

# the Canadian Caver

Number 78





Cavers with

# *Altitude*

(Peru 2012)

By Nicholaus Vieira

...I arrived through customs at a bleak 01:30 in the morning after a gruelling marathon of in-flight movies. After meeting my ride we raced another cab driver through the mean streets of Lima (with speeds in excess of 150km/hr!) to the hostel that we would be using as a base. Fellow cavers Andy McKenzie and Adam Haar, having arrived the day before us, were waiting at the hostel with a very welcome beer. We downed a few beverages while catching up until 4:15am. So began my Peruvian adventures!

The rest of the first half-team trickled in over the next few days, which included caving legend Al Warild (Australia), David Taberner (Australia), and my separatist friend Guillaume Pelletier (Quebec). As this occurred we saw to the duties of acquiring maps, food, and other supplies for the first three weeks of our expedition. The team was bonding well and banter was at high levels, with some rather unique 'props' being used to break the ice (in the form of male stripper butane lighters which included very good angles - *not leaving much too the imagination*). One such incident had me interrupting Adam, while engrossed in a conversation with a local woman, by placing the lighter between them and thanking him for its use. It had the desired effects of laughter all around. On a separate funny note Guillaume and I had some funny looks from the

locals when we were trying to buy a pressure cooker, white gas, and a machete. Apparently we must have looked the part?...

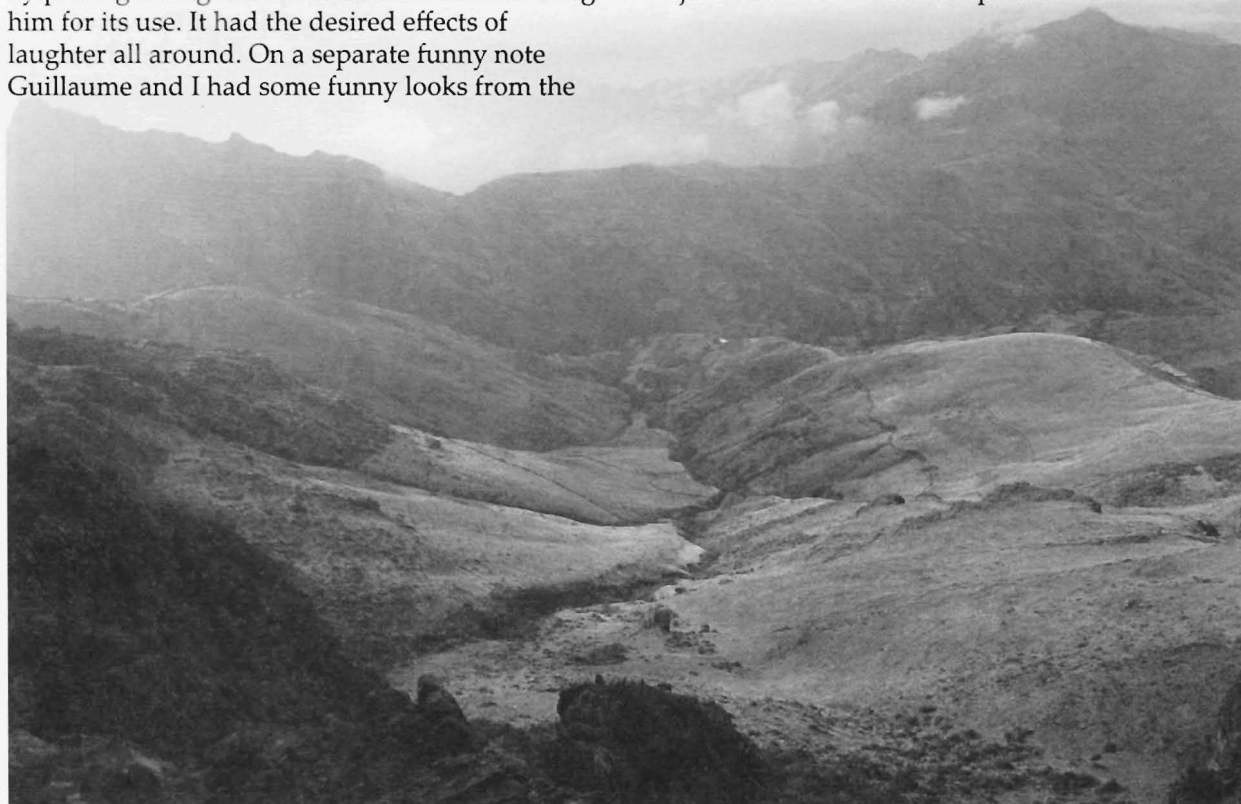
September 24th saw us pay for the Hilux's (pick-up trucks) in cash-up-front, which to an outsider might have looked suspiciously like a drug deal. We loaded up the trucks then had a life lesson about driving in Peru - if you are bigger, you win. Moving northwards up the desert

