

Reporter Dermot Martin attempts to conquer the deepest caves of the Andes

Why we didn't hit rock bottom

16/8/82
Peru

THE DEEP CAVE at Maipo was the final objective in the High Sierra. The party had to move down to jungle to carry out further work.

With time running out it was obvious we would never reach the bottom.

Maipo has nine vertical drops. It meant we needed plenty of ladders which we didn't have, and the two-hour climb to the entrance meant a serious bid for the bottom would be an overnight job... either staying down the cave or camping at the entrance.

We decided merely to poke our noses in as far as we could.

Alison, Dave and Scotsman Steve Gontarek, 19, and myself arrived at Maipo, estimated at more than 400m deep.

Steve had emerged as the expedition's secret caving weapon. The lad, a geophysicist, had an enormous appetite. If it moved he ate it, alive or dead, big or small, hard or soft he ate it.

For instance, Maipo had been blocked by a rockfall during the rainy season and it was Steve who performed the delicate operation of widening the entrance. His teeth marks will remain for future generations of cavers!

We made the first pitch, which looked like a dive into eternity.

I suggested Dave ought to go down first because he had that kamikazi look about him. He agreed.

We watched as his lamp shrank to a pin point over the edge of the 35ft precipice.

I followed and the two of us carried on down for 45 minutes through a spiralling tube until we reached a similar pitch.

It was pointless going further without proper gear and more time, but we agreed to return one day in our retirement to try again. Back at base camp, an icy dip in the mountain stream and a couple of bottles of servaso helped numb the feeling of failure.



INTREPID: Steve Gontarek

INTREPID: Alison Denham

INTREPID: Dave Kaye

INTREPID: Julian Payne

THE CAVE MAN OF PERU

EACH SUMMER a party of Southampton University students sets out for a remote part of the globe in the name of scientific research.

They perform experiments in the field, collect data and carry out surveys and other projects.

The expedition lasts for two to three months and returns with seeds, insect and animal specimens, as well as new information on the area under study.

This year Jane Wilson a 28-year-old medical student from Portswold led the team to a remote valley in the Peruvian Andes.

Jane's passion is cave ecology and she hoped to collect specimens of bats, bat parasites and anything which makes its home in high-altitude caves.

With her was Dr. Tony White from Knowle Hospital, carrying out a trial on a drug thought to help people suffering from mountain sickness; Amanda Patton studying nutrition among Peruvian Indians; Ian Strong studying the efficiency of Peruvian telephone service; and Jane's sister Mary studying a rare lung disease.

Others went for the dubious thrill of grovelling through virtually unexplored caves.

Echo reporter Dermot Martin followed the team for three weeks. He discovered it's no picnic squeezing through tight tunnels, camping in freezing temperatures and wheezing to catch a breath in the ether-thin air at 13,000 feet.

He also learned it's never safe to assume that where some are willing to crawl, others are afraid to tread.

DAWN comes quickly in the Andes. Some unseen hand throws a switch in heaven and suddenly the valleys are bathed in a brilliant white, warming light.

Outside the tent a layer of ice has crystallised on the tee-shirt casually discarded in yesterday's heat. The voice of an early riser hits you: "Minus 10 last night. Quite cool!"

That's when the shaft of sunlight slices across the roof. Now you can peel yourself out of your cocoon for a cup of tea. Now you can face the frozen tee-shirt and with any luck the ice will have decimated the fleas.

Thus the intrepid explorers from Southampton University faced the start of the day ready boldy to go where no man in his sanity has gone before... potholing in the Andes.

The expedition was based 13,000 feet up in the mighty mountain range which forms the backbone of the South American continent.

From here, 24 hours by road and rail from Peru's capital Lima, the plan was to explore and survey some of the most spectacular cave systems in the world. We were not to be disappointed.

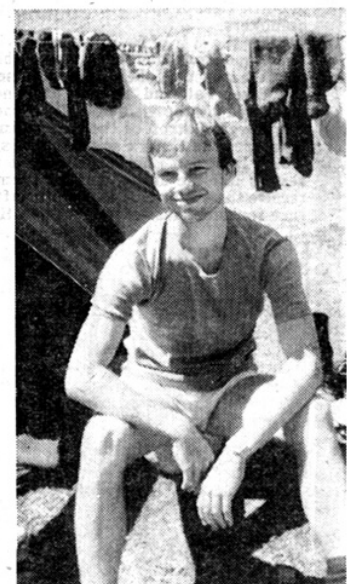
Above 10,000ft the air is vacuum thin. Lungs become rebellious bellows sucking useless air. The heart plays a samba inside your chest and your head is like a barrage balloon with an existence all its own.

The Indians call it "Soroche" and in severe cases it can kill. Normally after a few days' rest to acclimatise it passes. No-one with the expedition suffered too much, though.

Proper adjustment to altitude takes six months but we had only three weeks before moving down to the jungle area. It was a case of get used to it quickly or stay spaced-out.

Initially the aim was to tackle a cave called Milpol, thought to be the deepest in South America, but this was stalled by news of a cave thought to be unmapped and virtually unexplored. Milpol had already been mapped.

That Marmalade freak, Paddington Bear, is darkest Peru's famous celebrity. There was hardly a blacker spot in the whole country than La Gruta de Pacuy Huagen and because it proved quite



WASH DAY: Julian Payne and laundry.

sticky in places some wag nicknamed it Marmalade Pot.

