

Oxford University Cave Club Sima de la Chapa Expedition



2nd to 16th July, 2010

Final Report

Report prepared by members of the Oxford University Cave Club, Sima de la Chapa 2010 Expedition. Edited by Lorna Wilson and Gavin Lowe.

This report is available online via <<http://www.oucc.org.uk>>.

Cover photo: the large passage in Sima de la Chapa. (Photo RH.)

1 Expedition Members

Rosa Clements ¹ (Gear Order)	Andrew Mawer (Treasurer)
Nick Edwards	Dickon Morris
Ross Hemsley	Mohan Pilla Janakiraman
Jamie Jordan (Medical Officer)	Lorna Wilson ¹ (Leader)
Gavin Lowe (Equipment Officer)	

2 Acknowledgements

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- Oxford University Expeditions Council for financial support;
- The Ghar Parau Foundation for financial support;
- The A. C. Irvine Travel Fund for personal financial support;
- The Royal Geographic Society with the Institute of British Geographers for recognition.

We are also grateful to members of the Federación de Espeleología del Principado de Asturias (FESPA), particularly Nacho Montero, for their efforts in trying to arrange permission for us to cave.

Thanks are also due to Lyon Equipment and Starless River for help with equipping the expedition, and to Steve Roberts, Tony Seddon and Ursula Collie (Home Agents).



The view from Ario. (Photo: RH.)

¹Did not travel to Spain.

3 Summary

The Oxford University Cave Club, Asopladeru la Texa Expedition took place in the Picos de Europa in Northern Spain from the second to the sixteenth of July. The Expedition had been intended to continue until the ninth of August, but had to be abandoned when the National Park refused us permission to cave; we discuss this further below.

The Expedition vehicle left Oxford on the second of July. Gavin and Ross drove through France, arriving at the base of Los Lagos late the following day. Dickon arrived the same evening, having flown out to Oviedo.

The following day, Jamie, Andrew and Mohan arrived, their flight having been diverted to Santander, and Nick arrived having caught a coach from Geneva. The rest of that day was spent carrying gear up the hill, and establishing the camp at Ario.

Caving began on the fifth of July. The previous year, the team had not had sufficient time to finish de-rigging that year's cave, Asopladeru la Texa, so that was this year's first objective. Gavin, Dickon and Ross descended and derigged back to the bottom of ¡No Hay Cristal!. The following day, the other four returned and finished the job.



Looking up the 54m pitch. (Photo: RH.)

This year's main objective was the cave Sima de la Chapa. The cave had been found and partially explored by members of the Equip de Recerques del Centro Excursionista de Cataluña (ERE del CEC). They had kindly agreed to let us continue exploration.

Gavin, Dickon and Jamie headed down the cave on the seventh. They rigged the first four pitches on ropes that the ERE del CEC had left in the cave. These pitches led to a large passage, about 10 metres across, unusual for this depth in Spain. They rigged another pitch part way along the large passage, and then another three pitches, as the cave became more vertical, reaching the ERE del CEC's limit of exploration. Another short pitch and climb landed in a rift. At first, the team descended in the rift, reaching a tight slot above a pitch, which they tried to widen by hammering. After a while, though,

they realised that an easier route was to follow an ascending traverse along the rift. This reached a squeeze, which was easily hammered open, to reach the head of a 54m pitch. The team partially descended this pitch, before running out of rope. During the trip, the team also surveyed the cave to a point part way along the large passage.

The following day, Nick, Ross, Andrew and Mohan continued exploration. They rigged the remainder of the large pitch, landing in a meander-type passage above the water. At the end they dropped a short pitch, landing in another meander. This was too tight at the bottom, but climbing up led to some well-decorated passage. This led to a point where they could rig a pitch down the rift, before it opened out into a pleasant shaft. The team also continued the survey to the top of the big pitch.

On the ninth, Gavin, Dickon and Jamie returned to the cave. They rigged two more pitches from where the previous team had finished. The second pitch landed at the start of a rift, from where the team explored two different routes. One route ascended the rift, which led to a narrow crawl, which had to be negotiated feet-first, as it led to a short climb down into a chamber. The other route descended the rift,



Dickon in the meanders.

