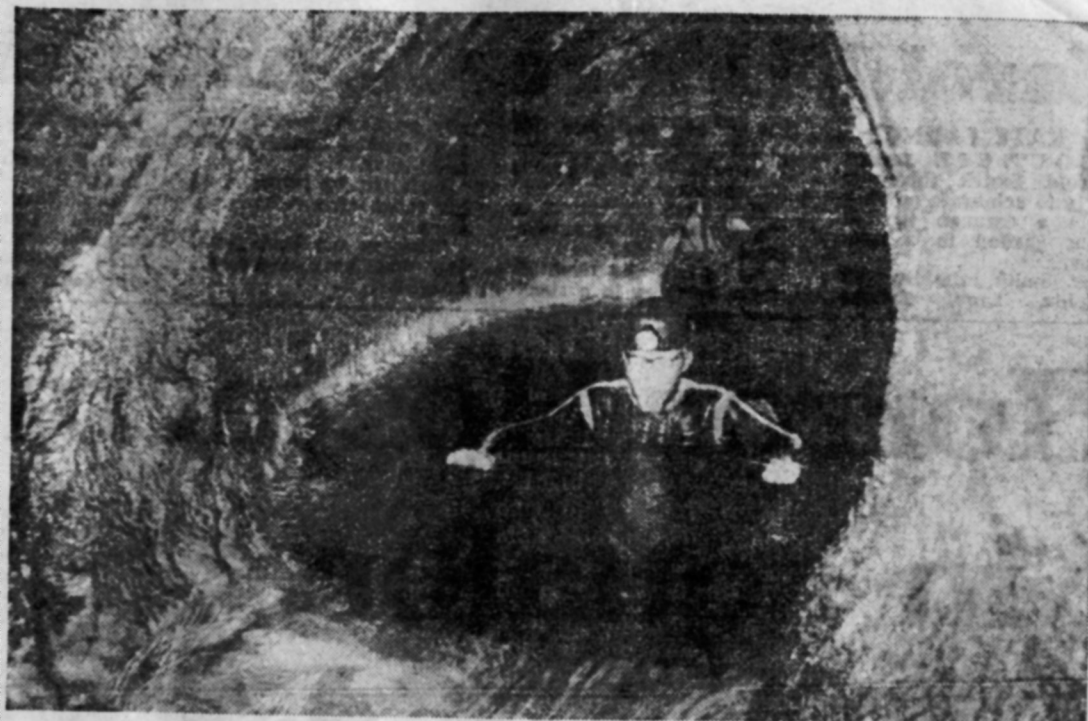




COLOURFULLY described as Shelob's Lair, this cavern is also in the Cueva La Boriza.



UP TO HIS NECK in it . . . a member of a previous expedition swims through a "sump" — a deep underground pool — in the Boriza cave system.



A TYPICAL cave entrance in the limestone country of northern Spain

Hell hole is heaven for Colin

by ROLAND SMITH

COLIN NICHOLLS is going to Spain for his holiday this year, but he won't see much of the sun.

While the seething thousands will be flocking lemming-like to the sea, Colin will probably be inching his way along a water-filled passage 900 feet below the Cantabrian Mountains in the heart of Basque country.

For 24-year-old Colin, whose parents live in Yardley, is a member of the Oxford University Cave Club's 1979 expedition, and pot-holing is his idea of heaven.

Slightly mad

Of all the "adventure" sports, caving is perhaps the most difficult for outsiders to understand. Recent television films have conveyed some of the mystery and attraction of delving into the bowels of the earth, but pot-holers are still regarded with something like suspicion by ordinary mortals.

It is an attitude that slightly offends Colin and other cavers, especially now that mountaineering and climbing has been largely accepted by the public.

"Most people regard climbers as some sort of super-heroes, boldly going where no man has gone before," he told me in the common room of Brasenose College, where his is studying for a Ph.D. in low temperature physics.

"Pot-holing is still regarded by most people as slightly mad and a bit grubby and dirty compared with climbing.

"But really, there is just as much adventure and excitement in our sport — it's just that it hasn't got the glamorous, outdoor image."

Not that the image is going to worry Colin and his fellow 14 team members on their personal quest to "explore new worlds."

The aim of the expedition is to find new caves in the Picos de Europa and Picos de Cornion areas on northern Spain's Costa Verde. "It means the green coast — a comment on the local rainfall," explained Colin.

The OUCC has made this area of limestone hills its own special preserve, and this year's trip is just the latest in a series which

the club has undertaken in the last ten years.

