



Is Optimism a Strategy?

Tonio Pomar enjoying the pitches in Lorenzo's Right Eye
All photos: Boaz Langford

When planning an international expedition to somewhere as far away as Peru, it helps if you have some leads to look at but, as Pete Talling reports, sometimes optimism is all you need.

I felt a long way from home. I was lying on my side in a tight oval-shaped tube, whose exit was perched above a 7m pitch, and eyeing up the squeeze and down-climb beyond. It was hard to see, but there might be a continuation of the passage beyond the pitch. The nearest person was my partner Fleur, seriously ill in our tent with diarrhoea. The other three people on the expedition were two days away, exploring the edge of a high-altitude plateau at the very brim of the Amazon rainforest. An hour earlier, I had come over a hill to see a large river sinking at the end of a deep gorge. After blundering through dense vegetation, I rolled away a slab to find an obscure body-sized hole that led for 10m to this small chamber and pitch. Nobody knew where this hole was.

Hmmm. I stepped across the pitch again, right-hand side down, shuffle. Come on, a year of exploring squeeze-infested maze caves in the UK's Northern Dales should prepare you for this. Do it! Hmmm. The exit from the squeeze was tighter. A forward roll down the pitch beyond would be sub-optimal. I backed off and decided

to come back with a rope. Ho-hum. It turned out to be our last chance to find ongoing caves on that 2022 trip, in an area with amazing karst. I was soon ill with the same bug Fleur had, and we ended up going slowly down from the plateau the following day.

This led me to ponder a critical question: how much ongoing cave on an initial expedition is enough to organise a second expedition. Was just 10m of cave enough? I remembered a story from an old climbing friend, who was now the Chief Technical Officer for a big tech company. He told me how he had once exclaimed in frustration to his boss that 'Optimism is not a strategy!'. Did his catchphrase apply to exploring new caving areas across remote corners of the world? I decided to find out, and recruited a larger team of cavers to come back in 2023.

Pico del Oro plateau

SO, why did we go to the Pico del Oro plateau in northern Peru? The story started with being cooped up during Covid lockdowns, so I started a Google Earth project to compile a database of promising caving areas across the globe. I had started with South America; it would be easier than Asia. Then I came across www.cuevasdelperu.org

Expedition members

2022 caving team: Jean-Yves Bigot (GSBM, France), José Antonio ('Tonio') De Pomar Cáceres (Peru, ECA), Gino Staccioli (GSBM, France), Fleur Loveridge (UK), Pete Talling (UK),
2023 caving team: Pete Talling (UK), José Antonio ('Tonio') De Pomar Cáceres (Peru, ECA), Gareth Davies (UK), Chris Densham (UK), Dominik Frohlich (Germany), Mike Futrell (USA), Rene Haemers (Netherlands), Martin Holroyd (UK), Andreas Klocker (Austria), Boaz Langford (Israel).

This is an amazing website for caving in South America, created by a team of French and Peruvian cavers from the Groupe Spéléo Bagnols Marcoule (GSBM) and Espeleo Club Andino (ECA), and based on over 20 years of expeditions. In particular, the setting of the Pico del Oro plateau looked superb. Using Google Earth I saw that the number of disappearing rivers on this plateau was also quite remarkable. The French-Peruvian team had previously ventured on to the plateau during two previous expeditions in 2018 and 2019 and explored a large but choked river sink, Tragadero de la Planura del Pico del Oro. There was truly world class depth potential. Rivers sinking at 3,500-3,600m on the high plateau lie up to 2,800m above a huge (up to 34m³)



Andreas Klocker looking towards the edge of the Pico del Oro plateau and the Amazon basin

resurgence. This Rio Negro resurgence is notably colder than other resurgences along the foot of the Andes, suggesting fast throughflow. It is one of those few places where caves could exceed the depth of the deepest cave yet known, and by quite a margin.

We contacted Jean Loup Guyot and Jean-Yves Bigot from the GSBM and they very kindly invited us on a small trip in August 2022 with just five people: Jean Yves Bigot and Gino Staccioli from France, Tonio De Pomar from Peru, Fleur and me. It was a tough trip for us, as we both became ill during the initial walk-in. There was no chance to starve out the bug, and Fleur eventually lost about a stone in weight. We had only two days of caving, and on one of those I misread the small degree, minutes and seconds symbols on the GPS, so took Fleur up the wrong hill in the pouring rain. I now have a first set of Specsavers glasses.

A key issue was also a need for lightweight satellite camps, with dehydrated meals and stoves. In 2022 we had stayed in shelters built by Dario, our Peruvian guide, who had cooked on fires inside the shelters. But the commute from these shelters to the caving areas would be too long. Therefore, in 2023 we brought 50kg of dehydrated meals and 30kg of granola, together with Milo chocolate powder, for an international team of 10 cavers from UK, Peru, Germany, Austria, Israel, US and the Netherlands, as part of a wider 2023 expedition by the GSBM and ECA team. There was an early test of optimism levels, as we eventually decided to take ~650m of rope.