(Photo: RH.)

to an intermediate traverse level, which led to the top of a short un-descended pitch back down to the streamway; an awkward climb in the other direction led back to the chamber on the first route. From this chamber, the cave changed character and became phreatic in nature. The team rigged two short pitches, ending in a chamber with another pitch continuing, before running out of time. They also advanced the survey to the start of the final section of rift.

That day, we heard the surprising news that the National Park had decided not to grant us permission to cave; see below. We therefore suspended caving, hoping that they would change their minds. However, when nothing had happened after four days, we took the decision to abandon the Expedition. We derigged the cave on the 14th. The following day, we carried the gear down the hill, and loaded the car. Gavin and Ross started the long drive home; the others stayed one more night before leaving.

Permission

The National Park's reasons for denying us permission are based on the fact that in 2009 there were two incidents that lead to members of the Expedition asking for assistance from the local cave rescue services. In the first incident, a team reached the bottom of the second pitch of Asopladeru la Texa to find that

a previous team had accidentally displaced the rope on the pitch, so that the subsequent team were unable to reach it. In the second incident, a large storm hit while several cavers were underground, making some pitches impassable; the cavers were forced to wait until the water levels dropped. In both cases, the cavers left on the surface were rather inexperienced, and so asked for assistance from the local cave rescue services. In each case, three members of the Guardia Civil attended, and quickly made contact with the overdue cavers. However, it would have been better if those on the surface had themselves investigated before asking for assistance. In the past, similar incidents have been dealt with by members of the Expedition, following a philosophy of self-reliance.

Expedition members had insurance which would have covered the costs of this rescue, but we received no request to pay.

After the Expedition, the club reviewed its procedures. Improved guidance was produced on the circumstances under which the rescue services should be alerted. The club produced a report on the incidents which it sent to Juan Jose Gonzalez, the President of the local caving federation, to be forwarded to the National Park.

The 2009 Expedition Leader, Nick Edwards, talked to Juan Jose Gonzalez about the incidents, in late 2009. Juan Jose promised to sort out permissions for the 2010 Expedition.

The 2010 Expedition Leader, Lorna Wilson, wrote to Juan Jose early in 2010 asking for permission. However, she heard nothing back. Further, Juan Jose did not respond to emails.

Gavin Lowe phoned Juan Jose about four weeks before Expedition started. Juan Jose informed him that he was no longer President of the Federation, but that he would pass on our request to the new President, that he



Ross, near the bottom of the cave. (Photo: RH.)

didn't anticipate any problems, and that we ought to hear back within two weeks. However, the Expedition still did not hear anything back from Juan Jose. Further attempts to phone him did not get through.

On the first of July, the day before leaving for Spain, we found two new email addresses for members of the caving federation, and contacted them. The mail was forwarded to Nacho Montero, who now deals with permissions for caving in the National Park. He informed us that Juan Jose had done nothing about sorting out our permissions: it appears that there are very poor relationships between

Juan Jose and the people now running the Federation. However, Nacho quickly passed our request on to the National Park, and hoped that it would be approved quickly. We therefore started Expedition, working on the assumption that the permission would soon be confirmed.

On the ninth of July, we received an email from Nacho saying that the Director of the Park was reluctant to approve the Expedition. Apparently, the local politicians and press had used the rescue operations to pass a law allowing the regional government to charge a fee for mountain rescues in cases of negligence (we had been under the impression that this was already the case). The Director of the National Park wanted us to provide a guarantee in cash to cover liabilities. However, the local cavers were reluctant for us to do this, to avoid setting a precedent. It seems that having insurance to cover the costs of rescues was not considered adequate. The local cavers were strongly supportive of us, and praised our long record of excellent expeditions.

We suspended caving as soon as we heard this. We waited until the 13th July to see if there would be any developments. When there were not, we removed the tackle from the cave, and abandoned the Expedition.

The club is very keen to regain permission for the future. This will clearly require rather delicate negotiations. Those negotiations have already begun, with Nacho continuing to negotiate on our behalf.



