

Sima Pumacocha PERU

June 2001

by Ian McKenzie



Mark Hassel probes the wet P1 entrance - note the blasting cord on ledge. Photo Nick Hawkes

Les Oldham and Nick Hawkes, exploration geologists working out of Lima, invited several foreign cavers to investigate a sinking stream as they couldn't find any active Peruvian cavers. Through contacts in the Peruvian mining industry, Nick and Les had arranged for two Toyota crewcab 4x4s, bunkhouse accommodation, a cook, and all our food, at no cost. Who could resist? We all met in Lima (except Les, who was back in England at the time) at the beginning of June 2001.

We drove from sea level to 4818m in two hours, then descended the east slopes of the Andes and stayed overnight at the Hotel Blub in Huancayo. Next day after repairs to smoking brakes we climbed back west, and stopped at limestone karst at 4550m with draughtless shafts at a spot noted on the map as Millpoc (a variant of milpo, the Quechua word for shaft and a frequent place-name in the Andes). We crossed the spine of the Andes near the mining community of Yauricocha, noting more shafts just west of the 4825m pass.

'High and dry' describes the Peruvian Andes in June. As we drove up the single-track road stapled to the steep mountainside, we stared out at cactus, clumps of dry grass and llamas under a warm blue sky. Soon after the appearance of vertically-bedded limestone, we reached Pumacocha (mountain lion lake) near the head of a valley at 4375m. We hopped out to have a look at the sink point; Hmm, as wet as described. We followed a hundred metres of shallow dry canyon past five abandoned sinks, two of which were wide open.

Matt, Mark and Nick were keen on the five-second pit, but Rob and I quietly volunteered to do the big, heavily draughting hole ten metres away. I'm sure we were both thinking the same thing: seen a lot of blocked shafts in my time, but the gobs of mist pouring out the hole is enough to make you weep. We kitted up, rigged the sloping moss-lined pit, and dropped through bands of sunlight into the spacious chamber below. Two short climbs down past two side-leads brought us to a 3m high, 2m wide tunnel where the draught was so strong it rippled the surface of a small pool as we stepped across it. It would have been horrendously cold in Canada, but here the cave temperature

felt about ten degrees. Another pitch; we returned to the entrance chamber where I waited as Rob, panting from the unaccustomed elevation, ascended to retrieve the 'short' 9mm rope; 170m in a bright yellow bag.

Back at the draughty tunnel (now called Crowsnest Pass) we tied off around a boulder in the floor, and I descended about 10m to a wide ledge, then twenty more metres to a rubble floor perched atop another pitch. We bowlined around a large pillar and Rob began his descent of the next, third pitch. Nick caught up with us before Rob's distant 'rope free' floated up the pitch; a deep one by the sounds of it. I descended past mudstone nodules that broke as my toes scuffed by, past dinner-plate sized ammonite fossils that stood two to three centimetres proud of the surrounding limestone, past innumerable small rub-points - holy moley, the pitch just went on and on. I rounded a bulge and finally saw Rob's light still far below as the pitch went free. He was waiting by the discarded yellow bag; all but a few metres of the rope was gone, and there was another pitch. Well, -175m including a 113m pitch; not bad for a first day's recce. The others had 'only' bottomed a 120m blind (but draughting) pit.

On the bumpy ride down the valley to our bunkhouse, an hour and 1500 vertical metres away, I marvelled at the tenuous connections that had earned me an invitation to Peru. I had met Rob Harper caving in France a decade ago; he knew someone who knew Nick Hawkes, the trip organizer (it turns out I had met Nick fifteen years earlier on an expedition in New Zealand, although neither of us really remembered each other). In contrast, I had never met Matt Tuck or Mark Hassel before, even though both lived an hour from me. Juan Castro worked with Nick in Lima and was keen to support our expedition.

