

Número 10

Number 10

SUBTERRANEO



The Joys of Caving

El Placer de Explorar Cuevas

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Este PDF©2016 por John Pint. Espeleoclub Zotz es conocido también como Grupo Espeleológico Zotz y fue fundado por John y Susy Pint en 1985. Zotz ha encontrado, explorado, topografiado y fotografiado cuevas en Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit y Michoacán. Los PDF de Subterráneo fueron publicados en el Internet en 2016 por John Pint, correo: ran chopint@hotmail.com.

EL SOTANO DEL TAPANCO

VOLVER A NACER

Todo comienza el sábado 19 de julio de 1997 a las 9:00 AM. Un grupo de personas esperábamos con ansia la salida hacia una cueva de tiro que recientemente les habían dado a conocer a John y a Susana, quienes encabezan el grupo.

9:45: nuestro grupo compuesto por Susana, John, Vicente, Victor, Mario Arturo y Sonia se dirige hacia dicho lugar. En medio de lluvia y comentarios sobre hongos alucinógenos y plantas psicotrópicas, llegamos a Ayotitlán en donde nos encontraríamos con la persona que guiaría nuestra expedición, pero el hombre no se encontró así que nos dirigimos al lugar, guiados por los Pint. Después de unas cuantas anécdotas, comencé a hacer algunas prácticas en un árbol con el equipo de John ya que para mi, todos los aparatos eran nuevos y jamás los había utilizado. Me gustó mucho trabajar con el Croll y subir como rana. Era muy divertido.

Minutos más tarde, todos estuvieron de acuerdo en que comenzara la acción, así que nos dirigimos cerro arriba bordeando por la cerca de piedra que allí se encontraba, buscando la cueva de tiro. Después de creer más de dos veces que habíamos perdido el pozo, John se adelantó y encontró finalmente nuestro objetivo.

Llegamos al mediodía y echamos un vistazo dentro. El sol iluminaba hasta el fondo, lo cual hacía lucir aquella cueva mucho más interesante y hermosa.

De inmediato, Vicente comenzó a vestirse de "spelunker" pues él sería el primero en entrar a la cueva. Comenzó a descender sin ningún problema mientras nos describía el interior de ésta, y una vez que llegó al fondo, una lluvia de preguntas y respuestas irrumpieron el silencio.

El pozo tenía 16 metros de profundidad aproximadamente y al parecer no era muy grande en el fondo, aunque a la mitad se encontraba una posible desviación o abertura tal vez a una cámara un poco más amplia; Vicente quiso explorarla pero no pudo hacerlo por la falta de equipo y se limitó a salir de la



Sonia trying to convince herself this was "just another hole." Actually, it wasn't.

REBORN IN THE BASEMENT

Examining the root of a near disaster

On July 19, 1997, Susy and I took a group of cavers —including several novices— to the foot of a hill called El Tapanco (The Attic). Here we did some ascending and belaying practice and exchanged anecdotes about close shaves in caves: situations that could have been prevented if this or that safety rule had been followed, such as wearing a helmet, carrying three sources of light, only using vertical gear you are familiar with, etc.

"I saw, to my horror, a very large stone detach itself from the wall about a meter above the climber..."

cueva presumiendo que era buena, aunque muy pequeña.

Después de algunas fotografías, Vicente bajó nuevamente, esta vez para esperar al grupo turista que entraría a la cueva y como era de esperarse, decidí ir primero sin que nadie se opusiera. Con ayuda de John, coloqué la marimba en la cuerda y después de una deliciosa galleta con atún, me aventuré a bajar, aunque para esto sufrí un poco pues siempre tengo miedo en rapeles y bajadas hasta que no siento un poco de apoyo en al cuerda. Cinco o diez minutos bastaron para hacer que el grupo perdiera la paciencia y estuvieron a punto de arrojarme hasta que Arturo me ayudó y quedé suspendida en el aire.

La bajada era lenta pero segura y esto me sirvió para admirar más el trayecto hasta el fondo. Esto, claro, mientras dejaba caer algunas pequeñas piedras de manera accidental sobre el casco de mi compañero que aguardaba pacientemente sentado sobre su pie sosteniendo la cuerda.

En el borde del pozo se encontraba un árbol — que no supe de qué especie se trataba — y dos de sus raíces pasaban por todo el pozo llegando hasta el fondo. Una de ellas era gruesa y la otra muy delgada, semejando lianas (como las de Tarzan). Una vez estando yo abajo y después de regresar con otra cuerda el equipo a los de arriba, exploré la pobre y muy reducida cueva pues más que grande era alta. El suelo era resbaladizo con tierra muy suelta pero mojada sin llegar a ser lodo. Un olor algo peculiar que más tarde supe se trataba de guano impregnaba todo el ambiente. Algunos hongos blancos cubrían las paredes y la oscuridad, y aunque no llegaba a ser total era segadora.

Cuando el segundo turista venía en camino, me coloqué a un lado de las raíces y comenté a Vicente de su peculiaridad: él estaba un poco distraído cuando yo moví las raíces y cayó sobre mí un poco de lodo y piedras así que decidí retirarme de allí. En ese momento él

se acerca y, exclamando un grito tarzanezo, se colgó de las raíces haciendo que estas se rompieran debido al peso, provocando una lluvia de piedras un poco más grandes que cayeron sobre Mario. Aunque le faltaba poco por llegar, parece que una de ellas golpeó duro su pierna pero no pasó a mayores.

Victor nuestro tercer turista decidió bajar y yo subí antes que él lo hiciera, esto para que el grupo tuviera suficiente espacio para practicar las sesiones chamanísticas de Vicente quien me ayudó a colocar el equipo correctamente para ascender. Sin ningún contratiempo transcurrió el ascenso de manera rápida y divertida. Mientras subía, volteaba de tiempo en tiempo hacia abajo y podía ver aun el casco de Vicente que se hallaba exactamente debajo de mí. Admiraba nuevamente las formaciones de la cueva, mirando también hacia donde estaba la posible entrada a otra cámara y luego eché otro vistazo para abajo.

En este momento, escuché un ruido y luego gritos y simultáneamente sentí que algo golpeó fuertemente mi mano izquierda y rebotó en mi rodilla. Supe entonces que era una piedra de considerable tamaño y comencé también a gritar, tremendamente asustada de que aquel monstruo le cayera a los cueveros abajo. Vi como la piedra se alejó con rapidez y cayó en el fondo y comencé a gritar si estaban bien los de abajo y recibí la simpática respuesta de, "Estamos bien pero un poco más chaparros..."

Miré que mi mano estaba sangrando y temblando — ¡parece que el trancazo estuvo duro! Sin sentir dolor, subí aprisa hasta que salí a la luz donde John me esperaba para tomar una foto de horror que más tarde se convertiría en mi gran alivio al saber que no había pasado algo realmente grave.

Victor comenzó a bajar seguido después por Arturo, quedando solos John y yo arriba ya que Susana había regresado a la camioneta a cuidar las pertenencias

Next, we began our hike up the hillside, weaving our way through the ubiquitous *dominguilla* plants (which sting like nettles) and collecting limestone rocks covered with fascinating fossils. Near the top, we came upon a strange-looking carnivorous plant whose bright red, horizontal flower lies upon the ground and sports on its side a circular "death pit" lined with hairs that allow insects easy entrance but no exit.

The hole we were looking for is called El Sótano del Tapanco (literally, The Attic's Basement) and it's located near the top of the hill just beside a large karst outcrop which displays some of the finest "prickly rock" you could ever hope to avoid sitting on. From atop this point you can see lush, green limestone hills in every direction and looking straight down, a steep precipice that would offer a challenging workout to any climber desirous of shredding clothes and skin on the razor-sharp wall.

The pit entrance is a hole about one by two meters wide immediately opening into a long fissure beneath the surface. A second hole, a few steps away, is only a few inches in diameter, but offers a dramatic view of the upper part of the pit where sunlight casts deep shadows on long, vertical formations covering the walls.

Borrowing an idea mentioned by the Brits on the *Cavers Digest*, I had brought along several lengths of airplane cable, which allowed us to rig directly off an abrasive rock with no need for padding.

The floor of the pit is only 16m below, but we had hoped (from the sound of rocks tossed in) that there would be a second pit right next to the first. In fact, it turned out there was one, but choked with rocks a few meters further down. One more feature of the *sótano* was a very long tree root only an inch or so in diameter, which ran straight down from the very top of the pit to the bottom. "It looks strong enough to climb,"

exclaimed one would-be Tarzan, giving the root a few tugs, which resulted in a shower of small stones and dirt.

About an hour later, a member of the crew, named Sonia, had jumared her way up the rope — on her very first ascent of a real pit — to a point about 10m above the floor. At this precise moment, two of us happened to be checking her progress, peering down from the entrance and the small "peep hole." I was the one doing the peeping and saw, to my horror, a very large stone detach itself from the wall about a meter above the climber, a stone that neither she nor the rope had touched. The lozenge-shaped stone was at least two feet long, six inches thick and a foot and a half wide: the size where wearing a helmet no longer makes any difference. As if I were seeing it in a dream, it did a very slow flip in the air as it came straight at Sonia. In my mind's eye, I saw Sonia ripped from the rope and the three people at the bottom — whose headlamps I could just barely discern — crushed and battered. But, incredibly, the rock disappeared from view and Sonia was still there, alive but bleeding from the back of both hands. Of course, all three of us shouted to the people below, who quickly replied they hadn't been touched by the deadly missile.

Later I congratulated those three individuals for having followed the cave safety rule of never standing below a person on rope. "Er, well, actually, we had all been standing right there underneath her, but then we stepped over to the far end of the crack to have a look at some formations."

It hadn't previously occurred to me that roots can grow behind huge chunks of rock in a very solid, stable-looking pit and create a life-threatening hazard. It now seems obvious that suspicious looking spots ought to be carefully checked out by the first person bottoming the pit and that, in general, roots running up the side of a pit should be left in peace.

entraría a la cueva puesto que recientemente había padecido histoplasmosis y no quería arriesgarse en una cueva recién descubierta. John no bajaría porque estaba un poco enfermo del estómago y se limitó a tomar fotografías y recibir comentarios.

Había una vista preciosa en aquel cerro por cualquier ángulo y decidí tomar el que miraba hacia la carretera y un pequeño valle por donde pasaba el río cerca del cual se encontraba Bandoleros, una cueva a la que no íbamos en esa ocasión. Recostada sobre las piedras, admiré el paisaje un par de minutos para luego cerrar los ojos y limitarme a percibir y escuchar los olores y sonidos, cuando John comenzó a apresurar a los de abajo puesto que se escuchaban truenos de lluvia.

