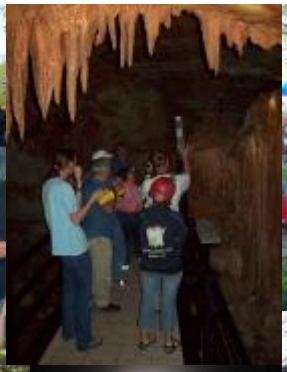
The TEXAS CAVER - 2nd Quarter 2010




























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The TEXAS CAVER

Written by Texas Cavers FOR Texas Cavers

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The TEXAS CAVER

April — June - Vol. 56, Number 2

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Back Inside Cover — A montage of photos from the TSA Spring Convention. Photos submitted by Roger Moore, Can Evren Yarman and Mark Alman

Back Cover — Sean Lewis and Ellie Thoene ridge walking on the edge of the mountain.
This remarkable photo by Joe Datri.

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The TSA is an internal organization of the National Speleological Society and represents the greater caving community in Texas. The organization holds business meetings 3 times a year, organizes an annual convention for Texas cavers, and sponsors caving projects and events throughout the state.

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FOR CAVE ASSISTANCE, CALL THE CLOSEST NUMBER:

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La Navidad del Panqueque Christmas 2009 PEP Expedition

By Lacey Heath
With Bill Steele and Sean Lewis
Photos by Lacey Heath and Joe Datri.



The car wasn't stuck. It just made a good picture.

Ellie Watson, Joe Datri, and I had left San Antonio, Texas, at about 1:00 PM on December 23, 2009 - as soon as Ellie was dismissed from work at noon for her Christmas vacation, we ate platefuls of spinach at Souper Salad and were out of there. (I'd demanded this last vegetable feast, since I had packed only tuna and minute rice for the two-week trip. Note: this is not a good idea. Future expeditioners, heed my advice: join Bill Steele's and Diana Tomchick's food group. Even if you don't care about vegetables, do it for the dutch oven brownies.)

It was cold. I had the sniffles. Joe drove the whole way. We sang along with Christmas songs and Bob Marley. We were all desperately excited.

The night of the 23rd, we had gotten into Mexico and through Ciudad Victoria when we camped at 2:00 AM in a spot recommended by Gill Ediger, at an orange grove next to a small canal. Gill's notes had mentioned that the canal was nice for swimming, which would have been lovely, had we had the strength of body and mind required to swim in freezing (almost-freezing?) temperatures. After one short night's rest, one brief oh-my-god-someone-is-knocking-at-our-tent freakout, a few energy bars, one missed opportunity to swim, and (luckily) zero episodes of getting the car stuck, we drove up the mountain to Mesas Juarez.

My favorite part of driving up the mountain was stopping at the Paso de Muerte. Stops at the Paso de Muerte are traditionally meant to include the tossing of food off the steep, mountain-hugging, fairly death-defying road. I was under the impression that this was meant to appease the gods, and keep one alive throughout the journey. Thus, I tossed chunks of bread while Ellie performed a dance for the gods' entertainment. I firmly believe that you haven't truly lived until you've participated in a bread-throwing god-appeasing ritual dance on the edge of a mountain in Mexico.

Later, Gill informed me that the tradition began merely because cavers wanted to take pictures at the spot and "see how far one could toss a Frisbee," and at some point, in the absence of Frisbees, tortillas were substituted. Regardless, our dance was fabulous, and indeed we made it to our destination safely, so you may draw your own conclusions regarding the power of the Ritual Bread Dance.

We arrived at camp on the afternoon of December 24th. Bill - the trip's leader - and the approximate fifteen other members of the expedition were firmly ensconced in camp; we were the last to arrive. We were greeted with the exclamation, "You have GOT to see 'The Sean!'" The camp's latrine had been lovingly crafted by Sean Lewis, and featured a warning



Nico Escamilla and Emily Zuber laugh by the fire. Photo by Lacey Heath. (I really like this photo—Editor).

flag for privacy, a moss-covered rock for sitting / leaning, and a pile of mulch complete with hand shovel for covering one's business. It was easily the most luxurious camp latrine I've experienced. Oh, Sean. Way to create a legacy.

Bill Steele's purpose in organizing this expedition had been to search for possible connections to Sistema Purificacion from the highest point possible. Shortly after our arrival, expedition members began returning from a day of ridge-walking and pit-dropping. We found out that many pits had already been located and / or dropped: on the 23rd, Virginia Del Rosario, Don Broussard, and Tom Shifflet had located seven pits, one with airflow; and Emily Zuber, Nico Escamilla, and Sean had tagged and mapped PEP 557, which they found to be a rectangular room approximately 12 by 12 by 12 meters. On the 24th, Virginia, Don, and Tom's pit had hit a dead end. Emily, Nico, and Sean were joined by Paul Fambro, and the team dropped three pits: the first was dropped by Sean, who used an approximate 43-meter rope, got short-roped by five meters, and, in view of a mud plug and in absence of any moving air, pronounced the lead completed. The second was dropped by Nico, who discovered a rat in a six-meter room at the bottom of a 20-meter drop and thus christened the pit "Pozo Raton." The third, an unobtrusive hole about an hour to an hour and a half from camp, was stumbled upon by Sean, and featured a two-meter by two-meter entrance and a long first drop that hit a muddy ledge after 18 meters, then continued about ten more meters. At the bottom of the approximate 28 meters, Sean was short-roped for the second time that day. While Sean was hanging, staring covetously at the walking passage below him, a bat flew up and out! With this tantalizing day's end, the team had returned to camp.

Enter Ellie, Joe, and myself. After being shown around, admiring The Sean, navigating herds of squealing and snorting pigs to set up our tents, and enjoying the magnificent campfire that was maintained throughout the trip, we got a solid night's rest. On Christmas morning, Diana cooked pancakes. They were rife with nuts and berries. (Oh dear, Diana's food group. I'M TELLING YOU.) Sean and Ellie feasted and packed some extra pancakes, then, armed with more rope (Ellie had brought her never-before-used 200-meter pit rope!), the two of them, Joe, and myself set out to further investigate the previous day's lead. The lead was marked as PEP 559, and we dropped into it one by one. I hung back a little. I know that it reflects poorly on my spirit of adventure and exploration, but I never like to be the first into a vertical cave. I don't believe in cave chupacabras ... but just in case.

We traveled slowly and all together, surveying as we went. We stopped at the ledge until all four of us were there - balancing precariously and making overly light conversation while looking for bats or rats - then dropped down again. Ellie, then I, arrived at the next landing first. She was measuring distances and I was handling instruments (behind us, Sean was sketching, and Joe was assigned to rig the whole thing, lug his seven thousand pounds of photo equipment, and handle photo documentation). The room that we landed in was long and slanted downward, and about ten meters long. We sadly noted that it was not, after all, walking passage. The bottom end of the slant pinched off in a tiny circular room about half a meter round, and the whole affair was carpeted in soft dark mulchy dirt.

The guys arrived and poked around. Shortly, Joe discovered that a small window about a meter and a half up



The expedition patch that Ellie designed to mark the trip. Photo by Lacey Heath.

the wall was the source of the blowing air that everyone had noticed. Those of us who scrambled up and stuck our heads in the hole noted that air was blowing strongly both IN and OUT, like an inhale and exhale. Oh boy. Excitement (and a water break) re-energized the whole group. Climbing up into the hole (it was christened "la ventana"), we noted that the other side pinched into a vertical passage that squeezed tightly for a meter or so (this became "the sphincter") before opening into another significant vertical drop.

Joe used webbing to fasten a 36-meter rope to the top of the sphincter, and we squeezed and dropped one by one. I am told that this drop was approximately 28 meters. About ten meters above the floor, it ran against a curtain of stalactites, many of which were about the width and length of my arms. Significant dexterity was required to avoid smashing the rope into the stalactites, especially since, at this point, I was wearing a borrowed Ultralight harness which, as everyone present heard me wail repeatedly, was cleaving my body into two pieces, rendering my legs pain-shot, heavy, and useless. Twenty-eight meters? I swear it was fifty, at least. All of which I screamed through.

No, really, 28 meters.

Ellie demonstrated significant creativity by marking three stations over the course of the drop, all of which were either 90 degrees or almost-exactly-90 degrees. At the time, it made perfect sense. We were working around growths on the walls, and wanted to be very precise with our surveying!

The space at the bottom was the biggest that we had seen! It featured one large circular room, then a long slanted portion, all of which was decorated with lovely stalagmites, stalactites, and popcorn. Near the top of the circular room, Ellie discovered the skeleton of a small animal lying on its side. Based on its shape, we supposed that it was a cat of some sort, and speculated as to the circumstances that could have allowed it to get as far as it did - surviving the first 26-meter drop (including that ledge!) then climbing up to la ventana before falling again to this point. How was that possible? I bet that cave chupacabras have special powers...

The slanted portion led down into a forest of formations, including one repeat-offender forehead-knocking stalactite that was eventually tied with flagging tape and labeled "NOT A STATION" just to prevent further accidents. This forest of formations led down further and further and became steeper and steeper, encompassing approximately 22 meters, until finally it became the pit's third drop.

Joe rigged matters once again then got his turn to be the first down, using a 23-meter rope - the last that we had brought with us! - while Sean, Ellie and I waited at the top, holding our breath. THEN,

His rope ran out.

Sigh.

This meant that not only was the day's exploration over, but I had to cleave myself in half again to haul out. Luckily, Joe relayed while he was short-roped that he could see a landing below him with yet ANOTHER drop continuing. The excitement engendered by this news provided some motivation.

While we climbed to the pit entrance and gathered our things, Sean and Joe continued the discussion that had lasted two days so far - what to call the pit. As Joe insisted that the perfect name would just happen, Sean munched on the pancake that he'd packed for lunch. In a flash of illumination, Pozo Panqueque was born. (Everyone enjoyed the irony of calling a multi-drop cave after something flat, and it was

hoped more than once that the irony would continue.) In celebration, the last (deliciously dreamy) hunk of berry-and-nut pancake was split into four pieces for a Pozo Panqueque toast.

A camp-wide feast and a campfire topped off Christmas evening, and everyone went to bed. I mentioned the sniffles, right? This whole time, I had been popping ibuprofen as though they were Pez. On the morning of the 26th, the congestion and pain had slipped from my throat into my lungs, and I woke up hacking green stuff, burning up, and crying. (Apparently the group hadn't had enough of my Ultralight harness complaining, so it was time for some sinus infection complaining!) I stumbled to camp, where I threw myself on the kindness of strangers (MANY THANKS to Linda Ryan, Ben Edelstein, Matt Lutz, Paul Fambro, and Katherine McClure, whose understanding, antibiotics, ginger tea, and essential oils kept my lungs together and in my chest, and kept me sane). I sat pitifully by the fire for that day and the next, so my documentation of the days' happenings is secondhand.

On the 26th, Ellie, Emily, Joe, and Sean hiked back to Pozo Panqueque and made their way down the 76 explored meters to the top of the drop that had short-roped Joe the day previous. Don Broussard went along in order to apply his expertise to the cave's rigging (both already present and to-be-completed). The group re-outfitted the first drop into two drops, putting a rebelay at the giant ledge that was halfway down. After squeezing through la ventana and the sphincter and reaching the bottom of (what was now) the third drop and the "NOT A STATION" room, they re-rigged (what was now) the fourth drop with a longer rope, and surveyed that drop at 28 meters. The bottom of that drop reached a complicated and highly decorated room complete with pure white, sparkling walls and formations. The room centered around one large drop – the one that Joe had seen previously – and also had a side room with yet more formations, small pits, and breakdown. This fifth drop was rigged, and Emily finally got her turn to rappel into virgin pit.

Unfortunately, the drop led to a small set of rooms – one tiny and one tinier, like a closet with its own closet – with the only way on consisting of what can only be described as a very (very, very) tight crack. The crack blew a significant amount of air, but in addition to being small, it was both (a) pointing steeply downward, and (b) lined in popcorn and larger projections.

It was much tighter than the sphincter. Emily dubbed it "the urethra," and had I been there, I would have clapped at her cleverness. No one could fit through it, and Sean was photographed looking utterly despondent by its side.

