

BATS NEWS



View from Actun Chapat, Belize
Photo by April Cantrell



BATTLEFIELD AREA TROGLODYTE SOCIETY

February/March 2006

FEATURES

ANOTE FROM THE EDITOR:

Well, we finally have our first BATS newsletter since before I even joined. I just wanted to give a big thanks to those who sent in articles for this newsletter. Robin sent in a truly excellent Mexico trip report for VBATS – special thanks! Keep them coming in for the next newsletter. Also, a giant thanks to Meredith and Sarah for doing a great job proofreading.

See you on the dark side!

April

CALENDAR & EVENTS ... pg. 3

MEETING MINUTES

March 2006 ... pg. 4

TRIP REPORTS

Glade Cave ... pg. 6

Actun Chapat and Actun

Tunichil Muknal ... pg. 7

The Mexican Trilogy ... pg. 13

ARTICLES

How To S*** In A Cave ... pg. 9

Rappin' With The French Wrap ... pg. 10

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Grand Caverns Restoration ... pg. 18

Spring VAR 2006 ... pg. 19

35th Annual Speleofest ... pg. 20

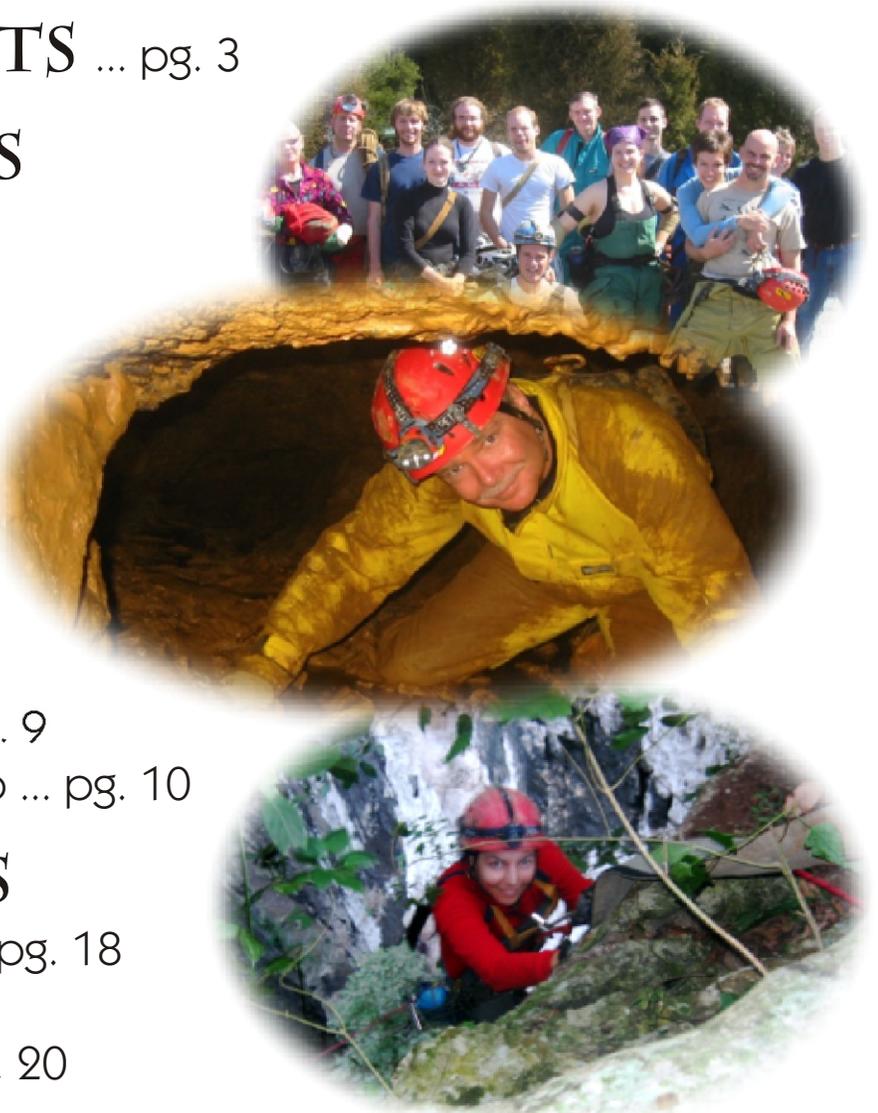


Photo on cover by A. Cantrell. Top two photos on this page courtesy of Meredith Hall Johnson. Bottom photo on this page courtesy of Robin Mitchell.

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CALENDAR & EVENTS

APRIL

April 11th ... BATS Meeting, 7:00 p.m.

April 15th ... VAR Grand Caverns Restoration Weekend

Contact Meredith for info or go to VAR website at:

<http://www.varegion.org/var/events/GrandCaverns/GrandCaverns.shtml>

April 28th - 30th ... Spring VAR at Grand Caverns

For more information, visit <http://www.varegion.org/var/events/SpringVAR/SpringVAR.shtml>

MAY

May 9th ... BATS Meeting, 7:00 p.m.

May 13th ... BATS Grotto Trip to Hamilton and Trout Caves

Both hard and easy led trips. Watch the BATSlist for details.

JUNE

June 13th ... BATS Meeting, 7:00 p.m.

Date TBD ... BATS Grotto Trip

Gordon is looking into a possible trip to Bubble Cave.

JULY

July 7th ... BATS Meeting

This will be a POOL PARTY at Allan's house in Woodbridge. Bring something to grill, something to drink, and something to share. We will have a meeting too!

July 21st - 23rd ... 3rd Annual 10th Anniversary BATS Weekend

This time at Big Bend, WV. A float trip is planned and a trip to the Via Ferrata is being talked about.

AUGUST

August 7th - 11th ... NSS Convention 2006

Where: Bellingham, Washington

Cost: NSS Member Registration (includes guidebook) ... \$130

Non-NSS Member Registration (includes guidebook) ... \$166

After June 15, 2006 ... Add \$30

Info: <http://www.nss2006.org/index.htm>

August 15th ... BATS Meeting (possibly), 7:00 p.m.

If you are planning on attending, please let Meredith know if the August 15th date is good.

MEETING MINUTES

BATS MARCH MEETING MINUTES

March 14, 2006
Potomac Senior High School
Dumfries, Virginia

ATTENDEES

Gordon Birkhimer, Morgana Birkhimer, Mike Hill, Meredith Hall Johnson, TinY Manke, Allan Weberg, and Jeremy Meyers for five minutes

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Meredith is pleased with the recent growth and activity of the grotto. We're getting new members each month and lots of inquiries on the BATSlist. We just had the biggest BATS grotto trip ever! Thanks to Mike Hill for volunteering to take over as Grotto Librarian. Upcoming events are the annual Grand Caverns Restoration Field Camp (flyer passed around), Spring VAR (flyer passed around), and the deadline for the NSS Convention Slide Salon is actually April 15, not March 15, so I still have time for that elusive photo I tried for last weekend!

SECRETARY'S REPORT

None (we are waiting on the minutes of the 2/20/2006 Executive Committee meeting, but Nikki has been sick and has not gotten to them)

TREASURER'S REPORT

Seth has not had a chance to update the file, but will soon put it out on the BATSlist.

BATS BUCKS

We took in \$19 even though there were so few attendees. TinY was playing catch-up.

OLD BUSINESS

Venture Crew New Caver Orientation and Cave Trip - The NCO is supposed to be this Thursday, March 16, and the trip to Trout Cave on Saturday, March 25. Can anyone help out with either of these?

NEW BUSINESS

- **BOG Meeting Update** - Meredith talked about preparations for the BOG meeting in November. We checked out the facilities and Gordon said they were fine. Allan got permission to NOT have a custodian on-site that day (saving us up to a couple hundred dollars!) but that means we have to clean up after the meeting: sweep, trash, and toilets. We will need help with the following: picking up people from Dulles and National (and taking them back on Sunday), hosting BOG members and NSS officers, arriving early Saturday at Potomac Senior High School to set up for the meeting (must be ready by 8:30!), bringing lunch back, showing cave photos in a continuous slide show during dinner at Don Pablo's Mexican Kitchen, and generally driving folks around.
- **New Caver Orientation** - Steve Bennett (formerly known as "Long Hair Steve")(more recently formerly known as "Broken Leg Steve") wanted to bring up a motion but did not since he was not here. It was the consensus of those present that the NCO is important and should remain a requirement, though we can make exceptions in cases like the recent one discussed on the BATSlist (an experienced caver who is well-known within the grotto).
- **BATS Blog** - Allan reminded everyone to take a look at the newest page on our website: the Blog. He is the only one who can upload files and photos, but it is very easy and quick to do. Please send him trip reports and cave trip pics. Gordon said a guy, Mike Crockett of Pine Mountain Grotto, has had a blog for a few years and it's really neat for the grotto to have.
- **VAR Hospitality** - Jeremy could not stay for the meeting but did say that he plans to make a couple of batches of home

MEETING MINUTES

(continued from page 4)

brew for Spring VAR.

