

Expeditions '84

Peru Canada

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The Imperial College Caving Club Expedition

Clive Orrock

Speleologically, Peru, like much of South America has been very neglected. Few foreign expeditions have visited the country, and there seem to be no native Peruvian cavers. The Southampton University 1982 expedition (Caves and Caving 19 p.25) suggested that the area North of Cajamarca looked promising. Research revealed reports of large river caves which had been investigated in the last century but never explored. A Spanish expedition visited the caves in 1973 but were severely hindered by flooding and got little further than earlier investigators. So eight of us planned a light-weight reconnaissance expedition to the limestone region around the village of Ninabamba.....

Two weeks after flying into Lima we were finally established at our destination. Ninabamba is situated in a fertile valley surrounded by brown 4000m peaks. Being in a country where agricultural land is at a premium,

the valley is heavily cultivated with innumerable small fields, and we were camped on the only bit of vacant flat ground. It soon became clear that we were camped by a major system.

The Rio Chancay, a large

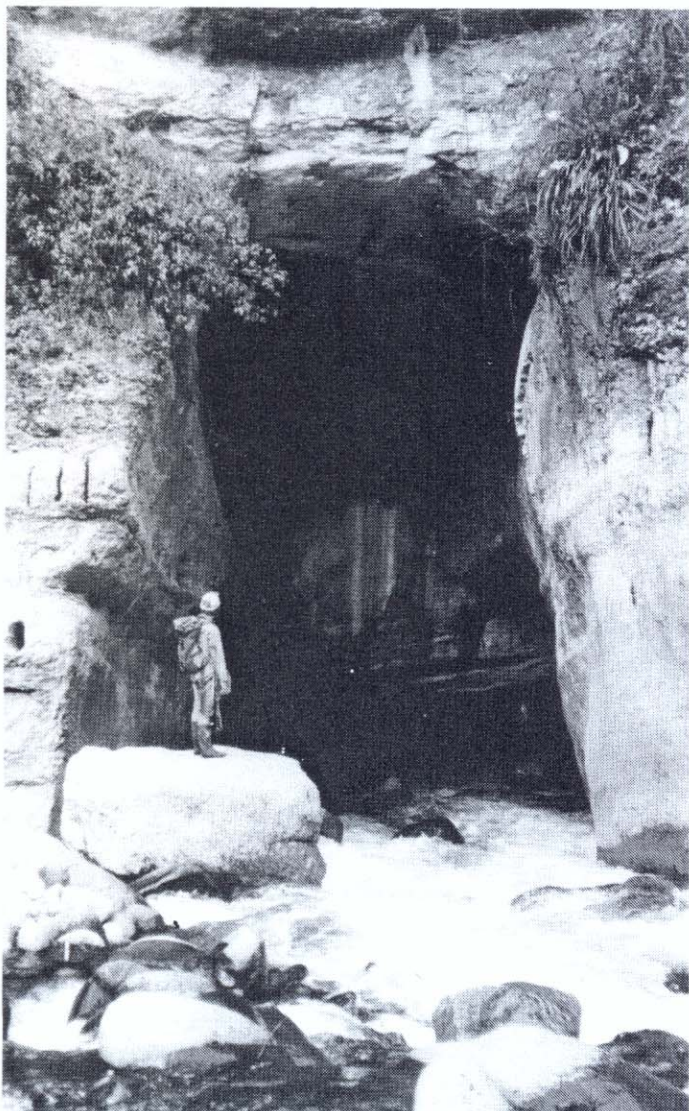
powerful river of about 4 cumecs flows through the valley until it disappears into an impressive 8m x 12m high cave entrance at the base of a limestone cliff. El Tragadero (The Throat) swallows the entire flow of the river which thunders down between the smooth vertical walls of the entrance in a series of rapids. Standing on a spray-lashed block by the entrance we could see the river turn left and disappear out of sight. Somewhat over-awed we left Tragadero alone for a while.

