

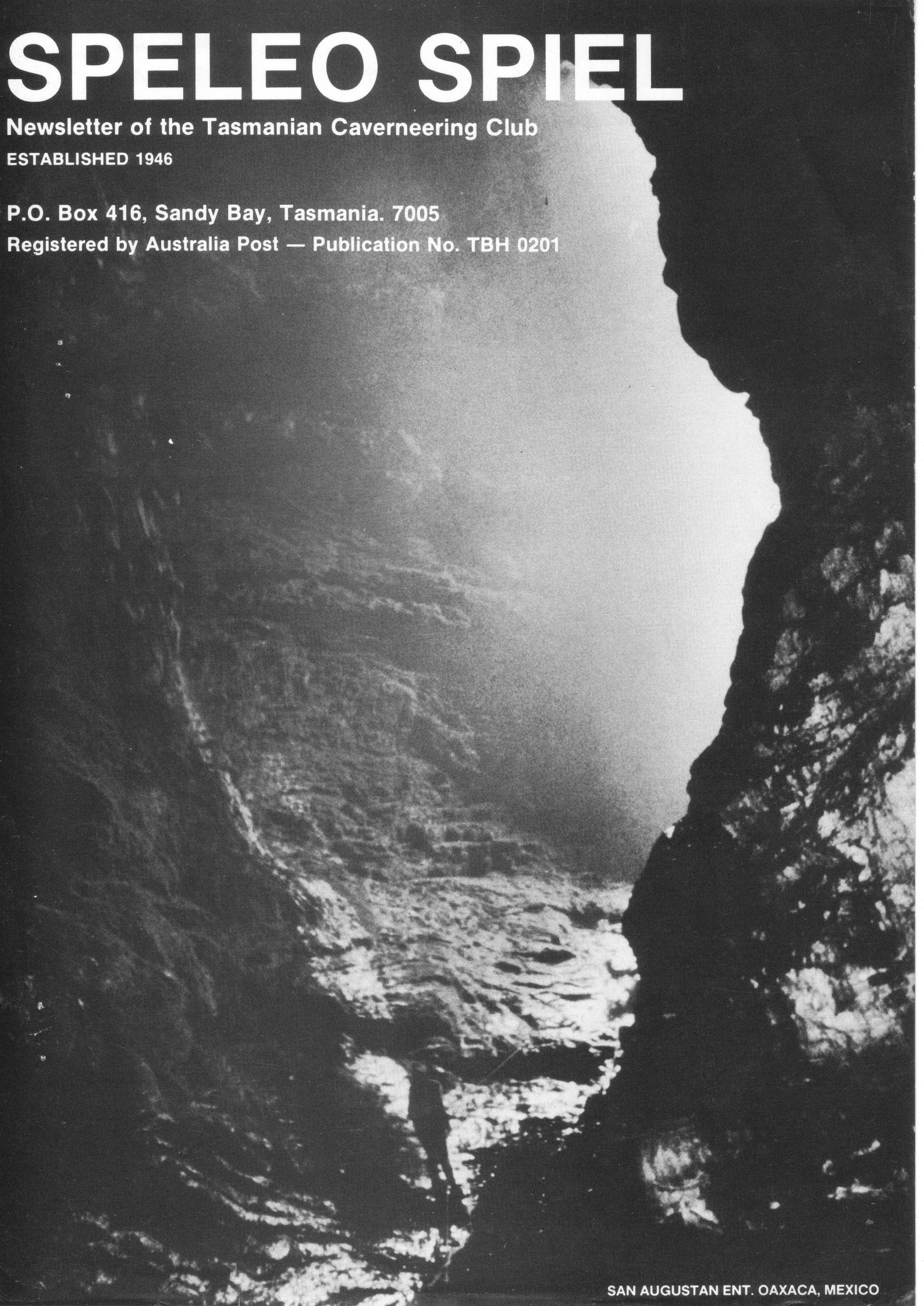
SPELEO SPIEL

Newsletter of the Tasmanian Caverneering Club

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SAN AUGUSTAN ENT. OAXACA, MEXICO

NEWSLETTER OF THE TASMANIAN CAVERNEERING CLUB

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EDITORIAL

Not much to say really on the heavy (typical) editorial scene. The content of this edition of the mighty TCC rag is devoted entirely to Mexico. A couple of years ago Nick Hume joined an Australian expedition to that country, the expedition having the aim of "finding the deepest cave in the world.." (haven't they all??). This article was deemed to be relevant as another Oz expedition to Mexico occurs at the end of this year. This time TCC will be represented by Stefan Eberhard, one of the forces behind most of the major exploration in the Florentine Valley, Mount Anne and Ida Bay areas in the last few years. Stef is also a veteran of the '82 PNG trip and various exploits in New Zealand. The probability of their aim (its still the same!) being realised is greater than ever, as a promising area was cursorily looked at on the previous trip that even then revealed some fairly world shattering discoveries.