- **August Meeting Date Change Proposal** - Meredith asked whether anyone would mind if we met the THIRD Tuesday in August since the normal meeting date falls during Convention when many of the more active members and several of the officers will be in Washington State. This question will go out on the BATSlis and *an answer from each of you who plan to attend the August meeting is requested!*
- **Cave Conservancy Forum** - Gordon moved that BATS sponsor the Howdy Party for \$150 (or other event for the same amount) during the Cave Conservancy Forum, which will be held in Lewisburg, West Virginia, in mid-September. Meredith seconded. *Vote will be taken at April meeting.* For sponsoring an event during this national conservation forum, BATS would get credit on the WVCC website and in the guidebook produced for the forum. Gordon passed out a copy of the e-mail he sent out to the BATSlis explaining what the Cave Conservancy Forum is and what he proposes. This e-mail will be resent to the BATSlis (hopefully) since it might not have made it through.
- **Volunteer Opportunities** - Thanks again to Mike Hill for taking over as Grotto Librarian. We also have opportunities for members to get involved, the main one being Newsletter Editor. Meredith would like to see a “Knot-a-Month” or so at every meeting or every second or third meeting wherein a member who knows knots would teach one knot to those of us who have trouble remembering how to tie knots. Uses for each knot would be given too. Volunteers? At this time, we do not really need a Trip Coordinator; we seem to be swamped with trips and BATS members to lead them. We could use a Conservation person.
- **Executive Committee Meeting** - Four of the five BATS officers and one member met in February to discuss a variety of things. Meredith went over briefly what was discussed. Some things, like volunteers, have already been written about in these minutes. She plans to start starting the meetings on time, which means at 7:00, but this depends on traffic, of course. We talked about the possibility of having meetings “more north,” so that our many members who live too far from Fredericksburg will have a chance to attend now and then. We agreed Stafford would be a good start, but found out later that week that the library is pretty much booked up when we meet – still looking, suggestions welcomed. We also discussed the BOG, the grotto mailbox and its lost/misplaced key (we decided to keep the mailbox at least until the time we paid for is up, and then we'll talk about whether we need to keep it or not), the wealth of trips already planned, including the 3rd Annual 10th Anniversary weekend, which will be held July 21-23 at or near Big Bend, West Virginia, so that we can spend an afternoon floating around the bend in the river. As for the BOG weekend (November 3-5, 2006), we will need BATS members' help throughout the weekend.

TRIP PLANNING

- April grotto trip is VAR (and the Grand Caverns Restoration Field Camp).
- May grotto trip is Hamilton Cave (hard), led by Jeremy Meyers, and Trout Cave (easier), led by ???.
- June grotto trip – Gordon is going to look into maybe a trip to Bubble Cavewill let us know later.
- July grotto trip – July 21-23, 2006, 3rd Annual 10th Anniversary BATS Weekend, this time at Big Bend, WV. A float trip is planned and a trip to the Via Ferrata is being talked about.
- **ALSO, note that the JULY MEETING date has been CHANGED from Tuesday, July 11th to Friday, JULY 7. This will be a POOL PARTY at Allan's house in Woodbridge.** (NOW we'll be sure to see the northern members!) This will be similar to last year – bring something to grill and something to drink. Something to share would be nice too :-). If you drink, don't plan to drive; that's why this is on a Friday night! And we actually will have a meeting too.

VBATS REPORT

TinY reported that he and Kurt “Wrong Way” Waldron are sharing vertical class duties. This week (last week by the time this goes on the BATSlis ...) will be at Kurt's; next week at TinY's. He talked about how it switches back and forth. Someone suggested just putting out that each 1st and 3rd Tuesday will be here and the 2nd and 4th will be there, but it was pointed out that months with 5 Tuesdays/weeks will mess that up. So keep up with where vert class is when via the website or the BATSlis.

Minutes taken and submitted by Meredith Hall Johnson.

TRIP REPORTS

GLADE TRIP REPORT

by Nikki Bennett

Man, what a trip we had to Glade Cave yesterday. I'm so sore now, I just don't know what to do with myself!!

This was the "Max Bennett Memorial Cave Trip" for me, and since Max passed away because basically he couldn't pee, it was interesting that the cave we picked had most of its passages named for parts of the gastrointestinal tract (like the Duodenum, the Urinary Tract, Reep's Rectum – you get the picture!!!)

I'm way out of shape, and after the stressful and exhausting week I had with having to put Max down, I really had no business going on a caving trip, but I did it anyway. Glade Cave, mostly at this time of year, is a very muddy, slippery cave. The last few times we went into this cave, we went during a drought when everything was fairly dry, and the difference in difficulty for me was just like night and day. Glade was (and still is) one of my favorite caves, mostly because I can usually maneuver it fairly easily, but yesterday proved to be very difficult. I knew I was in trouble when I arrived at our meeting point (a Burger King) already feeling like I needed a good nap (it didn't help that I went to karaoke the night before, then got up at six to feed the animals and make the two-hour drive.)

We got to the cave and got suited up, and were all crawling in before 11 o'clock (which is pretty good for us), and we explored some passages that I had never been in before. Most of the passages in Glade are fairly narrow – you can usually keep two hands on the walls on either side and the walking is pretty easy (no breakdown to climb over), but it is pretty muddy, and the ceiling is low enough so you end up crawling in a lot of spots.

After about an hour and a half of this, I knew I was way too exhausted to get back to the Lake Room, where everyone else was headed. I knew that way, and there were some pretty hard climbs (for me anyway) and I was really afraid that my strength would give out on me if I tried. And since the further you go into a cave, the further you have to go to get out of it again, I decided to wait for everybody else near the entrance. Meredith stayed with me and the boys went and did the Lake Room trip.

We got really cold waiting. It doesn't take long for hypothermia to set in. Most caves are about 54 degrees or so in Virginia, and even though that's not very cold, when you're sitting in wet socks and wet gloves and you've sweated a lot so you're all wet, it doesn't take long before you're shivering. So we decided to get out of the cave and wait for everyone outside. The trouble was, the way out was a slippery climb and there was one spot where you had to maneuver sideways through a slit in the wall that was about maybe a foot wide. Needless to say, I got stuck. I got my hips through the slit okay, but didn't have enough hand grips to pull myself through the rest of the way, and Meredith couldn't push me any more from behind because the slope was just too slick for traction. So smart me, I decided to let myself slide back through, forgetting that my chest was a bit wider than my hips. Needless to say, I wedged myself in pretty good and almost went into a full-blown panic before I forced myself to go limp and let gravity (and some good tugging from Meredith) take its course. Since I'm writing this, obviously I got myself unstuck. But we decided to wait,



Photo by Meredith Hall Johson.

Mud formations in Glade Cave

TRIP REPORTS

(continued from page 6)

shivering, until the rest of the group got back from the Lake Room, which thankfully was only about an hour. We found a different way to get out of the cave, and even though I was totally exhausted by then, and had to be helped quite a bit in several places, we all got out alive, so it was a successful caving trip!! And fun too. We went for pizza afterward, and after the long drive back home, I was so tired I didn't even take a shower, even though I was pretty muddied up. Just fell asleep.

Having a trip like this usually makes you think about what you should really do to prepare yourself for when not-so-happy things happen. Things I want to add to my cave pack are: a thermal shirt (polypro) that I can put on in an emergency, more food, some of those hand-warmer thingys, and an extra pair of gloves so I don't have to sit around with wet ones on. And a nice warm hat. ■

ACTUN CHAPAT & ACTUN TUNICHIL MUKNAL TRIP REPORT

by April Cantrell

Photo by A. Cantrell



Pre-Columbian Maya pots in Actun Tunichil Muknal



Photo by Meredith Hall Johnson.

