

Caves & Caving

£2.20 · ISSUE 73 · AUTUMN '96



THE BULLETIN
OF THE BRITISH
CAVE RESEARCH
ASSOCIATION

T H E H I D D E N of Peter

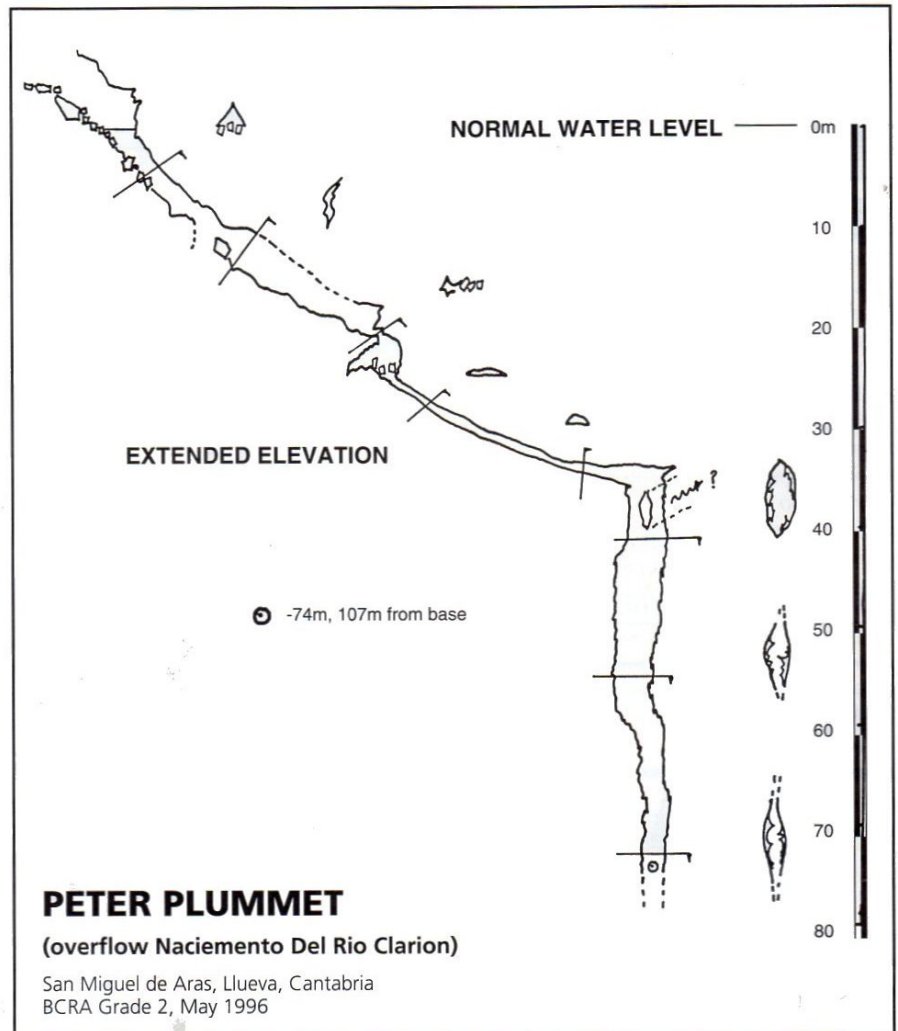
Peter Plummet is a seemingly bottomless sump pool near San Miguel in Northern Spain. Rupert Skorupka tells some of its history and describes his descent.

Peter Plummet was the nick name coined for a forbidding sump pool, located not far within the entrance of an ancient overflow cave, above the Nacimiento Del Rio Clarion, near San Miguel de Aras in Cantabria, Northern Spain.

These sites were first dived by British cavers in the mid-seventies (ref. 1), during the Matienzo expeditions, as they held great potential for discovering unknown cave systems below the massive limestone block to the south.

The Nacimiento entered high level passages ending in tight sumps. A dive in Plummet revealed its rapid downwards trend through narrow fissures. After several dives, the lip of a deep pot was reached at a depth of 36m, but attention was turned away to tackle more feasible projects.

No progress was made until 1995, when Rupert Skorupka descended this spectacular sculpted shaft, using air, to a depth of 60m. No floor could be seen, the walls plunging down into the azure depths. The diver moved into the realm of trimix diving, and a further attempt, assisted by Fred Winstanley, was made in October 1995. This failed, due mainly to the awkward nature of the initial rifts, and problems with equipment



combined with lack of experience. No further depth was gained.

The Great Flood

In May 1996, RPS returned alone, with girlfriend in support. My equipment was refined and streamlined, I had accumulated more hours of trimix experience and I was confident we would succeed.

Two weeks were allowed to take into account the Spanish springtime weather.

This was fortunate, for after just one setup dive, a flood of biblical proportions arrived. The entire sea around the cave turned into a lake, my diving gear was somewhere under the swirling brown pool inside the entrance to Plummet.