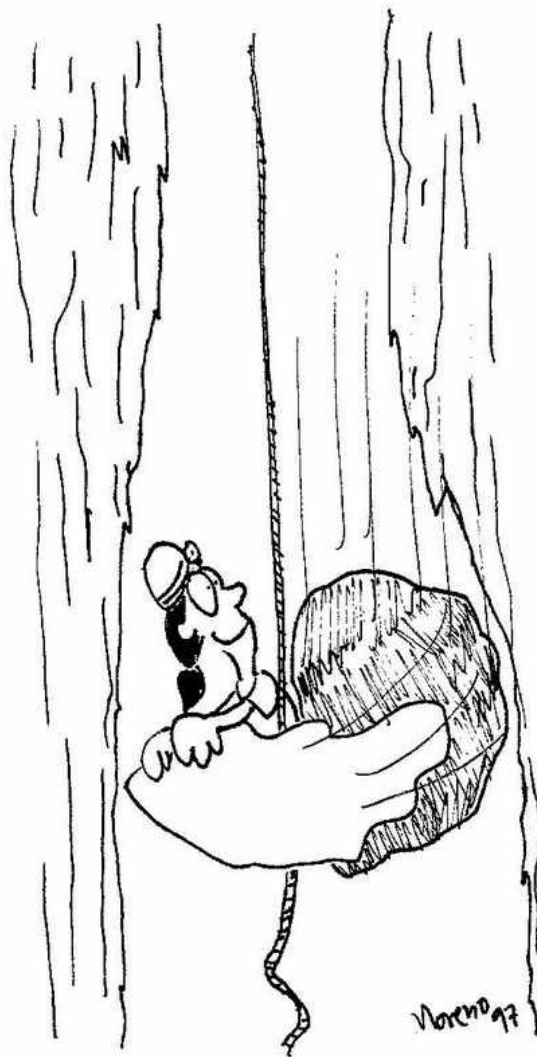
Todos comenzaron a subir, bromeando que dejarían al culpable del "pequeño accidente" abajo. Cuando todos estuvimos fuera de la cueva, hubo más fotos, más comentarios y puntos de vista sobre lo que había ocurrido y claro,

no faltaron las bromas. Se nombró aquella cueva *Volver a Nacer* ya que de caerle encima a Vicente o a mí aquella piedrota, nos hubiera esparcido los sesos.

Después de beber agua y descansar un poco comenzamos el descenso de aquel cerro topándonos con algunas piedras llenas de fósiles y también con una hermosa flor carnívora que John decidió llevar a su casa para cultivar. Tomamos algunos recuerdos y nos dirigimos cerro abajo donde nos aguardaba Susana. Una vez contada la aventura, todo el grupo nos esparcimos en la camioneta y nos preparamos para pasar un agradable momento de bromas y carcajadas en el trayecto hacia Guadalajara.

Sin duda, una experiencia inolvidable, al menos para mí.

Sonia R. Calvillo Macías



Sonia emerged from the *Sótano* remarkably unperturbed, with only scraped knuckles and a few bruises on her legs. The rock had barely grazed her on the way down. It had also missed the rope entirely... that is, until it hit bottom where it turned our unnecessarily long 60m line into two 30's. The three who had been at the bottom were profoundly moved by the experience and, reckoning they had been given a nearly miraculous second chance at life, immediately renamed the pit *Volver a Nacer* (Rebirth).



As for me, I emerged from the experience with that dramatic scene of the slowly falling rock forever imprinted in my memory and with yet another cave safety rule to pass on to all concerned: Don't Boot That Root!

John J. Pint

PIHUAMO RIVER CAVES

ON THE BANKS OF THE PIHUAMO RIVER IS THERE A BIG CAVE SYSTEM LURKING IN AN UNASSUMING CORNER OF JALISCO?

Don Rafael was hard at work when we drove up to his little shop, which is the only place you can buy a *refresco* along the long, dusty dirt road linking La Estrella, Jalisco, and the iron mines of Navidad.

"Don Rafael, remember that cave-near-a-river you told us about? Think we could find it if you give us some directions?"

"Nope."

"Er, any chance you could show us where it is?"

"Sure, anytime."

"Oh... well, er, how about today?"

"Busy today."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"Busy tomorrow, *también*"

Since Don Rafael himself had told us that one could easily spend all day wandering inside the cave-by-a-river, none of us was ready to give up so easily. After another hour of chit-chat with a lunch break in between we finally talked him into "taking us partway..."

The river in question is the Pihuamo, a two-hour brisk hike down into a wide, lonely canyon said to be the home of *animales de uña*: pumas, mountain lions, etc. Shade trees dot the shallow river which sometimes cuts through beautiful, massive chunks of limestone.

Although the heat was stifling and it felt like our brains were frying, we fairly flew down the hillside and headed upriver. Halfway up a high cliff, we spotted what looks like a large cave possibly accessible by a very long (and precise) rappel from the top. This, however, was not the cave-by-a-river Don Rafa had in mind. His cave turned out to have a small, easy-to-miss entrance, which was a bit of a let-down until we stepped inside...

THE MUDDY METRO

It's been a long time since we've seen a cave in Jalisco anything like this: a smooth borehole 4-5 meters in diameter that reminded us of a subway tunnel. Near the entrance, the passage was covered with a thick layer of dried mud, top to bottom. The floor was cracked into a million little pieces and a few steps ahead, stalactite "hands" reached down from the ceiling.

Because we had taken Don Rafa away from his work (naturally, he hadn't stopped at halfway), we gave ourselves only ten minutes to see what we could see. Just a few steps away we came upon a high-ceilinged room and so many beautiful stalactites that we knew without a doubt this cave was special.

SMACKED BY A BAT

At one point, Luis Rojas stepped into a side passage and WHAP! suddenly flew backward, falling to the floor. I figured he had walked right into a low ceiling, but it turned out he had been hit head-on by a very large bat in a very big hurry and obviously not echo-locating. This love tap suggested the name KIROPTERAN KISS KAVE (or K3) for this cavern, which appears to have no local name {Note: Today this cave is referred to as Cueva Chocolate}.

Ten delightful minutes in the cave were followed by a long, hot, dusty trek back up the hill and a quick departure for a place called Fatima Bridge, which we heard might have a good spot to camp. Considering the lumpy, rocky, sloping place where we had reluctantly slept on our Pozo Fortin trip (see below), most of us were willing to try just about any place. Claudio Chilomer, however, announced that he would not dream of camping other than on a genuine BEACH...

A half an hour later (after fording the river several times) we pulled up on a wide stretch of sand next to a dam in the river. All of us gaped at this ideal campsite in awe and wonder except Claudio, who gave us a smug look that said, "Don't we Brazilians know it all!"

No sooner did we put up our tents and light a fire than a short, intense fellow appeared right out of the darkness. "I heard you're looking for caves," he announced. Now, we had just driven a half hour from Don Rafa's place and knew he had no electricity, much less a telephone. So how did...?

Anyhow, our nocturnal visitor casually remarked that his cave was even more spectacular than K3, that he'd be happy to show it to us next morning and that if we happened to possess a metal-detector, we could probably find treasure galore inside. The next day he took us to a cave which in the rainy season is the mouth of a mighty river that roars down an impressive waterfall just below. Once again, we had only minutes for a quick look inside, which was all we needed to reach water and a long, muddy downslope that would need a hand line (at least) for safe negotiating. This very promising cave got the name TINDARAPOS which is the local name for *canclos* (cave-dwelling relatives of the vinegaroons).

The following weekend Luis Rojas and I were back in the area with the intention of camping alongside the Pihuamo River and getting a better look at K3. When we reached the stream, we found Don Rafael watching over several busy women and scurrying kids. It was Laundry Day! When we told him where we were going, he warned us to be careful. Upstream several armed men were "poisoning" the river with lime. This, said Don Rafa, was illegal and something he disapproved of. "They're after crayfish, but this way they kill everything else in the river, including the baby crayfish." Having seen Mexican "justice" in operation on too many occasions, I could understand why no one would bother going to the authorities about this. In the face of crime or government indifference there's not much people can do except *aguantar* (suffer)... or start a revolution, Chiapas style.

We invited Don Rafa to join us for breakfast and a short cave tour the next morning. He warned us that it could be dangerous to head upriver at this moment, but we decided to take the chance.

After a short walk, we came upon several men and boys stuffing dead crayfish into gunny sacks. Dead minnows floated in the cloudy-white water where the lime had been dumped. We smiled and waved howdy-do hypocritically and passed by without getting shot at.

We filled our canteens at a cool spring and proceeded to K3 where we stored our backpacks just inside the entrance. Soon we were in the side passage where Rojas had received the Chiropteran Kiss. This petered out after about 20 meters, but inside we came upon a *Chinche Hocicono*, a two-inch-long blood-sucking "bedbug" that carries Chagas disease. Further on we found two ferocious-looking Arañas Lobo (Wolf Spiders) whose bite is said to cause painful swelling.



Leaving behind this delightful menagerie, we returned to the main passage which led us to several rooms bristling with countless, shimmering brown stalactites. Many of these were within arm's reach and we were amazed not to find any of them broken.

Not far along we gazed up at a balcony which looks like the mouth of an upper passage through which muddy water pours into the cave during the rainy season. It was also home to a good-sized colony of bats. We called this The MUDFALL and speculated on how one might get up the slippery wall. The next rooms we came to were either filled with breakdown or great heaps of fine sand. In one place we found deposits of iron "dust" and what look like layers of iron oxide not surprising since this area is famous for its iron mines.

IN THE HALL OF THE GOBLINS

After 300 meters or so, we stood at the opening to a very large room filled with lots of chunky breakdown. We both stopped and looked at each other: "Do you hear what I hear?"

The sound reaching our ears was so much like the voices of people laughing, shouting and playing in a swimming pool, that we really expected to find a *balneario* at the other end of the room. We actually set out looking for these people whom we named Los Duendes (the Goblins) but what we found were two streams of water on both side of the room, each heading off in the opposite direction, apparently fed by a spring rising up from beneath the breakdown. Were our "voices" generated by the gurgling stream on the right or were they real voices floating above the wider "river" heading off to the left? There was no way we were going to find out that day. The small stream would require scuba gear for exploration while the bigger, deeper one would require swimming and/or rafting.

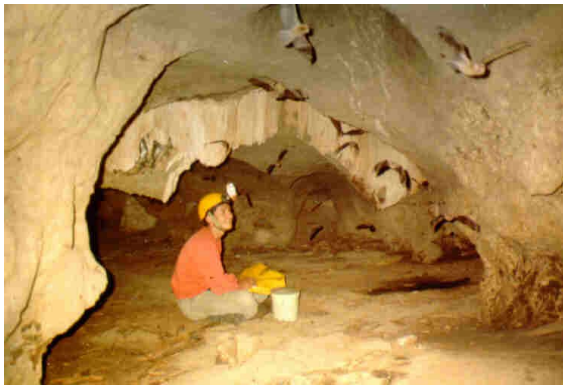
As we hadn't come prepared for water sports and the hour was late, we determined to leave El Salón de los Duendes for next time and headed back to the entrance where a couple of conveniently located stalactites made it easy for us to pitch our tents. Tents inside a cave? With vampire bats fluttering by at regular intervals (not to mention the other critters we had seen), we figured it would be a good idea. Luis Rojas, who had been suffering from insomnia for weeks, finally got a good sleep which was suddenly interrupted in what seemed like the middle of the night...



ANYBODY IN THERE? ¿DONDE ESTÁN? came a loud voice booming through the cave. Was it the river-poisoners come back to finish us off or the midnight hunters we had been told might cause us trouble if we slept outside? We prudently declined to respond and a minute later heard "the voice" again, this time right outside our tents: "Here I am for my tour... let's go!"