Jeremy and mud pool in Glade Cave

As some of you may know, I found myself in Belize last summer for an archaeological field school. Of course, while there, how could I help but enjoy some of the country's natural and cultural resources? I weaseled my way into the good graces of a cave archaeologist I met on project break and he took me and few friends to Actun Halal (Dart Cave) and Actun Chapat (Centipede Cave), two caves near San Ignacio, which were once used by the Maya for rituals.

After an hour-long hike through beautiful subtropical jungle, we arrived at Actun Halal, which is really more like a rockshelter than a cavern. We examined some of the cave art before moving on to Actun Chapat, only a 30-minute hike up the mountain. The entrance to Chapat is massive and opens out of the side of the mountain like a huge gaping maw. This is probably one of the reasons why it was sacred to the Maya as an entrance to Xibalba (shee-BAWL-bah), the Underworld. The entrance gives an idea of the sheer size of the cave.

Coming up from the entrance are a set of worn stairs and several Maya-modified formations in the shapes of maws and goddesses. The room narrows and turns for only a

TRIP REPORTS

(continued from page 7)



Photo by A. Cantrell

Cave spider the size of a splayed hand in Actun Chapat

the seasonal floods that feed the arroyo at the bottom of the mountain. The rooms continue on in this manner with potsherds and animal skeletons littering the floors and with the occasional small “colony” of stalagmites or a 40-foot-diameter column thrown in for good measure.

At the second entrance, a sinkhole entrance, there is a wide waterfall of draperies, behind which are the remnants of a centuries-old bonfire. The pottery is even more prolific in this area, despite the obvious looting, and the carved formations vary widely, from crocodiles to faces with drilled eyes. One can imagine the ritual gatherings that might have taken place here: the drapery formation with an orange, dancing fire behind it, lighting the formation from top to bottom, shoepots and urns full of corn and beans, and perhaps a teenager ready to give his or her life to thank the gods of Xibalba for a good season. The beauty and savagery of the ritual make for an otherworldly mix.

At the furthest mapped back of the cave there lays a pool perhaps 30 feet deep and 60 feet across, but the air is bad as one reaches the other side, so there have been no further expeditions back there, though the cave is expected to continue for possibly miles. Too bad Belize doesn't have any dedicated (obsessed?) cavers to finish mapping this cave ...

The second cave I visited was Actun Tunichil Muknal, the Cave of the Stone Sepulcher, which is a protected national treasure in Belize. The tourist access is highly restricted and only two tour operators have been granted access. Yes, I caved-for-pay. And it was well worth it. Again there was a hike to the cave and I crossed the river three times during the hike. There was a camp near the entrance of the cave where we stopped for lunch, and then we continued to the cave itself. The cave was stream passage and the opening of the cave was like an hourglass sitting on the clear water. We

short period of time and then opens into a room that is 70 meters high and 100 across. The floors and walls are mostly smooth, having been shaped by

swam about 30 feet into the cave before we could stand and slosh our way through the first 1.8 miles of passage. The water was chilly, but nothing like the cold water of a Virginia cave, and the air was a comfortable 80 or so degrees Fahrenheit. The cave was stunning with layers of passage reaching up to the ceiling, which extended between 10 and 20 meters at times. There were crystals and formations studding the walls and ceiling. The walls themselves were carved smoothly in some spots, almost resembling a wind-formed sandstone cave.

Finally we reached the spot where we climbed out of the stream to an upper passage where most of the cultural remains had been left in situ by archaeologists. Only some 17 artifacts have been removed from this cave for study, while the rest were left as a sort of natural museum. We removed our shoes and followed the wide rimstone dams throughout this section of cave. The potsherds were so plentiful here, that with shoes on, one could have stepped on them and not even noticed. The pots, potsherds, and human remains were scattered throughout, some of them so thoroughly calcified that I had to look several times to see them. The cave was highly decorated in this area as well. At the end of the tour we reached a grand finale of sorts, with a full skeleton in place and calcified into the cave floor. There are a total of 15 skeletal remains in the cave, most of them teenagers, who would have been sacrificed in various rituals.

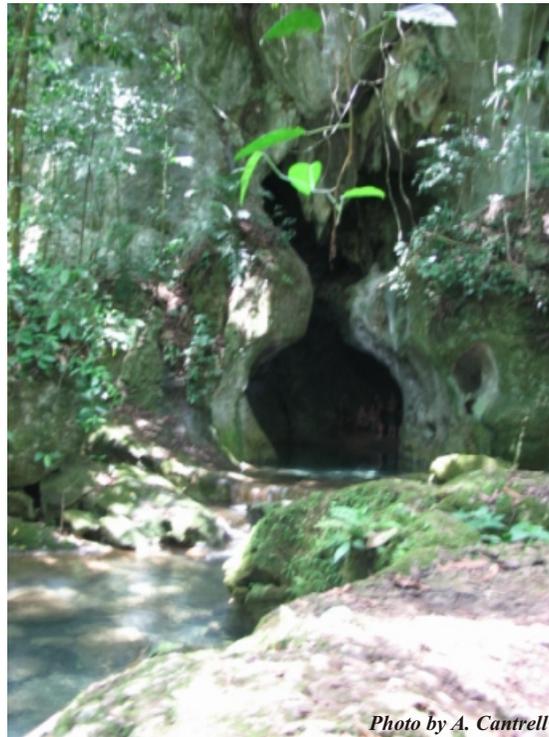


Photo by A. Cantrell

Entrance to Actun Tunichil Muknal

The caves were nothing like Virginia area caves, so the experience was both new and delightful. The guide, a native of Belize with Spanish and Indian roots himself, was very knowledgeable and fun to talk to – he is a world-traveled caver on his own time, how could he not be likeable? In short, I had an awesome time, and would not mind winding up there again in the future. ■

HOW TO S*** IN A CAVE

Some Practical Advice for Underground Poopers

by Anonymous

Due to the potentially embarrassing nature of this article, all identities have been withheld to protect the innocent poopers whose experiences have resulted in this tutorial.

On a recent cave trip to a nameless cave, the cave burrito system was put to the ultimate test. Surely all cavers go into caves prepared for the inescapable call of nature. But how many typical recreational cavers have ever really had the opportunity (or the necessity) to try out their well-thought-out poop systems? I am quite confident that few people (if any) long for the day when they have to take a dump in a cave. But, inevitably, your time is gonna come, as it did recently for not one, but *two members* of this anonymous caving party.

So, what do you do when you gotta go? You would think that the pooping process is common sense, but most cavers haven't given much specific thought to the logistics of actually pooping in a cave. First things first: you'd better be prepared with the appropriate supplies. After our recent excursion, we determined that a good cave burrito kit should contain the following items as a minimum:

- 1 black garbage bag (the black disguises the contents)
- Toilet tissue (outdoor equipment stores sell travel-sized roles of TP for camping/hiking)
- 1-3 gallon-sized Ziploc freezer bag AND/OR 1-3 quart-sized Ziploc freezer bags
- 2 disposable antibacterial handiwipes

All of these items should pack quite compactly into one Ziploc freezer bag. The kit weighs mere ounces and takes up very little space in your pack, but should you need it, it will be a trip saver.

When nature begins to beckon, find a solitary location somewhat distant from the path that your group will soon be taking. Open up your black garbage bag and roll the edges outward. Spread the bag over the ground with the opening facing upwards. This is your "pooping field" and the bigger you can make it, the greater your chances of success in hitting it.

At this point, you're ready to poop. Prepare yourself by having your toilet tissue handy. Now you can proceed with the actual deed. Lower your clothing and pull any extra

fabric (coverall sleeves included) away from the line of fire.

Squat over the bag (or lean against a wall or a rock or whatever you've got to do), and let it go. If you've made your "pooping field" broad enough, you won't have to worry much about hitting your target. This is of even greater relief to those who are concerned about splatter (resulting from the previous evening's partying wreaking havoc on their bowels). After pooping, quickly wipe, and then toss your used tissue into your black bag.

