

SISTEMA CARACOL

ABOUT THIS CAVITY:

Located in the municipality of Peñarrubia, not far from La Hermida, the Well of Hell, or Caracol System, takes its name from the shepherd Manolo Caracol, who discovered it and was the first to partially explore it. The Catalan team, the Sabadell Speleological Club (E.C.S.), has been the most prominent among all the teams that have undertaken exploration, carrying out numerous expeditions from 1969 to the present day. Among other things, they are responsible for the available topography, which can be found on either the website <https://undergroundadventure.cat> or the website <https://espeleoclubsabadell.blogspot.com>

Due to its size, formations, large volumes, and over 4,500 meters of passages, it would be an ideal cave for people with little experience, although the awkward access and some somewhat demanding sections might limit visits to the cave for novice speleologists, making it more suitable for "collector" speleologists.

In any case, we found it to be a cave well worth visiting, and it was clear to us that it would be a much more popular cave were it not for its unpleasant access and somewhat remote location. Furthermore, it can easily be combined with the via ferratas in the surrounding area, or for those with more refined tastes, with a visit to the Hermida spa and a good tasting of the local cuisine.

Further information on the Caracol System can be found in Los sótanos de la tierra by Carlos Lamoine Martínez (pp. 217-221), in Cantabria Subterránea by José León García (pp. 421-424), and in the Cantabrian Speleology Bulletin No. 16 of the Cantabrian Speleology Federation.

PARKING:

On the N-621 highway, heading towards La Hermida, approximately 1,100 meters before the turnoff on the right that leads to the Urdón hydroelectric plant, there is a small bridge on your left that crosses the Deva River (on Google Maps: 3.26852252946253, -4.634888261026719).

If you can cross the river with your vehicle, the parking area is opposite a somewhat dilapidated old fishing shelter called "Coto del Infierno" (Hell's Fishing Reserve), where there is ample space for several vehicles parked in a line. If you cannot cross the bridge, which happened to us due to roadworks, there is a good-sized pull-off not far from it, continuing towards La Hermida, where a car, or perhaps even two, can fit right up against the wall without obstructing other traffic. The access trail will be taken from the refuge heading NE until we reach what appears to be an old dry riverbed or gully where we will begin the ascent.

ACCESS:

Since the faint path that can be discerned is easy to lose, a GPS is almost indispensable for finding the way. We followed the Wikiloc track by Sarai_y_Vicent, and if preferred, the coordinates Datum WGS 84: 30 T 367540 4792379.

It is also important to mention that a pair of trekking poles are highly recommended for the ascent and descent and undoubtedly saved us from more than one slip and misstep. The trail climbs steeply uphill through dense undergrowth—muddy and slippery if it has rained—a veritable maze of ferns, brambles, and thorny bushes of all kinds. Lacking a brush cutter or machete, you'll have to contend with them as best you can in this treacherous ordeal. (Our deepest gratitude to everyone who took the trouble to clear the undergrowth and make the approach path more passable. They have truly earned their place in heaven.) For this reason, wearing a full-body suit and gloves is highly recommended, among other reasons, due to the presence of ticks. Despite it being December, we've encountered these annoying insects to the point of having to remove one that was stuck to us (greater caution should be taken in the months between April and September when there is greater activity. No matter how hot it is, it's best to dress warmly...).

The route improves slightly once you reach the pass, where you can enjoy truly spectacular views and a gentler slope, although you might have to scramble down some limestone pavement along the somewhat indistinct path. There's no cell phone coverage in the parking area, but you'll have it once you reach the pass, and you'll maintain it all the way to the cave entrance, ideal for calling 112 (mandatory in Cantabria). Beyond the GPS directions, you'll know you've found the correct entrance thanks to a red paint sign that reads "No. 1 Hell's Well." In total, including stumbles and getting lost a few times, the ascent took 1 hour and the descent 45 minutes.

Some of the more complicated sections are secured with fixed ropes, so we won't need much gear to explore this cave. Unless we decide to re-equip it or replace damaged gear, in which case the sky's the limit, 4-6 carabiners are more than enough (some slings and a few webbing loops might come in handy for the natural ones). If you want to explore further, a 10-15m rope can be very useful for securing exposed sections or climbing.

*Note: At R20 in the Mixeta Chamber, we left a 6m sling tied to a stalagmite that leads down to a comfortable ledge to avoid the somewhat exposed downclimb. If rope abrasion allows, you could also use a 20m rope from the same stalagmite to reach the bottom of the ramp and the handrail, saving you the descent to the ledge.