*Dickon in the meanders.
(Photo: RH.)*



Sunset from Ario. (Photo: RH.)

4 Expedition diary

2 July	RH, GL	Leave Oxford with the Expedition vehicle.
3 July	RH, GL, DM	Arrive at Los Lagos.
4 July	NE, JJ, AM, MP	Arrive at Los Lagos.
4 July	All	Carry gear to Ario to establish the camp.
5 July	RH, GL, DM	Derig Asopladeru la Texa to the bottom of ¡No Hay Cristal!.
6 July	NE, JJ, AM, MP	Derig Asopladeru la Texa.
7 July	JJ, GL, DM	Rig Sima de la Chapa to the previous limit of exploration; survey entrance pitches and part of large passage; descend next pitch and hammer open route to the big pitch; partially descend big pitch.
8 July	NE, RH, AM, MP	Descend remainder of big pitch; descend following two pitches; survey to top of big pitch.
9 July	JJ, GL, DM	Rig following four pitches; survey to start of final rift.
10–13 July	All	Caving suspended.
14 July	NE, RH, JJ, AM, DM, MP	Derig Sima de la Chapa.
15 July	All	Carry gear down the hill to Los Lagos.
15 July	RH, GL	Leave Los Lagos with Expedition vehicle.
16 July	NE, JJ, AM, DM, MP	Leave Los Lagos.
16 July	RH, GL	Arrive back in UK.

5 Sima de la Chapa

Location The cave is located to the east of Ario, overlooking the Cares Gorge. From Ario, cross the ridge to the east out of the Ario bowl. Then descend to and follow the ridge running east. At the bottom of the ridge is an obvious rock arch. (From here, the route to Asopladeru la Texa follows the comparatively good path to the right.) The path to Chapa goes straight ahead, following an indistinct path over the next lump, and then descending into the next valley. Descend the valley for a few tens of metres to a rock platform. Continue down the right hand side of the valley for about 10m to just before it becomes very steep. Then traverse left to the entrance, a cleft in the rock, not visible from above. GPS 0344906 4789684, alt. 1492m.

Description In the description below, for pitches marked with “*”, ropes belonging to the ERE del CEC were left in the cave at the end of the 2010 Expedition.

The entrance pitch (P13) lands in a boulder-floored passage. This soon leads to a short climb up to the top of the second pitch (P18). The third and fourth pitches (P11 and P10) follow immediately.