Now that you've completed the hard part, you should pack it up as fast as you can so that the stench does not have a chance to waft too close to your patiently waiting companions. Quickly close your bag, tie it in a knot, and deposit it into one of your Ziploc freezer bags. Next, wash your hands with your handiwipes, and then proceed to double, triple, and even quadruple bag your burrito using the additional Ziploc freezer bags in your kit (be sure to seal them well). Wash your hands one more time, and you're done! You have now successfully pooped in a cave!

The icky part is over, but now comes the tricky part: getting the poop out of the cave without it bursting (or seeping) through all those layers of plastic bags. Ideally, you will find a convenient location to stow your burrito so that you can pick it up on your way back out of the cave. But if that is not an option because you're on a through trip and won't be returning that way, your next best bet is to safely pack it into your cave pack and then avoid dropping or crushing your pack unnecessarily.

Once you have brought your poop safely out of the cave, covertly dispose of it into the nearest garbage receptacle and cross your fingers that you will never have to go through that experience again!

Note to all the gals out there: If you gotta do Number One and Number Two at the same time, try to pee first and then follow the instructions listed above. If you are unable to exert that much control over your bowels, you'll have to attempt a complicated balancing act: hold the bag up to your bottom to collect your specimen while at the same time collecting your pee into your pee bottle. It's tricky, but I suppose it can be done! ■



RAPPIN' WITH THE FRENCH WRAP

by Gordon Birkhimer

A VERTICAL CAVER'S WORST NIGHTMARE

Sotano de Octufu in Mexico offers an impressive 410-foot free pit. Halfway down my rappel, I heard the word most feared by any caver on a rope: "Rock!" I turtle-tucked into a defensive position, but nothing could have prepared me for the impending collision. The sound of the rock crashing into my helmet was deafening. The impact seemed to slam my eyes closed, and caused me to see a burst of spark and stars. Fortunately, my red Petzl helmet had done its job by protecting my head and deflecting the baseball-sized rock. Unfortunately, the shock from the force of the rock's 200-foot fall left me unconscious. This caused all my voluntary actions to suddenly cease, so I released the rope with my braking hand. I was unable to scream as I began helplessly free-falling to my death on an out-of-control rappel ...

I can relate this story to you because in this nightmare of mine my self-belay rappel safety system engaged and saved my life. This tale is one that can happen to anyone at anytime while on rope. On the other hand, the effectiveness of this rappel safety is real, and it might be the only thing that stands between hanging on rope unconscious waiting to be rescued, or that final fatal fall from the sky.

Rappelling is the most dangerous thing you will ever do on rope, if you do not employ a self-belay. Climbing up a rope is safer because ascending systems offer two or more points of attachment. The inherent danger while rappelling is easy to understand. The rappel device provides your only point of attachment to the rope. If you become detached from your descender or the rope, or lose control, your speedy fall to the ground can be fatal. I consider any fall in excess of 40 feet to be in "the dead zone."

Improperly loading the rappel device at the lip of a pit, becoming detached from the rope, operator error, inexperience, exhaustion, medical emergency, being hit by falling objects, and equipment failure are some causes of actual rappelling accidents that have resulted in serious injury or death. A self-belay rappel safety, when used properly, will protect any rappeller from a fall should any of these situations occur.

GENEALOGY

The use of a self-belay when rappelling can be traced to

mountaineers, arborists, and rock climbers, who developed and successfully employ a variety of rappel safety systems. Climbing books have detailed the development of both mechanical and self-belay rope rappel safety systems that are effective. Mike "TinY" Manke introduced the French Wrap, or Autoblock, to me as part of the Basic Vertical Training as designated by the Vertical Section of the National Speleological Society. The self-belay he taught me employs a friction hitch the French properly refer to as the *noeud Machard* or Machard Knot. The knot was named for the old French mountaineer who developed it. Given the choice, I would call it the Machard Hitch because a hitch makes a rope hold fast to another object, in this case the main rappel rope. The jargon in the world of rope can be rather confusing. The most accurate terminology for the arrangement I use would be, "The French Wrap Self-Belay Rappel Safety System with a Machard Hitch as the Autoblock." To simplify things I have accepted the name "French Wrap" and use that as the common expression.

Many climbing books show the Machard Hitch as a rappel safety, and they refer to it as a French Prusik or an Autoblock. Those two terms may cause some confusion to the reader. The term French Prusik can be problematic because there are several different hitches with the same name. Also, a French Prusik is not the Prusik Knot as we know it. The term Autoblock is not a specific knot, but rather a generic term taken from *noeuds autobloquant*. This is a term for an entire class of friction hitches used to grip a rope and when translated means Selfblock or Autoblock Knot. The most common hitches in this group are the Prusik, Machard, Braid (Plaited), French Knot, and the Valdotaïn. There are several other friction hitches in common use by climbers, such as the Hedden, Bachmann, and RBS.

I suspect the terminology used in climbing books may be responsible for some of the ambiguity prevalent in the caving community regarding the self-belay rappel safety. For instance, a caver reading a climbing book may not realize that "French Prusik" refers to a Machard Hitch and not to a Prusik Knot. In practical application, the Machard Hitch works well as a self-belay rappel safety, while the Prusik Knot performs poorly because once loaded, it is impossible to loosen unless all weight is removed.

Larry Penberthy first described the technique of using a rappel safety fashioned from rope and positioned below the rappel device in the article, "A Method of Securing a

ARTICLES

(continued from page 10)

Rappel,” in *On Belay* magazine, No. 16, August 1974. In the article, he recommends either a "Penberthy Knot" or a "Penberthy-Pierson Knot," which was a reinvention of the Helical Knot, also known as the Ascender Knot, or *noeud Valdotaïn*. Although the knot Penberthy used is different, the rappel safety system he describes is arranged exactly the same as the Machard Hitch self-belay method that I recommend. Penberthy accurately explained: "If the climber lets go with his braking hand completely, the knot grabs and stops him. If he grips the control knot tightly in panic, the extra braking friction force stops him." Penberthy also correctly cautioned: "The security knot must not be able to touch the rappel device. If it does, the security knot will not grab."

HISTORICAL FAILURES

The negative beliefs regarding the early self-belay systems involved two problems. Problem number one has two parts and resulted from using the wrong hitch for the job and attaching it too high on the rope. A Chest Safety Prusik Self-Belay System is a good example of this problem because once the Prusik Knot was engaged, it was out of reach and difficult to release until the weight of the rappeller could be removed. And if the knot was positioned just below the rappel device it could be sucked up into it. Mechanical devices, such as the Gibbs ascender, Safety Rappel Cam, Petzl Shunt, and the Spelean Shunt were all tried as a high, second point of attachment with less-than-rave reviews. Mechanical devices can run the risk of severing the main rope when put under the stress of a high fall factor. If the rappeller becomes out of control and suddenly engages a mechanical device, it can cut the rope.

Problem number two resulted from a phenomenon known as "negative action." In order for these early systems to work, the rappeller had to relax his/her grip on the Prusik Knot or mechanical device in order stop descending. As you might imagine, when accelerating out of control down the rope, victims are inclined to grasp tighter, thereby defeating the purpose of the self-belay, and falling unimpeded until impact. These negative action rappel safety systems began to be associated with accidents and they lost their appeal.

Many of these early attempts of self-belayed rappels resulted in hopeless entanglements, injuries from improper use, and even death. As a result of the problems encountered with the first systems, cavers decided that self-belaying while rappelling was not practical or safe, and should not be encouraged or recommended. Cavers mainly relied instead on bottom belays.

RENAISSANCE

The fact that the caving community was trying to develop a satisfactory self-belaying system indicates they understood the logic of adding a second point of attachment to reduce rappelling risk and accidents. Many years after those first trials, cavers again began exploring ways to self-belay a rappel, focusing on ways to avoid the problems encountered by their predecessors. Finally there was a breakthrough, and we now have a reliable, effective system to protect rappellers. The self-belay innovation used two new concepts: a lower fixed point of attachment and a more effective friction hitch, or Autoblock.

A life-supporting webbing loop is sewn directly to the leg loop on a seat harness, and a carabiner is attached. It is best to sew the carabiner webbing loop to the side or slightly toward the rear of the leg. A sewn carabiner webbing loop should be used instead of simply attaching a carabiner to the leg loop, because a carabiner tends to ride forward around the leg loop toward the rappel device. I believe wrapping the webbing loop around the leg loop and sewing it is much stronger than just sewing it on the outside surface of the leg loop.

