

MATIENZO 2013

23rd July

I flew out from Manchester to Bilbao with Xander, picked up the hire car and drove to Matienzo, where we pitched our tents in the almost empty campsite, met the few other expedition members out so early, then went for a run past some of the caves.

24th July

Simas del Picon, 75

Xander and I joined Ali Neill in this excellent cave for some surveying. The 17m entrance pitch was descended with the aid of a deviation from a tree, and led into a huge entrance passage and, via several chambers and a crawl, into a part of the cave that needed re-surveying. We climbed a couple of unexplored avens, which both led nowhere, and found, up a short climb just beyond the crawl, an unsurveyed passage to explore the next day.

25th July

Simas del Picon, 75

Xander, Ali and I returned to Picon to explore and survey 118m of new passage. From the top of the climb we entered a well-decorated rift (Coral Rift Passage) and, via three triangular squeezes on the left wall, entered Floose Boulder Choke. Through a squeeze in the boulder choke we entered a chamber with lovely flowstone, which we called Wish You Were Here Chamber, in honour of all those we wished were there, including you.

26th July

We were all kitted up and about to set off, when Dan texted Xander saying he was at the airport, a day earlier than we were expecting him. Being heroes, we dropped everything and drove to Bilbao to collect the handsome devil.

27th July

Simas del Picon, 75

The three of us (from now on all trips involve Dan, Xander and me) returned with Ali to descend a pitch just past the area we had re-surveyed on the first day. This pitch had been descended about 20 years ago, but not since then, and no decent survey of the passages beyond existed. Ali hammered in some bolts and we descended the pitch, explored and surveyed everything beneath it. At the foot of the pitch is a magnificent formation, which we (I) named Eight Girls, One Octopus. We also gave names to chambers called The Full Monty and The Dull Monty. Xander found a unique formation up a short climb. It's probably best if he describes it, as I'm not sure my vocabulary is up to the task.

28th July

Cubillon

We joined cousins Dan and Chris Hibberts to survey and investigate some passages beyond an aven they had recently climbed in this muddy cave. Three successive entrance pitches led into streamway, then things got a bit muddy. An ascending pitch followed by a descent via several re-belays took us to a muddy and loose passage that led up to an uninspiringly loose boulder-choked aven.

29th July

Cueva del Molino

After the loose, muddy trip of the previous day, we decided to treat ourselves to a relaxing time in this magnificent river cave, also known simply as Agua. We followed the river all the way to the sump and explored up a few spectacular calcite ramps. The formations in the area around the sump

are incredible, with huge stals and columns, brilliant flowstone and a Stone Age wall. Sadly, we have the rather dubious distinction of being the first people to record the very invasive American Crayfish in this classic cave.

30th July

Frog-in-a-Pocket Pot, 2000

Looking through the database for unexplored, or partly explored shafts, we found this one, which had been partly descended in the past by someone with a 40m rope, who reckoned the shaft was another 10-20m deeper than he got to. We armed ourselves with a bolting kit and 77m rope, and bottomed the loose shaft, via several re-belays, at a depth of about 55m. Xander found a frog at the bottom, which he carried out in his pocket, hence the name.

31st July

Playa de la Arena

We took a day off caving and went to this excellent beach, situated at the mouth of a river.

1st August

Carcavuezo, 81

We joined Ali Neill and Carmen Smith to look at some leads in the Four Valleys system. Initially, we found a previously unknown connection between two inlets, through some boulder chokes. After this, we went through a squeeze off Duck Passage and surveyed 37m of low crawling in Double Dildo Didgeridoo Passage, which may sound like a rude name for us (me) to come up with, but the squeeze further along Duck Passage was called Tart's Twat.

The expedition meal, or 'Breadgate' as I like to call it, was held on the night.

2nd August

Torca de Yusa, 116

We walked in with our gear, including a 144m rope, and Dan placed a few bolts at the top of this big shaft, ready for the next day.

3rd August

Torca de Yusa, 116

We descended the awesome 117m entrance shaft, via several re-belays, and found a live snake at the bottom. We then headed up a steep mud slope following a tip off that on a previous trip, continuing passage had been seen in the NE corner at the top. At the top of the slope, we found two pitches and descended them both. Space Serpent Pitch, in the NW corner, was about 10m deep and landed in a small, well decorated chamber with no way on. At the NE corner, there was a very well decorated wall and we descended a loose, muddy 15m pitch, which landed in a large chamber. I can see why someone had thought it might continue, but sadly just around a corner was a dead end. Xander poked about optimistically, as is his wont, but no further passage was found. Dan opted for the appropriate name: Shower of Shit Pitch.

I ascended the 117m pitch carrying the venomous snake in a bag around my waist and released at the top, where it slithered off into the sunset.

4th August

Torca la Vaca, 2889

For our last day of caving, we opted for a straightforward trip in this beautiful cave. We carried tackle for another group doing some exploration over the next few days and descended two ladder pitches, with Dan creating some photographic masterpieces, thanks in part to his choice of models.

We had a massive night in the bar, not abed until about 8am.

5th August

Somehow we got up and had a trip down to the river, then ate at Restaurante Arredondo with MUSC.

6th August

We got up early, drove to the airport and flew home. Two weeks previously, we were three lost boys searching for meaning; today we are truly men.

Chris Scaife



Photos – Alex Ritchie (top) & Daniel Jackson (bottom)