Pitch Rope Rigging

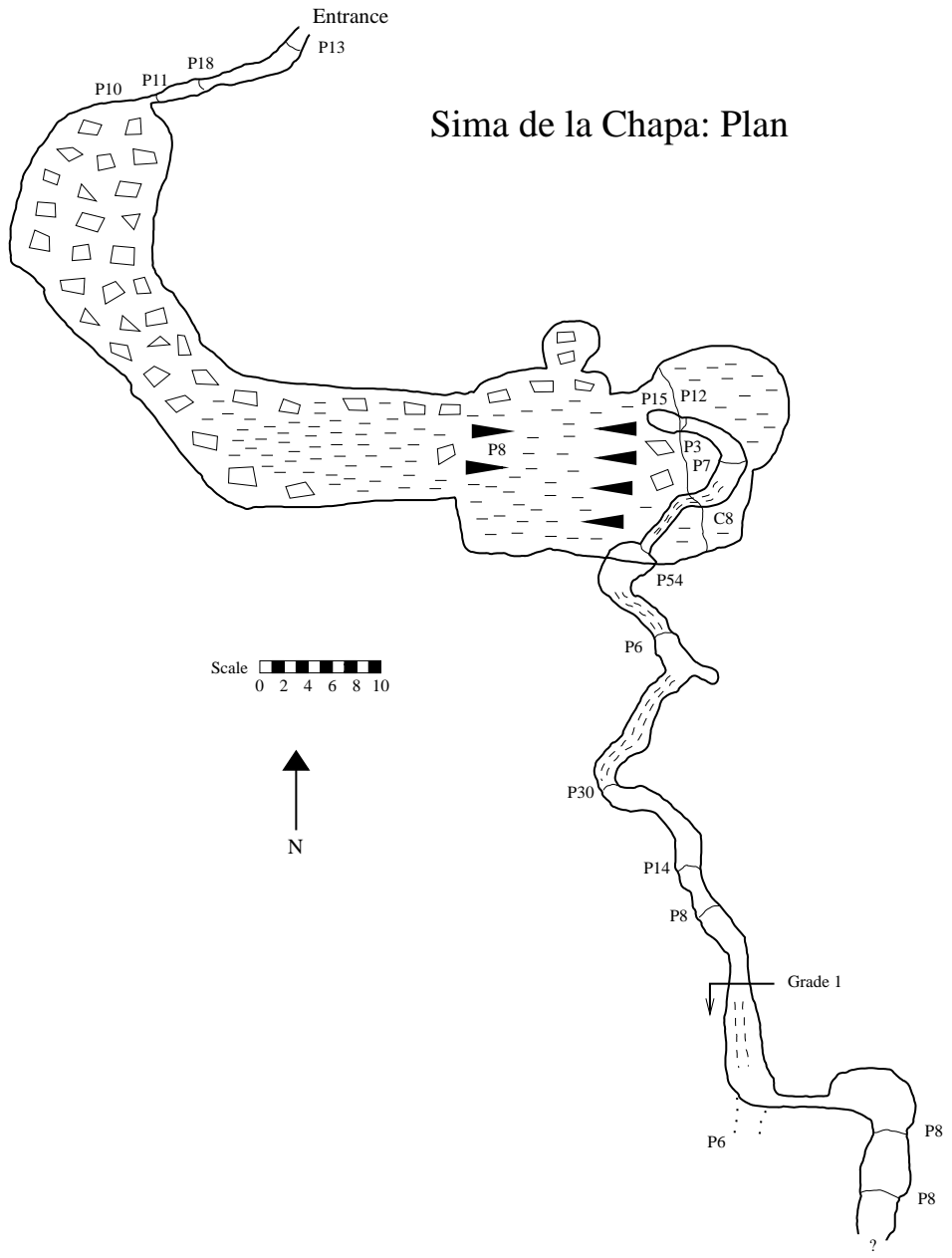
- | | | |
|------|-----|---|
| P13* | 25m | Two bolts on surface; bolt rebelay at -3m ; two-bolt Y-hang at -7m . |
| P18* | 25m | Two-bolt Y-hang; bolt rebelay at -7m . |
| P11* | 18m | Rope backed up to previous pitch; bolt belay; two-bolt Y-hang at -1m . |
| P10* | 16m | Rope backed up to previous pitch; spike back-up; bolt belay; bolt rebelay at -3m . |

The fourth pitch lands in a 10m wide passage. [Immediately at the bottom of the pitch is another pitch, believed to have been descended by the ERE and to be blind.] Following the passage leads, after about 50m, to a cairn at the top of the next pitch.

Pitch Rope Rigging

- | | | |
|----|-----|---|
| P8 | 14m | Spike backup; spike belay; bolt rebelay at -2m . |
|----|-----|---|

At the bottom of the pitch, a mud slope (hand-line useful) ascends to the top of the next pitch (P12). This pitch lands in a chamber. [Ahead leads to an undescended pitch.] The next pitch (P15) follows through a slot to the left from where the previous pitch lands; it lands on a ledge with a pool at -4m , and then continues down a pleasant shaft. A hole leads down to a short pitch (P3), followed by a climb to the limit of the ERE del CEC’s exploration. Another



pitch (P7) follows immediately. This lands at the base of an ascending rift. [It is possible to descend in the rift to a slot at the top of a pitch; the slot is currently too tight.] The way on is to climb up in the rift (C8) to where the traverse leads to a downwards squeeze. Beyond the squeeze is a small chamber, the top of a large pitch (P54).