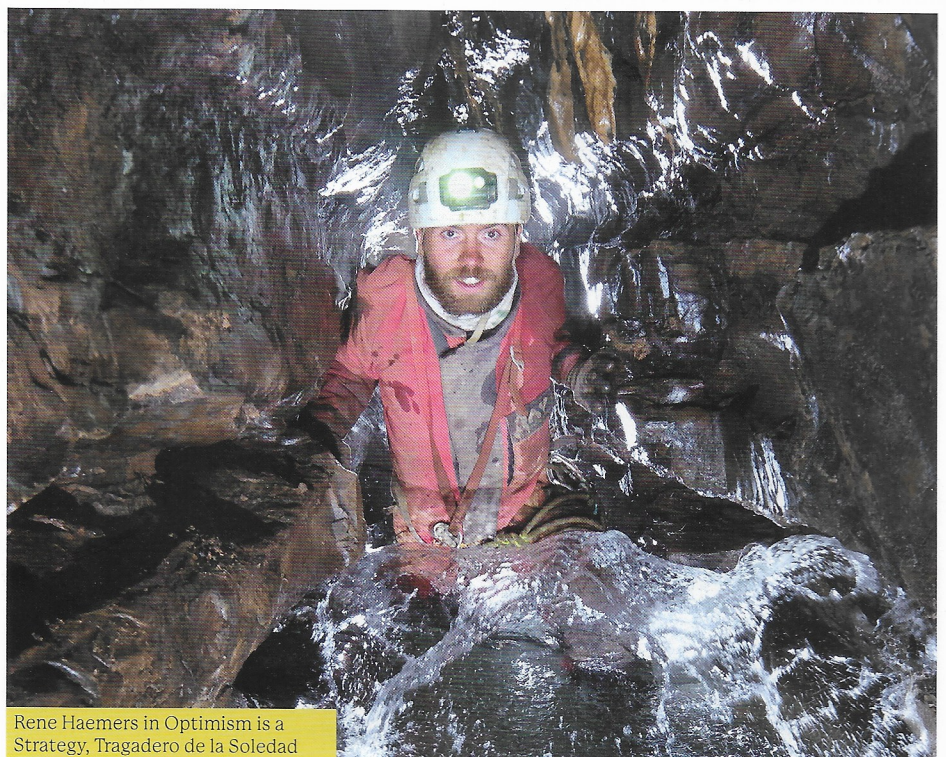
The trip started with a bus journey past the Rio Negro resurgence to Chachapoyas, during which I received a text message saying there had been a major breakthrough in our maze cave on the Stang in the Northern Dales. It was quite strange to be in the hot Amazon Basin thinking of the windswept Stang, and wondering if there would be more cave found there than on our Peruvian expedition.

The walk-in started from the small village of Granada, about two hours by bus from Chachapoyas. Here we met Dario again and arranged for nine horses to carry our caving equipment, together with food for 15 days. In 2023, the horses were accompanied by Lorenzo and Rosa, who cooked for the team on the walk-in and who were again superb. Our walk-in that took two days in 2022 was covered in a single long day to the Calamina Camp. On the next day Lorenzo took Team Faster – Martin, Boaz and Tonio – to see a pair of river sinks that he knew about, located several hours beyond the Planura del Pico del Oro sink, across challenging pinnacle karst terrain. They came back looking excited, after seeing two enticing holes that we named Lorenzo's Left and Right Eyes (Tragaderos de Los Ojos Derecho e Izquierdo de Lorenzo). We then split into two groups of five cavers, as Lorenzo, Rosa and the horses left for Granada. The first group explored an area of challenging terrain that

included Lorenzo's Sinks. They camped next to the Planura del Pico del Oro sink, which was two hours on foot from the Calamina Camp, and about two hours from Lorenzo's Sinks. The second group focussed on the 10m-long offering from 2022 (Tragadero de la Soledad), which was the first of 12 river sinks that extended in a line across easier terrain northeast of Calamina Camp.

Return to Tragadero de la Soledad

I WAS super-nervous as my team entered the 2022 lead. If it crapped out, I felt there might be some customer complaints about the expedition prospectus on which it featured heavily. The 7m pitch was descended from two nice and shiny bolts, with low stress. 'Don't kill the lead' was my only thought, just don't. At the base I peered around the corner; a 3m pitch followed.