Don Rafa? I reached for my flashlight and looked at my watch. It was 6:30 AM! Nevertheless, there was Don Rafael smiling at us and opening a big thermos full of hot *te de canela* (cinnamon tea). My body was aching for several hours more sleep, so I count myself lucky that Rojas who had slept much better than I crawled out of his tent, partook of the "coffee" and took Don Rafa on an (all-too-short) tour of the cave.

After breakfast, Don Rafa offered to show us yet another cave, just a little ways further up the river. "We call this one La Salitre," he said, gesturing toward what looked like a large, open-air stage plunked down right at the river's edge. On drawing closer, we could see that this "platform" was a big shelter cave with plenty of exposed stalactites and columns.



To our surprise, the real cave entrance turned out to be a narrow slot "backstage"... the kind of passage you'd swear was going to peter out to nothing in five meters or less. Only in this case, the further back you go, the bigger and better it gets. After several spectacular, pure white flow-stone cascades, we knew we were in yet another unforgettable cave. Sidestepping two nasty-smelling pools of gooey black vampire guano, we came to a large room with a very high ceiling. All sorts of pesky little bugs had suddenly appeared in the light of my carbide lamp which was cremating at least ten per second. "Luis," I said, "these bugs seem just like the "eyeball-biters" in Cold Dunk Cave. I wonder if that means we'll find the same kind of ..."

"Bats like these?" quipped Rojas, who was on one knee before a wall lined with cute little bats that made no attempt to fly away, no matter how close we got. This resulted in a field day for bat photography, a great opportunity, except for having to swallow an occasional bug every time you opened your mouth.

The friendly Bat Hotel led into a large, weird room with a dirt floor that ended abruptly in a straight ten-meter drop. A narrow, slippery, dirt "bridge" (less than a meter wide) connects to a sort of dirt island which

terminates in another, similar, pitch. As far as we could see, the lower level may continue on in several directions. To the right and slightly above us, there was a small room full of pretty formations and a natural basin of sorts into which water was falling heavily from up above. Rojas proved that the Baptismal Fountain would be reached by a short, but risky traverse. The temperature and humidity in this curious place was sky-high. All in all, it looked like an ideal setting for a Hieronymus Bosch painting.

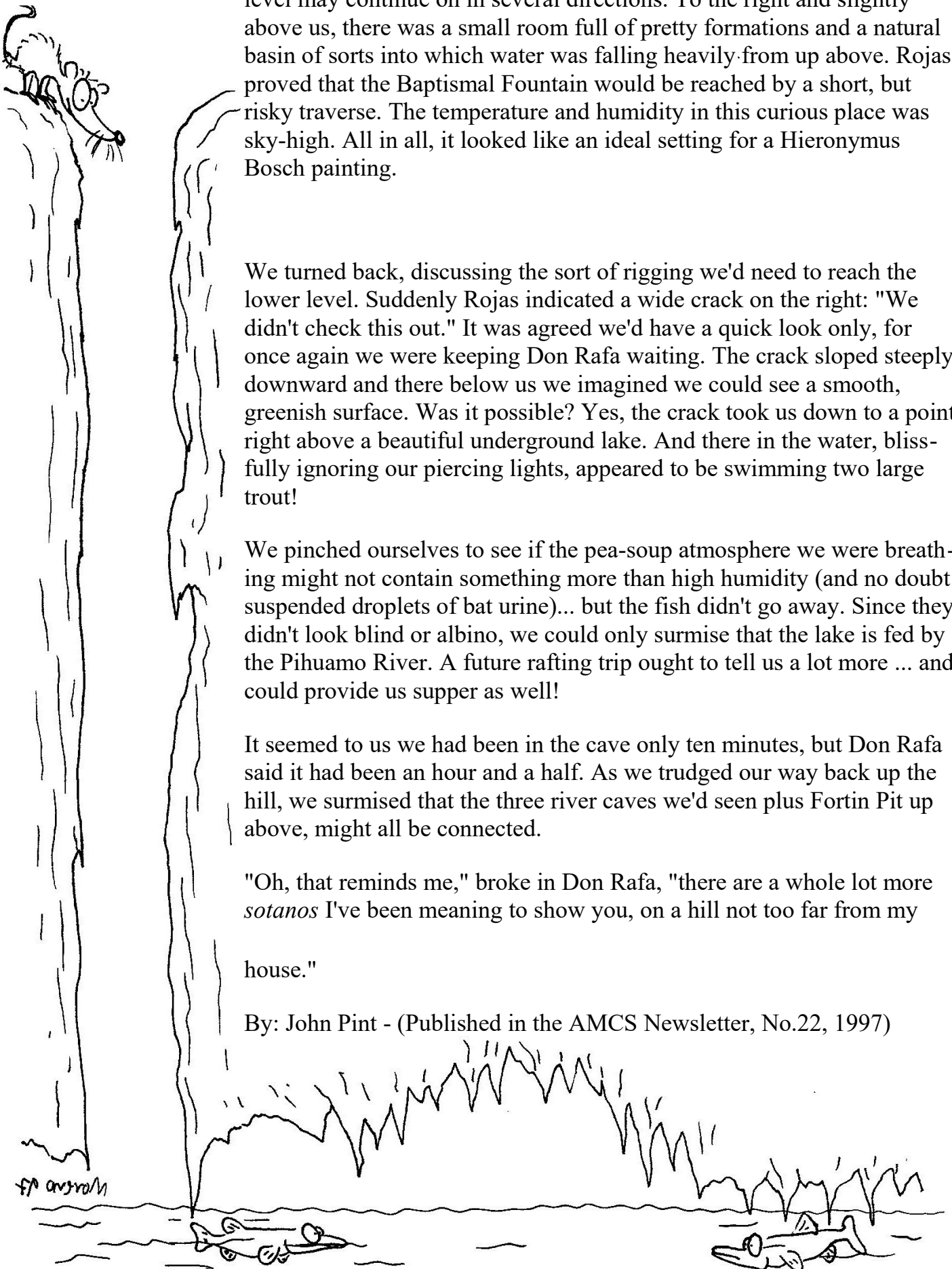
We turned back, discussing the sort of rigging we'd need to reach the lower level. Suddenly Rojas indicated a wide crack on the right: "We didn't check this out." It was agreed we'd have a quick look only, for once again we were keeping Don Rafa waiting. The crack sloped steeply downward and there below us we imagined we could see a smooth, greenish surface. Was it possible? Yes, the crack took us down to a point right above a beautiful underground lake. And there in the water, blissfully ignoring our piercing lights, appeared to be swimming two large trout!

We pinched ourselves to see if the pea-soup atmosphere we were breathing might not contain something more than high humidity (and no doubt suspended droplets of bat urine)... but the fish didn't go away. Since they didn't look blind or albino, we could only surmise that the lake is fed by the Pihuamo River. A future rafting trip ought to tell us a lot more ... and could provide us supper as well!

It seemed to us we had been in the cave only ten minutes, but Don Rafa said it had been an hour and a half. As we trudged our way back up the hill, we surmised that the three river caves we'd seen plus Fortin Pit up above, might all be connected.

"Oh, that reminds me," broke in Don Rafa, "there are a whole lot more *sotanos* I've been meaning to show you, on a hill not too far from my house."

By: John Pint - (Published in the AMCS Newsletter, No.22, 1997)



THE JOYS OF CAVING

Underground Delights of El Altilte

by John Pint

In previous editions of *Subterráneo*, we described our adventures exploring several caves we found in the marble hills near La Concha, Jalisco. A curious fact about these caves is that not one of them even remotely resembles the marvelous cavern that people in the area had repeatedly described to us. "There's this high room," they insisted, "with a circular staircase that goes down and down, round and round, finally leading to an underground river. Across this river a log has been placed, making it easy to cross over to the other side where you find yourself in a long, long passage and when you finally step out into the light, blinking at the brightness, why, there you are, standing on the slopes of the Nevado de Colima."

Since the Nevado Volcano is about 110km from La Concha's small, isolated hills of marble, we forgot about the "long, long passage" and concentrated instead on exploring La Cueva del Diablo (no staircase, no river) and the incredible petroglyphs decorating the marble cliffs.

The cave at last

However, a new chapter in this story began to reveal itself in 1995 when we made a concerted effort to photograph the petroglyphs and investigate their origins. In each of the nearby towns, we sought out everyone and anyone who might shed light on those fascinating engravings until one day, the police chief of La Concha casually asked us if we knew about the caves in the area.

"Of course," we replied. We've mapped them all."

"Oh, so you have a map of this one, too?" said the policeman, handing us a set of snapshots.

Well, I nearly swallowed my bridge when I saw those pictures. "Er... where is this cave?" I humbly asked.

This is the cave of El Altilte. There's a circular staircase in it and an underground riv—"

Thus we discovered that we "professional" explorers had actually never set foot in *the* cave people had been telling us about for years.

Swamp? What swamp?

Not that El Altilte is exactly on the main drag. The first time we went there was on foot, which means an hour of slogging through mud puddles trying their best to become ponds. When the road finally ended, we were staring at a lovely little "lake" (the quotes are in deference to Chris Lloyd

who, for some reason insists on calling it a swamp) fed by a warm spring: a truly charming spot for camping which we had never dreamed was only minutes from where we had been caving for ten years.

Better than Hollywood

Upon arriving at the lake we met a man named Juan who quickly offered to show us the cave entrance, located only five minutes from the pond. The entrance turned out to be an ugly, narrow, horizontal slot. You crawl through and stand up at the edge of a vast room whose far walls are invisible. Sunlight streaming through the slot spotlights gorgeous decorations on the ceiling. Water dripping from many of the formations plus steam rising through the sunbeams give this room the sort of atmosphere that would make a Hollywood director salivate. So we called it Studio One.

Following the perimeter of Studio One, we came upon no circular stairway, but we did find several passages heading off in various directions, one of which actually leads to a body of water (which we suspect feeds the lake). Many of these passages are still awaiting exploration and mapping, so look out, Nevado de Colima!

Soup but not noodles

Spotting a balcony high above the far end of Studio One, climbers Chris Lloyd, Vicente Loreto and Luis Rojas soon had Claudio and me risking life and limb to wriggle up a slippery slope to the Soup Shelf. The "soup" on the Shelf is a disgusting mixture of guano and stalactite drip sometimes a foot deep. What you see swimming in the soup are not noodles, however, but four-inch-long millipedes which looked white to my eyes (during those precious seconds when my glasses weren't fogged up) but came out tan in all the pictures. Curiously, on hearing mention of the "soup," Susy suddenly remembered it was nearly supper time and headed out towards the clean, refreshing lake.

It was much hotter and steamier on the Soup Shelf than in the rest of the cave, so no one was particularly anxious to follow Luis Rojas into a low passage he said went for "a long, long way" but which we would have to crawl through in the company of even more squirming white critters like those populating the Shelf. "Don't worry," said Luis, "they're harmless."

Even though I believed they were inoffensive, the thought of having a couple of these wrigglers down my neck would take some getting used to.

Millipede Mile

Nevertheless, the day did come when a fairly large group of us girded our loins, clenched our teeth and crawled into the "long, long passage," presently known as Millipede Mile. Now, the survey says it was only about 23 meters long, but distances are relative when you find yourself "belly to belly" with a thousand-legger — so we forgive you, Luis!