Pitch Rope Rigging

P12*	20m	2 bolts, back from pitch head; bolt rebelay at -1m .
P15	22m	Backed up to previous pitch; thread belay; bolt belay; bolt rebelay at -4m ; spike deviation at -8m .
P3	8m	Backed up to previous pitch; spike and bolt Y-hang.
P7	10m	Backed up to previous pitch; bolt belay.
C8	18m	Backed up to previous pitch; large spike at top of climb.
P54	65m	Backed up to traverse; thread belay; two-thread Y-hang; spike rebelay at -4m ; spike deviation at -8m ; spike rebelay at -35m ; spike deviation at -45m .

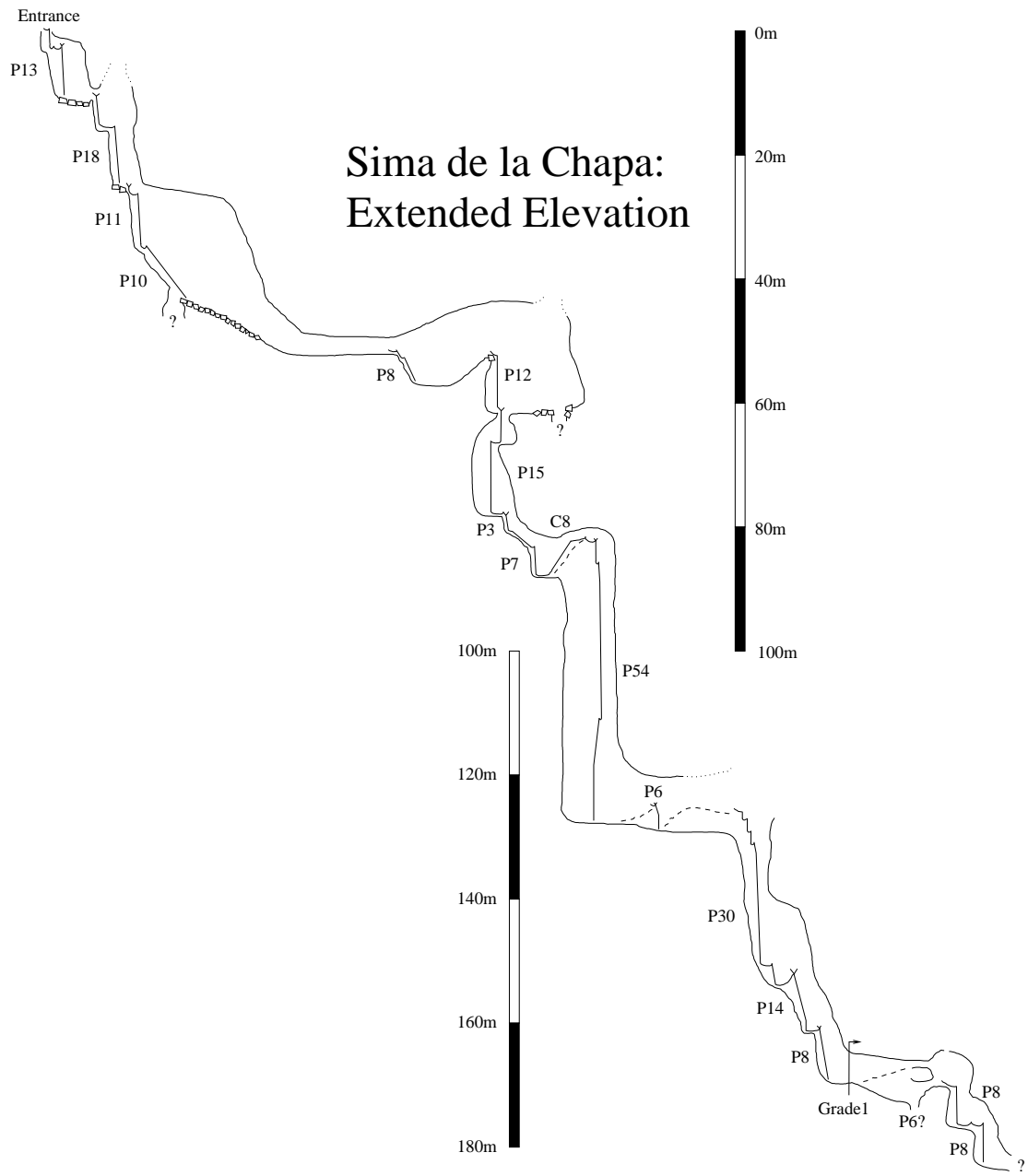
The pitch lands in a meander, leading to a short pitch (P6). A traverse up a well-decorated rift leads to a pitch (P30) which starts down a rift before opening out into a shaft. This is followed immediately by two more pitches (P14 and P8). The limit of surveying is a cairn at the bottom of the pitch.

