

Preliminary Report - Chica 2006
Oxford University Cave Club - Picos de Europa, Spain
3rd July - 17th August

The OUCC Chica 2006 team have returned safely to the UK after a successful expedition in the Asturian Spanish Picos Mountains. Below is a brief report outlining the major events during the effort and its achievements, in advance of the main report due for release prior to the end of 2006.

FINAL TEAM MEMBERS

In the field

Chris Sinadinos (leader) 3 Jul - 17 Aug
Gareth Phillips (treasurer) 3 Jul - 26 Jul
David Legg (deputy leader) 3 Jul - 24 Jul
Jill Drury 3 Jul - 17 Jul
Gavin Lowe (safety) 7 Jul - 30 Jul
Pete Devlin (medical officer) 7 Jul - 16 Jul
Chris Densham 16 Jul - 24 Jul
Michael Hopley (website) 18 Jul - 3 Aug
Thomas Evans (science) 26 Jul - 17 Aug
Richard Siddans 31 Jul - 6 Aug
Elisa Carboni 31 Jul - 6 Aug
Simon Goddard (gear) 3 Aug - 17 Aug

Committee from home

Rosa Clements (sponsorship)
John Pybus (technology)
Chris Cooper - 'Pod' (website)

PRIMARY AIM - EXPLORATION OF CHICAGO CAVE

Progress and rigging

Chicago (Fissura de Chica) has been extended to a surveyed depth of 521.9m and is estimated to drop to almost 600m via an undescended shaft of 70 to 80m depth. This represents a vertical advance of some 320m from the 2005 limit of exploration. Despite significant discovery of horizontal passage (350.5m), little net deviation from the entrance position by compass leaves the cave dropping near to the Pozu Cabeza Muxa streamway. The increasingly wet nature of lower regions of the cave lends credence to such proximity. A connection with Muxa could yield a system of between 820 and 875m whilst presenting the possibility of a high-level Muxa sump bypass, furthering vertical progress towards the Culiembro resurgence. The very wide nature of Chicago's lower pitches is a cause for further optimism, suggesting that multiple routes towards or past Muxa may exist.

Ropes for pitches below 150m depth, and for short climbs and rifts throughout the cave, have been left coiled or in situ in anticipation that the pursuance of a Chicago - Muxa connection will constitute a key objective of the OUCC 2007 expedition to Spain.

Cave nature

Chicago is currently divisible into 3 sections based upon the type of cave encountered. Successive entrance shafts are wide (aside from at the narrow entrance) and drop rapidly to a 3-way rift at -150m. A series of pitches through rift that are interspersed with climbs over Picos-style ramps follows, resulting in a modest depth gain to approximately -250m. Finally, a shaft series drops swiftly to the current limit of exploration. The vertical nature of this current section adds to the enthusiasm regarding current progress in Chicago.

SECONDARY OBJECTIVES

Shaft bashing (entrance location and investigation)

The 2006 focus was on 3 distinct regions to the west of the Cares Gorge:

- The frequented northern section of OUCC Area 4, directly to the north-east of the Cabeza Corvu - Julagua ridge ('orange rock valley') was off-investigated en route to Chicago, but didn't yield any promising new finds.
- Prospection of the more remote southern Area 4, immediately north of Cabeza Llambria, yielded 2 new interesting caves to be documented as **76/4** and **77/4**. 77/4 was further investigated to a drafting passable rift at -50m, and its further investigation is recommended to forthcoming OUCC expeditions.
- An excursion to the more distant Area E, high on the north-eastern slopes of La Verdelluenga Mountain, was also undertaken. This area is of current interest due to receding snow levels, good depth potential (typically 400-500m greater than Chicago), and recent neglect by OUCC. Reduced snow plug levels (**E18**), mysteriously drafting entrance chambers (**E19**), and possible new entrances were documented without a major new lead being found.
- A drafting dig near to our Ario camp (**79/5**) was also initiated, but may require fumigation for future work!

Conservation project

The planned Chica 2006 conservation biology study was not undertaken, primarily due to the lack of a suitable streamway for hydrological sampling in Chicago. Wetter passages with small pools amenable to net sampling were only encountered below 400m depth - a distance to which the ferrying of equipment was not feasible with the man power available. The pools were also discovered relatively late in the expedition, by which time a before-after comparison was not possible. Several translucent cave harvestmen were observed in the upper cave, although sittings became less frequent as the expedition proceeded. This suggests that our presence may have had a detrimental effect upon a fragile population and underlines the need for an assessment of such effects in the future. We would thus encourage a second attempt at the project in 2007 at the lower pools in Chicago, despite the cave's lack of organic matter and possible oligotropic nature. The search for a suitable cave entrance at which to compare the entrance-proximal surface fauna, unsuccessful on this occasion, should also be pursued when time and resources allow.

ARIO CAMP AND SPANISH CONTACTS

Relations with the FAsE* and Picos National Park authorities remain very good. Water collection via a snow hole at Ario was undertaken for a second successive year, although significantly lower levels prompted concerns that the snow may recede and become inaccessible in the near future.

There is also concern that surface holes to the rear of the Ario stone shelter are being used by somebody in the area to dump rubbish, and that OUCC may receive undue blame for this. We hope to raise this issue with Juan

Jose of the FAsE prior to next years departure for Spain. Paramount respect for our beautiful area of exploration remains a priority for the future.

*Federacion Asturiana de Espeleologia

WITH THANKS...

An early thank you to those that made the Chica 2006 project possible:

Members in the field
Members from home
Corporate sponsors
Supporting funding bodies
The Gordon Foundation
Dragon and Lyon Caving Gear
Exploration and science advisors
Home contacts
Spanish contacts



Tom Evans in *Wild West Passage*



El Jefe with Rich Siddans outside 77/4

Compiled by Chris Sinadinos 20/08/06

<http://expeditions.oucc.org.uk/chica2006/>