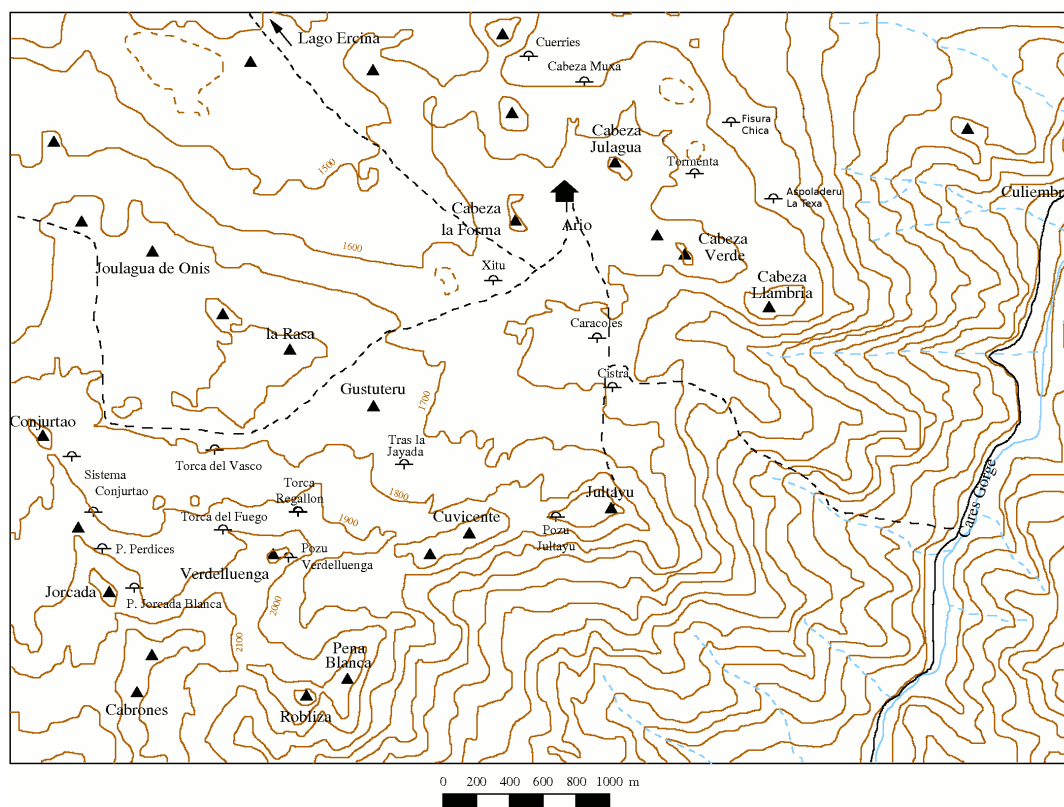


## OUCG Canal Del Montico 2008 - Expedition Preliminary Report

In July of 2008, OUCG once more ventured into the deep caves of the Western Massif of the Picos de Europa mountains of Northern Spain. In partnership with our sister expedition, Julagua 2008, we sought to explore the caves surrounding the Culiembro resurgence. Canal del Montico's main aim was the exploration of Fisura Chica, a pothole on the flanks of Cabeza Chica overlooking the Canal del Montico.



*The Ario area in the Picos de Europa.*

Fisura Chica was discovered in 2003 and was pushed in parallel with exploration in Sistema Julagua. The exploration of Chica was somewhat irregular; the cave was declared finished in 2004, only to be re-examined in 2005 leading to the discovery of a continuation. The 2006 and 2007 expeditions focussed on Chica, adding several hundred metres of depth to the cave. In 2007 exploration led down a magnificent pitch, Flawless, to an impenetrable boulder choke. A window above the boulder choke led into a section of rifts over several blind pots. The 2007 limit was a pot down which stones rattled for several seconds several hundred metres below the surface.

This year, we returned to examine this area. Our team arrived and, together with Julagua 2008, established Ario camp in parallel with a series of efficient rigging trips. The cave was rigged to the limit of exploration within six days of arrival in Spain.

The first exploration team entered Fisura Chica on the 8<sup>th</sup> July, and dropped an approximately 20 m pitch to find an awkward section of rift in sandy and chossy rock that appeared to close down. Subsequently two further teams entered the cave to examine the final reaches. The first team aimed to re-examine the 2007 limit in more detail, while the second team sought to find a way through the boulder choke at the bottom of Flawless and place dye for hydrological studies. Unfortunately, a

way on could not be found and the decision was taken to derig the cave. Within just 2 weeks of our arrival in Spain, the cave had been rigged, bottomed and about 1 km of rope removed from the cave and brought back to camp.

The expedition focussed on two aims after this point; the exploration of new caves near the surface and the support of the expedition in Julagua. In surface work, we concentrated on the areas near to the peak of La Verdelluenga and around Cabeza Gustuteru. Several sizeable entrances are known near to the peak of La Verdelluenga, some undescended and some descended to snow plugs, which it is thought may become passable due to global warming. Many of these shafts were descended and explored, while some new shafts were discovered.

On Cabeza Gustuteru, two known entrances were examined and extended, 27/9 and 14/9. 27/9 was a known 100 m deep pothole dropping several pitches leading to a very tight section of rift. Over a course of several trips the terminal rift was attempted at various levels. Some progress was made but further work will be needed. 14/9 was also a known entrance, carrying a strong draught a few metres to a boulder choke. In this case, the careful removal of boulders in the entrance enabled progress to approximately 100 m of passage and chambers, which was surveyed.

In addition we supported the Julagua expedition. This enabled some of our younger cavers to gain essential experience in deep caving and underground camping, as well as giving them the opportunity to explore at depth. Several trips were undertaken in Sistema Julagua, both pushing and derigging.

The conclusion to exploration in Fisura Chica was disappointing for us; the cave finished some 300 m above known, nearby potholes, at the bottom of a sizeable pitch series. It is in the nature of exploration that we just don't know what is around the next corner, and in this case it was not what we expected or hoped for. We aim to return next year to continue exploration of other deep caves in the area and hope to have more luck.



*Exploration of a pitch in 14/9.*