Pitch Rope Rigging

P6	12m	Natural back-up; Y-hang off two naturals; natural deviation at -3m .
P30	40m	Thread belay; spike belay at -1m ; bolt rebelay at -4m ; bolt and spike Y-hang at -7m ; spike deviation; spike rebelay for final section.
P14	18m	Backed up to previous pitch; two-bolt Y-hang; spike deviation for final section.
P8	12m	Backed up to previous pitch; two-bolt Y-hang.

From the bottom of the pitches, the easiest route is to ascend to the top of the rift, from where an awkward feet-first crawl leads to a climb down into a chamber. [Alternatively, from the base of the pitch it is possible to climb down in the rift and then to traverse. This leads to the top of a free-climbable pitch down to the streamway, where the rift is narrow. An awkward climb up from the head of the pitch leads up into the chamber, joining the main route.]

From the chamber, the cave becomes phreatic in nature. A short pitch (P8) lands in a chamber, with another short pitch (P8) following. An undescended pitch is just round the corner.



Pitch Rope Rigging

P8 15m Large spike back-up; bolt belay.

P8 15m Backed up to previous pitch; spike back-up; bolt belay.

Prospects Sima de la Chapa is currently slightly over 200m deep. Our experience is that once caves reach that depth, they normally continue until they hit the water table.

The cave is about 200m away from Asopladeru la Texa, and so it is possible that the two caves connect, possibly at the bottom of ¡No Hay Cristal!. However, Chapa would need to do a 90° turn in order for this to happen.

Our hope is that the cave continues independently, in which case it has every chance of reaching a depth of at least 900m. It is possible that Cabeza Muxa turns south beyond its sump, and passes below Pozo Tormenta, in which case Chapa is likely to drop into the continuation. Alternatively, extrapolating the current line of Chapa for 400m leads to Pozu del Xitu, at a point where it turns right and starts to cut down sharply, and where it is believed that an alternative route leads off.

6 Accounts

Income

Grant income ¹		
Oxford University Expeditions Council	400	
Ghar Parau Foundation	200	
Subtotal		600
Personal contributions		
Deposits ²	600	
Kitty contributions	224	
Travel contribution	160	
Gear order payments	2,221	
Insurance fees	240	
Subtotal		3,445
TOTAL		4,045

¹Half of each grant was returned, because the Expedition was cut short.

²Members paid a deposit of £80 (students and unwaged) or £120 (workers).

Expenditure

Group equipment		
Rope	135	
Underground camping gear	76	
Surface camping gear	281	
First aid and medical	50	
Subtotal	<u>542</u>	542
Personal gear orders		2,221
Transport		
Ferry	72	
Fuel and mileage	335	
Tolls	63	
Insurance and breakdown cover	94	
Accessories	26	
Subtotal	<u>590</u>	590
Travel insurance		240
Medical training		250
Kitty expenditure		223
Publications		20
TOTAL		<u>4,086</u>
DEFICIT		41

The deficit will be taken out of the float passed forward to next year's Expedition.

Personal expenditure

This section gives the average costs of an Expedition member.

Deposit	90
Travel to Spain	120
Kitty	32
Personal gear ³	100
Insurance	20
TOTAL	<u>362</u>

³The figure for personal equipment is intended to cover only the cost of *sustaining* a set of personal expedition equipment through an expedition, i.e. wear and tear; it therefore significantly understates the amount spent by individuals on building up personal equipment stores, estimated at £1,000 each.