After a 'day off' starting the survey and setting up rebelay and deflections on the pitches, we were ready to push again. Nick and I were surprised when we caught up with Matt and Mark at the head of the new pitch, so we explored and surveyed a small, undraughting side-lead to a pitch while waiting for a replacement bolt driver to arrive. Then Mark, with our 'long' 9mm rope (330m) tethered below him, rappelled 20m into the Huanca Gorge, then

SIMA PUMACocha

LARAOS

YAUyOS DISTRICT

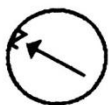
PERU

E424208

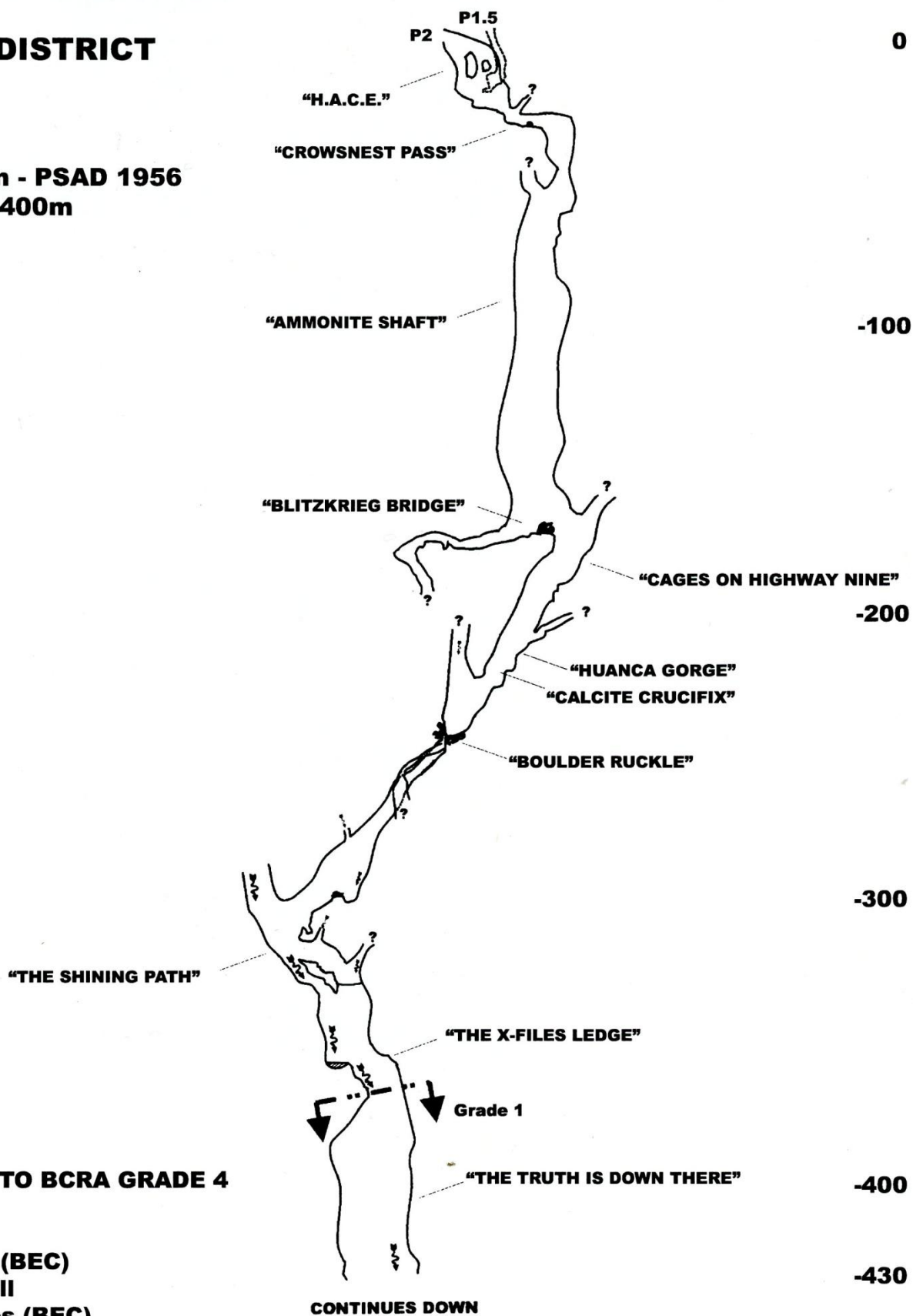
N8630500

Local datum - PSAD 1956

Altitude = 4400m



ENTRANCES



**SURVEYED TO BCRA GRADE 4
JUNE 2001**

by

Rob Harper (BEC)

Mark Hassell

Nick Hawkes (BEC)

Ian McKenzie (ASS)

Matt Tuck (BEC)

CONTINUES DOWN



40 METRES

continues...