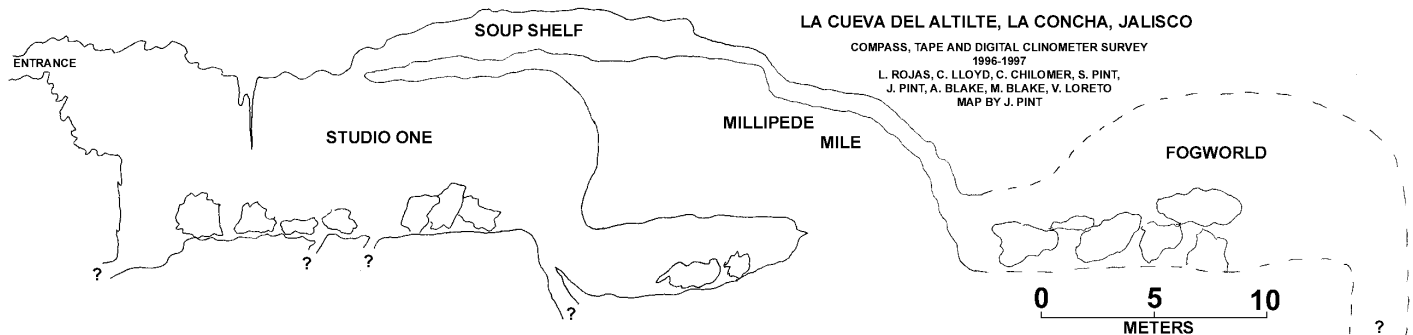
Unforgivable, though, is the fact that what we found at the other end of the Mile has yet to be recorded on film because the supersaturated atmosphere of the Soup Shelf penetrated everyone's camera, fogging lenses inside as well as out and later requiring professional cleaning. Even though its air is breathable, photographers might do well to think of Altilte as an underwater cave.

Slipslidin' on the Slabs

If you check out the Profile Map below, you'll see that Millipede Mile crawly slowly downslopes until it brings the crawler to another large room which is just about on the same level as Studio One, but separate from it. Perhaps this is a route that water took to get over a layer of harder rock. As the Plot Map shows, this room — Fogworld — lies right along the cave's main axis, exactly in the direction you would expect the cave to go.

Once again, we were standing above a large room whose walls were beyond the reach of our lights. Between us and those unseen boundaries lay an obstacle course consisting of great, smooth slabs of rock, each of them covered with a thin layer of guano (about half an inch) and each tilted at just enough of an angle to make you *think* you could walk on it without quickly ending up on your butt, sliding to the edge of who knows what. To avoid the slabs, most of us followed the right hand wall a short distance— short because above our heads were some very strange and beautiful stalactites which we were photographing with great enthusiasm (little did we know all we would get were blurs). Luis, of course, had sailed right over the Slippery Slabs and was shouting from somewhere in the distance, "I'm standing at the edge of a pit and I can't see the bottom!"

At this dramatic juncture, we were forced to depart Fogworld. As our survey shows, there's lots left to investigate... even if it doesn't go to El Nevado de Colima.



EL ALTILTE, UN LUGAR DE ENSUEÑO... Y CON UN POCO DE TODO PARA TODOS por Susy Pint

"¡Se está evaporando el lago! ¡Se está evaporando el lago", angustiado nos anunció Ricky, nuestro sobrinito de seis años cuando, a eso de las 6:30 de la mañana, salió de tienda de campaña y observó cómo un vapor extraño se deslizaba por encima de las tranquilas aguas del lago. "¡No, cariño!", le contestó su mamá, adormilada y sin muchas ganas de salir. "¡No se está evaporando, no te preocupes!... ¡Es sólo niebla! ¡Ven aquí y te explico!". Ya a esa hora, las garzas de distintas especies, desde garrapateras hasta grises y garcitas oscuras; los patos, los martín pescadores, los bienteveos y toda la hermosísima comunidad pajaruna que habita en esas áreas, adornaban el paisaje con su presencia y sus cantos matinales. Pero Ricky decidió quedarse afuera, encantado tal vez por toda aquella belleza que se presentaba ante sus ojos, y en su imaginación de niño, prefirió la idea de que el lago se estaba evaporando. "¡Tienen que salir todos!... ¡Sí! ¡El lago se está evaporando!", continuó insistiendo.

Y, como Ricky, quienes hemos estado ahí, encontramos en esa hora de la mañana en el Valle El Altilte, un encanto muy especial. Cuando la niebla poco a poco se pierde entre los tules que rodean el lago, en época de calor se siente una reconfortante frescura, y en época de frío, éste se desvanece cuando los rayos del sol penetran a través de las ramas del denso bosque tropical en el que predominan las higueras y los camichines; y, agregados a éstos por la mano del hombre, los tamarindos. Una multitud de tamarindos.

El Altilte es un pequeño valle sobre la carretera 80, a sólo 50 Kms. de Barra de Navidad. Su fértil suelo y la humedad característica de las áreas cercanas a la costa son elementos perfectos para que sus huertos de mangos, sandías, papayas y melones chinos se mantengan en producción.

Y no es sólo su pequeño lago de ensueño lo que nos ha atraído del Altilte, de tal manera que nuestros frecuentes viajes ahí se han convertido en una especie de ritual. La razón es esa... y algo más.

TABLEROS CON IMAGENES QUE HABLAN DE LA VIDA DE NUESTROS ANTEPASADOS

Como marcando lo que es el Valle del Altilte, se encuentra un conjunto de cerritos de mármol que, apenas bajando la imponente cadena de montañas de origen volcánico de la Sierra Cacoma, su existencia parece no tener lógica. Y cuando iniciamos nuestras expediciones justamente a esa área (en busca de cavernas, por supuesto), los lugareños nos informaron que en las paredes de uno de esos cerritos había "monos dibujados por los antiguos". Por algo así, ciertamente las cuevas podían esperar. Y dado que se nos había dicho que se encontraban en el primero de dichos cerros, nos internamos entre la maleza que lleva al lugar, subiendo entre enormes trozos de ese material.



La tarde comenzaba ya a caer cuando, absortos, paseamos nuestra vista por entre las altas y planas paredes. Y, poco a poco (unos diez metros arriba), como surgiendo de la misma roca, se delinearon distintas figuras. Prácticamente al frente, un risueño hombrecillo vestido con lo que daba la impresión de ser un pantalón bombacho y, en la cabeza, un extraño casco con una especie de pluma al centro, al que uno de los compañeros osó identificar como un astronauta. Poco a poco aparecieron otras figuras: por allí, un sol; más allá, lo que parecía un perro; luego, más allá, algo así como una



rana; luego, una flecha, y muchas otras figuras para las que no nos bastó la imaginación. Algunas de las figuras se repetían en distintos lugares (el perro y el sol, por ejemplo). Ahora, si era verdad que ese trabajo había sido realizado por nuestros antepasados, ¿quiénes fueron y por qué habrían decidido realizarlo en un lugar tan inaccesible? ¿Qué herramientas habrían utilizado para labrar en una piedra tan difícil de trabajar como lo es el mármol, y cuál sería el significado de ese trabajo? Aunque esa región hasta ahora no ha sido estudiada, después de observar nuestras diapositivas, el eminente arqueólogo Otto Schöndube nos pro-

porcionó algunos datos muy interesantes: A pesar de la dificultad para esculpirse, es obvio que esas gentes aprovecharon la forma de las paredes para utilizarlas como tableros sobre los que podrían grabar para la posteridad sus eventos importantes. Por otra parte, dado que las montañas a lo largo de la costa son perfectamente visibles desde lo alto del cerro, es posible que hayan hecho de ese sitio un lugar para observaciones astronómicas. Muy interesante también resultó que lo que a nosotros nos pareció un perro, el arqueólogo de inmediato lo identificó como un tejón. Otra de las figuras que se repiten, él piensa que tal vez representen escudos o algo así como antifaces. Esos petroglifos datan muy posiblemente del 700 al 1220 D.C. Debido a que el mármol se ha explotado ahí desde hace más de veinte años, la opinión del doctor Schöndube fue una contribución más para que los marmoleros, hasta estas fechas, continúen respetando la zona de los petroglifos. Y a pesar de que el lugar no ha sido aún estudiado, la gente que habita las zonas aledañas se siente orgullosa de tener dentro de lo que ellos consideran suyo, algo tan extraordinario.

En una exploración reciente con el biólogo José Luis Zavala, y tras una caminata bastante difícil, e incluso peligrosa en momentos (dado que los explotadores de mármol han cambiado en forma dramática la forma original de unos de los cerros, y lo que un día, por ejemplo, fueron pendientes inclinadas, ellos las han convertido en paredes escarpadas y casi perfectamente verticales), logramos subir a la cima de lo que ahora llamamos el Cerro de los Petroglifos. Ahí, descubrimos que entre las piedras más grandes se encuentran muchas más de esas figuras que, pacientemente, continúan en espera de que los expertos lleguen a ellas, y así, descifrar un día lo que, a través de todos esos símbolos, los habitantes de esa época quisieron compartir con nosotros, lo cual es una piececita más del gran rompecabezas que forma la historia de nuestro país.

TAMBIEN, HERMOSAS CAVERNAS DE MARMOL

Jalisco no es realmente un paraíso para los espeleólogos, sobre todo si comparásemos nuestras cavernas con tantas realmente espectaculares que se pueden ver en otros estados de la república. Lo que hemos aprendido de nuestras expediciones aquí, sin embargo, es que más allá de lo que podrían representar las dimensiones de una caverna, existen otros aspectos igualmente válidos. En las cavernas de El Altalte, por ejemplo, es siempre para nosotros un deleite recorrer esos mundos subterráneos cuya belleza se debe más que nada al material precioso en el que se han formado. El he-



cho también de que las cavernas sean el habitat de fauna muy especial, es algo que siempre nos ha fascinado. En todas estas cavernas, por ejemplo, hemos encontrado distintas especies de murciélagos. Y en dos de ellas: en la Cueva del Diablo y en la Cueva de los Tecolotes, habita más de una familia de hermosos tecolotitos.

Cuando iniciamos nuestras expediciones a El Altalte, no faltó quien nos hablara de una de esas cavernas fabricadas por la imaginación. Esta supuesta "gran cueva" cercana a un lago tenía una especie de escalera de caracol que conducía a un río subterráneo. A un cierto punto era necesario atravesar el río sobre un gran tronco de árbol para continuar luego, kilómetro



tras kilómetro, hasta llegar a las faldas del Nevado de Colima. Entendiendo, sin embargo, que la existencia una cueva parecida era por demás remota, decidimos enfocar nuestra atención en la búsqueda del lago, aunque, dado que nadie logró darnos información sobre su ubicación, también de éste perdimos la esperanza. Varios años después, sin embargo es decir recientemente regresamos al área, y sólo entonces descubrimos que el lago sí existe... y cerca de él... una cueva, sin la escalera de caracol, por supuesto. Esta caverna es de las más grandes que hemos explorado en el estado de Jalisco, y además de murciélagos, en ella habita en gran cantidad, por cierto una especie de milpiés de un color blanquecino (no muy bien apreciados por algún miembro del grupo) que se mueven muy activamente entre el guano de las varias especies que han encontrado en ese maravilloso palacio subterráneo un refugio. Por otra parte, podemos decir que desde un lugar en uno de los ramales más recónditos puede escucharse el fluir de agua en movimiento. Y aunque mucho dudamos que allende esas aguas se encuentre la manera de

llegar al Nevado de Colima, esta caverna es también de las más interesantes que hemos explorado debido a los tipos de dificultad que nos ha presentado en su exploración.

