

# Catching the Puma

*Ian McKenzie*

Our two weeks in Peru were just about over, with the expedition almost out of rope (again) and just a few days remaining to finish up in Sima Pumacocha. Indeed part of the team was champing at the bit to turn their backs on the high Andes and get in a day of recreation in Lima before flying home. While Mark and Snablet were undertaking one final push/survey trip the rest of us went drinking and dancing in Llapay, hosted by the locals as a special treat. At midnight the cavers were chased around the town's dirt main street by a fireworks-spewing paper bull which caught fire shortly after its human carrier escaped. Lots of fun, but probably not the best way to prepare for a big detackling trip.

Late the next day we learned that Mark and Snablet's final push trip had dramatically used the last piece of rope off their last bolt and reached a sump at -638m, making Sima Pumacocha the deepest cave in South America by about 150m. A heavily draughting passage that might be a sump bypass had not been attempted, meaning the cave might not really be bottomed though. They had detackled back to about -550m. We had selfishly hoped that they would pull the kit up further, but that was just the hangovers talking.

I discussed the day's detackling plan with Matt and Nick as we headed into the cave. Nick would retrieve the full rope bag hanging mid-pitch on Rolling Thunder (where Mark and Snablet had finally thrown in the towel) and take it back to X-Files; I would detackle Rolling Thunder and finish filling the second bag, which Matt would take back to X-Files; then I would detackle Jeny and take *that* bag back to X-Files, releasing the rebelay on The Perfect Storm for the three of us to haul and bag from the top. The others would have arrived by then; Tony would pick up bags as they appeared at X-Files and shuttle them to the Boulder Ruckle for Rob, Bob and possibly Dany to relay to the surface. That would at least get all the stuff from the wet bottom out of the cave, leaving the dry upper cave for the morrow and the three of us free to exit the cave unencumbered, unless we felt up to doing more. Great plan, but heavily dependent on the timing and coordination that cave teams are not known for.

We travelled down through cave terrain familiar to the three of us. A few days ago Nick and Snablet had rigged The Perfect Storm down to the end of The Horizontal Bit (a 35



degree boulder slope!) where most of the stream disappears; Mark and I had taken over and pushed on to Viagra Falls where the entire stream reappears as an impressive column of water pounding down from the ceiling with a roar that gave the previous pitch, Rolling Thunder, its name; then Matt and Tony had surveyed the lot the following day.

Matt and I waited at the top of Rolling Thunder while Nick disappeared for awhile. Matt was dying for a cigarette and fidgetted nervously until Nick eventually reappeared with a bulging red tacklebag in tow. "Off you go Nick;" he'd agreed to pick up a second bag we'd unexpectedly found at The Horizontal Bit. I pulled a bight of rope out through the narrow pitch-head and hooked up my Stop, swung through the rift and descended down to the first rebelay, a loop of red webbing round a big flake. The pitch widened as I descended and, although the main stream skips this pitch, I began to get misted by an inlet stream as I approached the deep rumbling below. As the bottom approached and the pitch grew wider, the rigging took me out of the edge of the shaft to a pendulum across the inlet stream to the final rebelay. I collected the partially-filled bag hanging from the bolt there, and





View of countryside around Sima Pumachoca. Photo - Nick Hawkes.

began undoing the various maillons, bolts and butterfly knots and stuffed rope as I retreated back up the pitch. The bag was completely full by the time I reached the top, and I gratefully lobbed it up a 2m step to Matt. After a few moments of preparation, Matt gently swung across the pool to the base of the 15m pitch, keeping both his feet and the rope bag clear of the deep, still water, and headed up towards his rendez-vous with Tony.

I tossed a hammer and some other hardware into the last, empty bag, and untied the tail anchors before following Matt up the pitch. The sound of his clicking carabiners and toes scuffling on limestone receded as I paused to derig at each rebelay. This easy pitch was the only one in the lower part of the cave that was completely dry, but even it was festooned with bits of blasting cord, washed in from coils dumped in the surface stream sink. At the top, I climbed and detackled a short handline to The Horizontal Bit, then clambered over and around the huge slabs and boulders towards the noise and spray pulsing down the passage from the pitch above. In some confusion I paused and waited for a light that seemed to be approaching from ahead, until Matt's distant "off... rope" revealed this as an illusion caused by the mist and the steepness of the passage.