MATERIAL NECESARIO Y FICHA TÉCNICA

Dificultad	Ubicación	Cuerda	Anclajes	Observaciones
Pasamanos	Pozo del infierno	En Fijo	n/a	Tiene un nudo a la mitad
R30	Pozo del infierno	30 – 35m	Natural	Cabecera de la rampa, al final del pasamanos
R20 (E4 + R13)	Sala del Mixeta	En fijo	Natural	E4 en fijo desde estalagmita para descenso a repisa. Optativamente, destrepe algo expuesto
		15 – 20m*	Natural	aN en oquedad con columnas a la derecha. Dispone de cordinos en fijo
Pasamanos	Sala del Mixeta	En fijo	n/a	Vigilar el estado instalación, sustitución aconsejable. Corrosión galvánica en algún punto
Rampa de barro	Sala de las hacinas	5 – 8m	Natural	Optativo pero muy recomendable
E3	Tubo del viento	En fijo	n/a	Cuerda auxiliar con nudos
E8 + E5	Pared del CAS	En fijo	n/a	Paso no tan evidente entre rocas en cabecera. Cuerda dañada con nudo
E4 + Pasamanos		En fijo	n/a	Escalada entre rocas, pasamanos y estrechez
E3		En fijo	n/a	Salida de estrechez a un balcón. Precaución
Pasamanos	Gal. de los telares	En fijo	n/a	Vigilar estado instalación, sustitución aconsejable. Corrosión galvánica en algún punto
Pasamanos	Marmita	En fijo	n/a	Pasamanos superior en mal estado. Abajo hay alternativamente un cordino auxilia
Pasamanos	Sala del lago	En fijo	n/a	n/a

CAVE DESCRIPTION

Access is via a descending ramp that leads to a sort of bathtub or dry pothole, easily downclimbed. From there, continuing the descent, we will find a fixed handrail from which we will set up our rope to overcome the muddy ramp that is the Pit of Hell (R30). We set up the rope on the two columns at the end of the handrail (it remains to be seen whether it would also be possible from the first column of the handrail). As the ramp is not entirely clean, some care will have to be taken to manage the rope rub so that it is manageable. As we descend through R30, a ramped branch will open to our left, seemingly connecting to the upper part of the adjacent chamber—the so-called

balconies, if we are not mistaken. Due to the muddy and slippery nature of the ramp and the exposure of its exploration, we leave it behind and continue up the ramp. At the base of R30, to our left in a westward direction, we can access the Hall of Pools via a slope. This hall is full of rimstone pools and beautiful formations, and it is through this hall that the ECS (Cave Exploration Society) established the connection with the Candúa and Carmes caves.

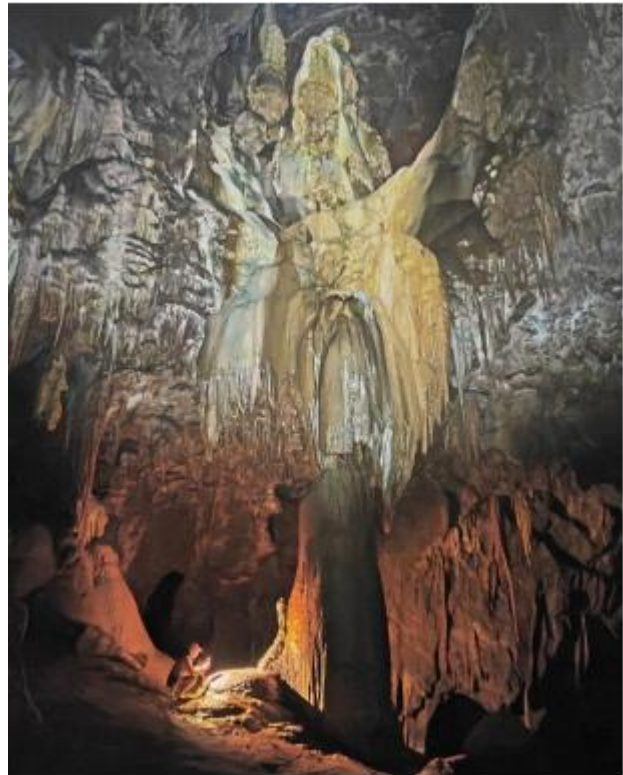
We didn't waste time looking for this connection and continued onward, as there is much more cave ahead. Again, from the base of R30, we continued, this time to our right in an eastward direction. We thus arrived at a magnificent hall with formidable dimensions that one, at least, did not expect, and which is also quite covered in concrete formations (an ideal spot for taking some photos).



