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# A CAVE IN BOLIVIA

THE GRUTA SAN PEDRO

by ANDREW PAVEY

"Getting to Sorata is easy" said the lady in the tourist office. "You just go to this corner ..." a pause and some hunting with a pencil "... in the Indian Quarter and catch a bus or truck".

"At what time and how much does it cost?" Quoth the travel weary caver.

"They leave at 6 a.m. promptly, so you'd better be there at 5.30 a.m. and the cost is about \$1 She said and turned to another slightly frazzled looking traveller standing to one side.

Now even when you've acclimatised to altitude, getting up without breakfast in the predawn cold of La Paz, Bolivia's largest city, and walking a mile and 500 ft. uphill carrying 50 pounds of accumulated mementos like stone statues and wall hangings, countless rolls of film etc. etc. etc. at an altitude of 11,500 ft. can be a trying way to start a caveing trip.

Being not only stupid gringos but also slow learners and only in South America so far for 6 weeks we dutifully arrived at the appointed spot at a foul smelling corner between multi-story mud-brick houses with neither truck nor bus nor any person in sight. "Charming" I said to Beverley and stamped off into the lessening gloom to find someone and ask a few questions. After some effort it transpired that the concept of "manana" is not dead and that something would indeed happen eventually. Surprisingly it did in the next half an hour as dawn thought about approaching activity appeared on the streets - women set up kerosene stoves and started selling large mugs of coffee for 5 c, trucks appeared around corners and parked on kerbs and corners and in the middle of streets, old men staggered by with enormous loads and by the time the growing light made it possible to see the length of the street the activity and bustle had reached the peak which it would maintain all day till nightfall and the sudden vacating of the streets.

Trading is a living much more so in the less developed countries of the world and for us it was a real educational

process to watch the day begin in this way so subtly different from a nine to five office grind.

By negotiation our transport to Sorata 150 km away was to be in the back of an open 10 ton truck. Early on it looked like we might be in for a lonely bumpy ride but as time passed the crowd in the back of the truck grew - some got on, some got off, and the load increased - a few more bundles of fruit or clothes, tins of kerosene etc. it started to become crowded and there was a little jockeying for positions with good soft seats and a view. Rumours of a prompt departure at 8 a.m. died with the passing of that hour but by 9 a.m. we were off with a lurch, round the corner and down hill. But not for long - a stop, some shouts and suddenly we were sharing the truck with another ton of sacked white flour - still it made an even better seat so who's to complain?

Eventually we left La Paz and climbed up the long winding road out of the canyon it's built in and onto the plateau above at around 13,300 ft., passing the highest commercial Airport in the world where we had arrived by sleek and only quarter full, 727 jet just three days before - the difference in transport standards was striking to say the least. There are advantages to travel in the back of a truck on a rough dirt road - in our case a superb view of the highest mountains in Bolivia on one side and Lake Titicaca on the other.

Sorata lies near, but certainly not at, the head of one of very steep valleys feeding the Amazon basin, on the very edge of the Altiplano. It is situated at about 2400 m. on the slopes of Mount Allampa and was once a major Spanish trading town on the route from the tropical jungles below to the majority of the population living on the Altiplano above. Due to changing patterns of transport and new roads it is now in decline and best characterised as a sleepy little backwater town.

The hair raising ride down the mountain on unfenced, landslide prone hairpin bends on a single lane road was considerably muted by the heavy bank of clouds and continual rain which left us dripping and cold, staring occasionally through wispy breaks in the clouds at the valleys, so ridiculously far below that they were obviously toys! We were glad to arrive and lucky to find good, clean, cheap accommodation in the store/hotel of an expatriate German trader and on the way down to dinner found our first confirmation that the trip was not in vain. On the wall, in the hall, was a small photograph of a man, standing near a boat in a large



cavern filled with water which disappeared into the darkness beyond.

Enquiries revealed that the "Gruta San Pedro" was just two hours walk down the valley, but that in the morning a truck would be going up the hill to the next village and from there it would be an easy walk down hill to the cave.