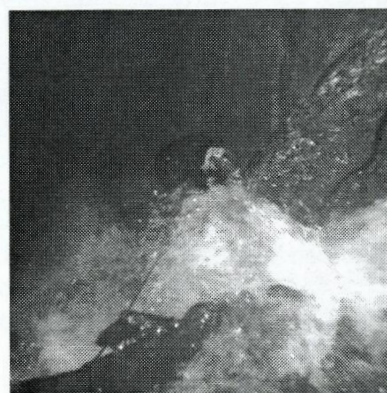
The Perfect Storm was going to be a bit of a problem. This spacious 75m pitch is somewhat sloping, meaning that the stream cascades around quite a bit, which the rigging had tried to stay away from. However the water had picked up since the pitch had been rigged, and where had once been mist was now heavy spray. A problem if you wear glasses! I had planned to pack all of the rigging hardware but leave the unknotted rope so the three of us could haul it from the top, which should theoretically speed

my ascent. There wasn't any bag-room for the rope anyway.

I approached the tail tie-off in the lee of an enormous boulder, keeping my head turned away from the spray, and released the tail, ascended to the first rebelay, released that, and stepped across onto the crown of the boulder. Now, stepping off the boulder was going to mean a gentle pendulum against the far wall, and with a little caution it was accomplished with only a satisfyingly slight bump of my feet.

Next followed an ascent to a short bolt traverse through the wettest part of the pitch, a now-spray-lashed ledge which was going to lead to another pendulum towards the cascades. My fingers were getting tired, or the knots were getting tighter, for it took several minutes apiece to undo the butterflies. Once the bits were in the bag, I began easing myself towards the fall-line, but lost my grip and swung right under the stream. *Glad I replaced my old oversuit* I thought, amidst the drumming of water on my helmet and shoulders. I began prussiking but with the pack on my back it seemed to take a long time to get clear of the water.

I prussiked up through space to the next Y-hang. I reckoned that the rest of the pitch would go better, being drier, but even after several struggling minutes I was unable to undo one of the knots. What to do, what to do... leaving knots in the rope would surely inhibit the hauling. So I clipped the butterfly knot to my waist and hoped the trailing loop wouldn't snag. Next came a couple of deflections utilizing well-placed chocks; *the top can't be far off now* I thought. But a seemingly endless succession of rebelayes followed,



2nd last pitch before the sump. Photo - Snablet



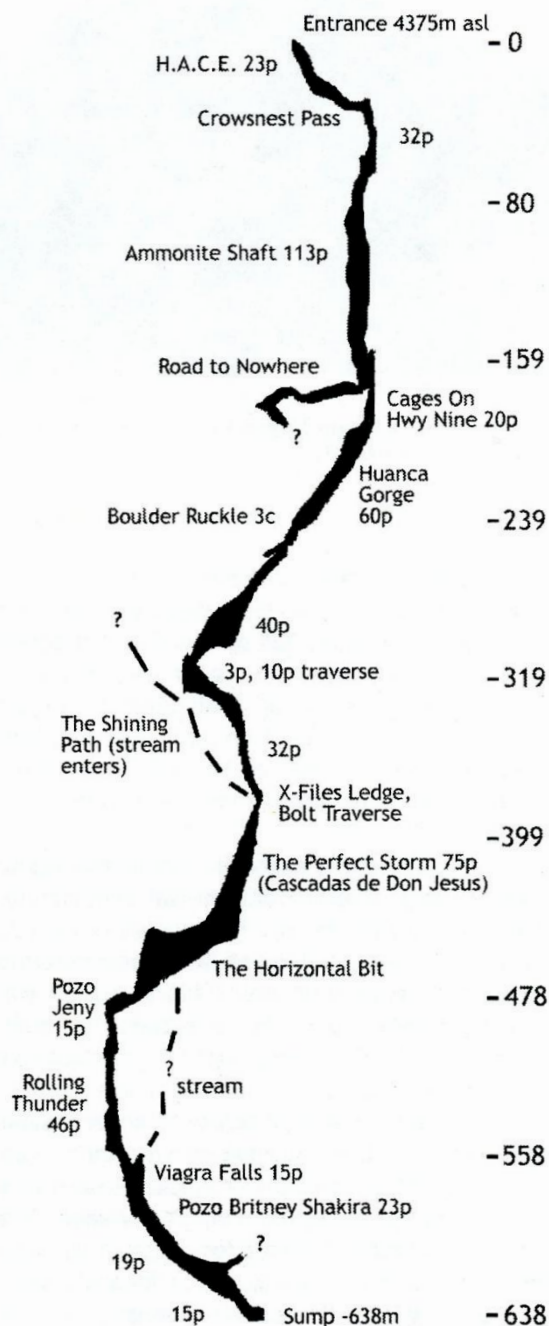
and I lost track of time with the boringly repetitive ritual of rebelay-passing, maillon-undoing, bolt-unscrewing, knot-untying. Eventually I had five or six stubborn butterfly knots clipped to my waist; by the time I topped out I had pretty well added the weight of the entire pitch rope to my load.