EN PELIGRO DE DESAPARECER

Aunque, al menos por el momento, podemos ver la zona de los petroglifos a salvo de la ambición de los explotadores de mármol, las cuevas de esos cerritos son otra historia. Una de ellas (la Cueva del Vinagrillo) no existe ya (;y quién sabe si otras que nunca conocimos!) La caverna del lago está a sólo unos metros de donde se está explotando el mármol en estos momentos. Y su desaparición no sólo significaría negar a futuras generaciones gozar de la belleza que ella contiene, sino también el derecho de sobrevivir que se ha negado ya a otros seres que formaban parte de la fauna que había encontrado en ellas un refugio seguro.

A PIT CALLED FORTÍN

By John Pint

Thanks to a tip from the owner of Killer Bee Cave, we were led, late in 1993, to a corner of Jalisco we had never seen before. "There's a bottomless pit not far from La Estrella," mentioned our informant as we breakfasted among the cow pies in his barnyard, "... throw a rock down that hole and it just keeps falling forever."

So far we have managed to get to the bottom of every bottomless pit we've come across, so one day we loaded 250 meters of rope into our truck and headed down the road toward La Estrella. A brand-new INEJI Geology map showed us that there were both large and small deposits of limestone all over this area and we decided we'd inquire about caves whenever we could.

The very first time we leaned out the window and talked to a man walking down the highway, we hit the jackpot.

"Dispense, señor, what's the name of this place?"

"Bueno, we call it La Cueva. Didn't you see the cave as you went around the last bend?"

As we walked back up the road, flashlights and assorted gear dangling from cords around our necks, a light drizzle began, which apparently infuriated the local flies and urged them to bite us mercilessly. Cursing, clanking and shooing away flies, we climbed up to a hole which apparently had been broken open when the road was constructed. The breaking must have continued after that, because every readily reachable stalactite had been snapped off in this 20 by 30 meter single room. Nevertheless, the cave is still very beautiful, with flowstone covering most of it. Besides formations, there are quite a few bats (for a change, not vampires).

As far as exploration goes, this cave took up no time at all, but it did show us what kind of limestone is found in these parts, so when our informant described another nearby cave, we listened carefully:

"It's a very steeply inclined tunnel that soon becomes a horizontal passage. We only went a few meters and then turned back, even though the passage continues. I'd be happy to show it to you next time you pass this way."

Christmas Mine (Mina Navidad)

We took the man's phone number and drove on to a town called La Estrella (the Star) where we saw a very expensive conveyor system in operation to bring ore down from a mine high in the nearby hills. We were reminded of the cable cars that take you up mountains in Europe, but this teleférico only carries powdered rock, no passengers.

When we asked what was being mined, we were told "minerals," and decided not to probe any further. After all, we were there to climb down a bottomless pit and didn't want to appear nosy.

The owner of the gas station had heard of the legendary hole we were seeking and sent us up a wide dirt road to a place called El Fortín, which means "the little fortress" and which turned out to be a two or three family settlement halfway to Navidad (Christmas) where the mysterious mine is located.

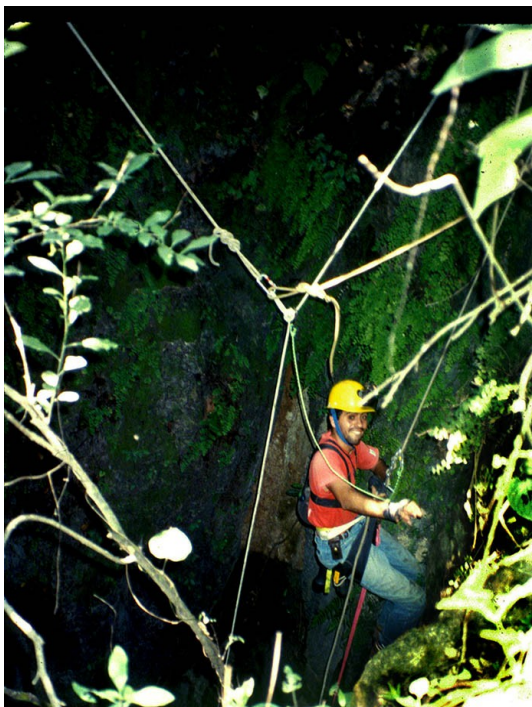
A resident of El Fortín was leaning against an old (and grounded) Jeep as we approached. The Jeep turned out to be a Willys, no doubt a valuable antique in the USA. Here it was a means of transport that had broken down and hopefully would soon be up and running again.

The pit was just a few minutes walk from El Fortín, conveniently located right alongside the mine road. However, we soon discovered that this was a bit too convenient, because apparently every visitor who comes to gawk also brings along a bit of the family trash and adds it to a heap that lies right between the pit and the road.

Thus it was that we approached the place with mixed emotions. The black hole about 8 meters across is definitely impressive, but who knew how much garbage (and what kind) might be piled up at its bottom, if it happened to have one after all.

The question of a bottom was quickly solved. Falling rocks hit it after nearly three seconds, indicating a depth of about 30 meters on the "corrected" Draco Falling Rock Scale... and sure enough, the old weight-on-a-string method showed it was about 28 meters down to something that sounded like a bottom anyhow.

So it wasn't deep, but rigging it took several hours of the next morning. We soon discovered that every one of its sides sloped inward, just enough to cause rope rub and none of the overhanging branches look sturdy enough to risk life and limb... a human limb anyway.



So we opted to support the main rope from three different sides, thus keeping it over a meter from the nearest wall... and, of course, too far away from the edge for directly connecting our descending and ascending gear. We would have to rappel a short distance down a padded rope against the side and then reconnect to the centered rope, a prospect that brought no smiles to Susy's face: "I need to practice that at home!" she decided, forcing Juan Blake and me to go it alone.

To tell the truth, I found that all that practice in trees is of little comfort when you lean over the edge of a gaping black maw and think about disconnecting yourself while hanging in midair from a rope to which you have just entrusted your life, in order to go hang from another. What is that they say about switching horses in midstream?

There I was, about to jump but feeling a bit strange. "Er, I think I need another drink of water, Juan," I mumbled, secretly wishing I could gulp down a swig of tequila instead... "and by the way, I think

I'm going to put a fatter knot at the end of this rope (the one I was attached to) just in case I rappel farther than I'm planning to."

All such gloomy pondering immediately ceased the moment I actually let myself over the edge. Now my life was on the line (literally) and all the practice paid off.

"First we put a jumar on the second rope, next..." I chatted to Susy, supposedly demonstrating how simple it all was. And in fact it did turn out to be simple. Nevertheless, it felt great when I was finally on the main rope with nothing to think about but a pleasant rappel to the bottom... assuming there was one and assuming again that my rope actually reached it and that there was breathable air down there (was my BIC oxygen-meter-lighter still hanging at my side?) and of course assuming no poisonous snakes had been tossed down the hole recently, and...

Well, by then I was practically at the bottom and could see coils of rope down there and learned:

- a. of air, there was plenty.
- b. of snakes, there were none.
- c. of side passages, two were visible.

While tromping over to the more promising side passage, I found the bones and skulls of two animals (maybe goats or dogs), which had long ago found their way into the pit. One of the side passages contained some very nice stalactites, but led to a hole no human could get into. The other passage was even prettier. Straight above it was a sort of "topless pit," a sparkling clean, dripping shaft that looked nearly as high as the one I had come down, but without a connection to the outside. Below it was a rock-filled slope leading to a hole less than a meter wide, obviously a channel for great amounts of water during the rainy season. A big canclo was creeping along one wall, claws ready to snatch an unwary insect. This creature a cave-dwelling relative of the vinagrillo was competing with several unusually large spiders we spotted. While peering down this hole within a hole, I accidentally dislodged a large rock which went smashing and crashing its way far down below me. Apparently we were far from the real bottom of this pit after all!

Later I belayed Juan Blake as he tossed innumerable stones down this hole, trying to determine the depth as well as rigging problems. We concluded that the passage probably goes down at least another 30 meters and that there's just enough of an angle to it to cause plenty of rope abrasion.

So, our plan is to return to El Pozo de Fortín with a bagful of bolts, lots of rope pads and a couple of cable ladders, hoping that the second pitch will lead not to the bottom, but to new passages and new adventures as we explore this small part of the universe where (to our knowledge) "no one has gone before."

CUEVA TINDARAPOS

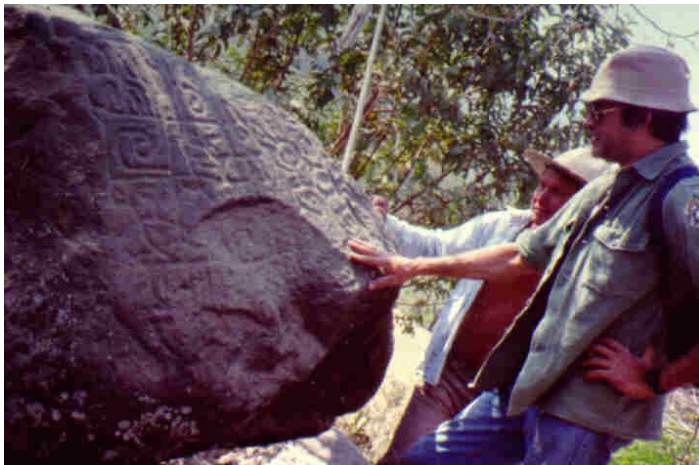
THE TREASURE HUNTER

The third cave we found along the Pihuamo River was brought to our attention by a man named Catalino who stepped out of the blackness into the light of our campfire and said, "I hear you are looking for caves." Catalino spoke of a third river cave north of Puerto de Fatima and "bound to contain treasure, so don't forget your metal detector."

Next day, on our way to the cave, Catalino showed us three large rocks covered with engravings from a bygone era. The third rock was particularly interesting because all the figures on it were spirals. "I'm sure it's a map and the spirals mean hills... but we can't quite figure out where the treasure is supposed to be." Apparently the indians of the past had never been told that an "X" is de rigueur for marking "the spot."



The entrance to Catalino's cave is 2 meters wide and 1.5 meters high. "This entire opening fills with water during the rainy season," stated our guide, who was already adjusting his treasure-hunter's headlamp. Indeed, we were later shown a flow-stone waterfall outside the cave which apparently turns into a raging cascade in the summer. Subsequent informants, however, say the heavy flow only occurs immediately after a storm.