"We have already discovered a cave 900 feet deep in the Picos de Cornion, which compares with the deepest in Britain at about 600 feet," he said.

"But what we hope to do this year is to find potholes on the 4,000-foot summits of the mountains and hopefully follow them through to where the rivers emerge.

"This will involve a high level camp at around 3,000 feet, within a short walk of permanent snow," said Colin.

Living off the land

In British terms, that is equivalent to finding a pothole on the summit of Ben Nevis, and following it through to Fort William!

Among the other objectives of the six-week expedition is to revisit a cave found last year but not explored, 40 feet up a cliff face with a stream issuing from it. "We will probably have to rope down to the entrance from above," said Colin.

Another group will be revisiting a cave near the coast where a biological survey was started last

year. Biologists will be looking at the various bugs and animal life of the cave to note any ecological changes since their last visit.

Colin is the tackle master for the expedition, and that involves the considerable logistical problems of organising and shipping around 3,200 feet of climbing rope, 200 feet of ladders, and several tons of other climbing equipment.

The expedition will use carbide lamps for their descents, because there is no electricity at their base camp high up in the hills.

"We will be living off the land for most of the time," says Colin. "We rely very much on the hospitality and friendship of the local people both for our food and to tell us where the caves are."

"We've already learned a lot from the local shepherds, who are real characters themselves," said Colin. "They walk around with large umbrellas and carry their belongings in old suitcases."

Previous expeditions have had no political trouble with the Basques, who are still pressing for independence from the rest of Spain.

As Colin says: "We reckon we are safer living among them than anywhere else. After all, they won't bomb their own people will they?"

So if you're going to Spain for your holiday this year, spare a thought for Colin and his colleagues . . . down below.

Hidden world yields its secrets



THE RAIN in Spain, to misquote Henry Higgins, goes mostly down the drain.

And in the harsh, limestone region of the Cantabrian Mountains on the north coast, the "drains" are natural pot holes which riddle the surface and honeycombe the rock like a huge Gruyere cheese.

Beneath that rugged surface which rises to snow-covered heights of over 8,500 feet, another magical world exists.

It is a world created over countless aeons by the subtly powerful action of water on rock. It is the world of the caver.

Birmingham cavers Colin Nicholls, Chris Ankcorn and Mick Clarke, were members of the Oxford University Cave Club's 1979 expedition to northern Spain which recently returned to England.

Two previously unknown major cave systems were discovered, explored and surveyed

by

ROLAND SMITH

during the six-week expedition, and much valuable knowledge of the subterranean splendours of underground Spain was gained.

The major "find" of the trip was the 1,600-foot deep Pozu de Xitu, which involved the exploration of 3,000 feet of underground passageways and has the potential to reveal much more.

Colin, who comes from Yardley and is currently studying for a Ph.D. at Brasenose College, explained: "In one of the larger chambers in this system there was a rift in the floor.

"We dropped a stone down and it took eight seconds to reach the bottom. This indicates there is much more to explore here."

Pozu de Xitu was largely explored by Colin, Chris, also from Yardley, and Mick whose home is in Erdington.

Mick and Colin reached the farthest point. On the last trip, it took 19 hours below ground to clear the cave of equipment and take the final photographs.

The cave, the entrance to which was ironically discovered only 20 yards off the main path from the expedition's high level camp at 5,500 feet, is the fourth deepest yet found in this part of Spain.

This compares with the 600-foot Gaping Ghyll pot in Yorkshire.

Xitu is what cavers call an "active" cave. That means it is still being formed by water which percolates constantly through it.

Ropes were required almost from the cave entrance — a narrow slit in the rock — as the first "pitch" dropped something like 600 feet in the first 50 yards.

Surprise

The other important new cave discovered by the party was given the significant name of Pessimisto Pozu.

"Its entrance, a tiny crevice in the rock about a foot across, was found less than 15 minutes walk from the main camp, and no one expected it to lead to much," explained Colin.

The descriptive names given to the various pitches or sections of the cave give some indication of the difficulties encountered.

First there was the Tinkle, named after the falling stalactites, then Surprises I, II and III, the Bombardier (after some injudicious "bombing" by Colin), Geriatric Squeeze, and Limbo Passage.

Pessimisto turned out to be 630 feet deep.

In Borneo

Martin Laverty, a geomorphologist and leader of the party, rated the expedition, which cost around £2,500, as the best in the history of OUCC — "especially when you consider that only two members had been to this part of Spain before."