Fortunately, the water levels dropped very quickly and the visibility seemed to clear. By ferreting about in various dripping rifts in the entrance of Plummet, I was able to recover most of my missing gear. A dive was made to

DEPTH S Plummet

check the two stage cylinders that had been in for nearly a week, and the narrow rift was relined through an enlargement at floor level.

No Bottom in Sight

Lying back on the sandy slope, encased in my own bodyweight of lead, steel and rubber, I could hear my heart beat banging through my head. The large vino tintos last night had put me soundly to sleep, but now was time to pay the price.

Staggering into the water and submerging to shoulder level gave immediate relief, the burden becoming suddenly weightless. This was the last time for checking and testing, everything must work perfectly according to the experts. Bloody rubbish, nothing ever works perfectly!

The final task is to start my Casio digital watch timer, a cheap but faithful piece of equipment. Then I submerge into a warm world of greenish gloom, with muffled clanks and the hiss of gas being pulled through valves.

For this part of the dive I was using a chest mounted 7 litre cylinder of air which also supplied the gas to my drysuit. This would prevent the excessive cooling that would be caused by inflating the suit with a helium based mixture. Loosely mounted on elastic and snoopy loops, the cylinder could be shifted to either side of my chest in each narrow section, without needing to be detached.

The line descends sharply to a tall rift with undulating walls, the best route through being a vertical shuffle near the bottom.

A couple of metres of sideways clanging, then the floor falls out and I am at ceiling level in a spacious chamber at a depth of 15m.

As this first section of the sump is a backwater, the visibility is still cloudy from yesterdays dive. Weird hanging flakes of sculpted rock appear out of the murk and pass by as the steep descent continues.

A little archway nearly blocked by boulders, at 21m deep, is the next obstacle. Shuffling through this to the lip of the pot, the murk suddenly clears and everything is seen in crystal clarity, but through a deep blue filter, Landing on a pile of blocks at minus

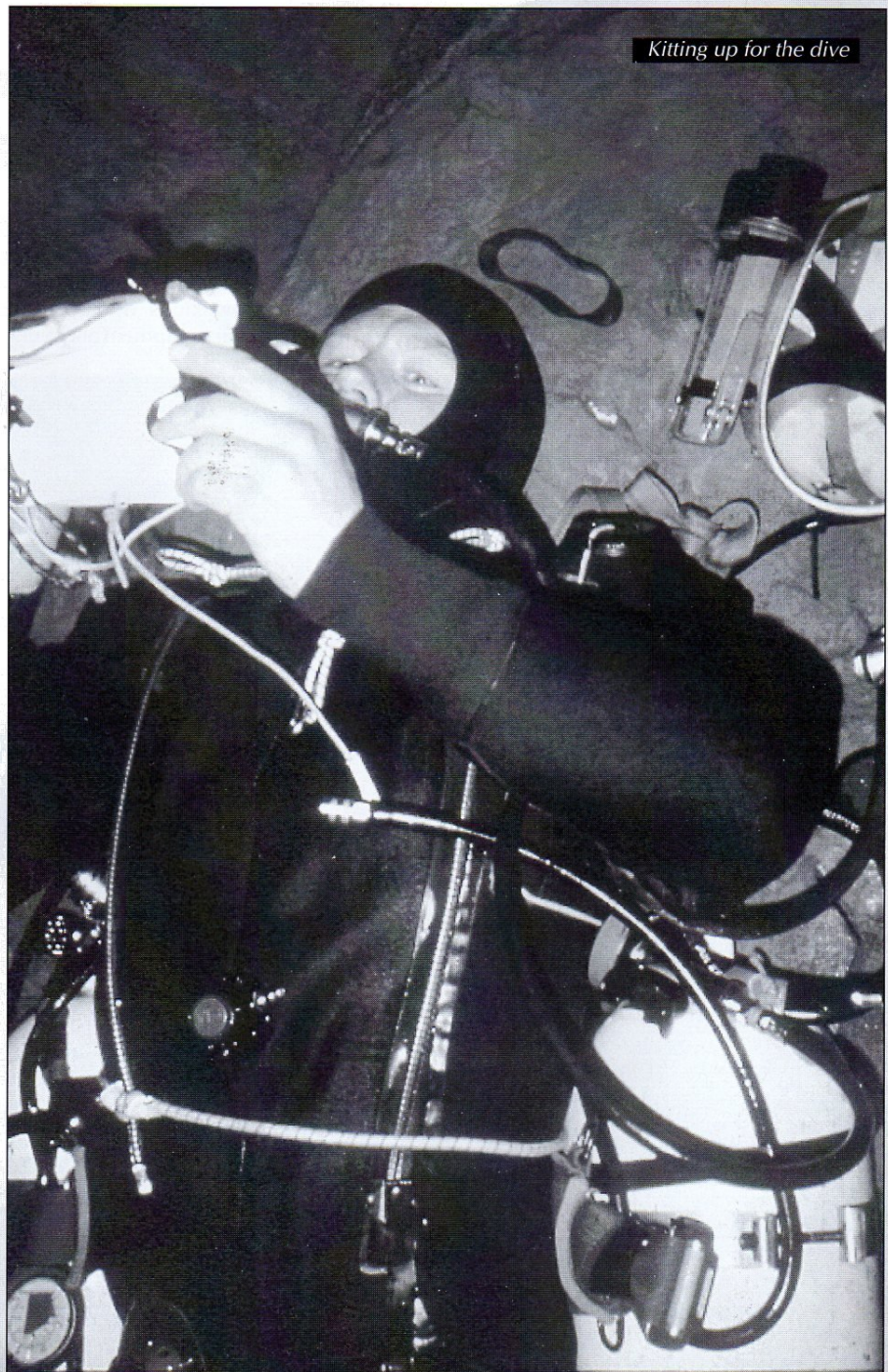
25m, the only exit from this roomy chamber is a low, sloping bedding under one wall.