A Prusik loop (note I am saying loop instead of knot) constructed of 8mm accessory cord is connected to the carabiner, and used to create the French Wrap with a Machard Hitch. The French Wrap is operated with the braking hand, which is relaxed on the hitch at the user's side near the leg loop. In this configuration, the hitch should never ride closer than 12 inches to the rappel device. The Machard is the right hitch because it engages properly and releases easily with the slight pressure of two fingers.

The earlier insurmountable problems associated with using the wrong knot and the higher attachments from the chest or seat harness are now solved. The low point of attachment ensures that the French Wrap will not become entangled in the rappel device. It also ensures that, by not reaching the rappel device, the hitch will catch properly and stop the rappeller in an out of control situation. Just as Penberthy elaborated, if the hitch does come in contact, the rappel device will actually be pushing, or "minding" the self-belay system down the rope. Because the French Wrap never comes close to the rappel device, it is a successful system, and the first problem is solved.

The second problem was the issue of negative action. The French Wrap is not a negative action self-belay rappel safety system. To descend freely, place your hand above or on the hitch, and push or hold the hitch at your farthest reach

ARTICLES

(continued from page 11)

down the rope – the position of the hitch on the rope controls the rappeller's speed, rather than pressure on the hitch. When the hitch moves up the rope, it tightens on the rope and begins to slow your descent. The relationship of the position of the hitch to the speed of rappel is easily mastered. If you let go of it, say after being hit on the head with a rock, you will stop. If you push the hitch up the rope as high as possible, you will stop. Grasping the hitch with the strength of white-knuckle fear will also slow the speed of descent through friction. Therefore, I believe that the problem of negative action is inconsequential when using the French Wrap and the second problem is solved.

Eliminating the two original self-belay problems was instrumental in developing a successful self-belay rappel safety system. However, I must emphasize that the French Wrap is not a Hail Mary air brake guaranteed to preserve life for those too lazy to learn the skills required. It is mandatory that each user takes the time to acquire the knowledge, skill, and experience necessary to operate the system. There are hundreds of types, sizes, and diameters of rope, and all behave differently. The conditions of the rappelling rope, such as age, moistness, stiffness, and cleanliness, also dictates its behavior. For example, a new rope is faster than an old muddy one, and the French Wrap may need to be adjusted to obtain optimum performance. My experience has been that four wraps around the main rope are usually adequate. On the other hand, the French Wrap may require a fifth wrap on new or smaller diameter rope to be effective. It's important to be aware of the existing rope factors and to understand how best to adjust the French Wrap according to those variable rope conditions. There are no shortcuts, but with training and practice, you can easily gain the skills required to employ the French Wrap.

CONCLUSION

The French Wrap can be used with practically any descending device. It has been used successfully with a rack, a Munter Hitch, and a Figure Eight. My SMC Rack has a Carroll Bassett Hyperbar and bars. Managing lifting

the rope on and off is easily accomplished by pushing the bars up to stop descent and simply accessing slack from the French Wrap. I have tested the French Wrap at almost every speed and distance, and under a wide range of conditions with great success, and there has never been a situation in which I could not use the self-belay system. I have employed it with a variety of rappelling devices, ropes, and distances, from a tricky 15-foot entrance pit to a 2,650-foot rappel in Yosemite, California, and I have always been pleased with its performance.

Under normal conditions, I run the French Wrap with my brake hand on the outside of my right leg. However, during the 2004 El Capitan Extreme Rappels LLC Expedition, it was necessary to modify it to run between my legs because I couldn't lift the weight of 2,650 feet of PMI rope with one hand by my side. By moving the carabiner point of attachment to a support on the inside center of my right leg loop, I was able to orient the French Wrap between my legs and vertically parallel with the main rope. The French Wrap system has been so successful; I will never again rappel with a single point of attachment.

I have identified five incidents in the *NSS News American Caving Accidents* 1996-1998 that involved a loss of control on rappel. In the *NSS News American Caving Accidents* 1999-2001, equipment failure and loss of control contributed to three incidents. It is my firm belief that a sound self-belay rappel safety system combined with an effective bottom belay (a bottom belay article is currently in the works) could have eliminated or reduced the number and severity of those accidents.

Cavers: There is an alternative to rappelling with a single point of attachment. The French Wrap Self-Belay Rappel Safety System is inexpensive, easy to learn, simple to use, and it operates flawlessly. Additionally, it does not interfere with the rappelling technique, but rather enhances the rappeller's control and capability. I strongly recommend you learn how to use the French Wrap, and take the time to practice, practice, practice ... ■



Photo by Meredith Hall Johnson

TRIP REPORTS

THE MEXICAN TRILOGY

by Robin Mitchell

Three 1,000-foot pits, or *sotanos*, were our reason for driving 45 hours straight and hauling enough rope to rappel the Empire State building twice. We pulled up to Mike Walsh's home on schedule. It was Tuesday, December 27th, 2005, at about 5 p.m. in Aquismon, a town in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. Leaving snow behind us in the D.C. area, we were now waking up in 85-degree sunny weather.

"You are now in the jungle," Walsh said, welcoming us into his home. His "Casa" is known as the Caver Motel of Mexico, located in the center of real caving country. Some of the worlds' greatest vertical cavers have stayed here.

The six of us, Nina Muller, Josh Babcock, Kurt Waldron, Allen Weberg, and Lance and Robin Mitchell, left Casa Walsh for Sotano Huasteca on Wed-nesday. This would be our first warm up for our drop on Saturday: Golondrinas. After leaving town, we started up a path that looked more like a clearing on a construction site for John Deere vehicles than a road. "My vertical sense," TinY would warn, "The worst roads in the States will be some of the best roads you'll see in Mexico," before participants committed to taking their vehicles through Hell.

In the beginning, every loud scrape and ding we heard as our CRV bottomed out against some rock would make us run out to reassure ourselves that we were not going to end up with a trail of oil ending at a stranded vehicle like the Ford truck we past earlier. A few miles and an hour later, we reached our destination. We parked in a small village habited by Huastecan Indians, better known as "the mountain people" to the town. We had to get permission from the *Jefe*, or boss of the town, to enter Sotano Huasteca. Unfortunately, women are not as high on the totem pole here as they are in the States and I could not meet the *Jefe*. There was a *guia*, or guide, from town to lead the way and carry a large coil of rope. We were to pay him 80 pesos, equivalent to about \$8 when all was said and done.

The rappel was approximately 420 feet and a straight drop. In order to rig for the rappel you had to attach yourself to the rope, then swing your body out freely hanging above the drop so you could rig your rappelling rack onto the rope and continue down. The bottom of the pit was like a self-contained ecosystem with its own miniature jungle. The pit must have been at least 500 feet wide and at the bottom was a small cave with old stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

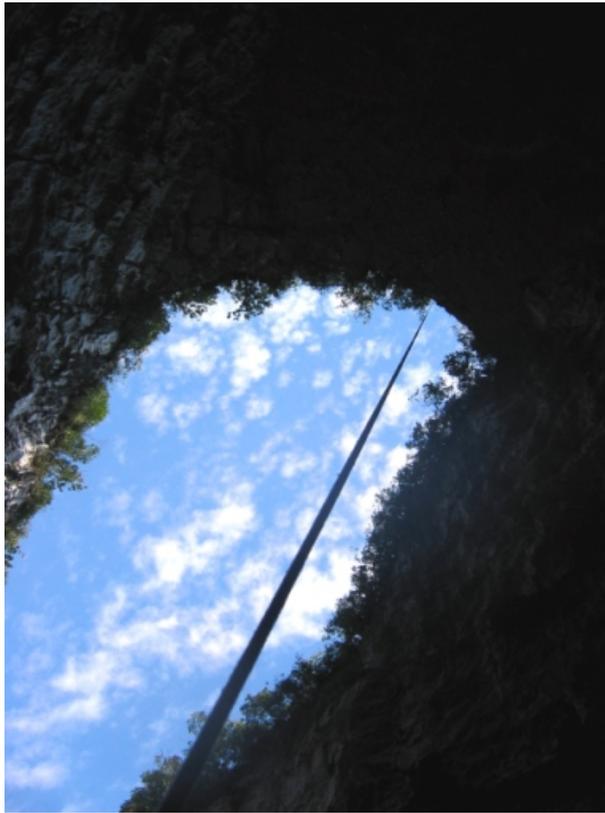
After a few of us rappelled down, two of us started our climb back up the rope. Lance Mitchell got on rope first, climbed 20 feet and I got onto rope. Lance's bum knee popped out of joint in the middle of our ascent. It's funny how old injuries always come back to haunt you in the least opportune moments. He stood up on his bad knee and popped it back in. It can be a scary thing to hear your friend 20 feet above you screaming in pain knowing full-well it could take a couple of days to get a rescue team out here. Lance winced with every step as we continued to climb the rest of the way out.

