

ARTS CORNER

Potholing: Skin and Stone

E. del Río

Dermatologist, Member of The Federacion Gallega de Espeleología, Clínica Dermalar, Santiago de Compostela, La Coruña, Spain

The incident involving the Belgian caver Annette van Houtte in early August last year, in the Navarre region of the western Pyrenees, had enormous repercussions in the media and brought public attention to a hobby both little known and discrete: speleology or caving. This science is, simultaneously, a hobby, a sport, an adventure, and, above all, a passion.

Caves may be naturally or artificially formed. The former are more common in areas of limestone rock formed at the bottom of seas in the Mesozoic and Paleozoic eras and pushed up by tectonic forces to form the highest mountain ranges on the planet. Rainwater dissolves the calcium carbonate in the rocks and deposits it again, shaping the most capricious cavities. Spain has a rich limestone heritage, including the Pyrenees and the Picos de Europa, which are both peppered with caves and potholes. Many are extremely well-known: El Soplao in Cantabria, Valporquero in Leon, the Drach cave in Majorca, Las Grutas de las Maravillas in the Onuba mountains of Aracena, or the Nerja caves in Malaga. Some caves were formed by volcanic action, like the famous Los Verdes cave in Lanzarote, and there are caves in granite areas produced by the direct erosion of subterranean rivers, like the Folón system in Pontevedra province, north-western Spain.

The conquest and study of caves has no objective other than knowledge itself—geological, topographical and mineralogical—and the personal challenge. Now that people have reached both poles and all the highest peaks in the world, the only unknown territories left for our adventurous spirit to explore and master are the ocean depths and bowels of the earth. Entering a space previously untouched by any human being is a magical, almost mystical, event.

The human relationship with caves dates back to prehistory. For thousands of years they were home to our distant ancestors, providing shelter against the cold and inclement weather, and protection from animals and enemy clans. In fact, only a few decades ago, some Spaniards still lived in caves carved out of the rock itself. It is more than likely that, at some point in time, an inhabited cave or rock shelter formed the first rudimentary hospital, in conjunction with huts in surrounding camps where injured hunters could

be treated alongside illnesses of all kinds. But also, caves have always had their other dark and mysterious side, as the lairs of witches and dragons. Some of these rock shelters or caves were assimilated into the Christian tradition and have become sanctuaries, as is the case at Covadonga.

Caving, like dermatology, has its own language. Some of the common terms include: stalactites, stalagmites, columns. Others are less well known but easy to interpret: crawl holes, chambers, flowstones, potholes. Some are more exotic: gours, cave pearls, cone karsts, etc. Also the kit and



Figure 1. The author during abseiling training on the Gundián railway bridge, 100m above the river Ulla, between La Coruña and Pontevedra provinces, northwest Spain.



Figure 2. Examining a limestone flowstone colored by iron oxide in the Tarelo cave, in the Courel mountains near Lugo, northwest Spain.

Correspondence:
Emilio del Río
Clínica Dermalar
C/ Laverde Ruiz, 7
15702 Santiago de Compostela, La Coruña, Spain
dermalar@clinicadermalar.com

equipment are complex: maillon, croll, carabiner, descender, chest harness, carbide generator, etc. At first glance, the kit and techniques used in caving are very similar to those used in climbing, but there are important differences: in climbing the day starts with ascent and ends with descent, while in caving the opposite is almost always the case—the greatest effort is made at the end, in the ascent. And the “contraindications” are different, mountaineering can be ruled out for those with no head for heights, while caving is not the most appropriate hobby for a claustrophobic.

Caves, like skin, can have thousands of varied surfaces and colors. Surprises await us in the apparently hostile darkness: granulous textures like ichthyotic skin, and soft silkiness like baby skin; hard like scleroderma, or delicate and fragile like furfureaceous desquamation. Formations can be seen, almost as sharp and angular as a scalpel blade, or smooth and sinuous as a young hip. Every cave, like every patient, represents an adventure, a challenge, a surge of feeling and an experience that enriches us.

The Passion of Discovery

*Les passions sont les seuls orateurs qui persuadent toujours.
(The passions are the only orators that always persuade.)*

François de la Rochefoucault

Entering a cave is an action that only the passionate will freely undertake.

I remember films from my childhood where one of the main forms of punishment was to be shut in the dark, in silence, disconcerted by the absence of time, and other points of reference. The solitude of a cave. The cave signified horror, punishment, claustrophobia, madness.

The cave was rarely a resource, a salvation, a doting mother. Only those who fled found protection and succor there. The paradigmatic example of this can be seen in Geneviève of Brabante, the noblewoman sentenced to death by her husband. Her executioner, taking pity on the cruelty of her destiny, abandoned her to her fate deep in the forest. She found refuge in a cave and spent years there with the son she bore a few months after her banishment, until she was eventually reinstated. A love story between the cave and the woman.

So it could be understood how some people, I shall call them neither crazy, lunatic, reckless, nor strange...but, I repeat, some people, discover a passion for caves.

And our erudite dermatologist is one of those who finds personal challenge in the conquest of a cave. Emilio del Río—Galician by origin, manner, and sentiment—has found a goal in the quest for and conquest of the dark, that reaches beyond the realms of emotion and reason. An almost supernatural passion. The requisite skills, the strength of character, the total fearlessness, convert caving into something more than a simple hobby—a magnificent passion.

The passion of discovery, tireless and beautiful. Don't you think?

A. Guerra