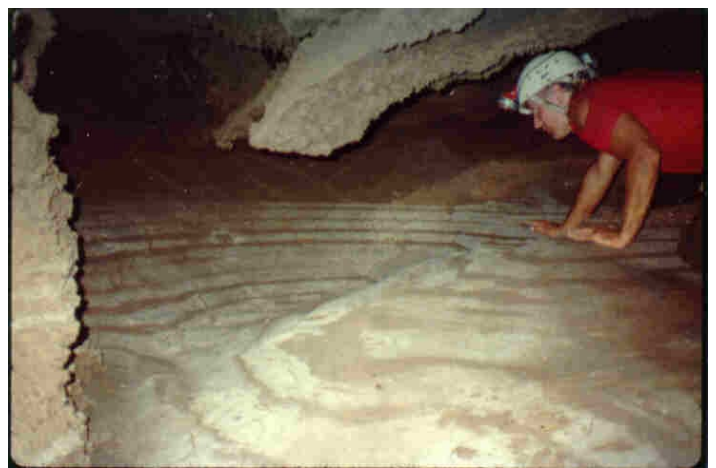


CLAWS, FANGS AND MUD

Inside the cave we spotted two canclos, cave-dwelling versions of the clawed and black-fanged creepers known as vinagrillos. "We call them tin-

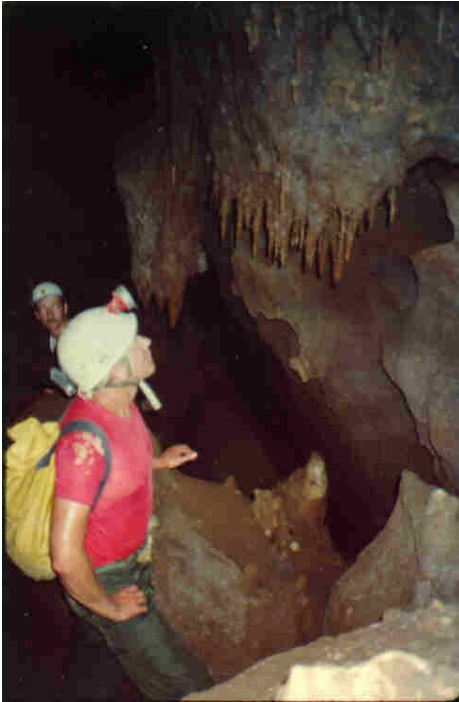
darapos hereabouts," said Catalino and that's where the cave got its name, even though it contains far fewer of these big spindly-legged creatures than most other caves in semi-tropical areas.

We followed a nice walk-along passage past two easy climb-downs, each above a small pool of water. The second of these is bordered by a series of delicate rimstone dams. The passage ends with a nice display of chocolatey stalactites above a muddy drop six meters deep.



After a "sabbatical" year in Saudi Arabia, we returned to Puerto de Fatima only to learn that our guide, Catalino had been murdered during an argument. We hope that the Passages of Plenty he may now be exploring are filled with the treasures he so earnestly sought.

Our ranks had swollen and our team now truly international included Susy Pint, Nani Ibarra, Luis Rojas and Vicente Loreto from Mexico; Claudio Chilomer from Brazil; Chris Lloyd from Canada and John Pint from "gringolandia." On our first trip beyond Muddy Drop, we used a cable ladder to climb down into a room barely big enough for three people. In its wall was a sort of shelf with a space only about 25 cm high above it. To our surprise, wriggling through this tight slot brought us into a going passage high enough to stand up in. A quick exploration showed us we were in a labyrinth of mud-caked passages, many of them natural fissures. This level of the cave appeared to be a vast reservoir and we could imagine, somewhere ahead of us, a lovely borehole, kilometers long, connecting the cave to the distant hills.



The survey of Cueva Tindarapos was begun during the spring of 1996, only to be interrupted by the onset of the rainy season, offering us an excellent excuse to forget about river caves for a while, wash out our totally mud-impregnated caving duds and roam the rich karst hills of southeast Jalisco in search of more bottomless

pits.

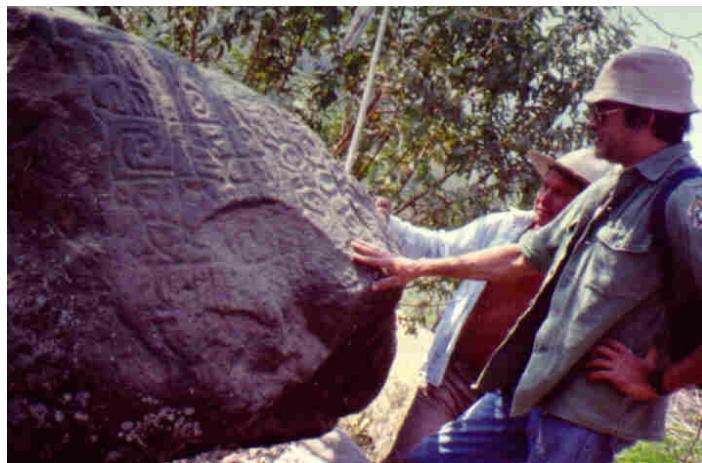
By John Pint

CUEVA TINDARAPOS

(Traducción por computadora, con la ayuda de Luis Rojas)

La tercera cueva en el río Pihuamo la encontramos gracias a Catalino, un señor que nos visitó en nuestro campamento, saliendo de la oscuridad y que lo descubrimos por la luz de nuestra fogata. Nos dijo: "Escuché que ustedes están buscando cuevas" y nos platicó de la tercera cueva en el río al norte de Puerto de Fátima; y que no olvidáramos el detector de metales, por eso de los tesoros.

El día siguiente, en camino a la cueva, Catalino nos enseñó tres grandes rocas cubiertas con grabados de tiempos pasados. La tercera roca era particularmente interesante porque todas las figuras eran espirales. "Estoy seguro que eso es un mapa y las espirales significan cerros. Pero no podemos



comprender donde está el tesoro." Aparentemente a los indios del pasado nunca les han dicho que deberían marcar el lugar del tesoro con una "X".

La entrada a la cueva de Catalino es de 2 metros de ancho y un metro y medio de alto. "Esta entrada se llena completamente con agua durante la época de lluvias", nos dijo nuestro guía mientras preparaba su lámpara de cazador de tesoros en su cabeza. Efectivamente, nos enseñaron posteriormente formaciones aparentemente hechas por la caída del agua, fuera de la cueva, donde aparentemente se forma una grande cascada durante el ve-

rano. Supimos después que la fuerte caída de agua solo sucede inmediatamente después de una tempestad.

TENAZAS, AGUIJONES Y LODO

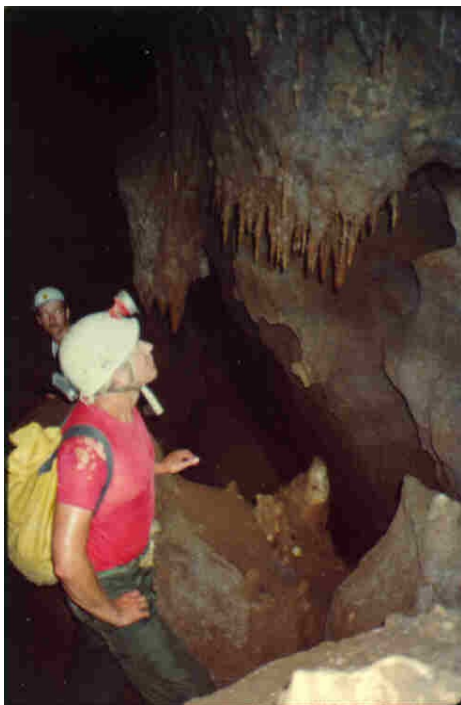
Dentro de la cueva encontramos dos "canclos", una versión "cuevera" de unos insectos con tenazas y aguijones negros conocidos como "vinagrillos". "Les decimos 'tindarapos' por aqui", dijo Catalino, y de ahí salió el nombre de la cueva, a pesar de que no se encontraron muchas de esas criaturas de patas larguísimas y aparentemente frágiles, comparando con otras cuevas en áreas semi-tropicales.

Seguimos caminando por un bonito pasaje, pasando por dos sencillos declives, cada uno por encima de una pequeña alberca. El segundo declive era rodeado por una serie de pequeñas presas hechas de bonitas (y filosas) estalagmitas. El pasaje termina en una pared de estalactitas que bajan a un pozo de 6 metros, con las paredes cubiertas de lodo, muy escurridizo.



Después de un "sabático" año en Arabia Saudita, regresamos a Puerto de Fátima para descubrir que nuestro guía, Catalino, había sido asesinado en un riña. Tenemos esperanza que en su Camino de Gloria que él ha de estar atravesando en estos momentos, pueda encontrar su tan anhelado tesoro.

Nuestro ánimo ha crecido, y el equipo de exploradores - ahora verdaderamente internacional - incluye a Susy Pint, Nani Ibarra, Luis Rojas y Vicente Loreto, de Mexico; Claudio Chilomer de Brasil; Chris Lloyd de Canadá y John Pint de "gringolandia". En nuestro primer viaje para seguir la investigación de la cueva mas allá del pozo de 6 metros, utilizamos una escalera de cable para bajarlo. Llegamos a un cuarto suficiente apenas para 3 personas. Había un pequeño pasaje de unos 25 cm de altura, por donde nos exprimimos para llegar a otro salón donde podíamos ponernos de pié. Una rápida exploración nos indicó que estábamos en un laberinto de pasajes, extremadamente lodosos, muchas de esas fisuras naturales. A ese nivel la cueva parecía un enorme reservatorio de agua y podemos imaginar en algún lugar más adelante de dónde estábamos, un maravilloso túnel de kilómetros de extensión, conectando la cueva a las montañas distantes.



La exploración de la cueva de los tindarapos empezó durante la primavera de 1996, y fue interrumpida por la temporada de lluvias, una excelente excusa para olvidar por un rato las cuevas formadas por ríos, dándonos tiempo para limpiar nuestros equipos totalmente impregnados de lodo y nos dirigimos a la investigación de los

cerros de roca caliza al sudeste de Jalisco, en busca de nuevos pozos sin fondo.

Por: John Pint, Photos por J. Pint

CUACHALALATE CAVE

Good luck if you can pronounce it, much less remember it

By: John Pint

We had long been interested in searching for deep pits in the limestone hills above the rancho known as Fortín in the Pihuamo River area of Jalisco. Pozo Fortín hadn't led us down to the "big system" we're sure is under there somewhere, so it was time to look for a new connection. One day in October of 1995, Claudio Chilomer, [Chris Lloyd](#), Susy Pint, Nani Ibarra and I decided to take a look.

"Before we go, why not call up Ramón Barajas of Tecalitlán?" I suggested, hoping he might be free to show us at last a cave he'd mentioned about two years ago, located near the road between Tecalitlán and Pihuamo. Next day we found Ramón waiting for us in front of the bee hives near Side of the Road Cave (famous for its friendly little "talking" bats). He and his son then led us up into the lush green hills below La Tigra peak.

"This is not the best time to go looking for a little hole I haven't seen since I was a kid," commented Ramón, swinging his machete vigorously. Indeed, the vegetation was luxuriant and we came upon all sorts of vines and plants we'd never seen before, including several that coat the passing visitor with tiny, hairlike needles called ajuates.

THE IMPENETRABLE WALL

Eventually, whitish karst outcroppings began to appear and at a spot called Puerto del Tabaquillo, we fanned out to search for the hole. "Fanning out" in a thick tangle of thorns and vines growing around and above great chunks of "prickly rock" means we all took one step forward and found ourselves nose to nose with a seemingly impenetrable wall

"How in the name of Zotz do we get through this?"

Claudio, however, must have learned a trick or two as a Brazilian Bush Baby for he managed to squeeze a whole two meters into the tangle, whereupon the old Chilomer luck struck again: "I found it!" shouted Claudio.

Practically on my belly, I crawled over to Claudio's find, picking up plenty of new ajuates along the way.