When we arrived back at our vehicles, Kurt Waldron, our GPS navigator, had brought gifts of clothing and Beanie Babies to give our *guia's* family. It is important to keep good relations with the local

villages in order to visit these pits in the future.

Thursday, we began our ascent up even rockier roads than before. The only vehicle we passed heading this far out was the Corona truck. After all, New Years Eve was only a day away. We reached Tamapatz and found beautiful homes and paved streets. How did such a town come to exist out here, I wondered. We met our guides, Habundio and his son, Habundio, and they carried our rope on the walk to the next mountain ridge. Sotano de Cepillo awaited us. Josh Babcock, of the BATS grotto, was our rigger for the trip. In a matter of minutes, he had two ropes rigged for the 420-foot pit and two additional edge lines. The lip to this pit is a particularly hard one to pass when climbing back out.

Sotano de Cepillo was filled with formations. Off to one



TRIP REPORTS

(continued from page 13)

side was a mushroom-shaped rock with an opening revealing the formations inside. "The cave inside of a cave" sat at least 20 feet tall and 30 feet wide. A small lake took up half of the cave, part of which was dried up and made crunchy noises when we walked on it. On the ground were pockets of perfectly-formed, pristine white cave pearls (oolites) that had formed into one-inch symmetrical balls over time.

Lance, Nina, and I were sitting near the rope waiting our turn to climb out when we heard a loud whiz through the air, ending with a sudden boom. A rock had fallen from the lip only 10 feet away from Nina. Caver rule: Never sit in the rock fall zone. We ran toward the cave wall, since, at that distance, a seemingly small rock can kill you. Here we were, three experienced cavers, distracted by pretty shiny rocks.

Lance and I began to climb out of the cave and after only 50 feet I began to have gear issues. Lance ended up climbing to my feet many times to adjust my foot loops. Unfortunately, gear problems only seem to happen when you're on rope far away from civilization. Thankfully, our team was ready for just about anything. Kurt had been running circles around the rest of us this trip. For every one or two rappels anyone else did, he had enough energy to do three. Climbing rope can be like riding a bicycle uphill in the highest gear and he performed every climb in record time. We all knew he wanted to have the fastest time climbing out of Golondrinas on Saturday, I guess we'd see ...

Friday had come and Hoya De Las Guaguas would be our pit. Before leaving, a local girl stopped me at my car, selling cheese. For equivalent of two American dollars I had two large round pieces of homemade cheese each wrapped in a large leaf. It looked so beautiful I couldn't resist. Did I mention I'm lactose intolerant? This could pose a problem as the day persists. We left for our pit of the day on the best roads we had seen all trip to arrive a half an hour later in a municipal of Aquismon. At this cave we had to buy tickets to visit the pit. We also acquired the help of five locals to carry gear. Unlike the last town, they were not too thrilled to help and later we discovered that this particular town was not too fond of gringos, or white people.

Hoya de las Guaguas is huge in circumference. So large that two points were rigged. One side was a 498-foot rappel and the other side was 668 feet. The longer rappel was called the high side, though it was deeper as well. Loud rumbles were coming from the pit, like a hungry giant waiting to devour us. When I reached the bottom on the high side, I saw that it was just Kurt throwing large rocks into a huge hole that led to the cave of Guaguas.



Photo by Robin Mitchell

"The cave is so unstable," he said, "An avalanche starts every time I roll one of these rocks into it." We did not go in. The pit itself was huge and filled with plant life like Sotano Huasteca. On the low side there were two holes on the wall, possibly leading to virgin cave. It would take a bolt climber to reach it. As the sun began to fall, swarms of birds soared into the pit and into the dangerous cave below. Thousands of birds live in this cave and only leave during daylight hours for hunting.

We packed up all of our gear and found our local guides waiting patiently for the walk down. We stumbled down the steep stone steps in the dark while our guides swiftly and quietly led the way. The townspeople are used to walking down this trail in total darkness, and here we were helpless without our headlamps. We reached the bottom, and agreed to pay the local helpers 100 pesos apiece. This will probably up the rates for cavers in the future, but we felt they had earned it.

There was a local coffee factory in town. "Just think," Josh exclaimed, "You'll be drinking coffee from the same coffee plants brushed out of your way on the trail." Reluctantly, they opened the factory just for us and 15 kilos later, we made out with enough coffee to last us until our next trip. On our way back, we stopped at our favorite restaurant in town just in time to see a pig slaughtered in an alleyway for food. The moral to this story is be careful what you eat – it just might have been slaughtered in your local alley!

We got up at around 4:30 a.m. to leave for Sotano de las Golondrinas. Most of us are not morning people (to say the least), and it really sucked. Lance drove up the long rocky road, and instead of my usual clenched butt cheeks and imaginary brake pedal, I slept the whole way. Lance and I

TRIP REPORTS

(continued from page 14)

napped as the rest of the group went to see the birds swarm out of the pit. The cave is named after the Golondrinas birds that live in the cave hole and swarm out in the day to occasionally get eaten by the parrots hiding in the vegetation. When we woke up, a little girl was throwing pebbles at our vehicle.

"You're lucky. Some American cavers come back with a brick through their windshield," Allan warned. I guess this village doesn't like gringos either. We made our way to the pit and the rest of our group.

I remember the first time I was hanging from our vertical sensei's tree adjusting my gear and listening to the stories of the great Sotano de las Golondrinas. Later, I acquired a picture of the pit and found myself dreaming of the day I, too, could rappel into the famous cave. Three years later, we're here ready to rig the point.

We found the rest of our group. They had already gained permission from the local *Jefe*, and his wife offered to cook us food when we got hungry. We were taken to our rig point where a crowd was already there, watching with curiosity as Josh rigged.

Sotano de las Golondrinas is famous due to its size. With a depth of 1,150 feet, it can swallow the Empire State Building. The rappel in is beautiful, and as you get about 340 feet down, the top disappears as the bottom comes into focus. Things get larger as you continue your descent. Once you reach the bottom, you still have no distance perception. The base of the pit is the size of a football field. A small hole seen from far away turned out to be at least 20 feet high and a pile of bird guano heaped up to it. Lance climbed up the pile of bird guano for a picture.

There is a plaque and memorial for two base jumpers who died jumping in the cave. There is also a register for anyone to sign who has made it this far. I looked in disbelief, "TinY was here just two days prior!" No, he couldn't have been, we're all the way in middle-of-nowhere Mexico. Lance and I began our climb up rope and the thought kept nudging me until I realized, duh, he told me before the trip to make sure I read the register. Turns out you can drive to another country and still find friends.

It's New Years Eve. We stop on the way back for

fireworks. There are no codes out here, so fireworks are made with twigs, string, and explosives. We celebrate our night with fireworks and tequila.

Sunday was mainly a driving day. I took full advantage of this by drinking my fair share of tequila the night before. The hot sun eventually got me out of bed. Besides, Kurt and Lance were taking a last walk to town for ice cream and shopping. Next to the ice cream shop, there was a small mural of cavers rappelling into Sotano de las Golondrinas. "I've been there," I thought. I took Allan to the far side of town where the nicest blankets can be found. Nine dollars a piece for warm wool and felt blankets or cotton-weaved pictures of beautiful scenery.

We finally left for our next destination around 1 p.m. We had a long drive ahead of us. We were leaving the jungle for the mountainous desert of Queretero. We drove all day, and around 8 p.m. we stopped in the city of Jalpan for food and sleep. It was a very nice hotel for only 400 pesos, or \$40 dollars a room. Our rooms had the only bathtub I saw all trip and a bed wider than a king-size bed.