Continuing along the route, you'll reach the 1970 Bivouac, where you can still find some water jugs and remnants of an exploration campaign. Further on, practically adjacent, at the other end, is the Mixeta Chamber. This is also another very photogenic spot with some beautiful columns alongside equally beautiful flow falls, reminiscent although on a smaller scale, of the Hall of Ghosts at Coventosa due to its collection of stalagmites. Also noteworthy is the echo and reverberation at this point, which is quite striking. To continue, we'll use one of the stalagmites as a natural anchor to overcome R20. We opted to leave a fixed hold (E4) to access a comfortable ledge, and from there, a double rope loop between columns on the other side of the ledge will serve as a natural anchor to continue descending the mud ramp (R13). The question remains whether it might be faster and with less friction to use an unbroken rope directly from the initial stalagmite and from there to the end of the ramp.

At the base of this R20, a fixed handrail that ascends to the left and which unfortunately has some maillons with galvanic corrosion will take us to the Snail Gallery, where at its

end we will turn left in a northwest direction to enter the fantastic Hall of the Stacks, as remarkable for its size as for its echo and speleothems.



However, to do that we'll first have to overcome another treacherous mud ramp that forced us to crawl for a while and carefully scramble down to avoid getting hurt, and where it might be a good idea to set up some footholds to grab onto. It's not a very steep ramp, but perhaps just steep enough to suffer the humiliation of getting stuck and unable to return because it's incredibly slippery (on the way back, we'll find a red reflector that marks the best point to overcome the obstacle). At this point, we unfortunately lost our ability to understand the terrain and short-circuited, like a Windows blue screen of death. Obviously, there's a very real possibility that we didn't interpret it correctly, but in our opinion, we disagreed with the map for quite a while, and either the map isn't accurate or it's not to scale. We also don't think the map available on undergroundadventure.cat with blue annotations has E12 and P10 (of the CAS wall, we imagine) correctly marked. Although oriented, since it is indeed a west-east axis, to our confusion, we're not entirely sure if we saw or missed the Lovers' Room, the 2003 Bivouac, and the Virgin Gallery... We'll have to come back.

Returning to the Hall of Stacks... Its main feature is a flowstone that has not yet fused with a stalagmite, and a significant number of enormous stalagmites and...different colours. For some, this chamber might mark the end of the visit, as the best formations and speleothems are found up to this point, and the rest of the cave is no longer as spectacular. However, if the urge to explore takes hold, there's still much more to discover. If we choose to go to our left upon entering the chamber, we'll find an ascending branch that ends at a striking stalagmite and a short climb, which we didn't attempt because we judged it lacked continuity (it's therefore optional unless you want to explore every nook and cranny). If, on the other hand, we go to the right, maintaining a northeast direction, we'll come across a tiny stream. Following its descending and

winding course, we'll reach our next step: the Wind Tube. This is another unpleasant section because it involves a descending passage through which water flows, so we'll get our hands and knees wet at the very least, although it's wide enough that we don't have to crawl with our chests to the ground and it prevents us from getting completely soaked.

At its end, the water will continue its path through the rocks, and we'll continue ours along a fixed ascending rope with knots, which will be to our left, thus bypassing a small E3 section. From there, we'll enter a chamber full of very cool flowstones and rimstone pools that are quite a shame to step on, so it's highly recommended and considerate to proceed carefully and choose your footing wisely so as not to soil or destroy the existing speleothems. This chamber forms a Y-shaped branch, where we'll take the right branch, since the left one seems to become blocked.

Some milestones will confirm that we are on the right track, and we will hear the roar of the water again.