Just then Chris and Susy shouted from even deeper in the thicket. "Forget Claudio's hole, Ramón just found the real one!"

SKYLIGHTS AND CRITTERS

But I had already joined Claudio and had little desire to forge a new path through the "jungle," so I climbed down to the landing a few meters below and discovered that Claudio's hole showed plenty

of promise. The walls were covered with flowstone and off to one side was a downsloping crawlway. There was also a curious formation on the floor. It was cylindrical and hollow inside, something like a petrified tree stump, but apparently a genuine stalagmite of some sort.

Chris, meantime, had downclimbed Don Ramón's hole and was shouting up news about a big chamber and plenty of formations.

Claudio and I were not ready to give up on "our" hole, however, even though it was so hot inside that I had to spend more time wiping off my glasses than wearing them.



About the time Claudio, on belay, had reached the end of the downsloping passage and was peering into what looked like a black abyss, we heard Chris's voice coming from farther down below. Connection! Soon all three of us were gawking at the surprising number of formations that decorate this cave. Although it is basically one big room, it really takes hours to have a good look around.



Besides the two entrances we had found, there are two "skylights" in the ceiling, one of which would be ideal for photos of someone rappeling into a forest of lovely stalactites.

As far as living creatures go, we found several large canclos (whip-tail spiders as big as your hand, with black fangs and scorpion-like pinchers), one chinche hocicona (a "big-mouth bedbug" an inch long with a long needle used for sucking blood) and more of the chattering bats seen in Side of the Road Cave.

As we crawled out, we were amazed to see Ramón busy talking on the telephone, apparently as comfortable with a telcell in his hand as with a machete.

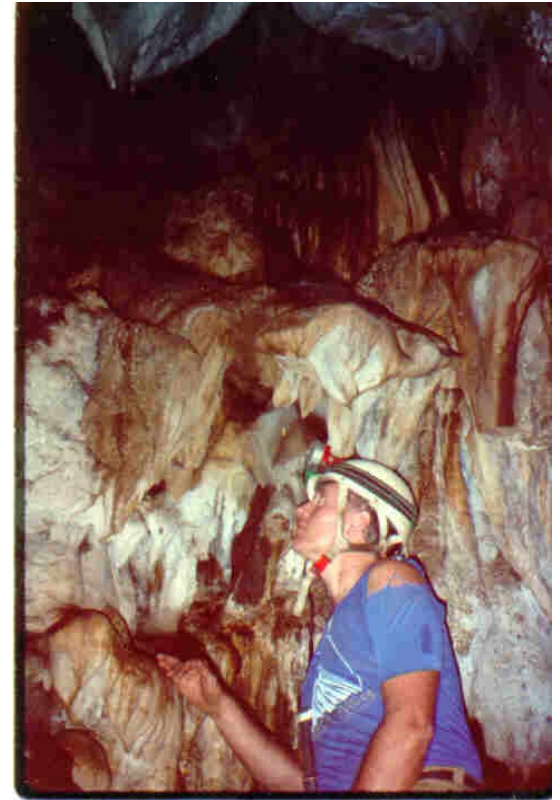
UNFORGETTABLE HISTO

Ten minutes later we were down at the roadside, trying to wash off the ajuates and güinas (chiggers) in a cool and delightfully refreshing, spring-fed brook, after which we headed for our favorite caving grounds near the little settlement of Fortín.

On a subsequent visit to this cave, our mapping endeavors got us into several dusty passages and everyone present ended up with histoplasmosis, even I, who was supposedly immune. For Luis Rojas, it was histo case number eight which may be the reason why he suggested the name "Cuachalalate" for this cave, a name so difficult to remember (supposedly it refers to a tree near the entrance) that it immediately suggests "forget this place" to the would-be visitor.

PITS 15 TO 19

Any place with nineteen pits sounds like Cavers' Heaven, but I've cheated a bit because we began counting from "Pit Fortín" that wonderful hole we hope connects with the Pihuamo River caves. Fortín is pronounced just like fourteen, so naturally we gave the name "15" to a pit shown to us by Jesús, son of Don Rafa, the morning of October 8. After a brisk, ever upwards walk, there we were peering down into a pitch black maw, when Susy leaned against a "tree" which happened to be a tall Nopal (prickly-pear cactus) which happened to be rotten and which immediately fell right on top of Chris, who standing at the edge of the pit slid halfway in before a couple of us managed to grab his arms.



We then convinced Chris it might be safer (but admittedly slower) to climb down the cable ladder, which he did. Unfortunately, neither this cave nor the next had going passages and we went on with Jesús to Pit 16 which proved too long for the cable ladder. This one is 15 meters deep by the old Rock-on-a-Thread measurement and looks worth a rappel.

WHACKING THE WASPS

Next we found ourselves in the middle of a cornfield, looking down a hole whose entrance was also home to a swarm of small wasps. Our guide Jesús immediately (and without warning) applied the traditional WASP DISPERSAL MANEUVER universally practiced by country folk: whack 'em hard and knock 'em on the ground. Of course, all the rest of us gasped and dove for shelter, but Jesús' technique worked fine and the wasps departed. This hole also proved too deep for the ladder, so we'll be seeing Cornflakes Caverns (Susy's name) again someday.

Hole 19 was quite different and is located on another hill, only three minutes from a convenient dirt road. A little two-meter drop brings you to a sloping floor that leads to a big, beautifully decorated room. There are plenty of large Canclos, too, but no sign of our dream passage down to the river caves.

So, in a few hours we visited five pits in the hills above Fortín and suspect there are many more: another fine caving area not unlike the famous Cerro Grande.

CHRIS LLOYD'S ROLLING BOMB

After a cold beer with Don Rafa and Jesús, we drove off, all of us crossing our fingers that the gasoline dripping from beneath Chris Lloyd's recently purchased "seminew" truck would not take us to the Great Beyond instead of Guadalajara.

Well, by the time we reached Pihuamo, the drip had become a trickle. But neither food nor a mechanic could be found in Pihuamo that Sunday, so we drove on to Tecolotlán, trusting in those same supernatural beings that permit Mexican drivers to pass semis on blind curves overlooking 1000-foot drops, with impunity. And sure enough, we reached Tecolotlán our trickle now a gush and immediately sat down for a long overdue lunch (first things first!) after which we sought out and found a great mechanic who just happened to like working on Sundays. He replaced the truck's thoroughly rotten gas lines and patched one particularly bad connection with a kneaded mixture of laundry soap and sugar, claiming this was better than epoxy.

Lo and behold, no more drips and no more fumes and like most "this- oughta-getcha-there" repair jobs, it lasted just long enough for us to reach home and then went to pieces.

Published in the AMCS Newsletter, Vol. 22, 1997

CUEVA DEL CUACHALALATE

Estabamos interesados en buscar los pozos profundos de los cerros calizos arriba del rancho conocido como "Fortín", en el río Pihuamo Edo de Jalisco. El pozo Fortín nos había conectado con el "GRAN SISTEMA".

Estamos seguros que esta abajo en algún lugar, entonces era tiempo de buscar una nueva conexión.

Un día, en Octubre de 1995, Claudio Chilomer, Chris Loyd, Susy Pint, Nani Ibarra y yo, decidimos hechar una mirada, "Antes de ir, porque no le hablamos a Ramon Barajas, de Tecalitlán"?. Yo sugeró, esperando que tuviera tiempo para enseñarnos -al menos- una cueva que había mencionado hace dos años, localizada cerca del camino, entre Tecalitlán y Pihuamo.

Al día siguiente encontramos esperándonos enfrente de unos colmenares cerca de la "Cueva al lado del camino", (famosa por sus pequeños y amigables murcielagos "parlanchines"). El y su hijo nos llevaron entre los exuberantes cerros debajo del pico "La Tigra".

"Este no es el mejor tiempo para buscar un pequeño hoyo que no he visto desde que era un niño", comentó don Ramón blandiendo vigorosamente su machete.

Efectivamente, la vegetación era exuberante y nos topamos con toda clase de guías y plantas que nunca habíamos visto, incluyendo algunas que cubrían la vereda con delgadas puntas parecidas a cabellos llamadas ajuates ("aguates").

LA PARED IMPENETRABLE

Eventualmente, el blanquecino karst comienza a aflorar, y en un lugar llamado "Puerto Tabaquillo", desparramamos la vista en busca del hoyo. Rodeados de delgadas espinas y arriba grandes trozos de "rocas espinosas", lo que significa que avanzamos un paso y nos topamos nariz con nariz con lo que parecía una pared impenetrable. "Como en el nombre de Zotz atravezaremos esto?".

" Lo encontré, gritó" Claudio".

Practicamente de panza, me arrastré para encontrar a Claudio, llenandome todo de ajuates. Entonces Chris y Susy gritaron desde las profundidades, " olvida el hoyo que encontró" Claudio, Ramón encontró" el verdadero".

CLARABOYAS Y ANIMALES

Pero, ya me había reunido con Claudio y tenía pocos deseos de hacer un nuevo camino a través de la "jungla". Entonces desescalé hasta lo plano, pocos metros abajo y descubrí que el hoyo que encontró Claudio sí prometía. Las paredes estaban cubiertas de formaciones y por un lado estaba en descenso, también había curiosas formaciones sobre la tierra. Estas eran cilíndricas y huecas. Algo parecidas a un tocón de árbol petrificado, pero aparentemente una genuina estalactita de alguna clase.



Chris, mientras tanto, había desescalado el hoyo que encontró don Ramón, estaba gritándonos noticias acerca de una gran cámara llena de formaciones.

Claudio y yo no estábamos preparados para darnos por vencidos sobre nuestro hoyo o lo que fuera, aunque estaba tan caliente adentro que pasaba más tiempo desempañando mis lentes que usándolos.

(about the time Claudio, on belay) había alcanzado el final de la pendiente del pasaje y, estaba escudriñando aquello que parecía un abismo negro, oíamos la voz de Chris que venía desde muy lejos y abajo.



Conexión. Pronto, los tres estábamos estupefactos ante el sorprendente número de formaciones que decoraban esta cueva. Aunque básicamente es un gran cuarto, toma varias horas darle un buen vistazo, a un lado de las dos entradas que habíamos encontrado, había dos "claraboyas" en el techo, una de las cuales podría ser ideal para fotos o algún rappel entre una selva de adorables estalactitas.

Tan lejos como las criaturas van, encontramos algunos grandes canclos (arañas con grandes colas, tan grandes como una mano, con grandes colmillos negros y tenazas parecidas a las de los escorpiones), una chinche hocicona de una pulgada de largo, con una trompa como aguja (que usa para chupar la sangre) y, mas murcielagos parlanchines como los de la Cueva de al lado de la carretera.

Cuando salimos, nos asombramos de ver a Ramón ocupado hablando por teléfono, aparentemente tan a gusto con un Telcel en sus manos con un machete.