*There was even a "State of Emergency" in place [due to mining protests] until a week before our arrival.*

coast and into the mountains was breathtakingly beautiful!

Cuevas del Norte-

The city of Cajamarca (elevation 2700m) opened our eyes to the political tensions within Peru. Cajamarca seems to be the epicenter for a lot of



*The high alpine of Peru. Photo by Nick Vieira.*

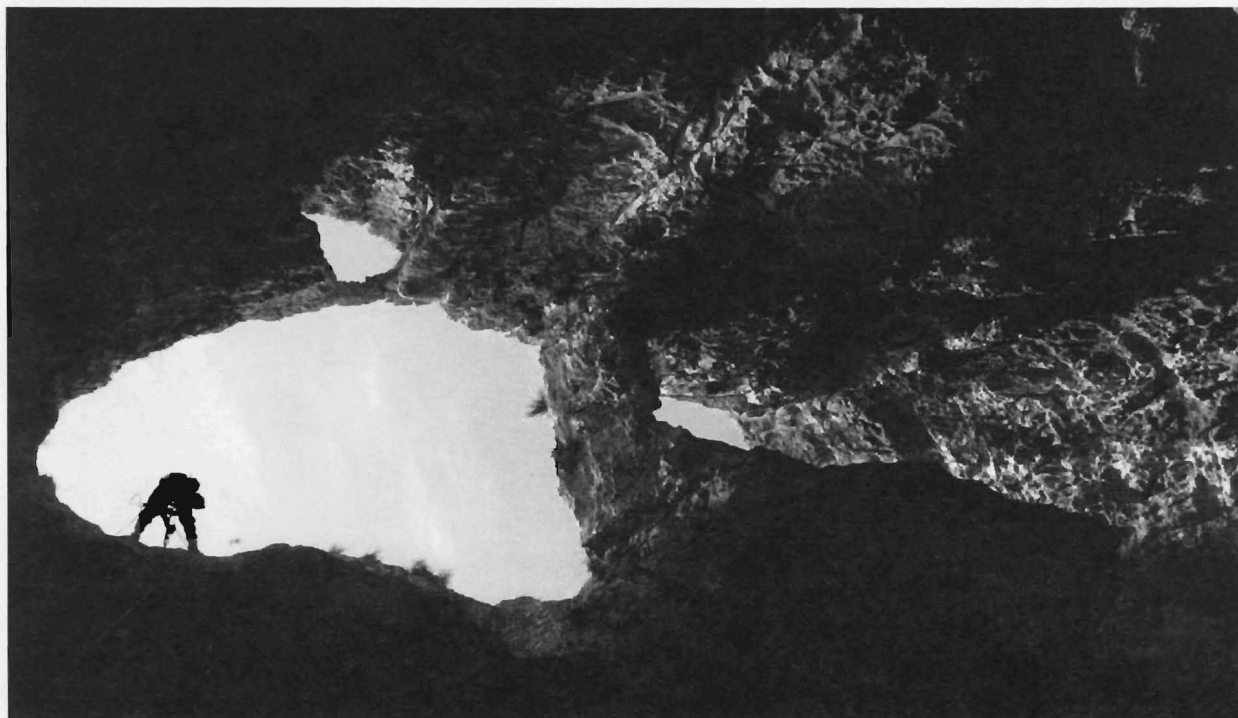


*Calcified human remains in the Puyo district. Photo by Nick Vieira.*

the mining opposition within the country. There was even a 'State of Emergency' in place until a week before our arrival. In a bid to keep an eye out for our gear (in the back of the trucks) and because I'm cheap, I slept in one of the Hilux's, and was awakened to a crowd moving through the streets yelling and shouting slogans. At a glance we could see that there was "Conga no va" graffiti everywhere, even on the hill overlooking the town, with the protests continuing throughout the day, and lasting through until the days we returned. This added a new element to our cave recce. Every local was charged with passion and