In the morning we were once again, waiting for the truck at day break, then in the truck and finally (did I say slow learners?) we left? The ride was both more exciting (a much bumpier road) and more scenic (we could see both the valley floor and the snow covered peaks far above) than the previous evening. Once safely stationary in the village a con-man in the form of a sweet, innocent school boy, was hired to show us to the cave. After a pleasant, slightly down hill walk to the other side of the mountain we had a sudden mutiny - "The cave is down there" he says pointing into the 4000 ft. and deep chasm representing the valley. "How much will you pay me?" "Um \$1" ... "No! \$3" ... "\$1 ...." "\$3" ... "Um Ok we'll find it without you. You can go" "Thinks" we don't have any hope of finding anything down there but he's not going to rob ME! THE KID, as we thought of him from then on, follows as we gingerly make our way down the precipitous slopes, around gum trees and sugar cane plantations and then breaks the silence and says "No No this way!" "Aha" thinks I "he admits my superior bargaining technique". Thus wise we proceed down the hill until suddenly the rock underfoot changes from shale to an almost pure white calcite, showing little rillenkarren every now and again.

THE KID stops, we could do with a break anyway its not easy going traversing steep slippery slopes. "Banito who owns the cave charges \$3 to get in" ... "Does he really?" ... "Yes he lies down there". "I don't see a house" ... "Oh yes its in the trees ... if you give me the money I could pay him ... if you don't pay him he'll call the police!" Bev chips in with "you pay him", thinks I "I'm puffed". "OK" to THE KID "heres the money" ... THE KID disappears and so does the money. Five minutes later a puffing KID reappears and shows us the way to the cave - cleverly hidden around the corner.

The Gruta San Pedro is named after a very small village nearby (San Pedro) and is located approximately two hours walk downstream of Sorata, 5-600 m. above the river Mapiri. The entrance is visible only from San Pedro village as a cliffed

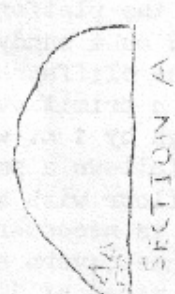
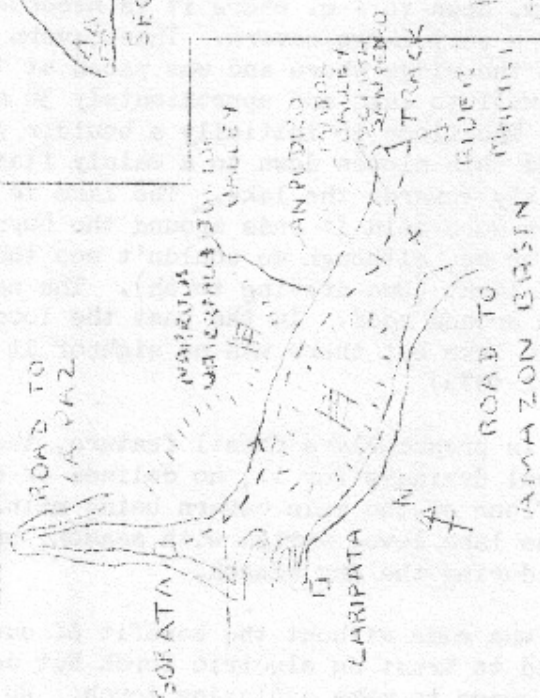
balcony above the main track about  $\frac{1}{2}$  km. from the school. The entrance elevation is guessed at 2500 m. above sea level. The cave is approached via a zig-zag track which leads to a flat grassy area (presumably artificial) below a cliff about 30-40 m. high. The rock is not easily identifiable. It is almost pure white with no obvious impurities or banding and I would guess it was a high grade marble. It outcrops only as cliffs up to 100 m. high along the valley from the cave back towards Sorata for several kilometres maintaining approximately the same height above the river. There were no signs of any other caves nor do the locals mention any when questioned.