Mexico is probably one of the few places around at present in which major discoveries can, and are, being made by expeditions from all over the globe, in a country that is relatively free of major hostilities. The middle east has some potential for exploration (eg Afghanistan and so on), but the physical risk to visitors (and indeed residents!) is enormous and in fact just gaining access would be near impossible.

The article is split into two parts: this first part is about 2/3 of the complete epistle, the remainder will be reproduced in the next edition of the Speleo Spiel, number 230.

Enough is enough - read on about Mexico.... its fairly inspiring stuff!

Stuart Nicholas
(Default editorial person)

T.C.C. Annual club dinner will be held at **WALTERS RESTAURANT**, Collins Street on Friday 2nd October. Meals to begin at 8 pm. B.Y.O. or pay House prices. Call **Trev** on **344862** for reservation.

MEXICO - FEBRUARY TO APRIL 1985

AUSSIERS DO A FEW DEEP OLES....

COVER PHOTO: Jorge on the second pitch of San Augustin, Mexico.

PARTY: Alan Warild, Dave and Carey Barlow, Dave Martin, Stephen Bunton, Mark Wilson, Ed Garnett, Anne Gray, Mark Bonwick and Nick Hume.

Hobart " LA " Mexico City in one day was a bit of a change from the weekly drag up to Maydena. Though, even with the direct flight, it took somewhat longer. Meeting the female star of the B-grade movie "Splash", in person, on the flight to Los Angeles was about all that could be said of this very expensive form of transport.

Being a very provincial Tasmanian, with absolutely no Spanish I found Mexico City to be something of a culture shock. Understandable perhaps, as there are meant to be 18 million souls in this very cosmopolitan centre. A few days of girl watching, and other forms of cultural absorption, along the "Reforma", put me right. Funny how quickly you pick up some Spanish when nobody else speaks any English!

I travelled by bus to Tehuacan, passing "Popocatepetl" and "Ixtaccihuatl", both snow covered giants of approximately 17500 feet. This whetted my appetite to attempt to climb them, whatever else may happen on this trip. Their clear, pure summits protruded above the heat haze and the cactus plains through which I travelled.

At Tehuacan I was supposed to meet up with the other Australians, and sure enough I found Al and Bunty reading in the central "Zoccola". I crept up and sat beside them for a brief moment, before saying "Giddy", much to their surprise. We struck out for the nearest curbside cafe, catching up on the latest news and consuming considerable cerveza and Mexican table fare in the process. They had been reconnoitering some promising karst to the south of the town over the previous weeks, and it was to this area that we would all return. We idled away a couple of days, rounding up the others and purchasing what must have been about a tonne or so of groceries. I observed, with some foreboding, the loading of our expedition vehicle with myriad very large cartons of the dreaded sardines - ugh!

We left the cactus forests of the plains for the high mountains, with their frequent fogs and hopefully depth potential. Straying left, off the main drag, past Teotitlan, we ascended some 1500 metres, very, very slowly. The road wound its way through canyons and over avalanche debris. Anywhere else it would be considered dangerous. God knows what the life expectancy of a roadworker is in these parts.

Coyomeapan is a sort of three donkey town at the end of this road and lays adjacent to a range of limestone, stretching to almost 11000 feet in height. Here we rented a large room above a shop in the marketplace to use as a basecamp for ourselves and gear. The rent was very cheap and we could leave spare stuff here safely while we went off camping / exploring the hills.

Saturday was market day, with throngs of people everywhere. Dismembered pigs sent a creek of blood down the main street. The poor beasts' hideous screams also sent our camera buffs into avid frenzy. Steve captured a blood spattered villager holding a gory head aloft, the sticky liquid trickling into the boy's armpits. Dinner that night was fresh pork.

We purchased some obligatory sombreros and after considerable bartering managed to rent three donkeys, to assist us in hauling the camping / caving gear up the dirt track, some 1000 metres climb to Ishlawá. The climb was fairly exhausting for us unacclimatised types, especially in the heat of the day. However it gave us a magnificent view over the distinctive karst of our own and the neighboring Huautla areas. We also saw the shapely summit cone of "Pico Orizaba", Mexico's highest mountain at some 18500 feet.