More clanging leads on downwards in a scal-

lop floored lens, until quickly, minus 34m is reached. The chest mounted stage is dumped here, breathing and suit inflation are now supplied by side-mounted 5litre cylinders of trimix. The pleasant glow of narcosis quickly disappears just as the floor abruptly ends over an incredible void. Looking down,

spiky projections jut out into the shaft which funnels down into the blueness.

My descent is rapid, and as minus 50m is passed, the shaft becomes narrower and longer than I remember. Seconds later, 60m and last years tie-off point is reached. I can now reach across and touch the opposite



Kitting up for the dive

▷ wall. A precious couple of minutes are wasted trying to prod the end of the new line through the tiny eyehole belay, but then it's secured and time to go.

On this dive I have tables for 70 and 75m, I never really thought it would go deeper than this.

A glance at my computer shows that I am already at 72m, and the shaft has further narrowed and has been carved into hollows with razor sharp edges.

At 74m I gain a good view of the huge detached flake that has fallen across the rift and that I thought was one wall.

With only one more metre of descent allowed, this seems like a sensible place to tie off the line. The shaft continues on down with no bottom in sight, even though this point is already 20m below sea level.

The ascent seems to take an age, but just four minutes later the edge of the crater looms into view and then the dumped stage. Now I can relax, at relatively shallow depth with a huge gas supply and three regulators. All is at 27m. At 24m, the chest stage is swapped for a 9 litre tank of nitrox, and the familiar warming glow as the chilly helium is no longer involved.

The visibility drops to less than one metre as the static water is re-entered, this was a big worry when planning the dive. However, in practise movement between each

stop is so slow that the narrow squeaks are passed quite easily. I have plenty of time to squirt a couple of pees out into the surrounding environment before ascending to minus six metres and the final gas switch.

The last two stops are made on pure oxygen, which considerably reduces the required decompression time. It is always a relief not to feel any niggling aches and pains on surfacing, but another 20 minutes are spent breathing surface oxygen and drinking lots of juice, as a precaution. Finally I can stagger up the entrance slope to glorious sunlight and a cup of tea.

One hour after surfacing, we find ourselves once more in Rosannas Bar in Llueva. This daily ritual is caused by a quirk of the local geography.

To return to our base, it is necessary to ascend to a pass at 450m and then descend 400m to the Matienzo depression. An ascent of such severity could lead to decompression problems. An arbitrary adjustment period is chosen, in this case the time taken to drink four beers.

Acknowledgement

The depth reached was but a fraction of the depths attained nowadays in the world's great springs, by a handful of specialist cave divers. This venture does demonstrate though, that mixed gas equipment and tech-

niques are available to normal mortals, even CDG members, without the need to attend expensive courses. In my opinion, the spirit of exploration is more of an asset than any number of the certificates and badges that now proliferate in the political realm of the 'technical diver'.

All gases used were purchased in bulk, blended and analysed by myself before leaving the UK, then re-checked before use. The nearest recompression chamber was known to be in Santander, though it was not known if they used mixed gas treatment protocols. No back up divers were available, or necessary for this dive. Technical assistance and discussion were given by Fred Winstanley. Thanks also to Dr P Glanvill and Dr P James, of Dundee University, for medical advice.

Thanks to Pete Smith, for letting us take over his house in Matienzo and for his continual enthusiasm in this project. Also, to Juan Corrin for help with access and permission to visit the site. Mention must also be made of the original explorers: Phil Papard, Fred Winstanley and the ubiquitous grand master Geoff Yeadon. Thanks to Julie, it would have been twice as hard and half as much fun without you. My sponsors included: Lyon Equipment Ltd., Speleo Technics, and grants were received from the BCRA and the Foundation for Sports & Arts. Refs. 1 CDG Newsletter 37:27 (1975)



Rupert Skorupka rests in the shaft.

Fred Winstanley



Photos: Fred Winstanley and Ripert Skorpaka