Monday came soon enough and off we went to find Sotanita de la Ahuacatlan, better known as Spooky Elevator. We had an early start and figured we'd find the cave and rig by noon. As 4 p.m. rolled around, we were still driving through the mountainous desert of nowhere in search of this cave. Later we discovered we were following the

wrong GPS point and all of the locals kept pointing us to El Sotano, a monstrous pit that is well known and could be seen up to two mountain ridges away. Unfortunately, that pit would have to wait for now. We came across an abode labeled "Casa Hernandez" and stopped. They knew of many Sotanos and were willing to take us to them. So we followed the Hernandez family members through the forest and past some bulls to look at four pits. None of them led us to the GPS point we were looking for. We refreshed on fresh beverages from the Hernandez store, and Kurt and Allan stayed behind to rethink the directions while the rest of us headed out to the neighbors' house to inspect additional caves.

We showed up at a home with two Dalmatians and the



Photo by Robin Mitchell

TRIP REPORTS

(continued from page 15)

owner kicked one out of the way. Most dogs are scavengers out here. The little old man must have only been five feet tall, yet he moved across the terrain with ease. He drove us to another part of his property and we walked through sticky brush and prickly trees to find another virgin Sotano. This did not fit the description of Spooky Elevator.

We traveled back to Casa Hernandez when Kurt discovered we were looking for the wrong GPS point. It was getting dark, so we ended up camping on the Hernandez property and shooting our last fireworks for entertainment. Lance and I made up instant Thai soup packets for everyone.

Tuesday, Kurt, Josh, Nina Muller, and I got up before sunrise and scouted out the cave, finding that it was the third *sotano* we were shown the previous day – and now it was accompanied by a rattlesnake hiding near the entrance. We hoped the snake would be gone when we came back. The group coiled the rope into two coils and led the way to the cave. All we had was a survey from the Seventies. The cave map was probably accurate, but the drawing of the land near it was very misleading. Who knows if anyone had rappelled the full 1,000 feet since? The map had a handwritten note off to the side saying "bad air!" No one mentioned it when Kurt was given the map but the possibility still existed. Bad air can kill the most experienced of cavers. If an unsuspecting victim did rappel into it, nothing could save them. Josh built a z-rig for hauling just in case and Nina was voted as the first person to go down, since she had experienced bad air before.

Before any rappelling could begin, the rattlesnake from this morning had to be moved. The locals wanted to kill it for anti-venom, but neither the snake lovers nor the vegetarians were going to let that happen. Lance stepped in, pinned it behind its head, picked it up while posing for the cameras, then carried it away. "My first encounter with a rattlesnake,"

Lance gleamed.

Kurt and Josh were the first ones into the pit. There is a landing about 70 feet down to walk on. A redirect was placed to direct the rope down the 'elevator shaft', the first part of the rappel from the landing. Nina headed down to the landing and continued down the shaft a few feet at a time as Kurt kept radio contact with her.

On ground level, Lance, Allan, and I waited patiently, not fully sure what was going on. We could hear all of Kurt's radio communication, but not Nina's. The day had caught up to me and I was getting really tired. After waiting around a couple of hours, we heard Kurt and Josh on the landing yell "Pull rope!" Lance and I simultaneously jumped on the Z-rig and started pulling like crazy! We only had a vague idea how a Z-rig worked.

We heard on the radio, "What are you guys doing up there?" Frustrated, confused, and worried, I called back, "You said pull rope and well, that's what we're doing!"

"No, we yelled 'rock', can we have our slack back now?" My brain began to cloud with emotion, I didn't know how to work a @!?!# Z-rig, "Is Nina alright?" I exclaimed. I heard a couple of grumbles from the pit and a radio call from Josh, "She's alright, don't do anything, I'm coming up."

Josh reached the top, we all exchanged a few words, readjusted the rig, and I left for a walk. Meanwhile, Kurt stayed calm as a cucumber, communicating on radio with Nina as she continued to descend a few feet at a time. This went on for an hour or more, and at around 250 feet, in Nina could only communicate three words per breath. From the present observations, it was decided this pit was unsafe. Kurt calmly instructed Nina to change over and to try ascending for a while. With good radio contact between Kurt and Nina, we were able to safely experience a dangerous situation. We have now experienced how essential it is to have the same level of communication with top. Nina safely climbed out of the pit, we de-rigged, and called it a successful day despite the bad air and attitudes.

Shortly after, we left our new friends at the Hernandez house and continued our adventures into the late night, driving until we were so exhausted that we stopped in a town

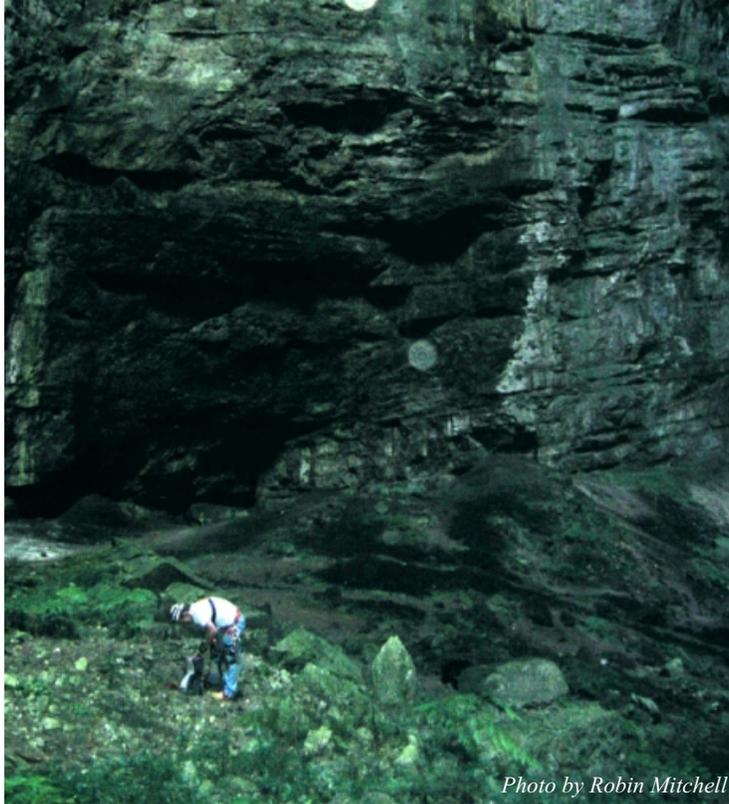


Photo by Robin Mitchell

TRIP REPORTS

(continued from page 16)

called San Joaquin. Nina spoke enough Spanish to get us a room. I crawled into bed and the next morning I was not quite sure how I got there. We continued our journey toward Santa Monica de las Tinajas through four hours of canyons with sheer drops and rocky dirt roads occasionally blocked by a pig or bull. An hour in, Josh's Subaru got a flat. There was a shrine in the distance, thousands of prickly trees and flesh-burning plants. The tire was fixed and on we went. The first town in three hours arose out of the dust when boom! The CRV bottomed out and a radio call from behind alerted us of the spewing oil from the underneath. Here we were, on a steep, one lane, rocky, messed-up road with a messed-up rear transfer case and two MACK trucks approaching us from each side. Eventually everyone backed up so we could pull over at the road ahead and think through what to do.

Lance and Josh left to try the only phone in town. Maybe a Honda dealership in the states would have some good advice as far as what to do. Unfortunately, three hours and many mountains away, the satellite telephone was not good enough. We were beyond any form of civilization, as we know it in the States.

"Five miles left to go," declared captain "Wrong-way Waldron" and on we went. Would we really be that much worse off five miles farther? Our four-wheel drive died about 20 minutes into those hellish roads. Tires spinning, we barely made it up those last inclines to arrive at our final destination. A town of eight homes maybe, a school with desks overturned and abandoned, and a small store with a stone floor. The townspeople gathered in the doorway to see what we would buy. Westerners are rarely seen in these parts. Pasta noodles, tomato paste, pink marshmallows, and vanilla cookies would be our dinner tonight. We ate and set up camp in front of the old school as the children gathered in a corner, watching our every move in silence.