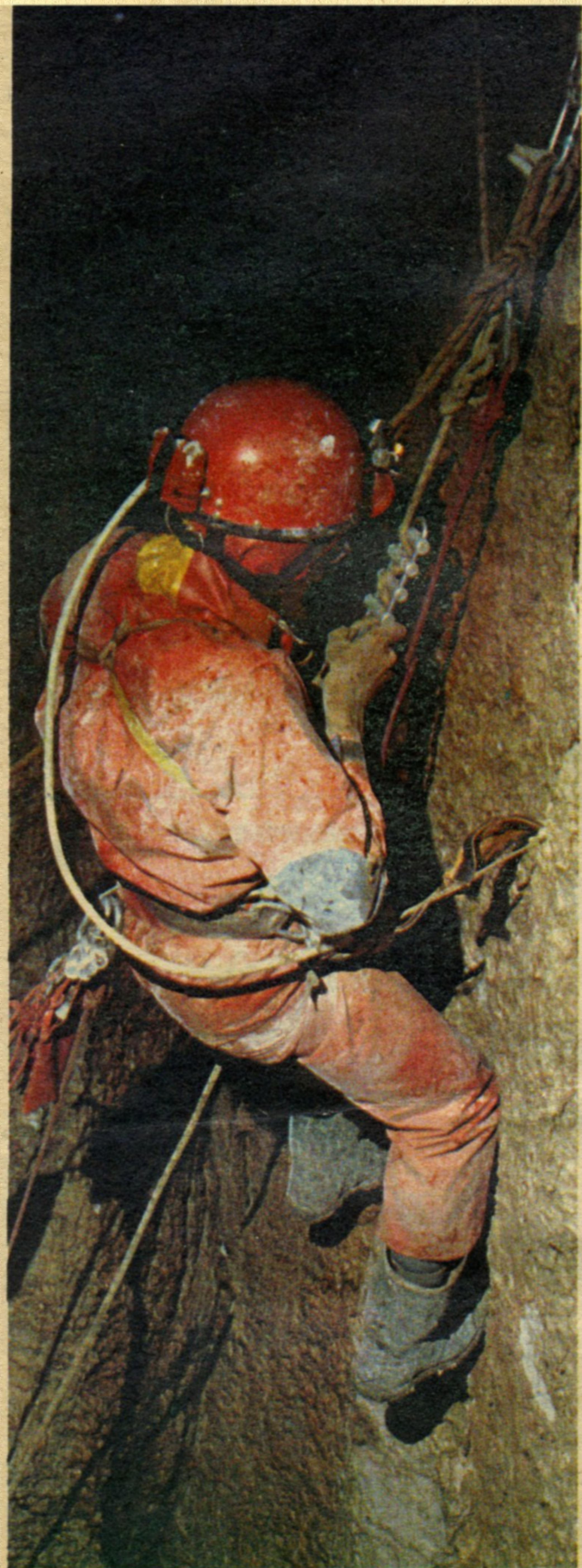
Now he's off on another to the even more formidable caverns of Borneo, while Colin, Chris and Mick are looking forward to the delights of such rendezvous as Black Shiver Pot beneath Ingleborough in Yorkshire.

The Pessimisto Pozu yields up its secrets...

TOP: Floodlights show in dramatic detail the major cavern discovered by the man from Birmingham.

LEFT: Colin Nicholls, from Yardley, Birmingham, needs all his caving skill to scale a particularly difficult pitch.

RIGHT: This massive stalagmitic column, formed by the joining of a stalagmite, growing up from the floor, and a stalactite, growing down from the roof, was used as a belay point for a 150 foot pitch in Pessimisto.



[Birmingham] Evening Mail Oct. 17 1979

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Into the black depths



Potholer John explores new caves

PILLING potholer John Singleton was with an Oxford University caving party which plumbed new depths in previously unexplored caves in Spain.

He has told of the gruelling preparations for the expedition in his first "Evening Gazette" article. Today, he talks about the expedition itself . . .

John, who has lived in Pilling all his life attended Pilling Church of England Primary School and Fleetwood Grammar School before studying physics at St John's College, Oxford.

IT was with some trepidation that I boarded the Plymouth-Santander ferry on a cloudy June morning, full of doubts as to whether my single-rope technique system would stand up to six week's intensive caving.

The sea journey passed quickly and after a few hours drive through the sprawling dingy industrial towns of Northern Spain, the expedition's ex-army Land-Rover, minibus and car arrived at Los Lagos, our lakeside campsite 3,500ft above sea level. Los Lagos is in a range of mountains called the Picos de Europa which rise to around 8,000 feet and are among the most barren and inhospitable peaks in Spain.