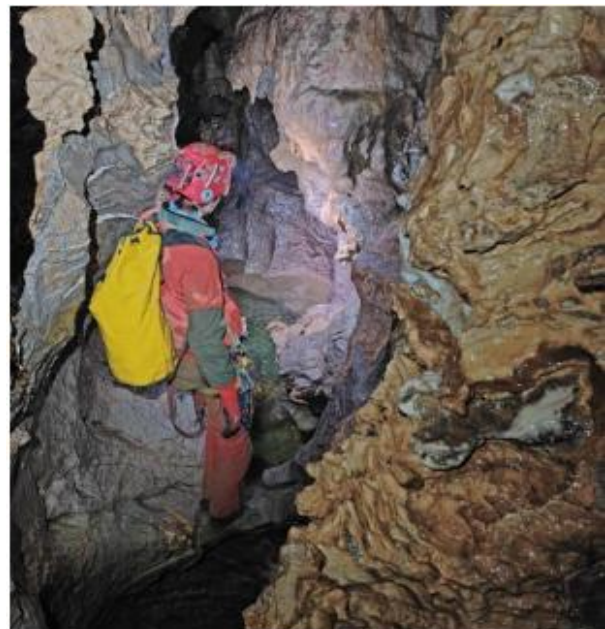


This is how we eventually reach the River Chamber, with its chaotic boulder field in the center and a siphoning spring on its right side that provides a copious flow of water. This is another very photogenic spot due to its turquoise blue and transparency. Skirting the chamber slightly on its left side, or climbing a bit if you choose to go straight ahead, we come across a fixed rope ascending the so-called CAS Wall (E8). The rope is quite old, and we find it with the caver's usual climbing partner: a butterfly knot to isolate a damaged section (although there's a very convenient ledge that allows for easy splitting, and the anchor, while it could have more redundancy, is in good condition). Having hung from worse things, we carefully ascend it, and it's highly recommended that the second climber wait until the first moves away from the anchor due to the risk of rockfall.

Having overcome this E8, it's time to venture among the rocks in a passage that isn't immediately obvious and ascends to the right like a spiral staircase. From among the boulders, another fixed rope (E5) will appear, leading to a short handrail. Again, weaving between the rocks and making laborious progress through narrow passages, another fixed rope ascending will overcome the final E4, finally leading to a balcony that we will have to descend with another fixed rope (E3). Enjoying the pleasure of being able to

walk upright again, we leave the small chamber and continue straight ahead until we reach the Gallery of the Looms, now collapsed and with water flowing through it. There is another fixed handrail on its right side, on a ledge, where once again galvanic corrosion makes its presence felt on some of the anchors. Having completed the handrail, on our left we could see a branch with an active flow that supplies water to this gallery, and which in a way reminded us of Valporquero because of the colours of the washed rock. Resisting the urge to get wet, we were left wanting to venture a little further and explore how far it extended. Continuing along the now meandering path, we came to the next fixed handrail to cross a pothole (interestingly, it's exactly what appears in image number 8 of the ECS survey).

This second-to-last handrail is mounted quite high and has some sections in poor condition. However, there is also a simple Dyneema cord lower down that we can grab onto, which does the same job of getting over the obstacle, so we didn't overthink the decision.



At this point, we access the Lake Room, which is neither very large nor particularly special, but at least we made peace with the mole again and took the opportunity to take some photos.

If we choose to go to our left, we will have to overcome the last fixed handrail that borders the lake and enter a meandering path full of potholes that will test our climbing skills and ability to avoid getting wet. There will come a point where we reach a final, enormous pothole, difficult to cross without getting wet, which leads to a narrow balcony that must be climbed. We assume this connects to the Sand Lake and the large chaos of boulders, which we sadly missed. It is at this point that we decide to turn around and consider this part visited. Back in the Lake Chamber, taking the path opposite the meander, we head towards the Mole Chamber.

This chamber boasts equally formidable dimensions... and even more formidable mud, to the point that we might slip a few times.

Access is either directly up a muddy ramp, or less practically but undoubtedly more adventurous, through narrow passages between large boulders located to our left when facing the ramp.

As you enter the chamber, to your right you'll see an ascending slope covered in mud and formations that are difficult to climb because it's slippery and deceptive where you can place your foot, as it gives way. If you continue straight ahead, you'll find a beautiful flowstone formation full of structures that could be climbed by throwing down some ropes and using natural anchors, but since we didn't have any more rope, we had to leave to see what might lie beyond (and things keep piling up).

Having finished exploring all the nooks and crannies that seemed interesting, we started the return journey to the entrance, surprised by this less known system which, despite its unpleasant sections and tedious approach, is undoubtedly beautiful and led us to conclude that it is worth a visit. In total, including stops for eating and taking photos, and with the mindset of exploring as much as possible, we spent 5:30 hours, making a total of 7:15 hours if we include the approach and return.



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CANTABRIA - PEÑARRUBIA

FOTOGRAFIA
J. ANGEL ARROYOS
EDMON CAMPS
JORDI FARRIOL



COVA DE CANDUA

CUEVA DE CANDUA