Sima Pumacocha

down down down the huge sloping ramp, feeding out a third of the rope until finally reaching a floor. The draught *whhhhhhh*ed through boulders pushed up against the far wall.

The next day we measured the big pitch and made further refinements to the Ammonite Shaft rigging; the 9mm rope was not performing as well as hoped. That night we extended the cave sketch on the bunkhouse's white-board, and discussed the likelihood of breaking the South American depth record, which certainly seemed possible given the voluminous cave passage so far and the porosity of the boulder choke.

Boulder choke? Thin cavers. Next day Nick insinuated himself through the ruckle and directed me to rig through a gap for the next drop, a 3m freeclimb in hindsight, into a continuation of Huanca Gorge. I jammed three chocks where it began to go vertical, and we shouted back to the survey team that the sound of the stream was now unmistakable. We rebelayed twice over the next 40m, then continued on across the narrow bottom, up over a boulder pile and down to where we could overlook the violent cascades of the Pumacocha stream (The Shining Path). We were over 300m below, but only 30m horizontally from, the sink point.

The continental depth record was still 100m away, but our faith was restored the next day when Nick and Juan drove us through the Alis gorge, the geologically-likely resurgence for Pumacocha, 14km straight-line and 1km lower. None of the springs were enterable, but there were some big entrances high above, in flowstoned cliffs like melted wax....

Nick and I surveyed down from the Boulder Ruckle as Rob, Matt and Mark pushed The Shining Path. We followed their tackle (now an almost unbroken line from entrance to limit) down ledges above the stream, through a large dry bypass, to an inlet-pitch of about 30 metres back into the main stream. Standing on a wave-lapped ledge with white cascades both above and below you can be a little baffling. Rob thought the stream could be crossed and a free-climb around a corner might achieve a dry hang, but a few minutes in the awesome streamway convinced the rest of us that we had reached a convenient 'end'.

That night we learned that we had surveyed to -370m, still 35m short of the Peruvian record, and that a quartzite cave in Brazil had been recently reported as -454m deep. Sima Pumacocha would clearly - well, probably - surpass both when we returned next year... Finally we agreed to delay the next day's detackling by several hours while Rob and Mark had one more try with the remaining 100m of rope.

The pushers were gone long before the detacklers breakfasted. After the drive to the cave, Nick, Matt and I kitted up Juan; he and I went down the first pitch, and we discovered a second entrance while exploring a side lead. Finally Matt, Nick and I descended to the Boulder Ruckle; no sign of Rob or Mark. Then, distant grunts and bumps grew louder, coalescing into the butt of a wet, bulging, cursing tacklebag poking though the choke. Rob's route had indeed been do-able, and he descended enough of the rope to see its tail wagging in ever-wetter pitch. Well, that's a more honorable end to an expedition: cave still going at minus 430 metres, but out of tackle.

I unknotted rebelayed and collected chocks, slings, Friends, pitons and hangers as I followed the other four cavers out; I guess it was a privilege to be the last person in Sima Pumacocha. As I parked at the base of the big pitch, I turned out my light, wriggled against a coiled rope and hunched my shoulders several times against the coolness of the wait, and then listened to distant voices and exertions. I thought about the past two weeks - the foreign scenery, the strange birds, the good company, the deep caving, but mostly just about being underground again; and whispered to myself: 'jeez I love this shit' 🍷



Rob and Mark sampling the draught at the P2 entrance to Sima Pumacocha.
Photo Ian McKenzie