conviction about the Conga mine, Conga No Va! The funny thing is the vehicles we were using were the types also used by the mining companies; we also had helmets with lights, completing the image of miners!

We left town to explore the sinking river Rio Jadibamba, an amazing location with stunning scenery and well developed karst. With some smooth talking we arrived and were granted permission to camp, under the watchful eyes of the locals. The altitude of our camp was 3644m, 10 km from the proposed super Conga mine. We spent 3 days mapping the caves which routinely ended in sumps; I wish I had brought my dive kit! Amazing stream passage with swims and giggles, climbs, and locals following our lights into the caves to fish for trout in the deeper pools. A team went down the road to check on another prospect but got run out of the area by very passionate people who thought we were the devil, or rather, miners (which are one and the same to them). We packed up and moved to a new area, in a long distance sort of way, during which I actually heard a Canadian separatist say that he loves Canada! That made my expedition! In the process of the trip Al had



*View from below in one of the many shafts of the Puyo. Photo by Nick Vieira.*

his wallet stolen and Dave and I were sent on horseback into the mountains for a report of caves. 20km and multiple hours later we returned, well after dark, with meager 16m long cave.

Finally, a few days of effort saw us at the "Bat cave", Cueva Chorro. Andy took the lead rock-climb into the entrance with myself belaying. With the rope rigged the survey team followed and we spent the next few days exploring this unique cave and area. It was complete with oodles of bats flying around, hitting you in the face while you tried calling your instrument numbers - fantastic! Yet again, it ended in another sump. Guillaume and I also got our 'climb' on, ascending a series of avens. Once finished it was time to make the trek south to the Puyo Valley and drop pits at 4600m. The drive south was uneventful except for a particular drunk with an award winning rant about how Margaret Thatcher ruined the UK: brilliant to watch the passion.

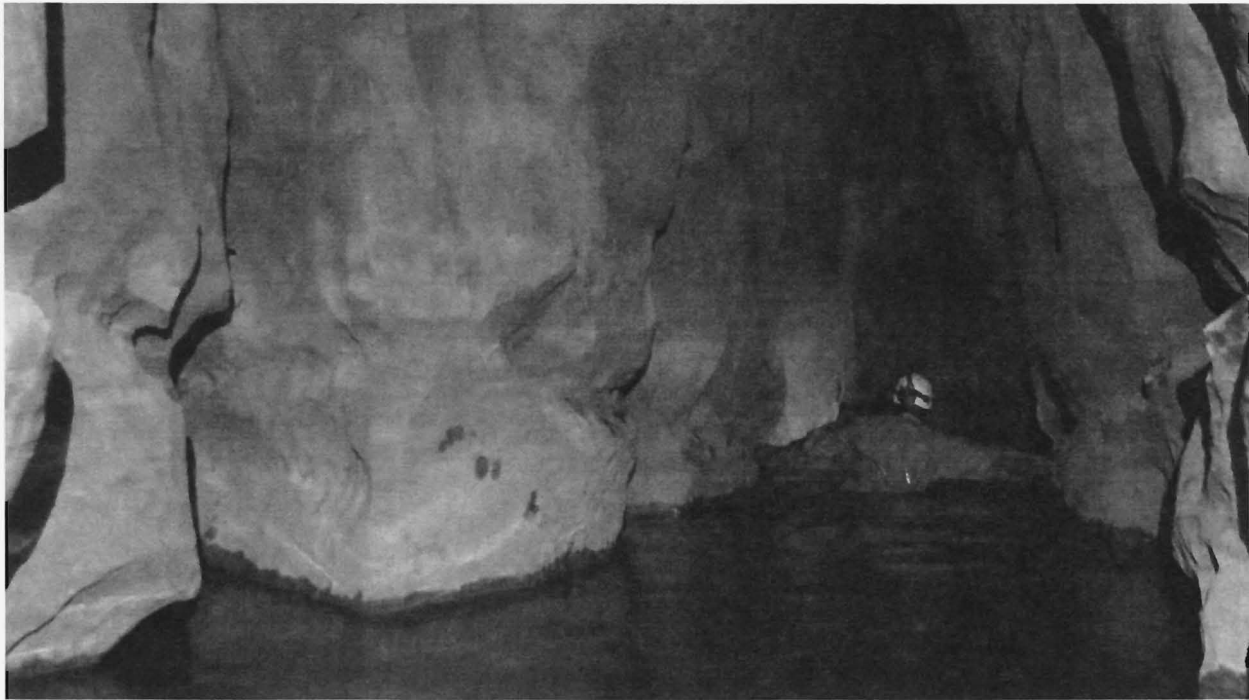
Puyo, Puyo, Puyo... the area beckons cavers back from around the world, we had new members join us for the second half of the expedition; Hanna Moulton (UK), Rob Middleton (UK), Andrew Perry (Australia), and Jesse Martin (Canada, on the occasion). Here we were going