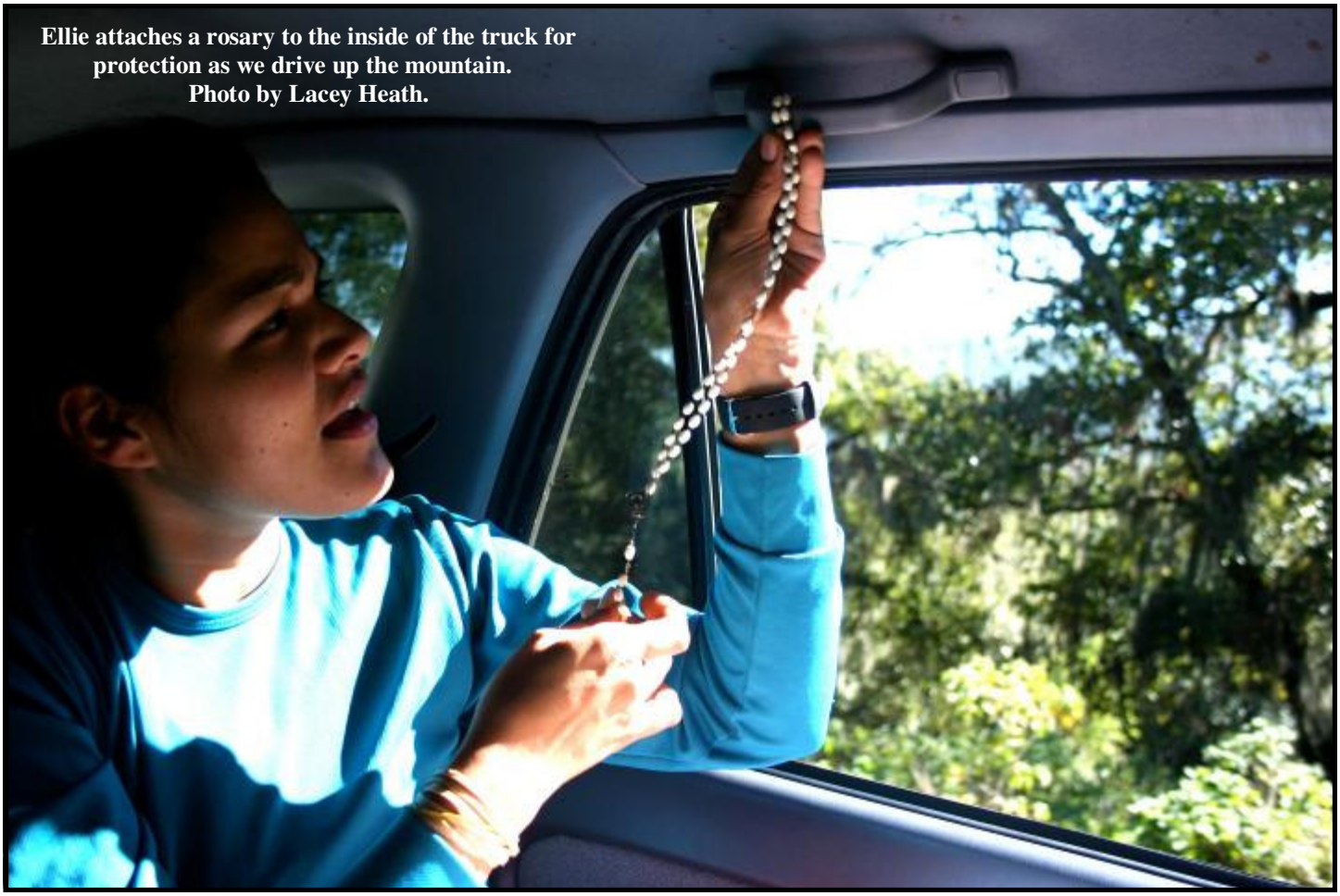
When the group returned to the campfire that night, moods were muted, and it was declared that the next trip to Pozo Panqueque would be mainly a de-rigging trip.

My second sick day was marked by Ellie, Joe, and Sean ridge-walking on ground that was so treacherous that Ellie wore her helmet. The day resulted in (a) the discovery that one Google Earth-marked pit was in fact a cliff (maybe the pit was in the cliff?), and (b) the snapping of one lovely fish-eye lens photograph in which Sean and Ellie look as though they're about to fall off the edge of the world.

On the 28th, with a renewed sense of hope and more rope just in case, Ellie, Emily, Joe, Sean, and myself returned to Pozo Panqueque where Ellie, Sean and I surveyed the glittering room and anteroom at the top of the fifth drop. Mean-



Bill Steele, Paul Fambro, and Katherine McClure warm by the fire on a rainy day. Photo by Lacey Heath.



Ellie attaches a rosary to the inside of the truck for protection as we drive up the mountain. Photo by Lacey Heath.

while, Emily was ferociously bound and determined to get through the urethra. She and Joe attacked the crack and its projections with sledgehammers and crow bars for approximately four hours. Four hours! Finally, they shouted up – they had broken through, and they could see another drop! We quickly finished our surveying and hauled the rope down to the bottom of the fifth drop, where Joe and Sean began the trials of rigging and descending in a very tight space.

The urethra was still causing trouble. Its main problems were (a) the presence of a large projection dubbed "the cock block" due to its position, and (b) the angling of the space, which forced a body to squeeze, in a blind, feet-first, 45-degree angle, then suddenly be freed and drop. This was not for the faint of heart. Once it was appropriately rigged, a caver was forced to go through without her or his vertical gear due to physical restriction, then, when near the end of the squeeze, with very little room to move one's elbows (or even eyelashes), don the gear, clip in, and safely descend. In Sean's words, when one was in the space for donning gear, one's legs were "hanging in free space over a drop, and [one's] chest was [restraining





**Sean Lewis is very sad that the urethra doesn't seem to be passable.
Photo by Joe Datri.**

one from falling] at the level of the thwarting projection." Holy moly.

Sean was able to finagle his way through in order to scout below. Going down the cave's sixth drop, he descended about 20 meters into a room that he noted featured one more pit and a large amount of "Swiss cheese free climbs." It appeared that, from the floor of the room, the climb-downs descended another 20 meters, but unfortunately, nighttime was upon us and it was time to go, so further exploration would have to wait. On the way out, however, in a burst of energy and inspiration, Sean attacked the cock block with hammers from its opposite side. Ellie, Emily, and Joe shouted loud, creative, enthusiastic encouragement while I tried not to let my laughter inhibit my climb up, and lo and behold!, Sean knocked a chunk the size of a soccer ball from the cock block, significantly decreasing its power. For this day's walk home, spirits were remarkably uplifted. We chattered about what else might be found, and how we were going to present the news to the team back at camp.

The 29th dawned rainy, windy, and colder than ever before. The dull weather combined with many team members' fatigue led to a plan to rest for one day, then start early and work extra long the following day. Hunkering down, we



**The author taking self-portraits in the rain.
Photo by Lacey Heath.**



The illustrious Camp Piglets. Photo by Lacey Heath.

all tried our best to create shelters from the wind, the wet, and the godforsaken wild pigs. We welcomed the chance to catch up on the news of the cavers who had been on other teams, dropping other pits. It was apparent that lots of ground had been covered and lots of pits had been dropped, some reaching large rooms and formations, but no pit had wielded the depth of Panqueque. While we hung out by the fire, talking and binging on tortillas, many boots and pants and kneepads were baked, and Sean read up on caving magazines.

The morning of the 30th began with early rising, as planned, and the carting of lots of extra rope to match our increased sense of hope and excitement. We had four fresh 30-meter ropes and one 60-meter rope. Many of our ropes, including some currently in the cave, were due back to their owner, Bill Steele, the following day – so we were on a deadline, and people were energetic and determined.

Well. We reached the urethra. With the cave's multiple rappels, it took a few hours to get the whole team that far. Ellie, Joe, and Sean talked themselves through the urethra calmly and efficiently, taking about half an hour apiece. Emily and I were confounded. It wasn't the squeeze, really, or the drop; it was the combination of squeeze and drop and the fact that I would be without my gear for a while and I wouldn't be able to see and I would just fall and, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god! My talking-myself-through-it did not go so well.

In the end, Emily was able to get through on the second try, and Ellie and I left the cave while Emily, Joe, and Sean went 16 meters to the bottom of the sixth drop, then Joe rigged another (seventh) perfectly cylindrical 20-meter drop followed immediately by a 15-meter (eighth) drop. When the team landed, they found a large breakdown room with so much to explore and so many holes that it was very difficult to comprehend its totality. At the time, the room was estimated to be ten meters in all directions. The south end of the room featured an ancient rimstone pool containing crystals. To the north, the breakdown continued in a spiral that was surveyed in all directions. Many small leads led away from the area, and some, not all, were checked. The bottom of this spiral became the bottom of the survey – there were spots that could have gone about 10 meters deeper, but the team was focused on finding an airflow and continuation of the cave.

An effort to go to the east side of the room revealed that the room was approximately twice as large as originally thought. On this side, several downward slopes, steep and some covered in decoration, continued about ten meters down. Still the team found no airflow, and of course they were short on time, so these were not fully explored.

The room also contained a free-climbable route down through one breakdown passage. Joe and Sean descended about 15 meters into this passage before deciding that it most likely ended.

All in all, the breakdown room yielded 50 meters of horizontal passage going mainly north and south. It was the opinion of all involved that leads remain to be pushed.

The team of Emily, Joe, and Sean spent several hours exploring this room and pushing possible leads, before finally agreeing to exit. The room's complexity was underlined when, as one team member climbed out, another spotted yet another possibly-continuing passage.



The author mid-hike to Pozo Panqueque. Photo by Joe Datri.



(clockwise from top left): Nico Escamilla, Lacey Heath, Ellie Watson, and Emily Zuber celebrate New Year's in the Brinco fieldhouse cabin. Photo probably by Joe Datri, but I don't entirely remember—Author.

The group de-rigged the majority of the cave and piled all the lower ropes beside la ventana. They returned to camp around midnight, exhausted and very celebrated. We were all sad that nothing definite had been found, but they stressed that the room was so big, and so complicated, that it was impossible to thoroughly survey and explore it in the limited time allotted.

On the 31st, Ellie and Nico rose early and de-rigged the rest of the cave, then hauled all the rope to the top, where a large group had gathered to help cart it the hour / hour-and-a-half back to camp. Don, Paul, Katherine, Bill, Sean, myself, and others all appeared to work. We had piled ourselves with rope and walked for about five minutes when I spotted a mirage – or wasn't it? – a truck! Bill had brought Diana's truck in which to load all of us, and the rope. It was a blessing.

The day continued in a flurry of packing and sorting. It was agreed that all the remaining trip members (some had sodded off early for New Year's Eve) would convene at



Joe Datri and Lacey Heath enjoy the drive down the mountain. Photo by Lacey Heath.



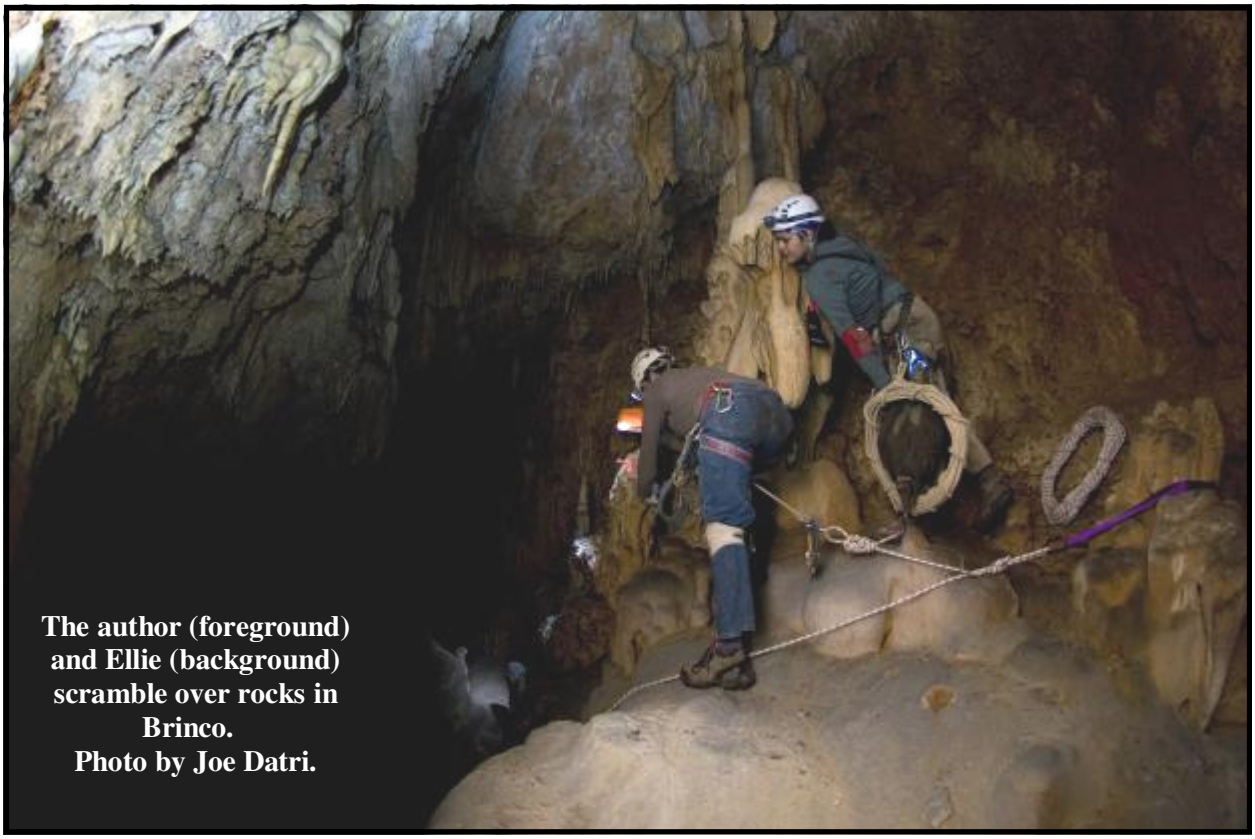
Ellie prepares to explore Brinco by doing some yoga in the sunshine. Photo by Lacey Heath.

the fieldhouse near Brinco to ring in the new year together, with camaraderie, feast-worthy eating, and a wood-burning stove. Ahoy!

New Year's Eve went pretty much as described, and we were very grateful. Bill showed a rousing movie – Jackass II, anyone? Later, I opted for a bit of Irish (Mexican? If you're adding tequila, does that make it Mexican?) hot chocolate to liven things up, and we danced the night away while Sean, exhausted and beginning to suffer his share of illness, slept in a cot he'd constructed in the eaves above us.

On January 1st, sadly, it was time for most friends to say goodbye, as Bill, Diana, Paul, Katherine, and Emily headed down the mountain, then north, aiming to do a bit of shopping on their way home. Ellie, Joe, Sean, and myself took this last day to explore some of Brinco. We scrambled up and over and around and through, and got as far as the changing room, where each of us took a turn working on the famous Pete's Dig. Very unfortunately, we did not break through anything, but I estimate that we put a few feet on the dig at least. That night brought solar showers, another hot meal, one more movie, and a fair amount of sadness regarding having to leave the following day. When morning came, though, clean-up was quick – Ellie is amazingly productive, and I think she singlehandedly packed and cleaned the entire place – and the drive home was pleasant and smooth.