The cave entrance proper is reached from the platform by scrambling down a zig zag track developed on a sandy slope, presumably the result of collapse from the cliffs above. The passage way narrows and lowers until a primitive gate is met at a point where the cave is 2 m. high by 1 m. wide. The gate is quite ineffective and there follows a small chamber with a sloping dirt, boulder strewn floor with a roof lowering from 2 m. down to 1 m. where it is necessary to crawl through to a very large cavern. This cavern seems to be parallel with the ridge above and was paced at 100 m. long, from back wall to lake and approximately 30 m. wide and 15 m. high. The floor is initially a boulder pile where entry is made and this slopes down to a mainly flat mud floor which slopes gently towards the lake. The lake is at least 30 m. long and we were told it ends around the corner with a depth of 8 m. or so, although we couldn't see that far with our limited light (One driving torch). The passage has a fairly uniform arched roof. In the past the locals have had a boat in the lake but there was no sight of it when we were there (April 1975)

The cave itself is presumably a fossil feature, there is virtually no local drainage for it, no dolines or streams nearby and the floor of the main cavern being mainly flat suggests that the lake level varies with season, presumably draining slowly during the dry season.

Our exploration was made without the benefit of our native guide who refused to trust an electric torch but couldn't find sufficient grass to make a blazing torch. We spent about one hour in the cave, taking photographs and drawing a sketch survey.