*Puyo, Puyo, Puyo... the area  
beckons cavers back from  
around the world...*

to finish off some leftover leads from previous expeditions, and thoroughly recce the area and look into few other areas as well. We camped at 4600m then began prospecting from there. A local named Abel put us onto some impressive shafts (one bottomed out at -115m, at 4700m sweet!). Weeks were spent shaft bashing - we killed the two caves left with leads in them, Tragadero and Cueva Puyo where I suffered a broken finger and a damaged Scurion from rock fall at the bottom of the cave). After 40+ shafts dropped (love those concrete screws!), multiple 20km recce hikes over the mountains, a search for missing team member Jesse (who had to descend to lower altitudes due to sorejche then went missing), and an unusual discovery of a cave full of human remains. We also explored some horizontal caves, with one note worthy cave consisting of phreatic passages displaced along the bedding, as if the upper



*En route to the exit. Photo by Nick Vieira.*



*Dave Taberner negotiating Peruvian streamway passage. Photo by Nick Vieira.*

section of the tube passage stayed put as the lower section shifted sideways (or vise-versa) to create an "S" shaped cross section. All members of the team have repeatedly pointed out the tortured geological history of the Andes, adding yet another to high altitude caving. We got to experience this geological torture first hand on more than one occasion, when we had some minor earthquakes.

*All members of the team have repeatedly pointed out the tortured geological history of the Andes, adding yet another challenge to high altitude caving.*

On October 24th, we broke camp and moved to new areas where we continued exploring caves and shafts, all the time pushing and suffering in the weather. On October 27th we began exploration of El Chupadero, the last cave the whole team would get to explore together, extending it to 770m long. At the end of October Al and David packed to leave, so we had a good-bye

dinner in Huancaya and said our fond farewells. Peru had one more surprise for us, a cave discovered by accident. This caught us off guard and had Rob, Guillaume, and I caving in the nude in stream passage. What a treat! El Nunador was a tufa cave over granite boulders, the wettest cave I have been to without diving. It was surveyed on another trip to over 100m long, and you may have guessed it, another sump.

Returning to Lima the remaining team shaved off our expedition beards, dressed in clean clothes (most of us) and then began to slowly trickle through the Lima airport to go home to our other lives. We will all carry with us a warm place for Peru caving. Some of us will return to share this place with others. It was an amazing experience with an amazing group of people, and I am hoping I get to meet them again on an expedition in some distant cave.

I plan to return to this place for caving, and for climbing as well. After all, we left a very large sinking river unexplored. Hopefully this will entice you to brave your own 6+hr marathon horse trip in the steep mountains of Peru to find that cave that will leave you as breathless as the altitude. □