The Christmas 2009 PEP Expedition was fruitful by any analysis. Bill Steele estimates that the potential for finding a connection to Sistema Purificacion from the highest point possible in Mesas Juarez is very good, and that there are approximately 1,000 pits and caves on Mesas Juarez, only approximately 100 of which have been checked. Bill's teams checked about twelve pits and two caves on this trip. Pozo Panqueque, the deepest found thus far and the most promising lead of the trip, lies (at its mouth) at 2630 meters elevation, and reaches a depth of approximately -211 meters. It will be re-checked when the 2011 expedition returns. Sean Lewis notes that when Pozo Panqueque is explored again, those teams will benefit by either camping nearby, or having the gasoline necessary to drive to the pit from camp. Sean also notes that about ten meters of depth could easily be added to the survey, and that there is a possibility for continuation of the cave, although the observed airflow patterns make it difficult to state definitively whether the cave continues or not.



The author (foreground) and Ellie (background) scramble over rocks in Brinco. Photo by Joe Datri.

Best of luck to the 2011 Mesas Juarez cavers!

Aquismon, San Luis Potosi 15 Jan 2010 to 23 Jan 2010

Organizer: Jim "Crash" Kennedy
Participants: Don Arburn, Ann Scott, Matt Turner
Also in Report: Jenni Arburn, Walt Olenick, Rae Nadler-Olenick, Don "Rojo" White, Pablo Mendoza Maximino
Primary Writer: Matt Turner
Contributors: Don Arburn, Jim "Crash" Kennedy, Ann Scott
Photos: Dr. Ann Scott
Caves Visited: Cueva la Gloria, Cueva el Cumpleaños Uno, Cueva el Cumpleaños Dos, Cueva Quilas, Cueva Cascabel, Mined Cave (Unnamed), Sotano de Quilas, Sotano Golondrinas

Report:

Jan 15th: Picked up Ann around 4:20 and we went to Crash's house. There we quickly loaded his truck (Sasquatch) and proceeded to Don's house in San Antonio, Texas. There, Jenni had graciously ordered us pizza. We watched *Monsters vs. Aliens* before going to bed.

Jan 16th: Woke up, got ready and started to drive. Drove all the way to Aquismon, by way of Pharr, TX. Luckily we had no police issues. Got to Mike Walsh's house and after some issues with the gate code we got in and settled.



The always sexy legs of Don Arburn.

Jan 17th: The day started earlier for Don and Ann as Don found out the hard way that there was a scorpion under his pillow. He went to Ann's room where she loaded him up on Benadryl and then they went to search for the scorpion that stung him. Luckily it wasn't a deadly poisonous species. Unfortunately, it stung him directly under the nail on his thumb and so it hurt more than it probably normally would have. Between that and the previous day's driving we decided to unwind by being Touristas.

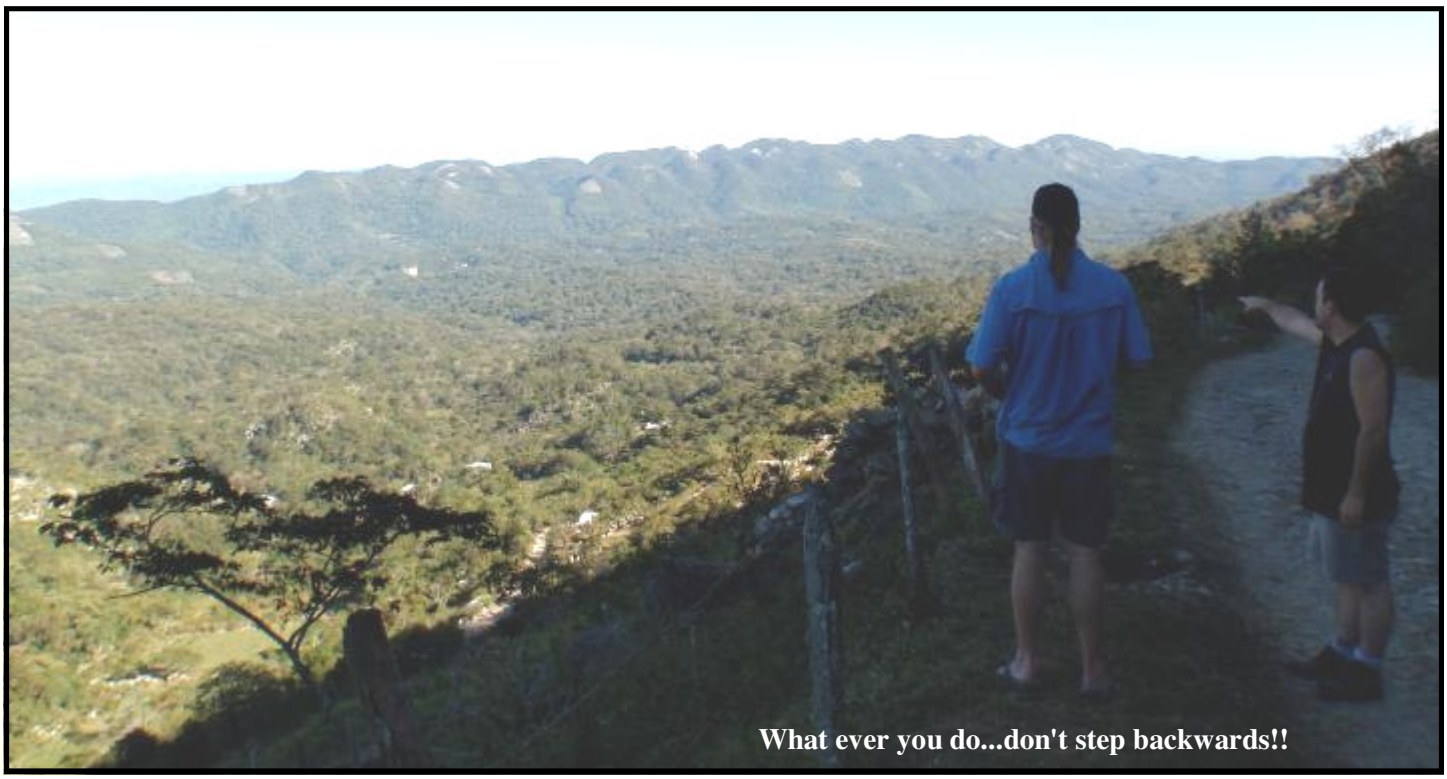
First we stopped at a nice restaurant/taquería and had breakfast. Jim and I tried to order Migas, but ended up getting Migados. Migados are quite different, but are awesome in their own right. They are basically a gordita shell with eggs, chicken, queso (the Mexican cheese, not the tex-mex dip), cream, avocados and a few other things I can't remember. Anyhow, they were probably my favorite new food from the trip.

Jim played tour guide. First taking us around the town to show us the lay of it and then off to so us some of the springs (read RIVERS) that come from out of the mountains. He showed those of us who hadn't seen them before (read Matt) how the locals use a tree branch for their fence posts that is able to replant itself. Therefore, most of the fence posts are actually rooted living trees.

We visited Tambaque first. This was one of those bittersweet places. The Mexican government has obviously spent some real money in developing the area into a nice park. Unfortunately, as is the norm, no real upkeep has been done on it since its inception. That aside it is still a very beautiful spot. Out of the side of the mountain a massive spring flows forth from a water filled cave. It flows for a while, then continues under a bridge into a nice swimming area that unfortunately is starting to fill with river stones. Part of the flow is diverted before this into an aqueduct that feeds some of the nearby fields.

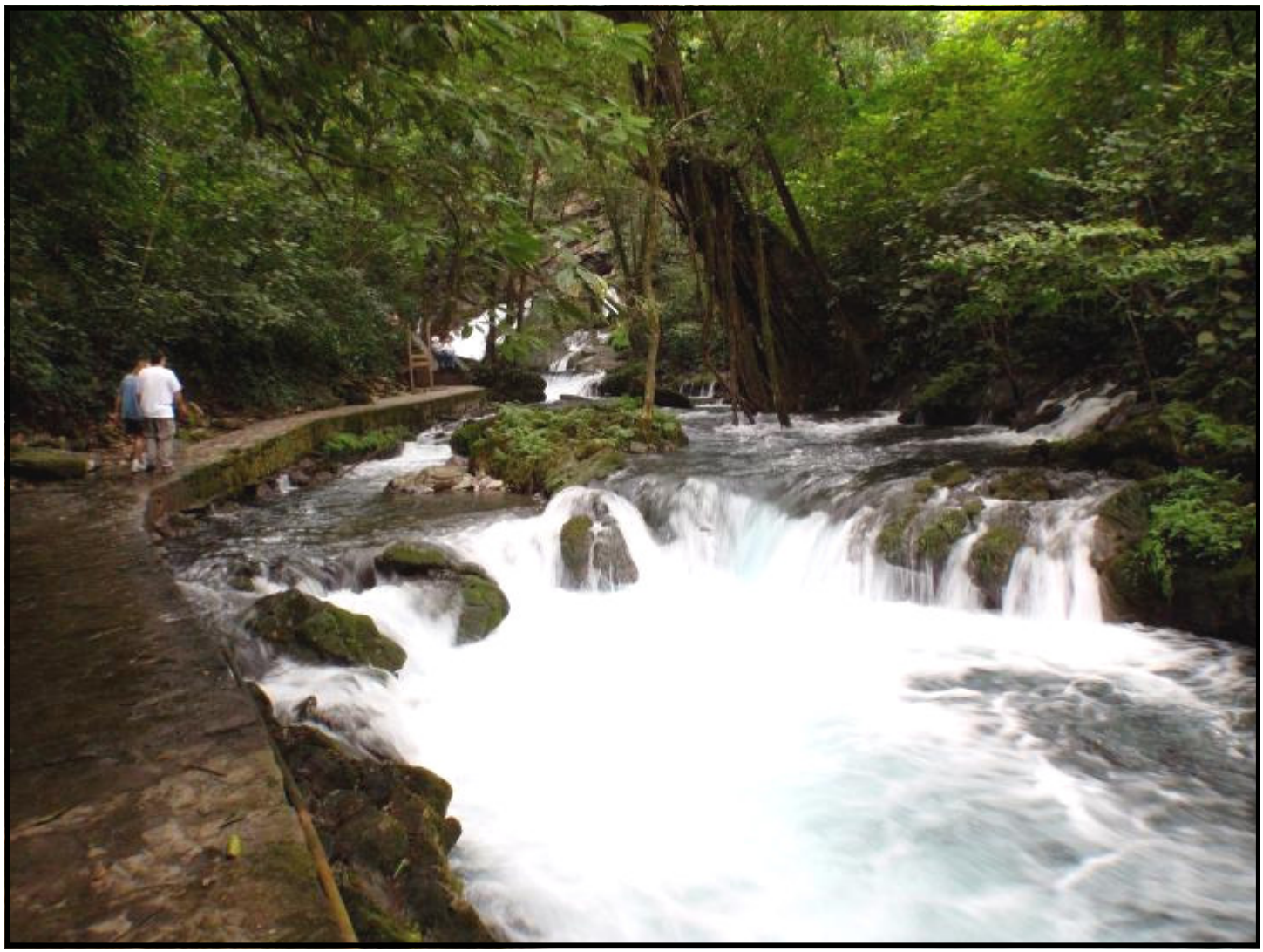
From here we headed to Huichihuayon. Along the way Jim showed me that most of the fence posts in this area are actually alive. The locals use this certain tree to build all of their fence posts. Basically they go to another fence post and cut a branch or branches off of it and as they build their fence they bury the cut end into the ground. This buried end takes root and so they have a living fence line. The trees that grow from this are odd looking things with very whippy looking branches with few leaves and massive scarification bulbs on the top from where they've been trimmed time and time again.

Anyhow once we get to Huichihuayon we got along the trail to the spring. This area hasn't been as developed, except for a water pumping station. The spring comes out of a cave that we didn't go into. Mainly because it would have involved getting in the water and that day it was coldish out. It appeared to have pumped a similar amount of water into a much better swimming area



What ever you do...don't step backwards!!

with amazingly azure waters. We start to walk around and came across a stone pathway or local “sacbe” (ancient Mayan road, crudely cobbled with limestone) or at least what appeared to be a sacbe. So we followed the sacbe into the vil-



lage and very quickly these three children approach us. They ask us if we want to see a cave, to which we of course answered yes. They took us down the sacbe to a small restaurant/house. There the owner of the cave asked us for 10 pesos a piece to see it. The cave ends up not being much (well the section they allowed us to see). The local cave is name Cueva Quilas. The kids show us different "formations" that are in the shapes such as a mastodon, Mary, or Jesus. We then talked to the owners some more and found out that the Mexico City cavers had already been there and they are pretty sure it ties into the larger cave that feeds the spring. The kids really were the highlight of the day as they were really excited. The village we walked through was as bipolar as one could imagine. Here you had these huts that a car could never get to, but in the last 3 yrs or so, have had power run to them. So, in them, you have people cooking on a wood-fired grill while listening to music as loud as they possibly could. You have shacks that are barely standing and look like you should expect some starving person to come out from them and in front is a girl with a cellphone who is texting someone. It was proof that this part of Mexico is improving, though still is very third world. After this we returned to Aquismon and stopped at this one taquería on mainstreet to eat and then pretty much hung out on Mike's Porch until bedtime.