Rene Haemers in Optimism is a Strategy, Tragadero de la Soledad

OK, not dead yet. Then a 5m pitch. This opened out on to a 10m pitch, and then two 15m pitches, all with huge round boulders wedged across them. This 65m deep entrance series led to a chamber, with a beautiful waterworn phreatic tube continuing from it. Muttering 'Don't kill it', we left Gareth and Rene to rig on down. They came back saying it sumped (Aaaargh! No!) before grinning and saying there was a climb over the sump, followed by a windy crawl that led into a horizontal streamway. Phew.

Over the next few days, we explored what is probably the most beautiful streamway I have seen in over 40 expeditions, slaloming our way between sturdy stalactites that dripped from the roof. It followed a mudstone-limestone boundary, and white formations contrasted against black mudstone. Clear water lapped at your wellies, and there were new and ever prettier formations to admire at each bend. This Optimism is a Strategy streamway extended for ~1.5km. At its end we climbed up into the large 20m-wide Lamb and Fox Chamber. Surely it would end now. But it was a confluence with an even larger streamway, which barrelled off in both upstream and downstream directions.

Apart from exploring Tragadero de la Soledad, this team also spent a day making a reconnaissance of the line of sinks that extended from it. The adjacent Sink 2 was wide open, and I had scampered down it for 100m before guiltily returning, although a survey team later reported bad air. Sink 5 also looked tremendous, with a short 3m entrance pitch guarding a continuing streamway. We finished at Sink 6 (of 12), with a view of further rivers ending at the boundary of razor-sharp karst mountains. In total, the expedition reached only nine of the 28 river sinks seen on satellite images, as we were distracted when almost every hole we entered just went.

Lorenzo's Sinks

MEANWHILE, the other team had been exploring Lorenzo's Sinks, with a much harder commute from their camp. Both of Lorenzo's Eyes turned out to be vertical pitch series, with consistent draughts. They were a more serious proposition, with careful rigging needed to avoid water, and a significant stream entering the larger Right Eye after heavier rain. Both pitch series were eventually explored down to ~150m, where they were left wide open as the team ran out of rope and hangers, with further pitches descending into the depths. These ongoing pits were