In times of flood Tragadero cannot entirely absorb the Chancay which then overflows down the valley for 1.5km to be engulfed by the 40m wide x 10m high cave of Pakaritambo, at which time it must be a very impressive sight. The large entrance passage of Pakaritambo led down over boulders and flood debris to a noisy river passage, the water presumably being that flowing from Tragadero. Upstream was a 6m waterfall, but a bedding plane crawl by-passed this obstacle to give access to a 100m long x 50m wide

chamber. Here the river was rejoined and followed up to a fast-flowing sump the water issuing from a wide submerged arch. A complex series of inlet passages were pushed in an attempt to bypass the sump. From these we were unable to rejoin the river but instead passed a tight duck to emerge on the surface in the dry river bed further up from Pakaritambo.

Downstream from the Pakaritambo entrance the river was followed past several very smelly bat roosts, an 8m waterfall and down some rapids to another entrance. This cave, Uchkupisjo (meaning hole-for-birds) is supposedly populated by oil-birds but they had either migrated or suffered at the hands of the local lads who shoot them for food and sport, since apart from the odd feather the cave was empty.

On downstream from the Uchkupisjo entrance the river flowed in a tight spiral under itself and into a deep, slow-moving canal. This was pushed for 200m by swimming but our limited supply of rope ran out. Unable to



The sink of the river Chancay - El Tragadero.

Chris Birkhead



obtain any sort of rope which we were willing to trust lives to, we were forced to leave the river to flow on alone towards the resurgence, which at this point is only some 400m away in a direct line.

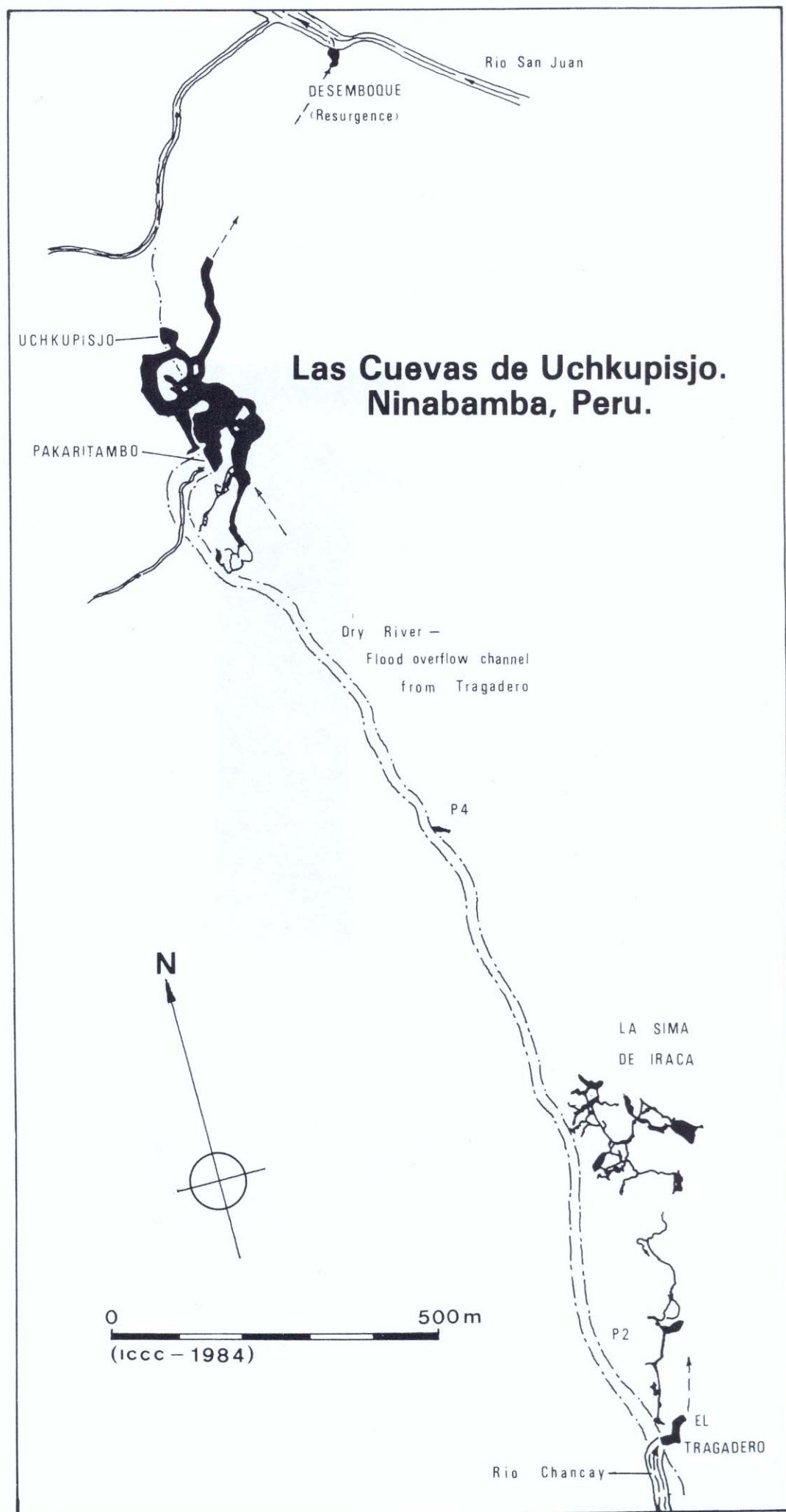
The resurgence itself was difficult to find, being hidden in the side of a deep, forested gorge. We knew roughly where it was because of the sudden change in colour of the rio San Juan from clear to a muddy brown, however it was a while before we forced a way along the side of the gorge to the entrance. The resurgence of Desemboque is a 20m x 20m hole in the side of the gorge fully occupied by deep, fast-moving water flowing from a 10m waterfall just visible at the back. Short of extensive bolting along the walls there was no way in.