Jan 18th: Today would be the death-march day, though we didn't know this quite yet. This morning we decide it's time to actually cave. So, the plan becomes to head to Cuitab (or possibly Quitab) and then take the trail that Jim knew that headed to Cueva la Gloria. This of course was easier said than done. On the way to the Cuitab we listened to Craig Shoemaker, which was funny. His Lovemaster skit was pretty much the main joke of the entire trip. Pretty much anytime we could make a joke about sex it was about how the Lovemaster does this or is endowed like such. So back to the point, the trail while only about 2 or 3 kilometers was one of the more treacherous trails I've seen. Any place that sunlight hit for most of the day was nice and dry, though not even remotely level. The problem was we were in the jungle and so light doesn't hit most of the trail. So we found that most of the trail was very slimy and slick with an unfortunate amount of vertical downgrades. This means that most of us at some point fell and/or tweaked ankles. Only one of us sustained an actual injury and that was a pretty nice bruise on the knee. As we were heading to la Gloria we ended up finding two different caves along the way. We're not sure yet that these are new caves, but it didn't appear to have had any traffic in them before. We called them Cueva el cumpleaños Uno(CeCu) and Cueva el cumpleaños Dos(CeCd)[Both of these caves ended up being found and mapped back in the 70's as part of the Sotano Quilas system]. Of course we found CeCu first.

This cave was quite impressive though we didn't take the time to survey it. It had a slight climb down entrance that went into a 15-20ft tall by 40-50ft long by 10-15ft wide room. In the right side of the room there was weird drain. I (Matt) decided I just had to squeeze through that drain. Once through the passage widened to 8 ft tall by 10-15 ft wide and went 30-40 ft before turning almost a complete 180 to the left. After looking back at the constriction and after some pottery shards had been found, we started to postulate that the constriction was actually a human built wall. That said it might not be, but the way it was structured leads me to believe this. Ann noted that she has seen this type of blockage of cave passages before in other parts of Mesoamerica. So from the turn the cave gradually grows in height to probably 25-30ft tall with small rimstone damming on the floor, with



Ruins.



Crash posing next to a modern Mayan altar used for contemporary ceremonies.

minor water trickles. It also is a slightly down angle. The ceiling also has some minor bat roost staining. The cave then takes a 90 degree turn to the right and the descent gradually increases. From here you can see a 30-40 ft entrance that is on the other side of a 40 ft diameter pit that is probably 40-50 ft pit. As you approach the pit there is some really large pieces of breakdown that are covered in popcorn, as is the floor. The cave definitely goes from the bottom of the pit. The ceiling above the pit is probably 80 ft from the level I was standing at. The other entrance appears to open into Sotano de la Quilas (the bird pit that is known).

While this was happening, Jim found another cave, Cueva el cumpleaños Dos, just on the other side of the small sink that we found the entrance to Cueva el cumpleaños Uno. Don, Ann, and Jim quickly explored it. They found a few things in there, but I will have to let one of them describe the cave as I never entered it. Ann once again noted that there were some artifacts and what looked like as a blocked passage at the end of the main chamber, which continues as a small crawl into more passage that goes.

After our diversion in the Birthday Caves, Jim quickly found the entrance to la Gloria, which was less than 100 meters away. We geared up and then headed into the cave past the pit near the entrance into the back part of the cave. There we started our survey at the point that was directly on this wall made of speleothems. In this passage along the right hand wall there is a small Vampire bat roost. I was excited by this because I had always wanted to see a vampire bat roost, yeah I know silly, but still. After some zigzags we get to a really small puddle that had a 1-inch Isopod in it. Yes, 1-inch. Anyhow there were some major curtains behind this that went up probably 15-20 ft. These where abutted by a flowstone that climbs 10 ft to a really small passage that has a lot of popcorn in it. This lead needs someone thinner than Jim to push it. We all talked about how we wished Andy Zenker and/or Wes Schumacher were here with us. As they could have easily squeezed through this and other tight leads. It shows promise as there where large bats flying in and out of this lead. After this we headed back toward the entrance. On the entrance side of the pit we climbed up some breakdown. This passage and been previously surveyed, so we headed to were that survey ended, which was right at another pit (later named Lovemaster Pit). Just to the right of the pit there is a passage just to the right, which zigs and then gets to a fork in the road. As Ann, Jim, and I surveyed the right passage Don started to climb up the left passage. To the right are a series of rooms that kind of seem like peas in a pod. They're nice spherical rooms with one or two hole into the next room. After about 3 or 4 of these they start to have more and more crawling passage between them. Eventually they are more of roomlets and not really actual rooms. One of these has great acoustic qualities. Jim hand a lot of fun playing in that room. Eventually the passage ends in a constriction that goes to a room 10-12 ft long by 4-6 ft wide. This is where we ended this part of the survey. The final station ribbon was blowing in the wind. There was another really tight constriction down



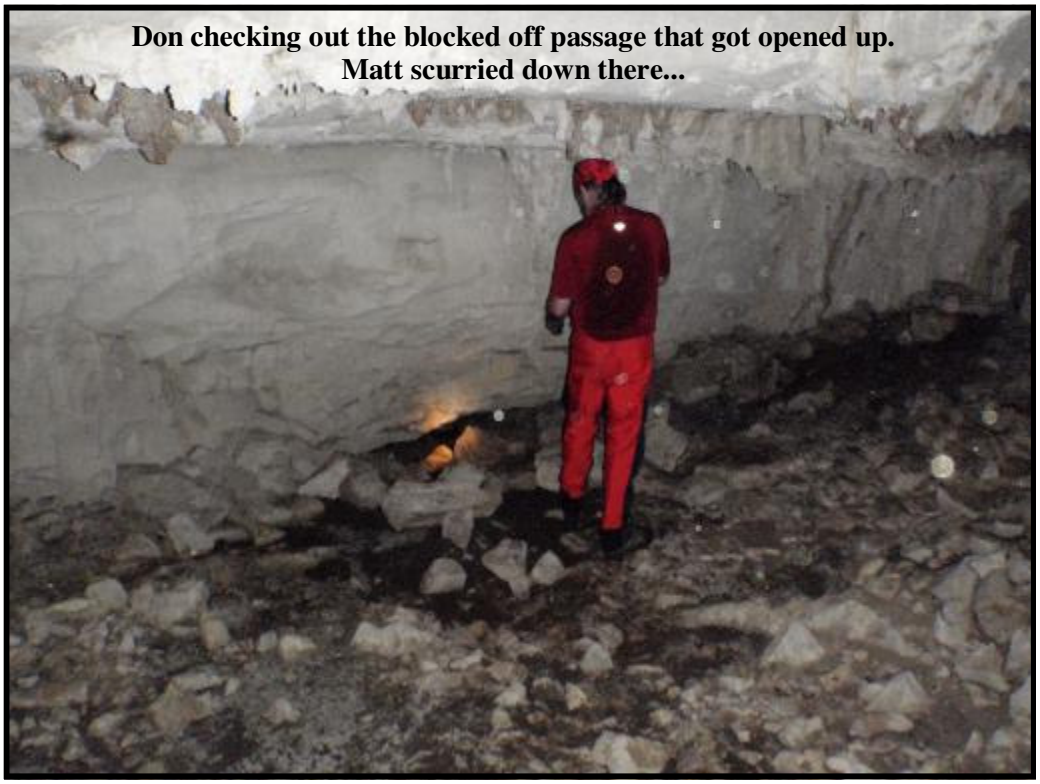
The sign in 3 languages! Cool!!

couldn't get their "materials" because of where our truck was parked. We didn't fall for this because you could have gotten anything short of a large Semi-truck around Moby (Don's F-350). Ann nicely apologized to them and then we left. Luckily on the hike up the mountain we saw another lower village and figured it would be easier to hike from there. We stopped and got beers and then stopped at the same taquería in Aquismon as we had before. We all were extremely exhausted by this point so we went to sleep pretty shortly after getting home. Though we did comment on how we wished Tone Garot and Kathleen O'Connor had been able to make the trip (this was a pretty common occurrence on this trip, yeah, if y'all read this, we love you guys!).

Jan 19th: We were pretty sore the next day, so we decided to take a break. After a few hours of sitting around while Jim and Don figured out what that other town was on the way to Cueva la Gloria, I was bored and wanted to do something. Everyone else was really too tired to do anything, luckily except Jim. So we loaded up the truck and headed into town where we did some business and then head back to Tambaque to go swimming. It had warmed up some outside so the water felt quite cold, which while refreshing was just a little too much. So after a short swim we went for a drive. Today was the only I day I drove in this area, which was an experience in and of itself. Between the bad roads and the fact that the workers would put their road materials in the road I had to stay on my toes. We drove to where you can kayak to go see Cascada de Tamúl, but decided we should instead just head back. We got meat and

and to the right. I dug it out some and started into the passage, but after nobody wanted to follow, even though it went into a passage that was 4-5ft wide by 12-15ft long and disappeared down, I pulled out. So that lead definitely goes as well.
Next we climbed up to where Don was. This was only a 12 ft or so, easy climb (though I was a little hesitant, luckily Crash and Don are good coaches) to an attic. Here, there was another pit that went down past the previous floor we climbed from, but it was too thin for us to descend down it. There was another clay filled passage to the left that inclined slightly but pinched off in clay. At this point we decided we were all tired and running out of water, so we headed out of the cave. Before we did we hid our vertical equipment in Lovemaster pit, so we didn't have to carry it out and back in.

Night was just starting to fall. This made an already treacherous hike worse. Most of us didn't have the forethought to eat before the hike and so after a while into our hike we all started to get hungry. Eventually, I was a little ways from the group and got to one of the things that the locals called fields. These are just cleared parts of the mountain, it seems with no regard for inclination. Anyhow, right as I crested the ridge, a goat, about 5 ft or so off the trail, bayed, which between the darkness and the fact that I had heard something large moving around, caused me to yell and get into a defensive position. While nobody else saw me react, they did hear me and so this caused us all to fall out laughing. From here we got back to the truck. There we were met by the locals who presented us with this story about how they


Don checking out the blocked off passage that got opened up. Matt scurried down there...



Ann with our guide, Pablo Mendoza Maximino.

some veggies and headed to the house. There, Crash and Ann cooked an amazingly tasty meal. We talked some more before heading to bed.

Jan 20th: Paxalja day. As I have stated before we had noticed a village that we believed was an easier hike to Cueva la Gloria than from Cuitab. Don and Crash had pretty much confirmed this using both a map and Garmin software. So we decided that was what was in store for today. We decided not to eat a heavy meal because we expected a possibly difficult hike. So pretty early we headed towards Paxalja (in Teenek means basically Water Cave or Cave of Water according to our guide. It's named such because its local well appears to come out of a spring cave that has been covered with stones). On the way, Jim knew of a rockshelter that the modern Huastecan's had been using for rituals. They had basically been making small pots and dishes and some small figures out of the clay deposits found there. We stopped there, so that we, and more specifically Ann, could look at it. This ended up being the best decision we could have made. While stopped, a local man approached us. His name was Pablo Mendoza Maximino and he said he knew of some caves nearby and also said he knew the trail from there to Cuitab. So he agreed to guide us. First we stopped by some ancient mounds that were just outside of Paxalja and Ann believed that they definitely were pre-contact Mayan.

From there Pablo took us over to a cave that had been Mined. We called this Mined Cave (though didn't know a name and didn't really give it a name). We knew it had been mined, Jim explained to me, because there was a square concrete column out front. This had been mostly broken, but it was still obvious what it was. None of us really entered this cave as we wanted to save ourselves for Cueva la Gloria. From there Pablo took us to Cueva Cascabel (the local name for it). This was an interesting area as to get to the cave you had to go up a 6-7 ft ledge that was slightly overhung and was right next to a 10-15 ft drop. The locals had cut sticks to make an easy bridge for them, but didn't stand up to my weight. Jim scaled the wall, in what admittedly was an easy climb and step across. That said, I chickened out. Only Don and Jim went to see the cave, which needed to be explored. Shortly after this Jim took a pretty nasty 6 ft or so fall. Luckily he arrested himself by wrapping his leg around a tree. Unfortunately he seriously hurt his arm doing this. Jim quickly made a sling out of some webbing and like Superman, we decided he is, marched on with little complaint.

From there we hiked towards Cueva la Gloria, which Pablo didn't know by name, but was a good enough guide to make a guess at the cave we meant. Anyhow along the way we stopped at a Tinaja. Jim has coordinates for this water cave but we moved on. After a much nicer hike to the cave we got there and got our stuff. Pablo also knew about Cueva el cumpleaños Uno and Dos. While everyone was starting the survey we had Pablo take me to Sotano de Quilas. While there Pablo asked, well, the best I could understand, if I wanted to climb into the pit on vines. I, of course, declined. In la Gloria, Don and I did the drop by the entrance, which didn't really do much more than drop about 15-17 meters (sorry for switching systems, but we have this data somewhere). After we climbed out of this pit we climbed back up the breakdown (Jim being stubborn did this at least as many times as we did with his hurt arm). From here Don and I dropped Lovemaster pit (LMP). This one was much more interesting. It descended maybe 10-12 meters and then bottomed out. It has a small shelter to one side and a tight passage to the other. Being the squeeze freak that I am, I went and shoved myself through that without waiting for Don to get into the pit. There I found another drop, but because of its angle and the fact that I was being a wuss because I was the only one down there, I couldn't tell how deep it was. Then, I crawled back out and helped Don survey LMP. Once that was done I climbed down into the other pit, which was in a round room with another small bottoming out pit to the right of it. The pit wasn't a pit at all as it was only about 2 meters deep. Once I climbed down there, the cave went to the left from LMP and then took almost a 90 degree turn to the right (when walking down). This area was covered in wet, yellow, nectar-eating bat guano and, of course, had the most biology of anywhere else we had gone to in the cave. It should be noted though that I didn't see any actual bats I did find quite a few rodent incisors on the ground. This room was about 20 meters or so long and sloped gradually downward to a 10-15 meter pit. The ceiling here was anywhere from 10 meters to upwards of 17 meters I would guess. At this point some of us were worried about Jim's arm, as it had started to hurt more and was slightly swelling, so they called me out of my exploration trance and we left. Jim, like a trooper, loaded the hammer drill into his bag without any of us noticing.

