, Diels Jan, Keunen Rik, Mandonx Koen, Masschelein Jan, Schrevens Eddy, Sleurs André, Ponet Ronny (V.V.S. members from SC Hades, SC Persephone, Spekul, W.T.S. and SC Orpheus)*

On Sunday 12/07/1987 the first cavers arrive in Sotres and the next day the camp is setup in the *Lake Depression*.

The following day Jos, Frank and Koen rig the cave down to -320m where our discoveries, from 1986, begin. We also re-rigged the equipment at the beginning of the *Heinous Shaft*, as last year we had some problems exiting the cave because of water following a storm. Now, after a spectacular pendulum, you can stay out of the water and it is possible to see all the cavers at different levels in this enormous shaft.

The following days were stormy and rainy weather, so we stayed wisely at the camp.

On Saturday the weather is good enough and Jan and Wim continue to a little, nicely decorated, chamber after *Anna's Pot* and they leave some kitbags there. From here on, the real exploration can start but most important is to find a place for camping, as it now takes 12 to 14 hours to get in and out, without much time for exploration.

On Sunday, Frank, Koen and Jos make their descent and at 5PM they arrive at the deepest point from the previous year. The 7m pitch is very wet, a lot of water is coming from above, and we are glad when we can pass it. The pitch is followed by... another narrow rift, which is followed by...another pitch.

This one is deeper and we can see a platform at -6m. We fix the rope around a rock, drill some bolts, and Koen starts to descend in the waterfall... Then we hear him call, "*A place to camp! A place to camp!*". At last we have a 'room' and a place to make a bivouac... When we descend, we hang the rope out of the water. Koen went to explore a little further and we find him at the top of the following pitch. The rock is very hard here and it is hard work to drill a bolt but luckily we find a natural anchor as well. The pitch measures 18m deep and is followed by a short meander to the next pitch, 8m deep. This one is very muddy and we call it *Koens Kot*. We start our way out at 11:15PM and are out at 6AM the following morning. When we arrive at camp, we're just in time for breakfast!

All camping gear is packed and Ronny and Patrick take it down later to *Anna's Pot*. The day after, Eddy, Rik and Jan Diels descend with more kitbags full of ropes and they also take the camping gear further on, to the underground camping spot.

On Wednesday, Jan M and Wim camp for the first time in *Sara*. They set up the camp and continue exploration. After rigging *Koens Kot*, they find a new rift. The last part is a wet crawl to a small 6m deep pitch. It is a wet and cold job to rig this little pitch and it's Jan who has to do the job and we call this one: *Jans Jolijt (Jans Joy)*. At this stage, the team is eagerly hoping for a big shaft and after a 20m meander, they find one at last!

It is a wet pitch, the first 10m is dry, the following 30m is in the waterfall... Wim arrived rather wet at the bottom of the pitch (*Wim's Waterval*) and we can see the next narrow rift! It is 12AM when they are back in the camp, and after a good night's sleep, they leave the cave at 3:15PM next day.

On Friday 24/07/1987, at 1PM Koen, Jos and Frank crawl through the entrance. We know our way by now, and 4 hours later, we are at the camp! We eat some hot soup and continue on our way: meander, P18, meander, *Koen's Kot*, meander, *Jan's Jolijt*, meander and at last *Wim's Waterval* (P40).

We were asked to re-rig the shaft so the rope hangs out of the water, but it is clear that it will take a lot of time, so we decide to leave it as it is and descend in the water. The narrow rift that follows the pitch, is rather nasty and cold, you have to crawl through the water and there are sharp rocks everywhere. We turn around and try to stay higher up in the rift.

After 20m we arrive at a junction, on the left there is a sandy, easy walking gallery going up. We don't have to think very long and quickly we follow this inviting gallery. After 100m we arrive in a small quiet chamber. We can see the fossil gallery going on, but we would have to make a climb first (only 4m?). This little chamber (*Bieke's Zaal*) is a good place to camp, but you would have to bring your own water.

However, because we want to go down, not up, we turn back and follow the meander to an easy place to climb down. After a few meters we arrive at the next pitch. Koen is the first to descend and after 5m he arrives on a big platform with a big boulder. After a re-belay from a natural anchor we follow. It's already very late now and we are wet and very cold. We decide to leave all gear here and just have a quick look ahead... After 30m of a narrow meander/rift

we arrive at the next pitch. It doesn't look very deep, but we can't see the bottom because of the water spray.

On our way back we try to take some pictures, but back home we see that almost all the pictures are bad. At 4AM in the morning we go to sleep, the sleeping bags are wet and cold but we are tired enough to have a good sleep. At 11AM in the morning we get up and begin to make the survey from the camp chamber to the P22. There we crossover with the next team, Jan Diels and Rik. They tell us that it has rained heavily overnight, but the *Rio Mancondiu* wasn't affected... When we arrive in the main cave, we notice that the stream is indeed swollen but every rope hangs clear of the water, and we leave the cave at 10:15PM without a problem.