LOCATION



SECTION A



SECTION B

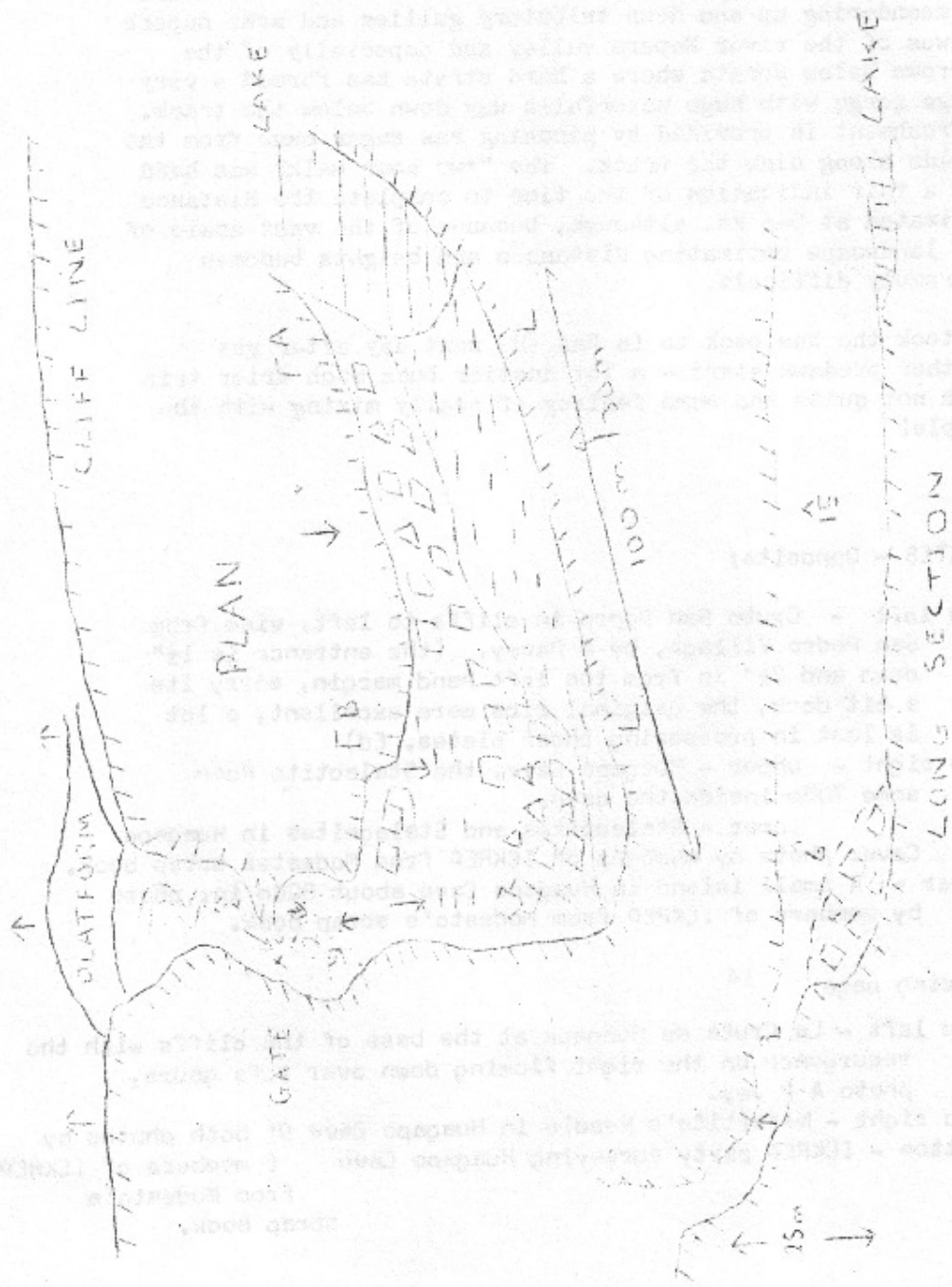
GRUTA SAN PEDRO

NEAR SOKATA, BOLIVIA  
 SKETCH C.R.G. 2 by ANDREW PAVEY  
 APRIL 1975

- |                                |                                 |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> SAND  | <input type="checkbox"/> MUD    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ROCKS | <input type="checkbox"/> HEIGHT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SLOPE | IN METRES                       |



-11-  
GRUTA SAN PEDRO



The return was a lot easier. THE KID wanted to go home via Laripata (his village) but as that was at least a 500 m. climb up hill we went back via the lower track. Two hours of meandering up and down tributary gullies and some superb views of the river Mapere valley and especially of the narrows below Sorata where a hard strata has formed a very large gorge with huge waterfalls way down below the track. Refreshment is provided by pinching raw sugar cane from the fields along side the track. The "two hour walk" was hard but a fair indication of the time to complete the distance estimated at 5-6 km. although, because of the vast scale of the landscape estimating distances and heights becomes extremely difficult.

We took the bus back to La Paz the next day after yet another predawn start - a lot dustier but a much drier trip with not quite the same feeling of really mixing with the people!

PLATES - Opposite;

top left - Gruta San Pedro in cliffs to left, view from San Pedro Village, by A Pavey. (the entrance is  $1\frac{1}{4}$ " down and  $2\frac{1}{4}$ " in from the left hand margin, sorry its a bit dark, the original pics were excellent, a lot is lost in processing these plates. Ed)

top right - upper - Huagapo Cave, the Stalactite Room some 700m inside the cave.

lower - Stalactites and Stalagmites in Huagapo Cave. photo by members of ICKREP from Modesto's scrap book.