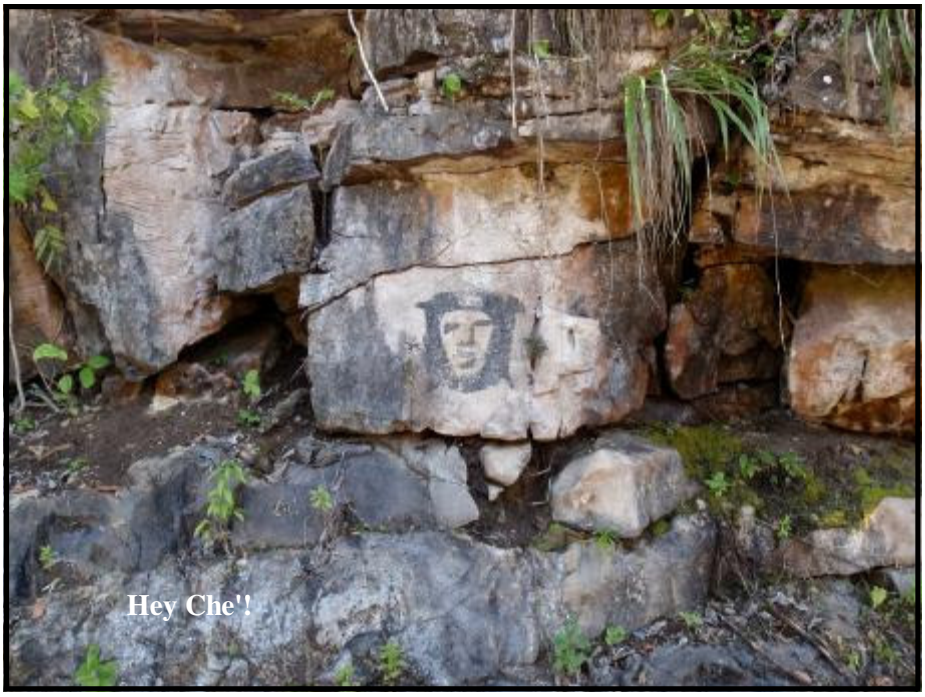
The hike back, while longer than from Cuitab, was amazingly easier. Not only were the slick spots rare, it was also a much more level hike. Eventually, Jim's arm got the better of him, and Ann asked Pablo to carry his pack. This is where I should mention that the local Huasteca really impressed me. Not only did I only see Pablo break a sweat once, for literally 10 seconds, he never got tired. Even with Jim's probably 30-50 lb pack he still was constantly waiting on us to catch up. That said, he was always gracious and willing to help.

We really couldn't have asked for a better guide. So when we got back we gave him about one hundred fifty pesos or so and bought him a soda (we offered beer, but he declined). As we were leaving he was genuinely sad we were going and asked us when we'd be back. He was also sad to hear when we said we'd be back, not sooner than a year and more likely two years. That said we told him that others might come and he said he would love to guide them as well.

So if you're ever in Paxalja and looking to get into a

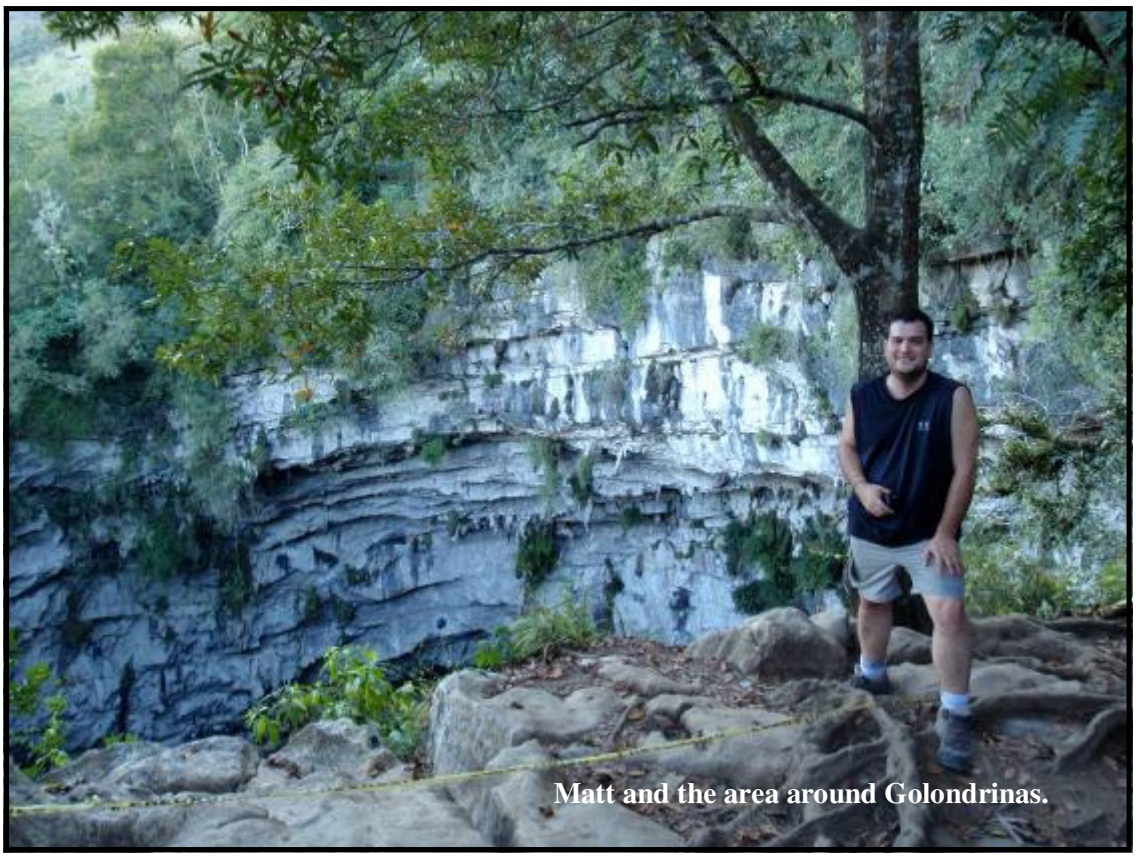
cave system nearby I would definitely recommend Pablo Mendoza Maximino as your guide. He shouldn't be hard to find as his family owns the store along the road. As of this report he was 26 years old.

From there we headed back to Aquismon, stopped at what was our standard taquería now and then, headed back to Mike's house. There we found Walt and Rae's bags, but couldn't find them. After a while of waiting up we eventually went to bed.


Hey Che'!

Jan 21st: We, again, started this day out light. We went to the same place we had before for breakfast and Jim got both of us Peach Raspas. Those are quite simply amazing. It's basically shaved ice with sweetened condensed milk, mashed peaches with a halved peach on top, cinnamon (I think), vanilla, and some other spices I couldn't tell. Anyhow, awesome, you should try one if you're in Aquismon. The best one from what I understand is in the northwest corner of the square (I think). We went to the hospital to get Jim's arm x-rayed, but on the way stopped by Rojo's house. Rojo (Don White) is a Corpus Christi born carpenter who has moved to Aquismon for early retirement. You couldn't ask for a nicer host. We talked with him for a while and then headed to the Hospital. Jim decided it was too long of wait at the hospital and instead went to the pharmacy and he purchased an ace bandage, a sling, and pain killers. After that we went and got gifts for people and then headed back to the house. There we found Walt and Rae and they explained that on their way down to Aquismon their Subaru Brat had broken down and that they had spent a few days trying to fix it. Only for it to miraculously start again and so they continued down to Aquismon. Of course, once they got there it broke again and wouldn't miraculously start again.

So after I walked around town for a while, while Don and Walt looked at the Brat, we loaded up and drove around trying to find a tow bar for the Brat. Eventually we found one and so we dropped Walt off at the house and took off to visit Golondrinas. After a long, fun drive to Golondrinas, we found out that the old way to get to Golondrinas is now not the way and that you have to continue up the mountain some more. Crash and Don decide they're too tired to go down the steps, so Ann and I decided to walk down to the pit. It wasn't that far and it was awesome to see. Ann was pleased to see that the signs were trilingual, with the third language being Teenek. Though I will say that there is only nominal English on these signs. Once there I grabbed a tree and hung out to be able to look down and take pictures. This was until the guy who was there with a rope, so you could do exactly this, griped at me. We walked around and then eventually headed back up. There, Don was watching the kids from the nearby town playing soccer on this gravelly road, which also had a 50 degree hill on one side. Once they saw Ann and I they came over and sat on the wall with Ann. Ann, being the best translator a person could ask for, was having a great conversation with them. They eventually started playing "Pasala", which involved lightly smacking one another in sequence while trying to dodge the person trying to smack you. Upon


Matt and the area around Golondrinas.



**Hanging out…
don't mess with Crash!**

smacking the other person you said "Pasala" or essentially, pass it on. They thought it was great fun that Ann played along. Before Ann and I had returned Jim had gone looking for Kayo, a very experience caver from the area, who unfortunately was in Aquismon at the time.

So we drove up the hill into town and got Jim and then headed to some other Mayan ruins Jim had seen on one of his previous adventures in this area. These where much more impressive than those we saw earlier in the week. They were in much better shape. Ann found a few really small pottery shards, but not much else. Though the sad part was we couldn't get close to the best of them, which included some Mayan layered stonework still in place. This valley is worth noting because it's huge and has no real drainage. There are only a few visible Arroyos and even they almost immediately dive underground. There is definitely some large underground system just waiting to be found here.

So after that we drove back. Some of us didn't want tacos again, so we head to this restaurant on this southeast corner of the square in Aquismon. There we found Walt and Rae. We talked some, but the food was horrible. Then we headed back to Mike's place only to find out that the tow bar didn't fit properly on the Brat. So Walt made the hard decision to leave the Brat in Aquismon. We all again hung out, and this time we actually drank some, then went to bed after packing some.

Jan 22nd: Got up early, finished packing and loaded the truck. We then cleaned the house. Again we couldn't find Walt and Rae; they had gone to breakfast. So once they got back, we headed to a restaurant just outside of town on the main highway and had breakfast. Again I had the Migados, but this time it was an assortment. Some had beef with nopalitos, some had chorizo, and others just had eggs. Anyhow, here, Walt realized he had forgot his money, so while the rest of were eating Walt took a taxi back to town. The timing worked out and he got back right as we finished, so we headed out. We were only going to San Fernando (the one off of 83 I think). So, a few times during the trip, we kept smelling this vomit odor. At first, we were like "well, it's Mexico", until Jim noticed that the odor was corresponding to when Walt would eat cheese he had. Yeah, whatever the cheese was, it smelled exactly like margarita vomit (you know that hung-over-from-margarita-vomit smell……..yeah, that one). So with Rae threatening to throw it out of the window Walt agreed not to eat it in the truck anymore. Why he thought that was ok in the first place the world may never know.

Along the way, we stopped by Cueva El Abra, well. I should say we tried to. Unfortunately it has been closed to visitors and we're not sure why. There was some fear amongst our group that the nearby limestone quarry nearby may have purchased the property.

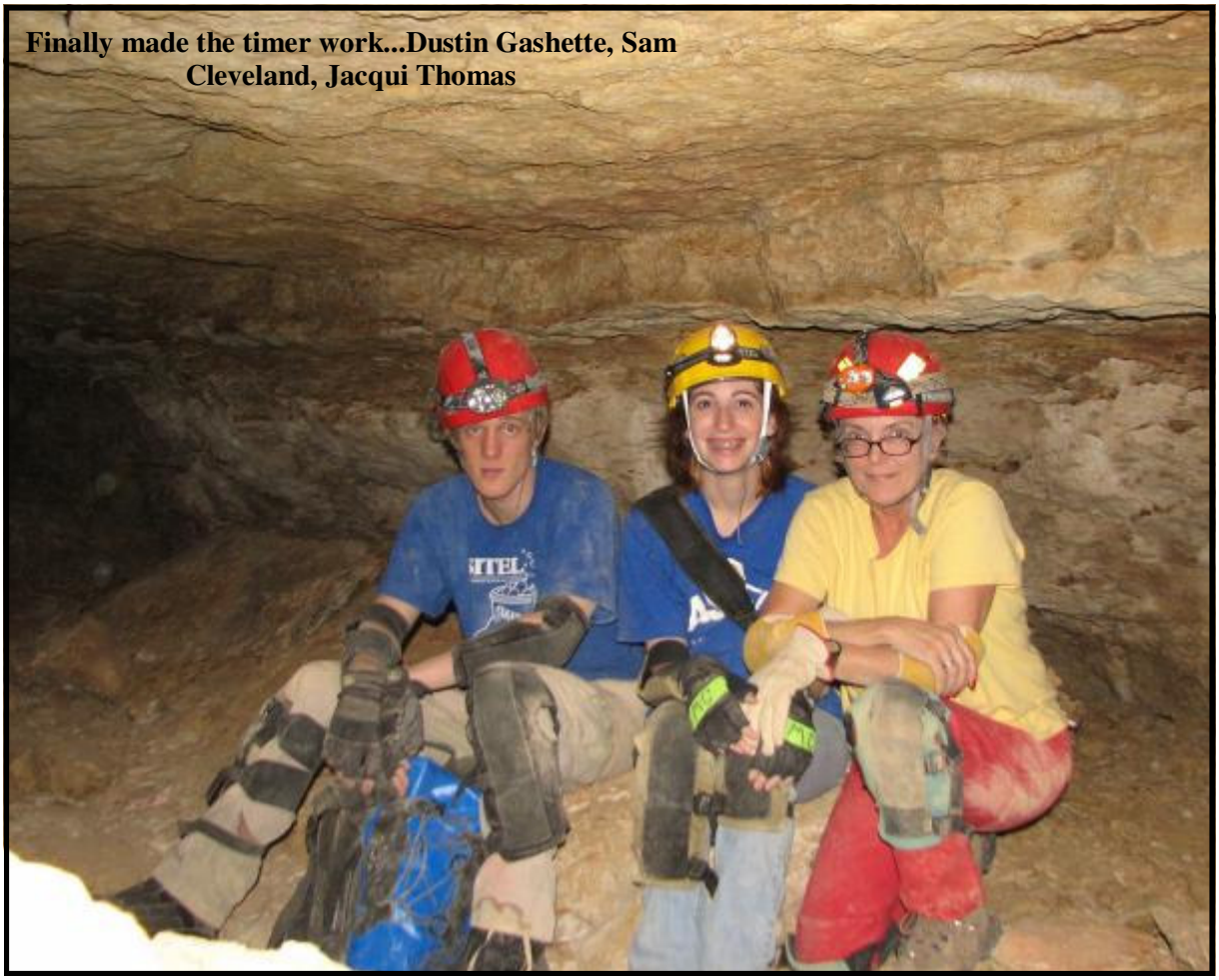
From there it was only a few more hours to San Fernando. Once there, we decided to stay at Hotel Paloma, which while a little pricey, was pretty nice. From there it was to find food, which was, umm, tricky as one of our new members was a vegetarian. We decided to eat at one place, they ate at another. This meal was amazing as well. We then decided to stop by a convenience store to get breakfast stuff because we just want to get on the road the next morning. This caused some tension amongst the group, but was quickly settled.