The length of the valley was prospected for other sinks which we hoped would give access to more of the underground course of the rio Chancay. A few metres from Tragadero a small entrance (P2) led onto a 20m pitch and on down a sporting streamway. Unfortunately it sumped at a length of 700m but was nevertheless interesting on account of the numerous blind white catfish in its deeper regions.

Further down the valley a very narrow rift was dug out and this uninspiring entrance led to a complex cave; La Sima de Iraca, which was surveyed to over 1.5km length. It too failed to lead us to the master cave but partially compensated for this in its varied character, including several superbly decorated chambers.

Although it was supposedly the dry season there were periods of rain. On one occasion torrential rain caused sudden flooding of the normally dry river bed. The narrow entrance of La Sima de Iraca was soon totally submerged with a party trapped underground. A hurriedly assembled dam succeeded in holding back the water and they were able to emerge safely. So constricted was the entrance that the stream inside the cave had hardly responded at all.

With all obvious caves explored we turned our attention once again to the main sink of Tragadero. A climb up the side of the entrance gained a broad ledge. We bolted along this to the back corner where we could drop down and traverse along at stream level for 60m to where the water thundered under a low arch in a mill-race of white water with limited airspace. With ears ringing from the noise we retreated.





The surrounding area was reconnoitred for caves but being a cultivated area all potential sites were purposefully blocked. A few kilometres east of Ninabamba we found a couple of open shafts but they choked at under 30m deep. At Ninabamba the flow rates from sink to resurgence are very fast so there must be a lot of cave passage somewhere but perhaps accessible only to cave divers. Nevertheless although much of

the underground course of the rio Chancay remains a mystery, the combined length of the Uchkupisjo-Pakaritambo system surveyed so far is 2.4km making it the longest in Peru.

We went as a light-weight expedition expecting to reconnoitre a large remote area but ended up exploring a major system at the bottom of a Peruvian peasant's field. There is a lot more cave somewhere under Ninabamba, and much remains to be done elsewhere in this fascinating country.

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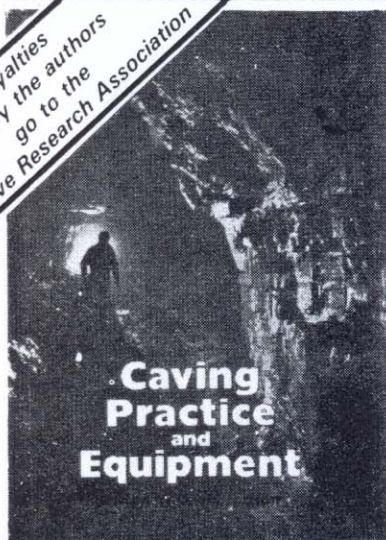
Photographs

U» Surveying in La Sima de Iraca.

D» Inside El Tragadero.

Steve Lane

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