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MCP Summer Expedition 2026 — Summary

Overview

Around 80 cavers took part over five weeks, including members from the USA, Denmark and Spain and several UK university clubs (Aberystwyth, Bristol, Sheffield). Many younger cavers joined their first expedition and gained surveying, bolting and digging experience. Weather was exceptionally dry and hot early on. The expedition coincided with the total solar eclipse over northern Spain; cloud blocked the view from the planned Matienzo viewpoints, though some who drove to the coast near San Mamés caught totality.

Overall totals: 100 sites visited, 189 trips, just over 3km of passage surveyed (2,621m new), 17 new digs/caves recorded, and 19 sites extended by nearly 1.4km, including the Risco system reaching 13,108m.

Key Highlights

Vallina II major find: Catalan colleagues working with the project broke through a boulder choke to find 1,247m of large, ancient passage (Galería dels Somnis) above New York Gallery, at the same level as Torca de la Vera Negra — suggesting a more extensive system linking the two caves. Further work here is a priority for 2027.

Rub-a-Dub-Dubs sump diving: Mark Smith, supported by a team carrying rebreather gear via Reñada I, extended the line laid by Rupert Skorupka to about 280m (12m depth) despite unusually cloudy water — likely caused by the drought followed by heavy rain. Visibility improved slightly near the end, and diving will continue in 2027.

Digging progress: Major efforts continued at Vallina (linking to Sump 6) and at dig 0813 in Cubija ("High Hopes Hole", involving many new members), stopped by hard calcite in Vallina and loose rock in #0813 needing further work or shoring in 2027. Jim Lister led eight trips at the "G spot" dig, again blocked by hard calcite.

Accidents: A serious fall in Armageddon, on a through-trip from Deception to Giant Panda, caused broken ribs and a cheek fracture; the caver self-extracted without needing a rescue call-out. Another precautionary hospital visit (wrist and arm) were later found to be bruising rather than fracture.

Other notable finds: New passage at Torca de la Vera Negra (0036), Cueva de la Espada, Cueva del Selvijo, and a resurveyed/extended Cueva del Mazo system (28m to 131m). Several strongly-draughting digs (Superfosfato, Socks, Pants, Palindrome) remain long-term projects.

By Area

Arredondo — Cueva Vallina

Beyond the Vallina II breakthrough, work continued near Ha! Aven, Resistance Gallery, Zarco's Pitch and Swirl Chamber on climbs in poor rock; a new route via "Cowboy Aven" was rigged after several attempts. Ageing bolts need replacing in places.

South Vega

Eight trips supported the Reñada sump diving. 295m surveyed near Blood Alley. Catalan cavers re-rigged Azpilicueta and repaired damaged traverse lines at Rub-a-Dub-Dubs. Torca de la Vera Negra (0036) was re-explored after decades, surveying 160m (78m new) with promising leads remaining. Several shafts (4998, 5053, 4999, 1239) were investigated with mixed results.

Seldesuto

A boulder-blocked entrance at Toad in the Hole was cleared with a hand winch, but further boulders and instability mean scaffolding is needed before proceeding — an Easter visit is planned. Small new chambers were found at shaft 2754; several minor digs (2741, 5559, 5568) showed little promise.

North Vega, Cubija and El Naso

Alongside 0813 (see above), Torca del Mostajo was checked for links (none found); a caver fell here, initially diagnosed with a fracture, later found to be bruising. New passage and a well-decorated chamber ("Moose is Loose") were found in Cueva de Rascavieja. Palindrome Dig's unstable boulder choke was assessed as not worth the engineering effort.

El Sedo, Ozana and La Colina

Cueva de la Puerta (0024) was extended and surveyed, adding to its link with Sistema del Risco, which now exceeds 13km with several leads left to push. Smaller extensions were made at Risco, Tiva, Selvijo, Mazo and the Hum resurgence system; several minor new sites were logged for future reference.

La Secada and the Four Valleys System

Twenty sites, 39 trips. Carcavuezo yielded 143m of new complex passage near Afternoon Stroll. Torca la Decepción was rigged for the Armageddon through-trip (see accident above). Numerous shafts and digs (1941, 5533, 5470, 5569, 5572, 5530, Cueva

las Cosas) were checked, mostly with limited results. Long-term draughting digs Superfosfato, Socks and Pants continued. At Riaño, a punishing new pitch ("Spousal Murder") and about 125m of canyon passage were explored, with more to push. Hoyuca and Espada saw familiarisation and survey work (47m new at Espada) as part of a planned Four Valleys System monograph.

Secadura and Fresnedo

A possible feeder sink for Hoyuca's Gour Inlet was checked for a 2027 permit application. At Fresnedo II, bolting toward Pepe le Puits added only 14m after navigation difficulties. Shaft 2415, blocked by forestry work, was reopened and rigged to its base but proved loose and unpromising throughout.

Northwest and Northern Sectors

At San Antonio, Torca el Suto's traverse was re-rigged after a loose flake broke away, reaching a boulder choke with 50m surveyed but no leads. Nearby dig sites (3082, 3083) showed little promise. In La Helguera, draughting sites 5519 and 5520 were dug, the latter giving a young member their first electronic survey and Inkscape drawing experience, but yielding only 14m.

Other Activities

A local TV crew interviewed Juan and Peter Smith at the Nacimiento del Río Clarín (found dry) about wind-turbine and battery-storage development in local karst areas, also covering the Matienzo Caves Project's work.