On the way back to the hotel we took a left turn where one wasn't allowed. This was shown only by a single green arrow pointing straight. You know, no sign saying “no left turn”, just a signal light that was a green arrow pointing forward. Anyhow, we were pulled over by the police and were fined for being stupid Gringos and luckily only had to pay a 140 peso bribe. Though we all agreed: A) at least it was for something legitimate, and, B) they were pulling over everyone, not just us. Still it sucks to be shaken down for money.

When we got back to the rooms we all convened in Jim and I's room to watch the movie The Watchmen and drink beer. After that we all crashed out. Midway through the night I finally got Montezuma's revenge, so not so much sleep for me.

Jan 23rd: Got up and started to head out for the border. I find out I'm not the only one having gut issues. Nothing too spectacular happened on this day, except a lot of bathroom stops. We eventually get to Don's house where Jenni already had food waiting for us. We ate and then we headed back to Austin.

I would like to again thank Jim for setting this up and would like to thank Ann and Don for being so fun to be around. Oh yeah, and for putting up with me. This concludes my crazily long trip report.



Finally made the timer work...Dustin Gashette, Sam Cleveland, Jacqui Thomas

birdwatching, eat a snack, read a chapter in each of two different books, and take a nap. The weather was chilly but the sun was warm and there was no breeze. Perfect hiking around weather.

First, we filled out TCMA membership forms. Next, we looked at the maps I had brought (printed from the TSS compact disc) and spent some time trading around lights and batteries and adjusting DIRT's new GGG kneepads, then we headed to the cave. It took me some minutes to unlock the gate and that gating/locking system is the slickest ever—I'm very impressed.

Amazing Maze: Still Amazing

Report and Photos submitted by Jacqui Thomas

Participants: Dustin Gashette and Sam Cleveland

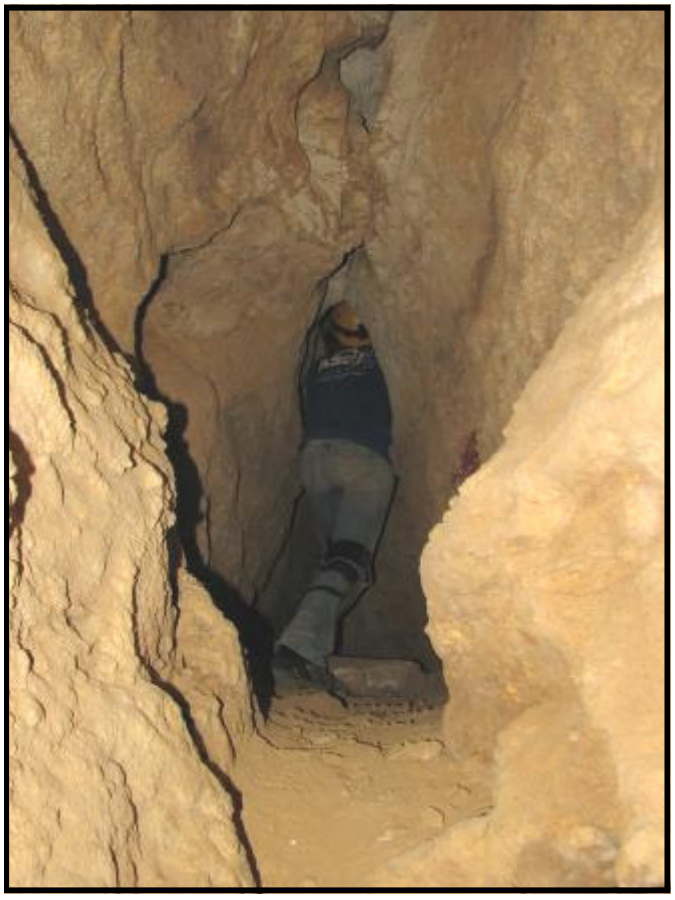
The PBSS trip for January was to Amazing Maze cave in Pecos County on Saturday, January 30.

Although originally set as a beginner and non-vertical members weekend trip, it became, due to illness and injury and scheduling conflicts, a three-caver exploration extravaganza.

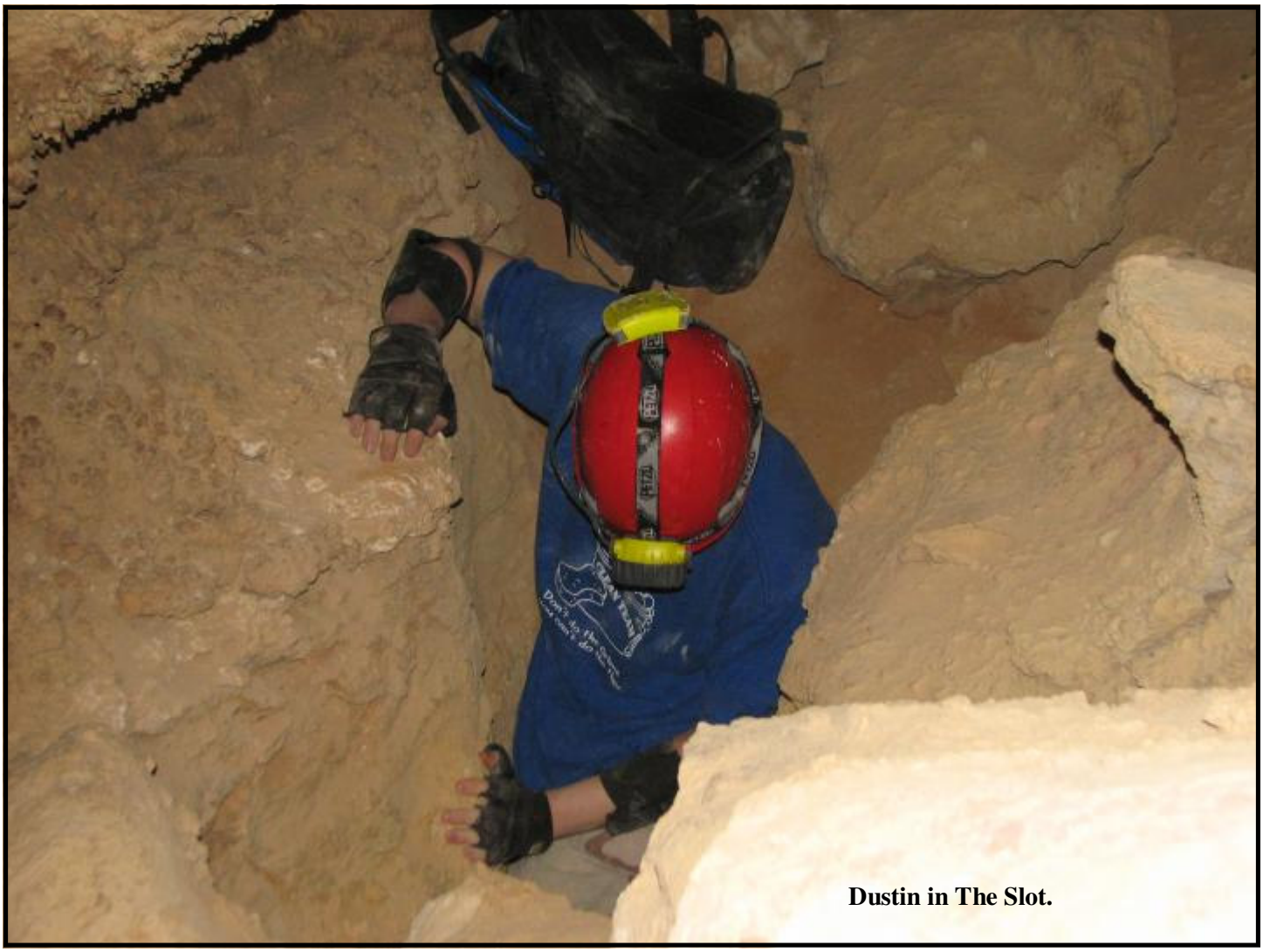
Two of us, DIRT (Angelo State University) cavers Dustin Gashette and Sam Cleveland, had never been to Amazing Maze. Most of Sam's caving experience has been in Five Mouth with a shovel so it was especially fun to explore Amazing Maze with her.

I arrived at the camping area at 0915. I had no problem driving in. I did some vegetation trimming, as little as possible. I removed the small mesquite tree blocking the gate from opening, and trimmed back a few mesquite branches that threatened to be hard on my side mirrors. West Texas had received quite a bit of rain in the last few days and the basin was quite wet and sticky but I kept to the right and was able to enter, park and leave without leaving tracks or ruts.

Dustin and Sam arrived at around 1415, which gave me time to find the cave, check the area for snakes, do some



Sam scopes out The Slot.



Dustin in The Slot.

There was quite a bit of scat in the entrance and most of it looked like ringtail. We entered at 1500 hours without incident and went straight. Fortunately, Sam remembered to bring a copy of the map. We looked at it frequently and pulled out the compass, checking them against what we were seeing, and did a really good job of going where we meant to go. We commented that the map from the survey in progress will be infinitely easier to figure out than the one from 1990.

We passed a slot that looked interesting but skinny, and after going on a ways, checking out side passages as we went, we decided to return to the slot. Dustin started down, looking for shorter people footholds and we also made sure everyone could climb back out before Dustin went the rest of the way down. I followed, then Sam. We followed a short dusty slope down to more passage, and basically ended up backtracking under the passage we travelled to get to the slot.

The floor of the passage became very dry dirt sandy, rock free, and dead-ended at a "T." We explored both directions of the cross-passage, and Sam and Dustin found another, skinnier way to cut diagonally from the dead-end passage to the cross-passage.

Not far from Sam's crawl-over, still in the cross-passage, we took a couple of pictures of what looked like a pair of tiny, dimpled stalagmites. At first glance they look like bases of coral. We frequently found bits of evidence that there was once quite a bit of calcite in this cave.

Back at the "T" we found somewhat soft, comfortable places to lie down for a while, lights-out, and enjoy the dark. Then we decided to start working our way back out, as we didn't want to cut too close to the time I gave Kel as the "If I don't call you by…"

It took us a bit longer to go up the slot than it did to come down, and we staged a person half-way up to get the packs out. As we continued out we made one wrong turn, or more correctly we did not turn when we should have, and we realized that pretty quickly because we immediately saw this pit. We wanted to get closer but we thought as soon as we looked into it we would want to figure out how to get down and we really didn't have the time to do that.

We exited the cave just before 1900 hours. We noted additional scat from what was in the entrance when we entered, and happy tiny millipedes making dinner of it. The sunset was beautiful but the evening was chilly and we locked up and headed downhill as quickly as we could.

The only other critters we saw were very tiny crickets, a very dark colored arachnid or tailless whip-looking thing that we couldn't figure out but took pictures (just before we reached the "slot"), rhadine beetles, and a couple of "stink bug" beetles in the entrance.

We picked up some trash, including a shiny new Bud Lite can that had been used for target practice, and were leaving the property by 1915.

We followed our post-Five Mouth tradition of eating at the Dairy Queen, only this time at the one in Ozona, then headed to our homes.

National Cave Rescue Commission Training at CBSP—February 26th-28th

Report By Ellie Thoene.
Photos by Amanda Bentley.



Cavers, the last weekend of February, I attended the NCRC Orientation to Cave Rescue Training at Colorado Bend State Park and I think it is a must have for any caver who has not yet taken it.

8 cavers from Bexar, UT, and Aggie Grotto attended the training along with 20 some other good-hearted firefighters and such who had the desire to be oriented in cave rescue.

The course is very organized and the trainers, who volunteer their time for the course, are very competent, having many years of cave rescue experience, and have a good understanding of caves and cavers. Their goal is to strengthen relationships and develop connections between cavers and rescue agencies.