Tragadero de la Soledad

Vista Alegre, Rodriguez de Mendoza, Amazonas, Peru

-6.06477, -77.51528

Alt. 3,420m

Surveyed 2023 by Antonio De Pomar Cáceres, Gareth Davies,

Chris Densham, Dominik Fröhlich,

Mike Futrell, René Haemers,

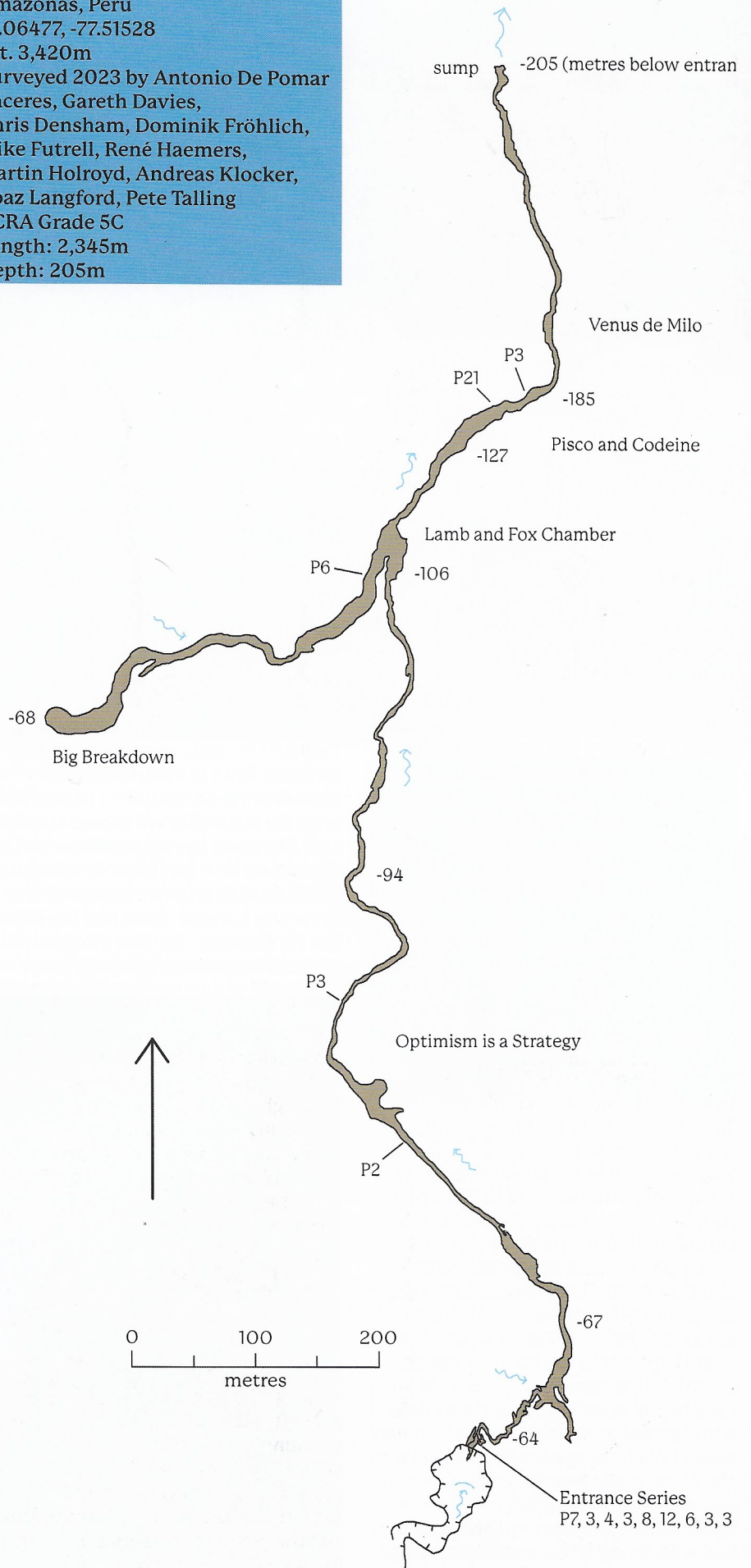
Martin Holroyd, Andreas Klocker,

Boaz Langford, Pete Talling

BCRA Grade 5C

Length: 2,345m

Depth: 205m





Rene Haemers admiring straws in the upper streamway in Optimism is a Strategy

especially exciting as they are located at the edge of the plateau, closest to the Rio Negro resurgence.

Thus, halfway through the expedition, all 650m of rope was down either Lorenzo's Left and Right Eyes, or Tragadero de la Soledad. Each hanger was being fought over. Maybe a greater dose of optimism about amounts of rope and rigging gear had been needed.

Final push in Tragadero de la Soledad

THE two teams of five cavers then amalgamated to continue the exploration of the lower streamway in Tragadero de la Soledad from Calamina Camp. The upstream branch was found to be China-sized, up to 20 x 20m in places, and surprisingly it headed into blank mountain back towards Granada. The nearest river sink in that direction was over 12km away. This borehole eventually ended at a major collapse, although a small bypass in neck-deep water is yet to be fully pushed, mainly because attention was on the downstream continuation of this Pisco and Codeine streamway. After a couple of pitches, this big streamway was found to contain even better formations

than Optimism is a Strategy. I remember seeing what was my all-time favourite formation – a jagged horizontal spear amid vertical cousins – only to see an even better formation, which was the same spear but with wiggly forks at the end. Marvellous. Tonio named it the Venus de Milo Chamber, after our beloved Milo chocolate powder. On the final day of the expedition, a combined survey, rig and derig team made a final effort to push this streamway. The way on was eventually barred by a short pitch, where it was discovered that Petzl Stops can work on nylon tape, although some form of human pyramid, or Martin Holroyd's fireman's lift, is needed on return. Eventually the team found a sump, although surveys legs could be shot for 30m into an overlying space, which may provide a bypass.

Optimism as a strategy

THUS, after 14 days of caving, we had left a 2.3km cave with beautiful streamways that reached a depth of 200m. It points towards the even larger Planura de la Pico del Oro sink explored by the 2018-2019 expedition, and the two deep pit series of Lorenzo's Right and Left Eyes that were left ongoing at about 150m depth. On some

expeditions you find nothing, but on this one every hole went. The Pico del Oro plateau in Peru does indeed have world class potential, and it is one of the few places on earth that could possibly host caves deeper than 2.5km. A return is planned with much more rope and a somewhat bigger team in 2024. It is a remarkably karstic and beautiful area poised on the edge of the Amazon Basin.

So, is optimism a strategy, at least for cave exploration? It could well be.

We would like to acknowledge The Ghar Parau and Mount Everest Foundations for their critical financial support, and Firepot and Adventure Nutrition for their tasty, dehydrated meals. This trip was part of cave exploration led by the GSBM-ECA Team. Many thanks also go to Liz Hidalgo (Peru), Jean Loup Guyot (France), Jean-Yves Bigot (France) and Oliver Fabre (France) for helping to organise logistics that include permissions, horses and local guides in Granada, group travel and equipment storage. We are also very grateful to Dario Labajos Conilla, Lorenzo Gebol Gomez, Rosa Auristela Labajos, Gilberto Gebol Gomez and others from Granada, who organised logistics and provided food and horses to carry equipment on to the plateau.



Tragadero de la Soledad
Photo: Boaz Langford