At the same time, Jan and Rik arrive at the undescended pitch, but they cannot find the bolts. They have to turn back without any further exploration (*we later called another pitch 'Rik's 'no bolt much gold' because he told us all the time he would find much gold in the mine system of Sara*).

On Monday 27/07/1987, Patrick, Jan and Wim go down at 10AM in the morning. At the P15 after *Wim's Waterval*, Patrick stays behind to re-belay the rope so it hangs clear of the water. When he arrived on the platform with the big boulder, the boulder started to slide down and crashes at the bottom of the pitch with Patrick left dangling on the rope... Luckily Jan and Wim were already gone. The noise of the falling boulder is enormous... The rope is cut through and Patrick was a bit shaken, but otherwise no damage done! We called this pitch *Patrick's Paniek...*

The pitch we stopped at last time is only 5m deep, then 200m of meander again, with a R3 and a P5. It's not easy to find the way in the narrow rift, sometimes they have to turn back and try higher in the rift to squeeze through. There's one passage where they have to crawl underneath sharp hanging rocks... some of them already fallen. It is impossible to pass without touching them... creepy! (This was called the '*Guillotine*').

At the end of the rift, they arrive in a very nice decorated little chamber! This was totally unexpected at this depth... On the other side, the meander continues. After a bend, they stand at the rim of a pitch in the bottom of the rift. They are at a depth of -522m. It seems as if the rift continues on the other side of the pitch, but you would have to make a long traverse around a bend to know! Patrick descends a short way, but it seems as if a new rift starts at the bottom. They turn back and start surveying the cave to the camp where they arrive at 2:15AM in the morning. They get out of the cave at 5:15PM.

On Wednesday Jos, Frank and Koen go in and we arrive at the last pitch at 4PM. We find all the equipment at the top of the pitch and we have another two kitbags with rope. Koen starts the descent and starts to re-belay at the third platform. Frank makes a re-belay at the second and I do the same at the first, in this manner everyone is busy and stays warm and we don't lose much time.

Frank then takes the lead and arrives at the bottom of this 41m pitch... then we hear him call. We hurry as fast as we can and soon after we stand beside him before a circular sump. It is

clear that the water level sometimes is much higher, far above our heads...⁵ We try to cross the sump but there is no way on.

We start to think at the work ahead of us, getting all the equipment out, surveying the cave... We fill three kitbags and when we want to start the survey, we notice that the topofil is out of use because of the mud... This will be work for the next team!

We're back in camp at midnight. In the morning, we have no desire to leave the warm sleeping bags and it is already midday when we leave. We cross Jan, Ronny and Rik on our way out. They will have a lot of work to do and the narrow passages are difficult even without gear. They will have to survey and get all equipment out! However, they get the work done and at 1:30AM in the morning they are back at the camp. Next day they are out of *Sara* at 9:10PM.

On Saturday it is Jan, Wim and Patrick again to go down. They have to survey some small parts (the fossil gallery and *Biekes Zaal* chamber) and de-rig all the pitches. They bring all gear to *Anna's Pot*, turn back down again and go to sleep in the camp. Next morning they take down the camp and de-rig the cave to *Franks Fantasie*. At this point they already have 8 kitbags at this pitch! For this, they had to pass *Dré's Miserie* two times (so 4 trips back and forth). They take three kitbags out of the cave.

Monday... We go down to get the rest of the equipment. Tim Nichols (*from the L.U.S.S. Tresviso 87 expedition*) will accompany us so he can get to know the big *Heinous Shaft*. We give him a big kitbag to get out in return! The following days L.U.S.S. will use our ropes in the main cave and replace them with their own equipment.

The last day, we go down again for some pictures of the cave before the big shaft. At the bottom of the *Heinous Shaft* is one kitbag left... We do a little game and Patrick is the winner! He's the one to go down and get the kitbag out! The same day, we go down to Sotres with all our tents, ropes and good memories.

We know there is a lot more to explore in *Rio Mancondiu*... Who knows? Maybe 1988?⁶

Further notes

Development: (Rio Mancondiu): 1500m

Depth: - 558m⁷

Total length of ropes used: 815m

90 karabiners and 75 hangars / maillons

2 ladders

16 kitbags

1987:

Total time underground: 875 hours (> 36 days)

Total time at underground camp: 178 hours

Jos Beyens

⁵ Flood markings identified 4-5m above the sump. Jos Beyens, personal comms. (2020)

⁶ The following year the team members were invited on a two month expedition to China and unfortunately after that the planned return never happened. Jos Beyens, personal comms. (2020)

⁷ Due to problems with surveying equipment and the resurvey of *Sara II*, it is possible that the sumps in both *Rio Mancondiu* and *Sara II* are at the same level, maybe even part of the same sump. Jos Beyens, personal comms. (2020).