I guess in the past, this was not the case, but in the training they teach that it's most efficient to work with cavers who know the caves and can move more quickly than those who are not familiar.

The training environment was very friendly, regimented, and constructive. The initial hours of classroom time





we had was immediately reinforced with multiple scenarios at the CBSP caves where we were given a chance to take part in every element of the rescue.

There will be some one-day trainings coming up in Austin and I recommend any caver that is available make use of this great opportunity.

DJ Walker issued an announcement out on CaveTex but you can e-mail Tommy Gillis at tommy.gillis@ci.austin.tx.us, if you would like to attend.



Dr. Robert W. Mitchell- 1933-2010

Submitted by Dr. William Elliott, Carl Kunath, and Logan McNatt.

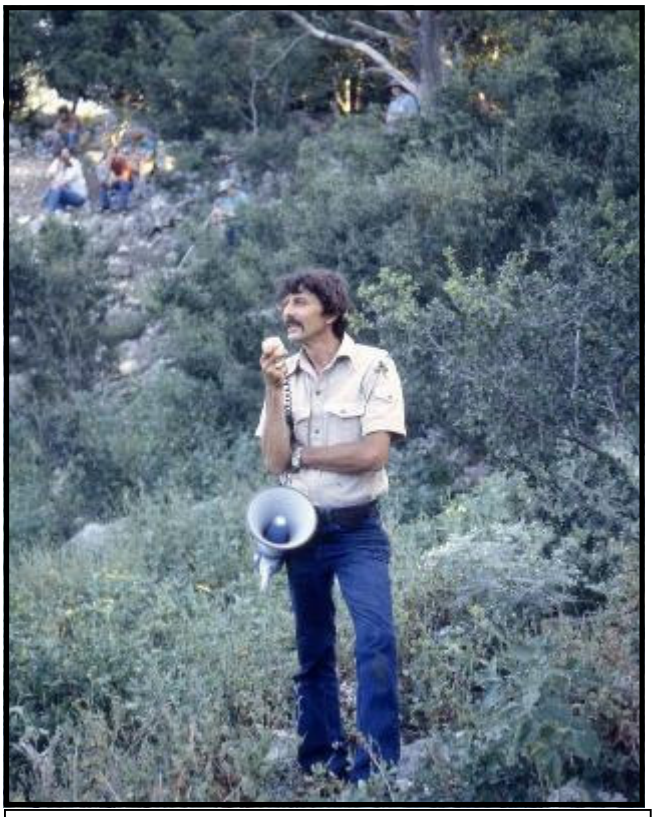


Photo of Dr. Mitchell giving a lecture on bat cave ecology at Bracken Bat Cave, NSS Convention, 1978, by Bill Elliott.

Dr. Robert W. Mitchell, famous Texas cave biologist, invertebrate zoologist, and nature photographer, passed away at his home in San Antonio, Texas, March 18, 2010, after a long illness. His family and many friends met at their home on March 27 for a memorial celebration.

From *"50 Years of Texas Caving"* by Carl Kunath.

Robert W. Mitchell, a graduate student at the University of Texas in Austin, made a detailed study of the biology and ecology of the ground beetle Rhadine subterranea (Van Dyke) in Beck Ranch Cave in the early 1960s. He set up an underground laboratory in the cave so that he could study the beetles in their natural climate. His dissertation was completed in 1965 and is considered a landmark study in cave ecology. He inspired Reddell to compile a checklist of the cave fauna of Texas, published in 1965–1967, and collaborated with Reddell in the description of the blind salamander Eurycea tridentifera from Honey Creek Cave.

After receiving his Ph.D. he joined the faculty of Texas Technological College (now Texas Tech University) and became one of the leading cave biologists in the United States. Although his primary research interest turned to the amazingly rich cave fauna of Mexico, he conducted a significant study on the ecology of Fern Cave, Val Verde County. This study was the first serious examination of the guano community in a large Mexican freetail bat cave.

The "discovery" by cavers of Mexico in the 1960s and the increasing time spent exploring, mapping, and biologically studying the caves of Mexico resulted in a gradual decline in caving and cave biology in Texas. Reddell left for the University of Kentucky in 1967 but, finding it too cold and remote from Mexico, returned to study under Mitchell at Texas Tech in the fall of 1968. Mitchell's lab at Texas Tech became a center for cave biology studies, with his graduate students including, besides Reddell, Glen Campbell studying cave cricket ecology, William Elliott studying the Texas cave millipedes of the genus Speodesmus, Virginia Tipton studying the Mexican ricinuleids (a rare order of Arcahnida), and Suzanne Fowler (now Wiley) studying cave Rhadine.

Bill Elliott wrote:

Here is an amazing story that Bob Mitchell wrote for the 10th Anniversary Issue of the Association for Mexican Cave Studies in 1973.

James Reddell reminded me about this account, which is the scariest, funniest story of an early exploration of a major pit cave in Mexico. I looked down this pit in 1969, and it is awesome.

Logan McNatt wrote:

Converting from pdf. to doc resulted in the omission of accents and probably a few typos I didn't catch. But the article will give you a hint of who Dr. Mitchell was.

At 105 m, the entrance drop of Huitzmolotitla is currently tied with 12 other pits as the 173rd deepest pit known in Mexico, according to Mark Minton's list of deep pits of Mexico (July 2009) on the AMCS webpage.

But in 1960, it was one of the deepest.

AMCS Newsletter, v. IV no. 1

Sotano de Huitzmolotitla—Robert W. Mitchell

I have been asked by Mr. William H. Russell and Mr. Terry W. Raines to informally summarize the results of some of my trips to Mexican caves. Some of these visits to Mexico have been particularly significant or interesting and it is upon these that I wish to dwell.

Perhaps the most important of the trips was one which I made during the summer of 1958, accompanied by Dr. Francis Abernethy and Mr. Tom Hayes. It was during this trip that we first saw El Sotano de Huitzmolotitla at Tlamaya, San Luis Potosi. The "discovery" of this sotano led in a somewhat round-about way to the eventual discovery of one of North America's deepest known caves, El Sotano de Tlamaya.

Ab, Tom, and I had headed for Xilitla, S.L.P., to meet Dr. Russell Strandtmann, formerly of Texas Tech, and a group of students. We arrived in Xilitla two or three days before Dr. Strandtmann's group, and during this time we chanced to meet a very interesting person, Senora Berta Semple, who lives in Xilitla. Explaining to her that we would like very much to see the tree ferns in the cloud forests above Xilitla, we were taken to Tlamaya to meet some good friends of hers who could probably arrange for a guide for us. These friends, later to become our dearest friends in Mexico and the friends of many a following spelunker, were Sr. and Sra. Modesto Gomez. We saw our tree ferns and were also taken to a

small cave in "downtown" Tlamaya. Sr. Gomez asked if we would like to see a sotano near his house. After we finally understood that this was a cave of sorts, he led us through the coffee trees to it. Those of you who have seen an immense Mexican sotano can well imagine how we felt standing there peering down the sheer entrance drop of our first sotano. When asked if it had a name, Sr. Gomez laughed and said we could call it El Sotano de Huitzmolotitla after the name of his ranch. We dropped a few rocks and got nearly seven seconds on them. We promptly decided that some day we would make every effort to descend this sotano.

Not until the summer of 1960 at the N.S.S Convention at Carlsbad did I say much about this deep cave to anyone. However, I then talked briefly with Bill Russell and several others about the deep pit I had seen in Mexico, but I don't think I was entirely successful in selling the idea of such a deep cave to anyone, although rumors persisted of these deep entrance shafts in the Sierra Madre Oriental and elsewhere in North America. At least I didn't witness any mass exodus to Tlamaya.

About this time, Dr. Abernethy and I decided that it was high time we entered the Sotano de Huitzmolotitla, so during the early part of the summer of 1960 we began planning our effort for August of that year. At least to us these were still the days of cable and winch and a fairly large team of people. I shall never forget our discussions on how much cable to buy. This was finally resolved by my wife, Rexell, and me by our going to Tlamaya in July of 1960 and lowering a string into Huitzmolotitla. We got about 350 feet as a good estimate, and so Ab and I bought 400 feet of quarter-inch steel cable. We borrowed a hand-cranked winch, a veritable monster which had a handle that slipped out at very inconvenient times. We organized a crew the likes of which no cave will ever see again. Since each contributed in some very important way to our visit and since each contributed such a distinct personality which so flavored this trip which will live in the minds of each of us forever, I cannot but name each of them. All were associated at the time with Lamar State College of Technology at Beaumont, Texas, where Dr. Abernethy and I taught. I was teaching biology and Ab was an English professor. A prominent student of East Texas folklore, he now is Professor of English at Stephen F. Austin State College, Nacogdoches, Texas. His love of natural history and of pure adventure ranks him as El Numero Uno whenever I am making a trip, especially to Mexico. Dr. Russell Long, still of the Biology Department at Lamar Tech, accompanied us, but his efforts were directed primarily to collecting butterflies in and about Tlamaya and drinking beer with Don Modesto. This only attests to the fact that Russell had more judgement than the rest of the crew collectively. Since our team was fairly large we decided we needed a cook, so we prevailed upon the manager of our snack bar at Lamar Tech, Mr. Starks Johnson. At the time this sounded like a great idea. The remainder of the people were students, all biology majors. There was first of all Mr. William Rhodes, who is now a chemist employed by Marathon Oil in Colorado. Dub remains one of the best friends, hardest workers, and finest field companions anyone could hope to have. Our association continues to the present. He, Ab, and I made our latest trip into Mexico only last August, a trip that will be described later. Mr. Kenneth Johnson, a graduate student of mine at the present time here at Texas Tech, made the trip. He is presently conducting studies on temperature preferences in the Mexican blind cave fishes. Mr. Charles Edwards was along. He now teaches at Port Neches High School. Mr. Leonard Tibbetts, who is now practicing dentistry, made the trip. I believe he now lives somewhere in the Beaumont-Port Arthur area. Mr. Roger Shoemake is just completing his Ph.D. in Archaeology at the University of Oregon.

We arrived along with the first rains in Tlamaya in the latter part of August of 1960. We had come prepared to stay for at least a week, so we set up shop in Sr. Gomez' coffee shed, later to become somewhat of a spelunker's headquarters. Now the road to Tlamaya passes fairly close to the Sotano, but the walk down the 45-degree slope to the drop is something of a chore with the kind of equipment we carried in. We had decided to set up the winch not on the last ledge before the drop but another ledge up. This placed the winch and winch operators some 20-25 feet above the drop and, I suppose, about 40 feet horizontally away from it. It was placed on the "high side" of the drop since getting to the low side was a real problem and also because there were no suitable ledges on the low side for the winch. Growing on the ledge below the winch and projecting out and over the drop was a large tree which we decided was the appropriate place for the block to support the cable. On our way through Mante we picked up about 500 feet of one-half inch sisal to use as a belaying rope. It was decided that the belayers were to take up their positions on the lip of the drop, again, somewhat below the winch position. About two days were consumed simply getting the winch into position and bolting it to a table we made for it one rainy day. But I will say that when it was finally in place it was there for all time to come. We spent most of the next day-after the rain-getting the block in the tree over the pit. Dub Rhodes and I tried to out-volunteer each other for this duty. I won. So I climbed up the tree and out on this large limb. Only when I was out 10 or 12 feet from the wall did I look down. After partially recovering from this experience, I set about trying to suspend the large block with a short length of cable. When I was about half finished, I suddenly realized that I was covered by ants. The limb was covered with them and there was simply no escape. This whole episode was quite painful.

To the end of the cable we attached a parachute harness. It was near the end of the day, but we decided to make a partial descent to test the rigging and to clear away vines, and larger plants that were in the line of descent. I went down carrying a machete. I cleared the wall down to about 70 or 80 feet when I came to rest on a tree, a very large tree anchored by three roots to the sheer wall of the pit. This thing was right in the line of descent, so I shouted up that I was going to chop down a tree and to lock the winch. After looking at the tree I decided that it would be easiest if I were to stand on the tree, chop away two roots, and then be winched upward so that I could lean down and cut the remaining root. I cut through the first root and the tree creaked and sagged slightly. The surprise came after I had cut about half way through the second root; the tree fell like a bomb. I took all the slack out of the cable in a hurry and slammed into the wall. Never have I heard such a noise as when that tree hit bottom. It literally exploded.

We were rained out the next day, but on the following day we made it to the pit early with every intention to put someone on the bottom. I must add now that we had also brought along a set of field telephones, since we thought it advisable to keep in constant contact. By now you realize that here we had three lines to be lowered simultaneously.

(Continued on page 30)

Punkin Cave Survey Trip #12, 5-7 February 2010

Reported by Jim "Crash" Kennedy, expedition leader

[For general background on Punkin Cave and previous survey expeditions, please refer to past postings on CaveTex]

We started with 22 cavers signing up for this trip, 15 veterans ("Punkinheads") and 7 folks who have never surveyed in Punkin before ("Punkin Sprouts"). By the time we got there, we lost two due to disabilities and last-minute job assignments. We lost another Saturday morning due to illness, and one of the Sprouts was a non-caver and did not intend to go in the cave. So we had 18 folks ready to go, divided into 4 teams, most of which attacked the relatively poorly explored Western Maze.



Western Maze (Team Further Down). Josh Rubinstein in a room we dubbed Windy City, near the bottom of the survey.

Photographer Chris Vreeland states, "It was from this point that we determined that the cave trended north, south, east, west, up and down."

