

Oxford University Cave Club

Julagua 2009 Expedition - Preliminary Report

This summer the Oxford University Cave Club returned to the Picos de Europa Mountains of Northern Spain to continue ongoing work exploring and surveying the region's deep cave systems. This preliminary report outlines the major events and findings of the expedition. A more detailed report will be published shortly.



Photo: Ben Lovett

The expedition's primary aim was to continue the exploration of "Sistema Julagua", a cave system located on the flanks of Cabeza Julagua, a mountain in the central Massif of the Picos de Europa. The original entrance to the system, "Asopladeru La Texa", was discovered in 1995 by the Barcelona SIE (caving) club. By 1998 it had been explored to a depth of 790m, terminating at what was believed to be a sump. In 2001 OUCC discovered a cave, later named "Pozo la Tormenta", which was subsequently connected into Sistema Julagua in 2003. In 2005 OUCC returned to the system and discovered that what the original Spanish explorers had thought to be a sump was actually a passable pool. The system was extended to a total depth of 1,061m, terminating at a sump. In 2008 an expedition returned to the cave with the main aim of diving past the up- and downstream sumps. In addition to new passage discovered beyond the sumps, the 2008 expedition explored a large dry old phreatic passage at a higher level than the downstream sump. The passage contained spectacular calcite formations, and was left as a wide open lead at the end of the expedition. It was to this passage that we intended to return.

The expedition left Oxford early on the 4th July and arrived in Spain late on Sunday the 5th. A surface camp was quickly established at Vega de Ario, and the first rigging trip took place on

Tuesday 7th July. By the following Monday the cave had been rigged down to -710m and an underground camp established. The first job for the underground campers was to implement conservation measures in the well-decorated chambers in the phreatic passage. A narrow path was marked through the passages to limit the areas of damage and many photographs were taken of the formations.



Dickon Morris with cave formation
Photo: Ben Lovett

On the 17th July the first proper exploration trip took place. A 9m climb at the limit of exploration was bolted up, revealing about 30m of wide passage before another pitch. A subsequent trip rigged down this pitch, which turned out to be 25m deep. The passage continued for a further 30m as wide phreatic tube with a beach-like sandy floor, before dropping down a 7m pitch. Another 55m of passage followed, before the explorer's came up their worst nightmare: a 24m pitch down to a sump pool, with no obvious way on. The pool was plumbed to a depth of 20m, but no bottom found.

Subsequent trips searched in vain for a way on, investigating numerous small holes, climbs and side passages, but nothing was found. This was not what we'd been hoping for, and unfortunately marked the end of the dry exploration. The final pitch series was aptly named "What am I going to tell the boys?"

Meanwhile, Tony Seddon continued work from 2008 diving in the downstream sump. Tony had previously dived the sump to a depth of 40m. He managed to dive a further 10m down, but owing to equipment failure, and faced with a deep sump which showed no sign of bottoming out, took the decision not to dive any further. The sump is estimated to be at least 60m deep, this sump and new sump shown by survey to be on the same level.

Exploration also proceeded beyond the upstream sump in "Cheesecake streamway". In 2008 exploration had terminated at a waterfall. This was climbed for a height of 40m, but the top not reached due to time constraints. Based upon the position and direction of the passages, we conjecture that it is likely to connect with the "Cabeza Muxa" streamway.

Following the termination of the dry leads, after 3 weeks in the field it was time to begin de-rigging. Unfortunately the expedition met with bad luck during this phase. A caver exiting the cave managed to get the rope on the second pitch caught up in their tacklebag, resulting in the rope getting hooked up 20m above the floor. This meant that the next party exiting the cave could not get out, and had to wait at the bottom of the pitch for someone to come down and free the rope. Since the team had missed their "callout" the Spanish cave rescue service were called. Expedition members then descended the cave, realised what the problem was and freed the rope. The trapped party then exited unassisted and unharmed, apart from a little cold and tired.

A further incident occurred a week later. A group of four cavers became trapped after an unusually heavy storm raised water levels in the cave. Before this storm, there had been no reported cases of the “Asopladeru La Texa” entrance shafts taking any water. After the storm a fair sized stream flowed down the pitches. Although nowhere near large enough to pose a danger to a caver in horizontal passage, it made the pitches impassable, as to attempt to climb a rope hung directly in the path of the water would have been extremely dangerous. The group had to wait overnight for the water levels to drop before exiting the cave. The Spanish rescue services had been called and provided surface assistance to the exiting cavers. A club investigation into both these incidents is ongoing, considering both their causes and the reactions to them; the results will be published with the full expedition report.

By 13th August the expedition was packed and ready to depart Spain. The expedition vehicle had other ideas however, and burst its radiator less than 20km into the journey. It was over a month until the vehicle could be repaired and returned to the UK. An additional failure occurred on arrival back in the UK, meaning the vehicle had to be towed for the final leg of the journey.

David Rose, a journalist writing for the Mail on Sunday, accompanied the expedition. A feature article was published in the newspaper’s “Live” magazine shortly after the expedition. We were very pleased with the article, and believe it portrayed a positive image of cave exploration, as well as publicising the expedition with the public.

Despite the incidents that occurred towards the end of expedition, we consider the expedition a success. Although we didn’t discover as much new cave as we might have hoped for, we have exhausted all dry leads and bottomed another Picos cave. The elusive link between a cave of the Western Massif and the Culiembro resurgence remains to be found, and gives future expeditions to the area something to aim for. We are sure the area has potential for many more deep cave systems, and we hope that future expeditions will continue to seek these out.

Report Compiled by Nick Edwards, October 2009



Photos: Ben Lovett

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