The hauling team was not there. I wondered if there had been a problem, but supposed that they had probably gotten cold, grabbed tackle bags, and headed for the surface. Very wise; it must be getting late. I didn't have an empty tacklebag and there was no flat place to pile the rope, so rather than haul it up I clipped all the butterflies into the top anchor, along with the full tacklebag (with considerable relief, but not without guilt), and slipped around the big flake that separated the pitch head from The Shining Path stream. The next 'move' is a long step across the deep vee where the stream begins its white, noisy descent down the pitch; clipping onto the rope provides inadequate bravery until your second cowstail is on the bolt on the far side. Mechanical, repetitive rebelay crossings follow, just a metre or so above the cascades; one, two, three, ... ten rebelays later I had moved perhaps twenty metres. I clipped my cowstails into the taut line and stepped back across the stream to the X-Files ledge - hey, there's the big, empty yellow tacklebag I had brought down from Calgary, The Perfect Bag for The Perfect Storm rope. More guilt, but apparently not enough to make me repeat the traverse twice more.

The next pitch was a straightforward drippy affair that soared 32m straight up from The Shining Path stream to a flat, dry oxbow; I was thankful that I wouldn't have to undo any more rebelays. At the top next to a pool was a full tacklebag. One Tony had missed? Well, I had no excuse to leave that one. A few metres of easy walking led to the delicate traverse on large ledges some 10m above the busy streamway, ending with a short prussik up to the main ledge. I dragged my load up over broken ground away from the stream to the base of the next pitch, the 40m unnamed one that *soooo* deserved a name... it's one of those sloping rifts that you try to prussik up with a foot on each wall while the dangling tacklebag jams in the crack below you. It seemed to take forever.

I was exhausted by the time I reached the top, and prussiked the 3m handline through the Boulder Ruckle. I saw beams of light poking through, and grunted between the last few boulders, bag-first, to where Bob and Rob quietly sat - *cold and bored* I thought. I dumped the accursed bag in front of Rob and sat down in the spacious boulder slope that almost blocked the foot of Huanca Gorge, and had a bite to eat, half a salt tablet and a long swig of the cached water. I wasn't looking forward to what I knew would be a slow ascent of the huge, 80m tube tipped on end at an awkward angle: not nearly vertical,

## Sima Pumacocha Yauyos District, Peru



Surveyed to BCRA 5, June 2001 and September 2002  
Rob Harper, Mark Hassell, Nick Hawkes, Tony Jarratt,  
Peter MacNab, Ian McKenzie, Matt Tuck  
Bristol Exploration Club and Alberta Speleological Society



not quite freeclimbable. Even without a tacklebag it was a killer, but during my frequent stops it was a pleasant surprise to look back down the gigantic passage illuminated by Bob and Rob's carbide 'ceiling burners'; I had never actually seen the entire passage before. The final 20m of freehang was a relief, as was shouting "Rope free" after I'd unclipped and untangled my leg-loops from the rope. I turned to see another abandoned tacklebag; *well, Bob didn't have a load yet, he's a big strong guy, and well rested, I should leave it for him...* but then the angel on the other shoulder said *don't be such a lazy bastard, you've already dumped two bags today, lazy bastard, lazy bastard....* With a sigh I clipped it onto my harness and began the ascent of the 115m Ammonite Shaft.