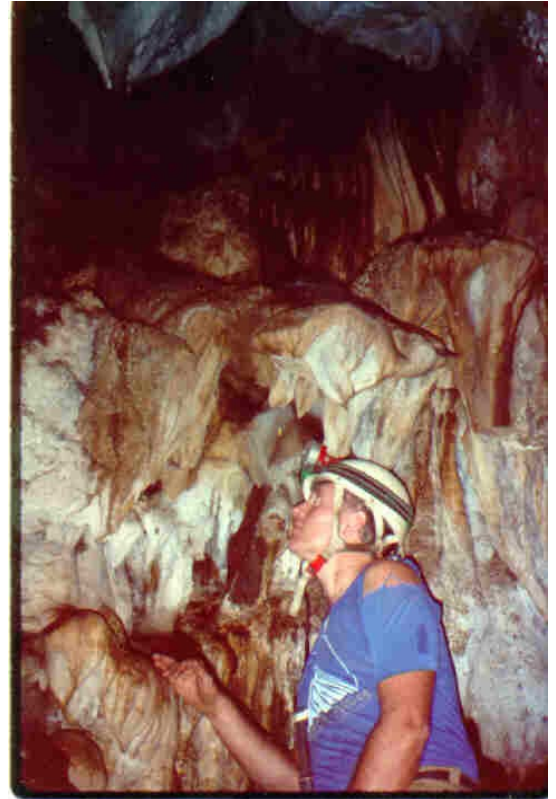
INOLVIDABLE HISTO

Diez minutos después estábamos en la carretera tratando de quitarnos los ajuates y las guinas en un frío y deliciosamente refrescante arroyo, después nos fuimos a nuestras cuevas favoritas cerca del pueblito del Fortín.

En subsecuentes visitas a esta cueva, nos llevó a varios pasajes polvorientos, y todos presentamos síntomas de Histoplasmosis, aún yo, que me creía inmune. Para Luis Rojas, era su octavo caso de Histoplasmosis, guía sea la razón por la que sugirió el nombre de "Cuachalalate" para esta cueva, un nombre tan difícil de recordar, (supuestamente referido a un árbol cercano a la entrada de la cueva)

que inmediatamente sugiere "olvida este lugar", para los posibles visitantes.

Por: John Pint (Publicado en AMCS Newsletter, No.22, 1997)



CHIQUILICHE CAVE

J. Pint



A good way to visit the beautiful limestone hills outside Chiquilistlán is to ask Luis Rojas to guide you to Chiquiliche Cave. Since "Dracula" Rojas has a way of vanishing at the most unexpected moments, you will have plenty of time to get acquainted with cornfields two meters tall and impenetrable tangles of thorny *maleza*. When you finally beat your way out of the bush, you're sure to find Luis somewhere

up ahead puffing on a cigarette and asking you, "What took so long?"

The Chiquiliche hills are also great for sudden torrential rains. Once, we arrived back at our car soaking wet only to discover that the *vado* (dip) separating us from Chiquilistlán had turned into the Amazon River and we were trapped right where we parked for a couple of hours. This is definitely a good place to bring along your *Cave Capers* board.

The layout of this cave is a bit unusual. The "Main Entrance" is a wide slot about 35 meters long with a steeply sloping floor at the bottom. The upper end of the slot is reachable by two climbable drops of about seven and two meters. A cable ladder makes it easy, but no matter what, the climber should be belayed.

At the bottom of the slot you have access to three different passages. One of these is the roofed prolongation of the slot itself. One summer day we were in this passage at noon and discovered that sunshine pouring through several holes in the high ceiling create impressive beams of light just begging to be photographed ingeniously.

On Sept 17, 2000, we decided to take up the challenge and brought along Roberto Barrero, who offered to be the guinea pig that would dangle in a beam while the rest of us clicked away at our shutters.

The first surprise occurred when we reached the slot and discovered that yours truly had forgotten to bring along the cable ladder. "You mean I've got to do that climb hand over hand?" moaned Susy, who decided she would rather stay above and assist Roberto with his rappel. Maybe, I thought, Susy will encounter some of the bat hunters we had run into on a previous occasion. These guys had brought their guns to the cave hoping to shoot a few "vampires" and Susy would be the ideal person to convince them that all the bats we had found in this cave were friendly ones which deserved protection, not a massacre. Since Jesús hadn't brought his helmet (are we *all* a little out of practice?) he was able to borrow Susy's, once he reshaped his head to fit it.



While Jesús, Luis and I set up cameras below, Roberto tossed down the 30-meter rope which was supposed to reach the bottom, but didn't. Since it was only two meters short, Roberto attached an 8mm cord to the end of it. Soon he was suspended in the sunbeam, his gleaming white coveralls suggesting an astronaut floating in space at the end of an umbilical cord. After we had taken enough pictures to give him a double case of harnessitis, Roberto slid down to the 8mm connection and somehow got stuck at the knot. Since we thought it was unfair for anyone to end his days dangling only one meter from the bottom of a cave, Roberto was initiated into the top-secret, ZOTZ "Rope-Escape Technique" which was been

passed down to us by the Mayan Indians, Zotz Branch, of course. This technique works best if someone with strong shoulders (like Dracula Rojas, for example) happens to be in the vicinity.

After Roberto's rescue, we worked on a less exciting project: trying to photograph small speleothems by the light of a white-LED (Light-Emitting Diode) flashlight. We discovered that the yellow cast of an ordinary flashlight is replaced by the cold blue-green cast of the LEDs which doesn't make for much of an improvement. However, the LEDs did give a nice, even light.

We exited the Slot either by brute force or consummate climbing skill, according to our various talents or lack thereof, and headed for the truck and cold, delicious, *cerveza León*.

The Vertical Catacombs of Barreras

By: John J. Pint



According to our friend Don Rafael, he recently struck up a conversation with a traveller from the little town of Barreras, Jalisco, who told him of an intriguing cave in the area. "It's a straight tunnel, high enough to walk upright in and it's so long..." Well, the man claimed people had walked in it for two days -- sleeping there overnight -- without ever coming to the end of the cave.

Now, I've never met a Mexican treasure hunter whose light (and they never seem to

carry more than one) has lasted over an hour, so I'm a bit doubtful of anyone who claims to have spent four days in a cave. However, Barreras is right smack in the middle of some of the finest karst in western Mexico, so we had to go take a look.

After bouncing along dirt roads for a bit over an hour, we came to a flat valley near the Naranjo river. While the streets of many pueblos have more ruts and potholes than the roads leading to them, Barreras had wide, neat cobblestone streets, generally straight as an arrow. It almost looked as if someone had planned to put a town there.

Chris Lloyd and I sat in the truck while Susy and Nani scouted up informants -- somehow people are always ready to divulge important cave info to the ladies, but can be suspicious of "men bearing helmets." Soon (as usual) we were sitting in someone's living room, sipping agua de limon and waiting for Noel, a young man who half the town said had actually been inside a cave.

While we awaited Noel (by the way, not even his parents knew that Noel means Christmas in French), the family slowly began to drag out fascinating artifacts of all sorts, figuring this was the sort of thing we looked for in caves. Among other things, they had several kinds of ancient beads, jade and bone carvings, the fat foot and thigh of some plump god or goddess and a beautiful necklace made of little pierced sea shells and rectangular "slices" of bone. Then they came out with a small jar, completely intact, with black hatching. "Keep it," they told Susy, "it's not worth anything."

About then, Noel walked in, just as friendly as the rest of the family and soon we were winding our way up to the top of the Cerro del Caballito (Horsey Hill) which is so covered with rocks (all beautiful karst) that we were surprised to find crops up there.

Noel took out his machete and off we went into the hilly woods beyond the fields. "It took me nine attempts to find this cave," said Noel and we could see why. His machete was kept busy every step of the way and not a path did we ever see. This was really a wild and wooly place, so wild that Susy suddenly decided to demonstrate her acrobatic techniques by doing a spectacular somersault that ended in a dramatic belly flop. But she was up and valiantly limping along in an instant.

The entrance to the cave was a small hole a foot and a half high, hidden in a jumble of rocks which blended right in with thousands of similar jumbles. How Noel ever found it at all is beyond me. And how anyone could describe this obscure hole as a "big, walk-in entrance" to a long tunnel was a mystery.



We crawled through and climbed down into a narrow little room. A black, spindly-legged creature -- maybe four inches long -- with huge claws, scurried past us. "It's a tindarapo," said Noel, but we noticed it was clearly different from any tindarapo that we had ever seen before, first because of its jet-black color and second, because it had a tail sticking straight up like a car antenna or like...

"Ah ha!" I cried. I do believe we've finally found the "whip-tail scorpion" which tindarapo is supposed to translate.

Nani, who is a medical doctor, then proceeded to push and prod the critter with a stick "in the interests of science," that is, to find out if it was going to bite or sting us. It turned out the "fierce beastie" was not aggressive at all, so we moved over to a hole at the end of the little room and peered down into a deep hole. It looked like a ten meter drop, straight down, but the walls of this apparently natural fissure were less than a meter apart and chimneyable. Noel, who had already strapped a hunter's lantern to his head, rose several

notches in my estimation. "You've climbed down there, eh?"

He nodded and I unpacked the cable ladder. The climbers in our group wouldn't need it, but I'm always thinking about the Arrival of the Unexpected: that falling rock, that batwing in the face, that wayward African bee. In caving, an ounce of prevention pays off handsomely.

The bottom of the crevasse wasn't a bottom at all, but a carefully constructed shelf with a hole at one end. Scattered here and there were lots of bones, human enough to be easily identified by Doctor Nani. "Last time I was here," said Noel, "a friend found four small fish made of jade, right in this room." He disappeared down the hole and we followed. Below was another floor that wasn't really a floor. This long, narrow space had a low "room" off to one side, into which Chris rolled in or-

der to experience the peaceful rest of a corpse. Of course, the tomb-robbers hadn't left a trace of the original body.

It was eerie climbing from one story to the next, seeing each floor become a ceiling, then looking up at those neatly arranged rocks and wondering what would happen if just one of them slipped out of position. Would the fact that they had been stable for hundreds or thousands of years increase or decrease the chance that they might give way today?

It turned out that Noel -- who was now on a borrowed flashlight -- had never reached the bottom of these curious, pre-Columbian catacombs, but at Chris and Nani's urgings, what appeared to be the last floor was reached at around 60 meters below the surface. Just enough formations could be seen on the two narrow walls of this deep slot to bolster the claim that this could be called a cave, but you would be reading a far more informative article if we had had an archeologist along with us. Who knows how much more there is to this story? Hopefully we'll find a volunteer to accompany us on a return expedition.

That night, we were treated to the sight of Dr. Nani's grimaces as Chris cremated a fat tick whose head was buried in my neck (and apparently still is).

Next morning, after a sweltering, sleepless night in the dead air of Chris's favorite camping spot, we stopped at a small pit along the roadside, planning to have a quick look at its bottom. "That tree on the other side is the one we should tie onto," someone said. Fortunately, before we decided who was going to do the honors, Susy shouted, "Stop! That's an hincha-huevos tree!" Sure enough, up on the mountain top, I had asked Noel 150 times to please warn us if he spotted this detestable tree, and now we were practically dancing in the branches of one. The hincha-huevos (Swollen Balls Tree) inflicts upon you even more than what its name implies. If a gringo type like me touches any part of its bark, the result is a multitude of oozing, spreading sores that make poison ivy look as friendly as honeysuckle. Local people claim all you have to do is walk past the leeward side of it to get infected.

"We'll send Luis Rojas (who wasn't present) down this one," we said, and headed for home, wondering what had ever happened to that two-day-long horizontal dream cave we had been looking

for in the first place.

