

## Shrimpbones, Mongooses & Porcupines

(What could possibly go wrong)?



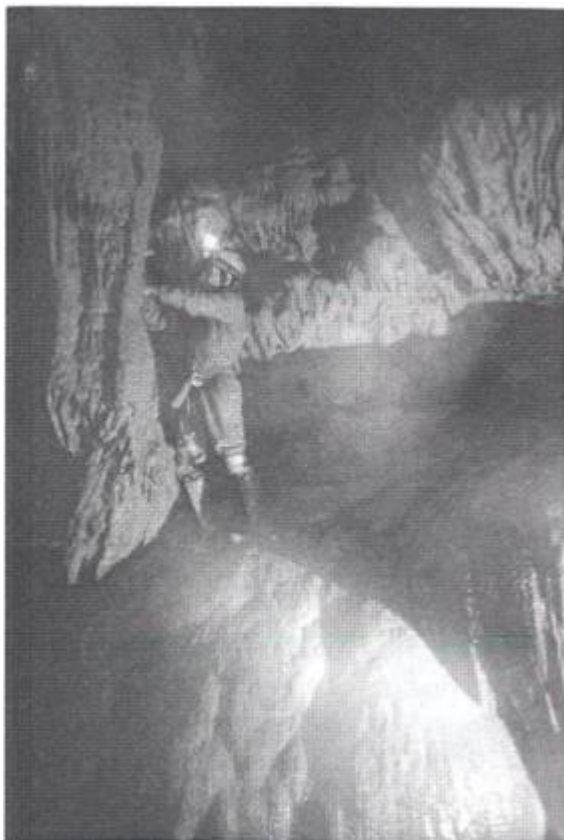
### Matienzo Valley

*Over Christmas/New Year of 1989/90, a well-known village within the Cantabrian mountains of Spain was witness to a small group of BEC cavers intent on exploration and merry making. The aforementioned foray into Spanish caving became infamous and is now firmly engraved in Cantabrian and Belfry folklore. This was mainly due to a small incident involving a few San Miguels, half a pint of Anise & Brandy, a couple of "empty looking" houses, a few cars and the Santander*

*Civil Guard's riot squad. However, a lesser known aspect of the 89/90 expedition was the exploration of Shrimpbone Inlet, situated deep within Los Hoyecka (Uzueka), Systema Los Cuatro Valles. The trip extended Shrimpbone Inlet a further 700m, finishing in a chamber with a ten foot waterfall coming out of the roof.*

Easter 2000, Matienzo was yet again the scene of an invasion of cavers. The annual cave and drinkfest started early this year. A small noisy encampment of tents was located in the marsh behind Casa German (Bar). A large collection of MUSS, NCC, Bolton, Liverpool, TSG, CUCC, CDG, RRCPC, and of course BEC, were responsible for this camp. The BEC contingent consisted of Rich Blake and Tony Jarratt, who had arrived by "Talking Terry's (I don't do time) magical mystery tours" and myself, who had arrived by the aid of a drunken taxi driver. Our objective was to carry out some unfinished business in Uzueka, namely to climb the aven at the end of Shrimpbone Inlet. However, as a starter we were invited, along with Andy Pringle (RRCPC) Liam Wright (TSG) and Sam? (CUCC) to a new find at the top of a 30m aven to help with surveys and detackling. This was to be carried out via an undescended surface shaft that Mark Wright & Martin Holroyd (NCC) had spotted from within their discovery. With the surface shaft quickly located, two 10m ladders were swiftly dispatched into the hole. RB descended the shaft to find that we needed a third ladder. Unfortunately, the third ladder had been inadvertently left in the boot of the jeep. This posed a small problem, as not everyone had SRT kit with them. The descent was an entertaining abseil on the lifeline to a knot, to ladder change over, via a small ledge. After the inevitable faff, the survey, exploration and photography took place without a hitch. Unfortunately, the remaining leads fizzled out, and the new passage was surveyed at around 150m long. The team split into two with four having fun and games detackling the 30m aid climb and the new entrance shaft by combined tactics and one

completing SRT kit, whilst L Wand myself (PM) detackled Abono's original entrance, thus a pleasant through trip.



We decided to carry out a gear carrying recce trip into Uzueka as far as the 'Astrodome', a huge missile silo type aven, 120m high, which is about a third of the way in. A simple trip, we thought, to refresh our memory – what could possibly go wrong! A strong team consisting of RB, TJ, MW, Sam, PM, (three of which had been in the cave several times before)

were unexpectedly side tracked by the Riano bar. This resulted in a devastating failure of internal compasses and route finding abilities. Many hours were spent wandering up dead-end passages and exploring series we were not intending to visit. All in all, it took seven hours to find our way to the Astrodome and two hours to get out.