The first team, **TEAM ORGY**, led by sketcher Allan Cobb, started on some new holes in the floor near the Western Parallel. "So many holes to check out!" they lamented. Assisted by team members Arron Wertheim, Jill Orr, and Lydia Hernandez (who was later traded for Sean Vincent), they made one vertical loop and ended up back in the entrance room before popping down another hole and eventually connecting to the Hellmouth section. They made 23 shots and surveyed 96.26m (315.8 feet), for an average of 4.18m (13.7 feet) per shot. There are other holes in the area still to be checked out in another orgy of exploration.

The second team, **TEAM TOP**, started the "ZZ" survey in yet another hole on the west side of the entrance room. Sketcher Geary Schindel led Don Arburn, Ann Scott, Matt Turner, and Sean Vincent (later traded for Lydia) to map a bunch of shallow loops in the western maze, tying in to previous surveys from Lee Jay Graves and crew, and also to surveys from the other two teams in the area at the same time. They closed several loops during their 25 shots, surveying 68.80m (225.7 feet), for an average of 2.8m (9.0 feet) per shot.

The third team, **TEAM FURTHER DOWN**, started out improving sketches from previous western maze surveys, aided by a line plot provided in advance. This team consisted of sketcher John Brooks, assisted by Chris Vreeland, Bonnie Longley, and Josh Rubinstein, all three of whom have been on previous surveys in this part of the cave. They began new survey at station WM24, and put in 13 additional shots, gaining another 10m of depth and leaving many leads for future surveys. Since some of their time was spent resketching old survey, they only got 50.45m (165.5 feet) of new survey, for an average of 3.9m (12.7 feet) per shot.

The last team, **TEAM PANCAKE REVISITED**, began cleaning up more leads in the Medusa Maze. Visiting NCKRI cavers George Veni (sketcher), Dianne Gillespie, Lewis Land, and sprout Matt Zaldivar were guided to this complex area by an injured Jim Kennedy. They began with one of two loops Jim remembered from the November survey, but soon got into more passage and didn't complete the loops. They ended up tying into both the previous Medusa Maze (MMM survey), and the Upper Medusa (UM) survey. They found another room with Pissicles and strange chalky white minerals, probably also biogenic.

After the seemingly endless breakdown mazes, they started the survey of the Dungeon, the huge lift tube discovered in November. However, George and Dianne were a centimeter too big for the top of the slot. After some fruitless rock pounding, Matt, Louis, and Jim shot a line into the Dungeon room, but didn't sketch it due to the approaching "out of the cave" deadline.

There are good leads there going down in this important part of the cave, and we still have to sketch that section, as well as complete the loops off the Pumpkin Pancake Room. This team set 32 shots totaling 93.58m (307.0 feet), averaging 2.9m (9.6 feet) per shot.

In summary, four survey teams in Punkin Cave put in another 93 shots of survey and added another 309.09m (1014.12 feet) of passage to the length of the cave, the best in the last five expeditions. The average shot length of 3.32m reflects the slow nature of the surveys. The new length of the cave is now 2822.2m. It just moved from the #19 spot on the Texas Long Cave list to #13, displacing Spring Creek Cave, Prassell Ranch Cave, Phantom Springs Cave, Rocket River Cave System, River Styx Cave, and nearby Deep Cave.

It only needs another 532m to hit #12 and displace Natural Bridge Caverns, and another 553 to pass Caverns of Sonora, and 622 meters to knock off Airmans Cave and enter the Top 10.

The depth of Punkin has not changed in several trips, remaining at #28 on the Texas Deep Cave list, but the Dungeon area holds great promise for something deeper.

The next trip will likely be in early June, and as usual, Punkin survey veterans will receive first notice before it is posted to CaveTex.

Deep and Punkin Preserve News

Recently, the TCMA board of directors voted to remove the second floor of the back porch structure because of safety and liability concerns. This was decided as the best option for the site. A work day will be scheduled at the site sometime in April or May. I'm sure the work date will be announced on TexasCavers along with a request for assistance.

I want to personally thank Jon Cradit who spearheaded the porch project over the last two and a half years and to also thank the many, many folks that have devoted their time, energy, and money to the project. Specifically, I want to thank Lex Cox and Milo, R.D., Jay J. and the many folks from the Ft Worth - Dallas area that worked on erecting the steel and providing materials. In addition, I would like to thank the folks from the Austin and San Antonio area for their hard work on the structure.

I also want to let folks know that I have decided to step down as property manager. After five long and wonderful years, it is time for some new blood at the site. Having the honor of managing the property has been a fantastic experience for both me and my family. My kids cut their caving teeth at Deep and Punkin and we had many joyous weekends and fond memories working and caving up there. I think the Deep and Punkin Preserve has really helped to consolidate the Texas caving community and I'm proud of the fact that cavers have come together to pay off the property so quickly. I believe that almost every Texas grotto has been involved in some form or fashion at the property, either through direct participation when possible, or through donations of funds and materials.

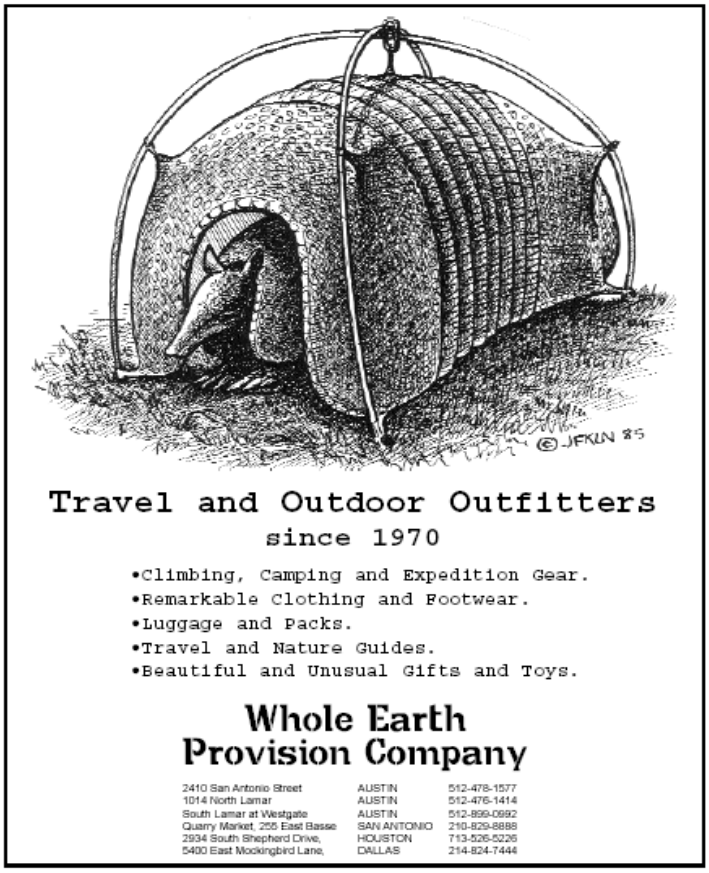
I would especially like to thank Jon Cradit for his assistance in selecting and designing the desiccating toilet system and for Eric Holman and BSA Venture Crew 410 that did a majority of the work on erecting the toilet, constructed the wildlife watering tank, the bunks in the cabin, many of the trails on the property, and helped replace the insulation in the attic. Managing the property has allowed me to meet and work with many wonderful folks and grottos over the years and I thank you for this great opportunity, I have truly gotten more out of the property and the caving community than I've put in.

Sincerely, Geary Schindel—TCMA Board Member

The TCMA Board is very pleased to announce that a new manager has been chosen for the Punkin and Deep Preserve: Don Arburn, a long-time member of the TCMA Board. He will pick up the work at the preserve that Geary Schindel has done since its purchase, and continue toward the goal of making the preserve a premiere destination for Texas caving. Thank you, Don, for taking up the stewardship of this important property.

(And thanks again to Geary for his years of work.)

William Russell —TCMA President



Spring Convention Wrap-Up

WOW! What a great Convention!

This was due in no small part to our illustrious rookie Vice Chair, **Ellie Thoene,** and her cadre of volunteers including **Diana Tomchick** and **Bill Steele** setting up the wonderful talks, **Lyndon Tiu** and the Greater Houston Grotto running Registration, **Terry Holsinger and His Crew** whipping up a fantastic feed Saturday night and last, but definitely not least, **Mike Walsh and the Texas Cave Conservancy** graciously hosting this event!

Special thanks also goes out to **Wes Schumacher** for lugging in, setting up, and maintaining the Hot Tub. What a great feature to have at an event, other than TCR!

I'm also happy to announce that we had a record setting attendance this year. Over 150, shattering the old record attendance of 138!

We had some excellent talks this year, with a special emphasis on cave diving, which I have no interest in doing, but sure enjoyed hearing about, including "**Creature" Krejca's** talk on diving Jacob's Well, the Honey Creek Cave dive project by **Kurt Menking**, and a cave I have never heard of but found thoroughly entertaining, Goodenough Springs, presented by **Chuck Noe**.

Roger Moore kicked things off with a humorous talk about "teasing" caves out of the Soil and **Allan Cobb** pitched hit nicely for an ailing Evelynn Mitchell discussing his wild and wacky adventures down in Belize at the menacingly named "Midnight Terror Cave"! Ooo, spooky!

All in all, great time had by all and hope to see all of you and more next year! Have a SAFE summer and I'll see y'all at TCR!

Mark

(Continued from page 27)

Wishing if at all possible to avoid adding a fourth line, we decided to go ahead with a descent without a guide line which would prevent any possibility of spinning. I was lowered without incident to about 150 feet below the lip when a strong undercut was encountered. I called for everything to halt while I surveyed the rest of the drop. Then I called for some very fast cranking on the winch to get me to the bottom without delay. But after being lowered 20 or 30 feet more, everything began to spin like mad. The lowering cable, telephone line, and belaying rope all wound together, and the whole operation came to a sudden halt. The decision was made that I come up and that we attempt a descent the next day using a guide line. The trip up was agonizingly long because of the necessity to unwind the fouled lines. It was necessary to cut the telephone line several times.

By this time I had decided that someone else could have the honor of being the first on the bottom, so the next day-with a guide line-Dub Rhodes was lowered to the bottom. After some time there he was raised. All this went with little incident. The next day Ab and I both were lowered. Ab went first and with no problems, but my trip down was marked with one interesting incident. When I had reached within about 15 feet of the bottom, the telephone line snapped near the top of the drop. The sound of 350 feet of line whistling down a sotano is indescribable. As those of you know who have been into Huitzmolotitla, we found little at the bottom of the entrance drop except for another vertical pit. Beneath a large ledge we suspended a vial with the names of those of us who made the descents on this first trip. The vial has been seen by some of the spelunkers who have followed.

Along toward late afternoon I was winched out. At some time during the trip up the handle came out of the winch but Dub locked the brake so fast that I was unaware-in fact, I didn't learn about this for several years. Also during this ascent the winch operators and the belayers became very unsynchronized. The belayers were not hauling up rope as fast as I was being raised by the cable. The result was a great loop in the belaying rope. I called for the people on the winch to stop cranking while the belayers took up slack. They did this very rapidly. I seem to recall that I was being very ugly over the telephone at this time. They took up the slack so fast that they raised me about three feet vertically now creating a sag in the main raising cable. I shouted into the telephone for some slack in the belaying rope so they threw me about a loop. The three feet I dropped before being stopped short by the cable was a long trip.

This venture was spiced with many other incidents and diversions, some relating to the Sotano, some not, but I have already rambled on too long about Huitzmolotitla. Initially, it seemed that we accomplished very little other than the mere act of entering the entrance drop of a deep cave. But as it now turns out, it amounted to something more. An interest in this area and its caves was generated which eventually led to the complete exploration of Huitzmolotitla and the discovery of the nearby Sotano de Tlamaya, one of this continent's deepest mapped caves.

Those of us who knew them were grieved when Sra. Gomez died in the early 1960's and again in 1966 when we learned that Sr. Gomez had been killed while driving his old pickup on the Pan Am near Valles. Xilitla, Tlamaya, and their cuevas and sotanos will never seem the same, especially to those of us who stayed at their ranch during the early days.

Thoughts on Knives and Pliers in Caving

Submitted by Bill Steele

I always cave with a knife. Always have.

I've tried all sorts of them and I've settled on what I think is best: a knife with a nice-sized blade, an awl (which works as a drill, too), a can opener, and a bottle opener. I use an official Boy Scout knife. Why? Well, for one reason because I'm an employee of the Boy Scouts of America, so I get a nice discount and they're sold in the store across the street from my office, but also because they come just like I like them, with a lanyard ring and with the features I've described above.

It never ceases to amaze me how many cavers don't cave with a knife. In vertical caving that's downright dangerous. Not only should vertical cavers always carry a knife, but it should be handy, where it could be whipped out quickly. I think back to the guy who died hanging by his unbreakable chin strap when he slipped and got his helmet stuck between the walls and his feet kicking in mid-air. If only his buddy had had a knife.

I see a lot of cavers with Leatherman tools. I have tried them too, and I've lost these expensive items. I think they have too many features for caving. You don't need a saw and a file and all that stuff. You almost have to keep them in their leather case, so you can't get to them in a hurry. And they're heavy.

A Leatherman does have pliers, but they're needle nose pliers. You can't use them for many things in caving. I carry standard pliers with uncoated, metal handles. Many years ago someone tipped me off that plier handles made good digging tools. Many times I've amazed people when I've pulled mine out of my cave pack and shown them that it's true. Mine can adjust to two sizes of opening. I've used them to open stuck lights, carbide lamp bottoms, lots of things.

So, I maintain the carrying a simple knife, with the one blade always sharp, and on a cord and very accessible, is the way to go. In addition to that, a pair of pliers, which will fit into whatever you carry for small items, such as a liter Nalgene bottle, is the only other tool a caver needs.








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Attn: Editor