At 10 p.m. we set out to rig Sotano del la Culebra, also known as The Snake. By midnight, I was on rappel. I had never been the first person down a major rappel before. One thousand feet of pure darkness,

I could not see the bottom until I was upon it. Rappelling was great once I got past the 20 feet of ledges and agave plants to smooth, straight rock on all sides. I began to wonder if I'd ever reach the bottom. Finally, I saw a floor of leaves and dirt. I called up on radio for Lance to come down. He turned off his headlight for a rappel in total darkness. After we ascended to the top Lance walked back to the CRV with the hope of attempting to fix the vehicle. I stayed behind while Kurt, Nina, and Josh rappelled the rope. It was getting really cold outside and I wrapped myself in any and all jackets and hats I found left over from the group and waited patiently for the return of the group. In the distance I could hear Josh's and Kurt's voices accompanied by Nina's musical laughs. They were triple-tandem climbing the 1,000-foot drop. Once everyone reached the top, we derigged the rope, packed up, and at 3 a.m., headed back to camp. We probably would have not made it back that night if it wasn't for a strong group and a good sense of direction.

The next morning we were packing up camp and a crowd of locals formed again, curious. Maybe easily entertained by strangers. Lance had miraculously fixed the vehicle, at least well enough to get us back to the States. The children of the town ran after us smiling and waving as we headed off, ever-so-nervous of re-banging Lance's "Joseph rig." It was

a stressful drive ahead. Lance kept a close watch on the vehicle fluids in between driving shifts, as I slept most of the way back to Valles. Late that night we arrived at the only place of luxury and rest, Hotel Tannanul. We arrived to find hot sulphur springs, great for sucking the poison right out of your itchy, red, painful, jungled skin. I was especially grateful after getting a bad attack on my bum. The next day, the group began the long journey back with a couple of extra caving friends who had enjoyed their own adventures in Mexico. It took us from Friday at 12 p.m. until Sunday at around 6 p.m. to get back home and another two weeks to accept coming back to reality. After a pretty successful "Mexican Trilogy," I wonder what we will do to top it next year? ■



Photo by Robin Mitchell

ANNOUNCEMENTS

MAKE MY EASTER-FUNK!



17th Annual Grand Caverns Easter Restoration Camp

Hop on down to the GRAND CAVERNS EASTER RESTORATION CAMP, sponsored by the Virginia Region of the National Speleological Society on April 14th - 16th (Friday Sunday), 2006. If you enjoy the aroma of melting chocolate eggs and napalm, join us for our annual gravel hauling express through beautiful Grand Caverns, and our equally exciting sinus plugging, epoxy FILLED escapades in NEARBY Fountain Cave! Repair broken formations. Eradicate moss. Improve cave-owner relations, wrestle with WILD rabbits in the Wesson-oil PIT, and a whole lot more! A great way to kick those Old Man Winter Blues and it beats making license plates! Primitive camping, socializing with convicted felons, and food and beverage provided for Saturday lunch and dinner! Easter egg hunts for the kids on Sunday morning! And, best of all it's all FREE (okay, donations are accepted)! If arriving at night, check the left-hand gate, it is usually left with the hasp in place so it appears locked to the uninitiated.

Directions to Grand Caverns:

Take I-81, Exit 235 onto SR 256, Traveling East [Left if traveling South on I-81, Right if traveling North on I-81, toward Grottoes] Travel East on SR 256 for 7 miles to Grottoes. At the intersection of Dogwood Avenue, turn South [Right] on Dogwood. Travel South on Dogwood Ave. for 1,000 ft. Turn Right into the Entrance of Grand Caverns [Grand Caverns Drive]. Phone (888) 430-2283.

For more information contact VAR Conservation Co-Chairs:

Andy Reeder, 840 Twin Lakes Rd., Green Bay, VA. 23942,
(W) 434-455-5876/ (H) 434-392-7452 or e-mail at: cavecon@earthlink.net; and

Meredith Hall Johnson, 8061 Kittiwake Court, Springfield, VA 22153,
703 451-3637 or e-mail at: merecaver@yahoo.com

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Spring VAR 2006

Grand Caverns, Grottoes, Virginia

April 28-30, 2006

Cave Trips

There will be a variety of cave trips offered, both led and self-guided. A kids' trip to Fountain Cave is planned. Trips to less demanding caves such as Church Mountain, Linville Quarry, and Island Ford tunnel) is planned. In addition to guided trips into Caves will also be available. Other more challenging cave trips will be 3-D Maze, Lyles Pit, Glade Cave (one of the muddiest caves in Virginia), and Cave Spring Cave (which has a most spectacular wall of flowstone called "Buttermilk Falls"). A trip into Crozet Tunnel (an old railroad Grand Caverns (not the new section!), you will be able to explore the hillside above Grand Caverns and check out many of the "new discoveries" on Cave Hill.

Friday Night

Music by John Fox

Saturday Night Program

Grand Caverns Video by Dave Socky

Talk on Cave Hill by Jim McConkey

Photos of the "New Section" from various contributors

More music by John Fox

Other Attractions

Speleovendors and the Guillotine Trough

Squeeze Box will be on-site.

Price

Pre-registration price (must be postmarked by April 12): **\$25**

Kids 4-14: **\$20**

On-site price: **\$27**

Kids 4-14: **\$22**

(Kids under 4 admitted free)

Saturday Night Menu

Chicken Bake / Meatloaf / Salad with assorted dressings / Mashed potatoes /
Macaroni & cheese / California blend veggies (cauliflower, broccoli, carrots) / Corn /
Rolls & butter / Brownies / Banana Cake / Carrot Cake / Cheese Cake / Cookies /
Tea / Lemonade

Registration Form

Make checks out to **D.C. Grotto** and mail to Carol Tideman, 7600 Pindell School Road, MD 20759-9725

Be sure to **PRINT neatly** so that you will get your *Regional Record* in the mail.

Name: _____

Other people you're paying for: _____

Mailing Address: _____

Telephone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

35TH ANNUAL KENTUCKY SPELEOFEST 2006

Memorial Day Weekend

May 26th-29th, 2006

Hart County Fairgrounds

Munfordville, KY

Hosted by The Louisville Grotto

Visit our website at <http://www.caves.org/grotto/louisvillegrotto>

It's that time of year again to start planning a trip to Kentucky for Speleofest 2006. This year's Speleofest will be held at Hart County Fairgrounds in Munfordville, Kentucky, a site located in the heart of cave country.

For those who want to visit Mammoth Cave, Crystal Onyx Cave, Kentucky Down Under or Diamond Caverns we are just minutes away from Kentucky's greatest show caves. We have many new caves this year, as well as some old favorites to make you feel at home. We have some easy walking caves for those with small children or you can get on rope and get real dirty. We have long trips and short ones the choice will be yours as we hold this year's family oriented event.

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

Thursday, May 25th – The gates will open at noon for early arrivals. There will be a \$2.00 per person fee for those who arrive on Thursday to camp. Gates close at midnight.

Friday, May 26th – Gates open at 6:00 a.m. Walk, talk, and get together. Cave trips will be posted so you can plan your Saturday and Sunday out. There will be Karaoke from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. for those who want to be a super star.

Saturday, May 27th – The cave trips will start at 8:00 a.m. The last cave trip will go out at 1:00 p.m. Don't forget to look up Dr. William Pearson's Field Trip. Look on the cave sign-up sheets for more info. There will be a Garden Party at The American Cave Conservation Association's Hidden River Cave at 7:00 p.m. (includes free trip and museum tour for Speleofest guests only). The Sun Kings Band will be at the campground at 9:00 p.m. until midnight.

Sunday, May 28th – Cave trips start at 8:00 a.m. The last cave trip will go out at 1:00 p.m. The banquet dinner will be at 7:00 p.m. This year's guest speaker will be Dave Foster and The American Cave Conservation Association which will start at 8:30 p.m. DOOR PRIZES will follow.

Monday, May 29th – Time to return to that other person we are and put our boots and helmets away.

SORRY, PETS ARE NOT ALLOWED

DIRECTIONS

Traveling South on I-65:
Exit 65 Munfordville. South on 31W.

Traveling North on I-65:
Exit 58 Horse Cave. East Hwy 218. North on 31W.

QUESTIONS? Contact Shelly Wolf-cavewolf@hotmail.com or (812) 597-0275

**DON'T FORGET TO FILL OUT THE FORM ON THE WEBSITE
AND SEND CHECKS TO THE LOUISVILLE GROTTO**