

Torca del Mostajo

Monday 11th - Thursday 14th August 2014

Cavers: Chris Scaife, Dan Jackson, Carolina Smith de la Fuente, Bill Smith, Mike Topsom, Jez Wong, David Dunlop, Lloyd Cawthorne, Adam Sharples

On our second day in Matienzo, erstwhile Milky Bar Kid Dan Jackson went and joined the long term dig at Torca la Vaca, just days before they made their big breakthrough. I was left in the groping hands of the MUSCateers, exploring their home from home, Mostajo. This cave is on the opposite side of the valley from Picón, where last year three brave souls from Black Rose worked their magic.

The entrance pitch drops down via two hanging re-belays, a slope and a deviation to a herpetologically active floor in a walking passage. This passage is followed to a roped traverse and a crawl under the left wall, a bit more walking and then a rope dangling down from above allows a graceful climb up. Some more walking, crawling, squeezing and two more roped traverses lead into more large walking passage.

The first lead we pursued was a gloopy crawl choked with mud and boulders. After several hours of capping and grovelling on our hands and knees in thick mud we were making slow progress, so decided to look elsewhere. Back in the main passage, Bill started looking down a climb and I was the only one left with any will to live after digging in the mud, so together we headed on down.

Adam had previously had a brief look down this climb and said there was a draughting passage blocked with boulders. We went straight past this lead and found something completely different: a draughting passage blocked with a boulder. Just as Arthur extracted the sword from the stone, so we rocked and rolled and removed the boulder, unblocking the passage. Beyond was the beckoning darkness of untouched cave.

We followed this ***Tenebrous Passage***, down, down, crawls, squeezes, climbs, every time we came to an obstruction wondering if we were at the end, but always finding a way on. We found a large pit in the floor that looked very tempting, but we had not brought the bolting kit so had to leave the pitch undescended for the time being.

Through another squeeze, we reached a T-junction and turned left. This brought us to a climb up, which was fortunately easier than it looked. Above this, further passage led to the vastly underrated ***Ice Sculpture*** formation, by-passed by a narrow rift to the right, thus keeping the decorations pure. This led to another pitch and another reason to come back, as the pitch led into a large chamber (***The Sweet Shop of Horrors***) and the passage seemed to continue.

Heading back, we followed the rift from the T-junction and soon heard running water for the first time in Mostajo. The source of this was the impressive ***Tmesis Chamber***, 18m high x 17m long x 8m wide, with a light flow of water coming from the ceiling and dropping through a hole in the floor. This was a third pitch for us to explore on our return, but it was getting late and our fellow cavers were getting worried or grumpy, so we headed out.

So, roughly ten hours underground on the Monday, obviously let's do the same on the Tuesday. Jez and David surveyed ***Tenebrous Passage***, while I joined Dan and Mike to explore the pitches. Mike bolted and descended the first pitch while I was showing Jez and David the way through. Mike said there was no way on from the bottom, but he could hear running water.

We then went to the wet pitch below ***Tmesis Chamber*** and placed a y-hang. Mike descended 8m first to a ledge, which Dan and I reached by a comfortable free climb, with a further descent of 8m into a large chamber and continuing streamway. We explored this ***Chthonic Streamway***, a mixture of walking, crawling and scrambling over boulders, and found it severely blocked downstream. It could be excavated by someone very determined, but it would certainly be a big job. A short upstream passage was also blocked. This blockage could be removed much more easily, but may not lead very far.

On the way out, we had a minor incident. Dan started to traverse across a boulder about the size of a washing machine (everything in Matienzo reminds me of washing machines) and I was directly beneath the boulder, with Mike just behind me. As Dan touched the boulder it moved slightly and, quickly realising that it was loose, Dan decided to wait on a ledge for the two of us to get out from under the boulder. Mike then stepped across the boulder and his tackle sack made light contact with the boulder, which was enough to send it crashing down into the exact spot where I had been moments earlier. If Dan had continued across I'd have been killed. And there my final chance to die with dignity slipped from my grasp.

The morning after a big night out, local 'fountain' of knowledge Miss Smith de la Fuente acted as tour guide to us BRCC chaps on the Wednesday and showed us the delights of Santander. And just for one day we believed that there was more to life than exploring caves.

With our bodies once more producing vitamin D, Dan, Carol and I dedicated Thursday to more subterranean investigation, returning to survey ***Chthonic Streamway*** and descend into the ***Sweet Shop of Horrors***. En route, we gave that loose boulder a damn good thrashing, so it seemed reasonably safe before we plunged beneath it and allowed its precarious balancing act to determine our fate.

The ***Sweet Shop of Horrors*** was a muddy chamber with several dubious leads that may attract a certain kind of psychopath, but we did not follow any and finished our surveying there. Over the three days of caving we discovered roughly 400m of new cave, dropped 3 undescended pitches and, despite Dan's best efforts, stayed alive. But for me the highlight of Matienzo will always be the Cola Cao con wobble.

Chris Scaife BRCC