The next trip into Uzueka was an overnigher, destined for the end of Shrimp bone. Heavily laden, Sam, RB and PM proceeded through the first third of Uzueka in good time. The additional gear was collected from the Astrodome. Our next obstacle was the massive 'Armageddon' choke. Luckily, we managed to locate the road works bunting that marks the route through the complicated choke. The only problem we had was locating the pitch at the end of the choke. The

1975 ladder was exchanged for a slightly newer one, then we continued down the extensive stream passage, interspersed with the occasional boulder piles. Eventually, the next potential obstacle 'Duckhams sump' was reached at about two thirds of the way in.

The roof of the 10m wide streamway lowers and the water deepens to neck deep with a couple of inches airspace (if you're lucky). Although you can avoid the swimming and most of the neck deep water by a sneaky right hand wall route, you can't avoid the final 10m duck/dive, in which you head for the sound of falling water. Once found, you search for a hole in the roof next to the waterfall and struggle in the deep water to climb into the passage above.

A guide line was rigged through the duck and left in situ, just in case. A thrutchy rift led to the start of the 'Rocky Horror Series'. At this point, Shrimpbone Inlet enters from the right. Shrimpbone Inlet is about 1.2 km long and starts as an impressive small stream passage. After 200m, it degenerates into misery and hard work. Alzheimer's must have set in over the preceding decade, because memories of formations, sculptured passages and delicate false floors were quickly replaced by sharp jagged spikes, awkward rifts and endless crawling.

However, the chert false floors were still there, albeit pockmarked by cavers feet crashing through them with shin-numbing regularity, and a body-sized hole with a slight resemblance to the shape of a certain Mendip caver. The Alzheimer's didn't stop there. When we reached the final chamber, we were dismayed to discover that the ten foot waterfall had increased in height to nearer forty feet. A brew station was established, while we took turns over the next nine hours to aid-climb up the overhanging waterfall. The waterfall issued from a letterbox, 10m above the deck, which was eventually reached by RB, only to find that a stal rib prevented access into the visible stream passage beyond. Time for a quick exit. The majority of the gear was abandoned and a fast five hour retreat was made. We surfaced after a 21 hour trip just in time to catch last orders at the Riano bar.



After a suitable period of rest (mostly spent prospecting and sampling the occasional ale) a plan for a third trip into Uzueka was formulated. This time, the same team armed with a lump hammer and chisel set off for another long trip. The stal rib was swiftly dispensed with, allowing entry into a decorated chamber. We surveyed up into the chamber and assessed the ways on. Above led up through boulders towards tantalising black voids. This route would require further bolting. Straight on, the stream cascaded 3m out of the roof over a delicate chert false floor. A passage could be seen beyond. The walls of the chamber were completely shattered, and we initially thought we would have to return with a maypole (a daunting prospect). However, after a short consultation and some precarious balancing, we managed to hammer a hole up through the false floor, allowing access via a human pyramid. With the ladder belayed to a convenient stal pillar, we continued with the survey along stooping stream passage. The passage eventually reached a fork, and we decided to explore the left branch, as it issued the larger stream (both draught strongly). The passage degenerated into a crawl and eventually reached a rifty squeeze, covered in sharp crystal spikes – 'The Porcupine'. The slot led through to a walking-sized rift, which in turn led to a chamber at the base of four large avens. The avens disappear into blackness, and any further progress will require a drill and a bivi. A small plastic mongoose (acquired from a local bar the previous evening) was left to mark the permanent survey station. Carbide and time were running out, so an exit was made, leaving the other two leads unexplored and still going. The two waterfalls out of Shrimp bone Inlet into the 'Mongoose Extensions' were left rigged; a short ladder on the 3m waterfall and an old climbing rope on the 10m waterfall with a rebelay to keep it away from the water (The rope will need replacing by whoever visits next). We exited the cave around 9 am, heavily laden after a 19 hour trip, and promptly knocked up the Riano bar. AJ accompanied by Talking Terry and Brian Davis arrived a couple of hours later, to kindly give us a lift back to Matienzo, via a Santander Blanco run.

Recovery from the latest Uzueka trip was again spent prospecting with AJ, TT, BD. Several interesting holes were dug along the hillside on the road up to the Smoos Bar. The most interesting was a small hole in the road cutting above Cueva Volvo. After a couple of hours of hammering, chiselling and collapsing boulders on to the road, we eventually managed to break into a small decorated cave – 'Cueva

Roadshow' – about 70m long, with a hopeful dig at the end. A call for help came from a couple of local farmers. Firstly, a gate was needed on a surface shaft, to prevent cattle from falling in. Secondly, we were called out to rescue a foal from the bottom of a 20 m shaft. Unfortunately, the foal had not survived its fall, but it did help to further good public relations with the locals in Matienzo. All in all, we had a superb time back in the happy valley where time is never called.

by Peter 'Snablet'  
MacNab



Caver in campsite



Strange rituals involving caver and animal