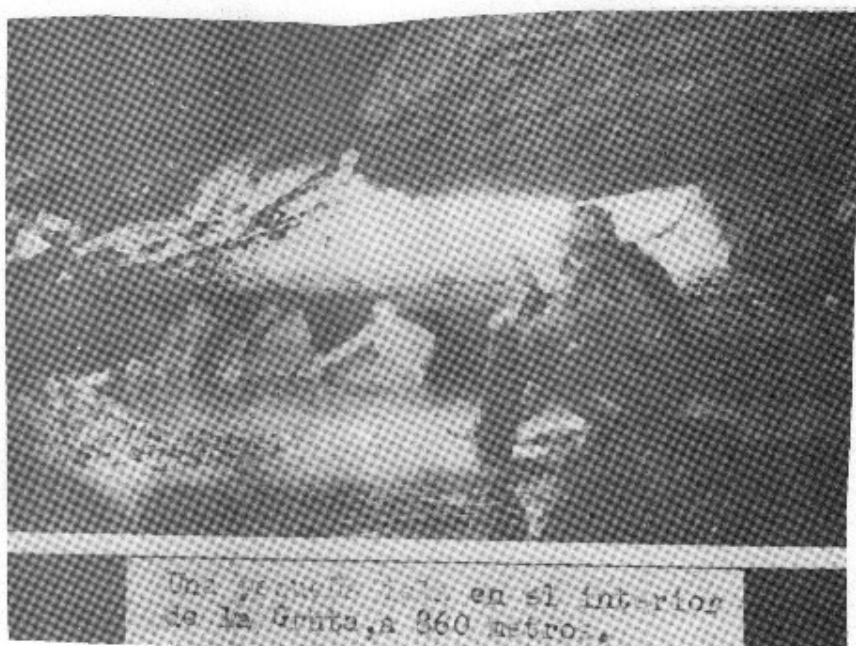
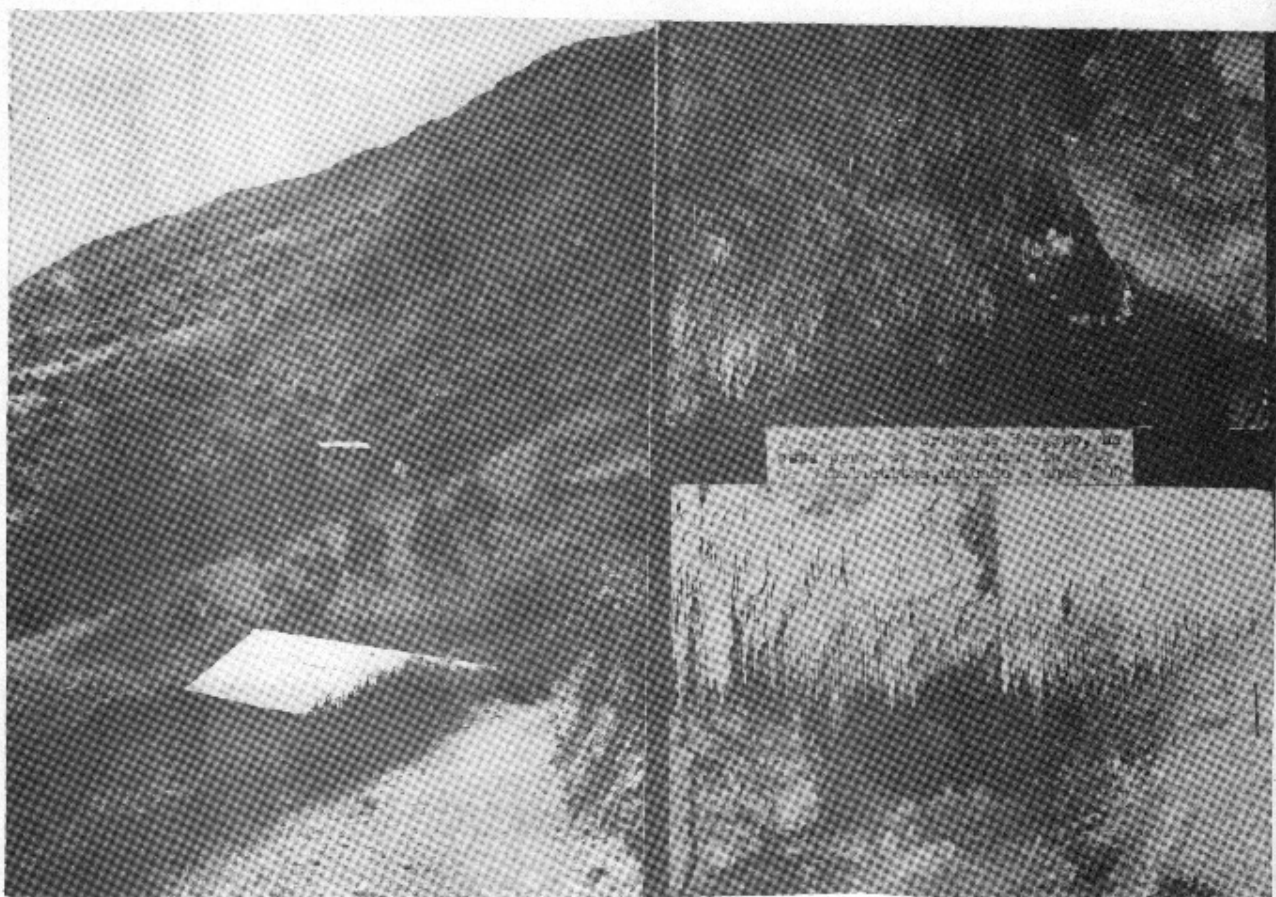
lower - A small island in Huagapo Cave about 800m in. photo by members of ICKREP from Modesto's scrap book.

facing page 14

top left - La Gruta de Huagapo at the base of the cliffs with the resurgence on the right flowing down over tufa gours, photo A. P. vey.

top right - Nefertite's Needle in Huagapo Cave 9( both photos by bottom - ICKREP party surveying Huagapo Cave ( members of ICKREP from Modesto's scrap book.





Una prueba en el interior  
de la Genta, a 360 metros.