Ammonite ran us all out of energy, even those of us who had altitude-adjusted well to "the world's highest major cave" (*ta-daaaah!*). The first 30 metres was bouncy and boring up to the most awkward rebelay in the cave, a bolt right on the nose of an overhang with one of the cave's very few stalactites. Next came the long, even more bouncy stretch of about 40 metres decorated with fist-sized or larger ammonite fossils, some eroded almost completely proud of the mother rock. I tried to settle into a measured prussik/rest cycle, but was too tired to keep it up for long. After another rebelay and a couple of redirects, I came to the final series of about six closely-spaced rebelay. When all were behind me I flopped down between boulders for a minute to catch my breath.

Rob and Bob's voices had faded, as they had waited until I had passed the bottom two rebelay before following. I slowly stood up and approached the rope hanging in the middle of the quiet chamber, and ascended the 32m split pitch, past the rebelay off the thread that had caused us so much abrasion grief last year, past the big ledge, and around the giant flake into the rift at the top. Then through Crowsnest Pass, the short bit of tube where the cave's draught is most concentrated, followed by a 3m climb. I walked past the side passage that leads to the second entrance - well, *third* if you include the stream sink - up a second short climb into the entrance chamber. Finally, the entrance shaft, past the mud and ferns, and out.

It was a clear, starry, freezing cold night outside, so without waiting I climbed out of the canyon and shambled robot-like back to the hut. I dumped the tacklebag, pushed open the door and fell over a pile of packs crowned by Matt's prone figure just inside (he explained that he hadn't wanted to get too comfortable, lest he miss his ride down to Llapay). "What time is it?" I asked, trying to keep my light out of his eyes. "Six a.m." God. I stripped off my oversuit and crawled into my bag, which someone had already thoughtfully spread out onto the folding cot.

When Rob and Bob arrived they collected Tony and Matt and drove off. I was alone.

I awoke when the door swung open to Mark's tall, lanky form silhouetted against the bright blue Peruvian sky, and a cheery "G'day mate!" "What time is it?" I croaked. "Nine o'clock!... You up to another detackling trip with me and Snablet?"

#### Peru 2002 Participants

Nick Hawkes	Peru	BEC
Rob Harper	Britain	BEC
Peter (Snablet) MacNab	Britain	BEC
Mark Hassell	Canada	ASS
Ian McKenzie	Canada	ASS
Matt Tuck	Canada	BEC
Tony Jarratt	Britain	BEC
Bob Cork	Britain	BEC
Dany Bradshaw	Britain	BEC
Juan "Diablo" Castro	Peru	
Carlos Morales Bermudez	Peru	CEESPE
Rolando Carascal Miranda	Peru	CEESPE
Samuel Arias Mansiel	Peru	CEESPE
James Cuentas Alvarado	Peru	CEESPE

BEC = Bristol Exploration Club

ASS = Alberta Speleological Society

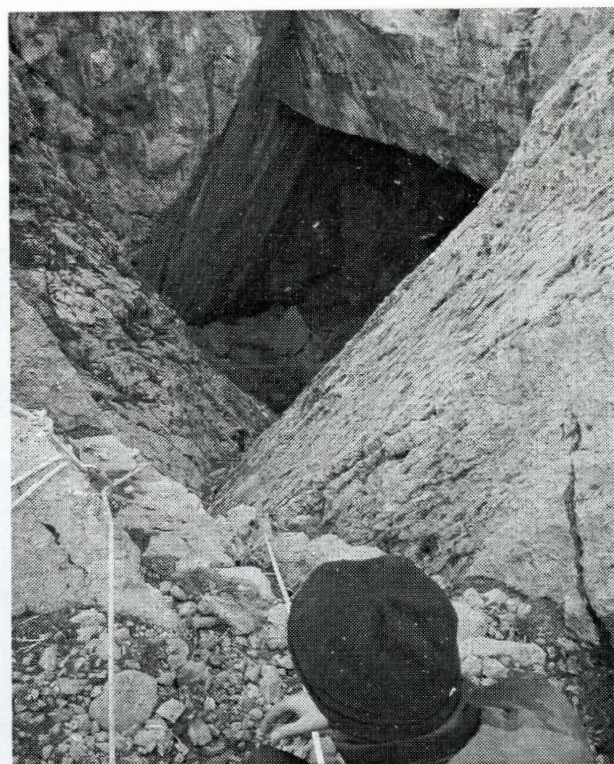
CEESPE = Centro de Exploraciones Subterranas del Peru

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Les Oldham

Rio Tinto Mining and Exploration



Nick Hawkes descending nearby Qaqa Machay (he is the dark spot part way down the pit). Photo - Snablet