After setting up camp we got down to the expedition's first task of surveying a large cave about a mile to the north, inspected only briefly by the expedition in 1976.

Cave surveying is not a pleasant job. It involves three people, one to hold the tape and a carbide lamp which acts as a survey station, another to sight up the lamp through an accurate compass and clinometer and a third who records the readings and sketches the passages.

My job was to use the compass, which often meant lying up to the neck in ice-cold water in some tiny uncomfortable hole for several minutes while the tape man got into a new position and then trying not to set my hair on fire with my carbide lamp as I illuminated the scale on the instruments. After two weeks of eight or 10-hour surveying trips I was feeling quite demoralised.

One of our objectives mentioned in my previous "Evening Gazette" article was to explore "El Hoyo le Madre," literally the mouth of mother, a cave high up a cliff face from which a large river issues.

Our proposed abseil from the top of the cliff into the entrance turned out to be 700ft long, which would have been a waste of two of our longer ropes. In the event, we climbed about 100ft up to the cave from the bottom of the cliff with the aid of several ladders.

On entering the cave, besides finding a river 8ft deep by 8ft wide, we found that French cavers had been there already. By the thousands of yards of cotton thread they had left around, they hadn't seemed too sure of their way out either! All our own attempts to explore the many passages upstream ended in impassable sumps. Some explosive might soon alter that but

the Spanish Authorities did not seem too keen.

An occasional scouting trip made a pleasant change from the horrors of surveying, as it gave me the chance to walk the rugged crags and plateaux of the range, stopping for the occasional word with solitary shepherd and his small flock of goats and sheep.

I found quite a few cave entrances during such trips but the first one I found sticks in my mind as it contained 30 or 40 cheeses left to mature by a shepherd. At first we could not work out what the overpowering smell was.

As well as discovering new passages and entrances in partially explored caves we found several new caves. However, time only allowed us to explore two of these thoroughly.

The first of these started as a 6in diameter hole in limestone pavement directly above 70ft shaft. A rope was dropped down

and the entrance enlarged to a size that a pygmy could easily get through (must keep it sporting, you know). On one occasion in my squirmings to get in while attached to the rope, I set fire to all the grass around the entrance with my carbide lamp. All my hair singed again!

The cave below proved to be very arduous and contained several pitches and tight squeezes full of jagged rocks and stalagmites. One of these has such a devastating effect on wet-suits that it was named "Gillette Crawl."

At the bottom, five hours in and 700ft down was "Mud Palace," a magnificent mud-floored chamber almost 200ft high. Our final trip lasted 18 hours, showing what a nasty and arduous cave it was. No wonder we called it "Pessimist's Pot."

Our other big discovery was Pozo de la Xitu whose entrance was at 5,500ft in the mountains. This cave contains almost three miles of stream passages at various levels and is 1,150 deep as far as we have explored it. Here a major subterranean river runs in passages varying from 50 to 200ft high and possibly emerges in the Cares Gorge nearly 4,000ft below the entrance.

One thing which Pozo de la Xitu emphasised was the danger of flash flooding. One day our usual exploratory group of three was emerging after a day's work of driving in rock bolts and hanging rope on the lower pitches. I was going out first and had just reached the top of the last rope pitch. Suddenly there was a tremendous roaring noise from the tight entrance rift some distance above me.

My first thoughts were that the roof was falling in the rift and that we were trapped.



These ponderings were rudely interrupted by the entrance of a 2ft high wall of water which promptly put out my carbide lamp, leaving me in darkness. After five minutes of fumbling with flints and blowing on hands while standing in ankle-deep rushing water, I relit my lamp to be greeted by the sight of my friend looking like a drowned rat emerging from the previous pitch which was now a waterfall.

Luckily we were close to the surface as it would have been a very unpleasant, if not dangerous, business climbing up all 17 pitches in such water apart from swimming the streamway which appears to flood to a depth of around 10ft.

After six weeks of every day excitement of some sort (for example on Friday, July 13 two enormous boulders narrowly missed me) my return to peaceful Pilling seemed quite a relief. Still, the dramatic majesty of the peaks and the enormous depth and challenge of the pot holes of the Picos de Uropa call strongly to my sense of adventure and I will be one of the first to volunteer for next year's expedition.



A cave deep under the peaks of the Spanish mountains where the expedition took place.