Caves like Marmalade and Milpol were formed in the 60 million years since the Andes hauled themselves out of the Earth's crust.

Mad rushing water from melted snow and ice cut the shortest route to the jungle, dissolving lime and stone and forming the vast system.

The mountain scenery was sensational. An early explorer to the

names to caverns and rock formations.

It took three excursions to the pot before we found bottom. Ten hours spent underground fumbling along cul-de-sacs; Indian crawling skin tight passages, climbing steep pitches; being impaled on jagged rock outcrops; trying not to show the panic in your voice when your "highly reliable" acetylene lamp spluttered.

On the second trip we discovered the skeleton of an animal larger than a rat, smaller than a rabbit. It was sobering to wonder why the creature had chosen this place, to lay down and die.

That trip ended when the cave floor turned to sandstone as brittle as an after dinner mint.

It was Dave who insisted on going back a third time to tackle the sandstone, and a short but tricky pitch, using a steel ladder.

On July 27 fuelled on sweet oranges, stale bread and Polo mints we made that two hour yomp uphill to the cave for the third and final step.

Dave, Julian and myself plodded on down through muddy stream bed up a small chimney making distance measurements with nine metres of tabulated washing line, taking compass bearings and jotting descriptions of sensational limestone rock formations.

We hardly had time to savour the sights because we wanted to find the end as quickly as possible. Julian, a railway engineer at BR Eastleigh, made tracks through a small gap guarded by stalagmites. He could have been poking his head into a shark's mouth.

All four had only limited caving experience but they soon became intoxicated with the cave's beauty and the knowledge that they were giving new



JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: The entrance to one of the caves.

At one point we thought we'd lost the main passage. Trust Julian to find it. If I could have stood up my heart would have rattled in my boots. Julian's way ahead was an evil looking crawl through a hole the diameter of a tooth-paste tube.

Turning the colour and texture of tooth-paste I oozed through into a chamber 3ft deep in clear freezing water.

Beyond it was cave wall, nothing else. Unless someone was prepared to dive under water this was the end of the trail: the final sump, where the stream goes under the mountain.

In a vain attempt at humour I volunteered to hold Julian's breath for him while he dived to look.

Then we saw it. It was just a faint outline at first, but in the pale light it was quite unmistakable.

There in the mud at the end of a forgotten crack in a remote mountain on the backside of the world was the perfect impression of a hobnail boot.

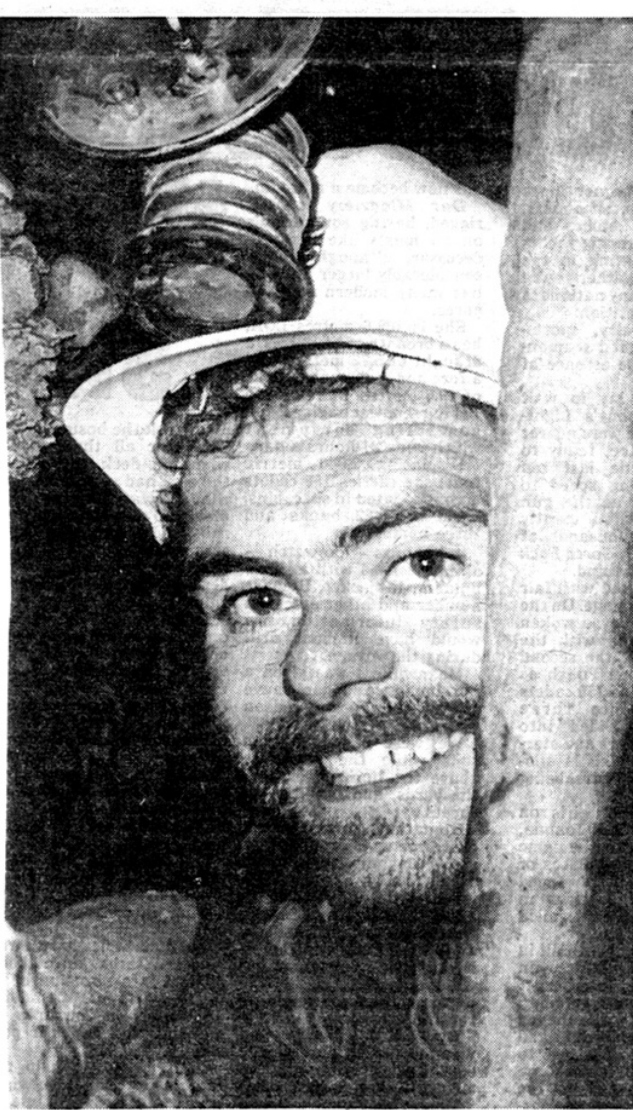
It was size nine, the same as mine. Not an eight, not a ten, but a nine... what's more the heel was slightly worn on the one side.

It was like landing on the Moon to be greeted by a notice saying "Kilroy was here".

We winced and planted the Union Jack.

At base camp the mystery of the footprint was soon solved. Our local contacts remembered the cave had been explored and bottomed in 1975 by a French team. Pipped by the French... C'est la vie.

Still Dave had our survey, and as far as we are concerned the only current map of the cave is the one he so lovingly sketched.



SMILING THROUGH: Reporter Dermot Martin.



GOING UP: The train heads up the Andes.