Al was definitely setting the pace, easily outstripping the heavily laden donkeys. The rest of us were struggling to keep up with these animals and eventually followed them along some distance behind. A better place for various reasons!!

We established camp in a beautiful pine forest near the village. Fairly close to a spring and not much further to the all important cervezas at the local trading post. Close to camp were three big shafts, all of which had freefalls of 5 to 6 seconds and all unexplored.

Buntý built "starting blocks" over a convenient shaft for use as a toilet. This was explored first as it had something of a draught. We built a New Guinea style kitchen block under the constant gaze of curious locals, one of whom, the "refresco bandit" supplied us with eggs and fresh vegies (and somewhat dubious company) during our two week stay.

The karst hereabouts was superb. Numerous and obvious features were easy to locate in the open forest. The stands were sparse due to the activities of numerous timberfellers, whose ingenious methods of timbergetting were a delight to observe. It was quite simple to explore a considerable area with minimum of effort, in contrast to the sometimes vile bushbashing required back home in Tasmania.

The Belgians had done a quick reconnaissance here some two years back. They did not have any time for exploration and consequently reported nothing of the area in any international journals. The karst area was quite huge and included a massive 1500 metre escarpment of limestone on its southeastern flank. We had all the time in the world to crack something big, hopefully.....

Our first day's caving was quite unique. Mark, Ed and I chose to do the central shaft of a fault controlled series of three, located some 200 metres from camp. Each of the three "entradas" were about 30 metres apart but ours was perhaps the choicest. The sizable entrance hole yawned into an utterly vertical shaft, apparently 200 metres deep. Trees overhung this chasm to provide an excellent anchor point for the 130 metre rope, rigged free by Mark and Ed.

I descended a 140 metre section that went freehanging with the assistance of a single redirection. At a narrow step I had to rebelay for a further drop of 30 metres. Had there been a crack in the opposite wall I could have swung across and put in a redirection to make a continuous pitch of 170 metres.

The descent of this widening shaft was very impressive. Passing into a dense fog layer located about halfway down, the sudden loss of perspective produced a curious attack of vertigo. Mark joined me on the step and descended 30 metres to a gravel floored chamber. I joined him and we both explored down to a sandy sink taking a minute trickle of water. The cave went no further.

All the same, this was superbly clean and warm caving. The hot prusik out completed four very enjoyable hours underground and our return to the surface saw us keen to do more.

After some lunch at camp we wandered down the glade for two or three hundred metres to a "football field" clearing, dotted with small features. One of these proved to be shaft of modest size and promise. Ed descended a couple of pitches with much encouragement from the surface, before it choked out. A gust of wind sent my hat spiralling down the thing once we had derigged it. Thenceforth it was referred to as "El Sotano de Sombrero".

Meanwhile, Mark wandered up an apparent fossil valley where he found an entrance camouflaged within a field of rillenkarrren. We regrouped and returned to his find. It consisted of an entrance shaft of 15 metres dropping to a porch above a sizable pitch. This second pitch had a freefall of 5 to 6 seconds and appeared immensely promising. We left a stash of gear for some continued exploration on the following day. Darkness and hunger forced a return to camp at the end of a great day's caving.

Following a particularly prolonged visit by the "refresco bandit" and friends, it was late in the morning before we returned to our lead. Descending to the porch, Mark did a good job of anchoring to a chockstone then redirected several times down some 120 metres to a huge chamber. Arriving at a step, a further pitch of 50 metres was dropped to a massive breakdown room that had simply choked itself off. A total depth of 185 metres.

That afternoon we surface trogged the nearby hills in the scorching heat. It was quite wonderful to be wandering about the open karst fields, at an altitude of over 10000 feet, wearing just a pair of shorts. Next day was my turn to guard camp, "assisted" on occasion by the "refresco bandit". Considerable fresh fruit and vegetable consumption made camp life a pleasant chore. It contrasted starkly in comparison with the New Guinea expedition of 1982.

Studying Al's aerial photo's of the region, many large scale features (dolines) were obvious. Several of us set out for a valley below the glade to check these collapse structures. I acted as guinea pig, ie I sweltered in full caving gear and when the others found a shaft I was the one who "bombed" it. Speleobopping four big holes and numerous lesser ones was a nice way to spend the day, though nothing went below about seventy metres.

We were discovering that this two pitch shaft arrangement seemed to be the general trend for the area. Impressive, draughting holes were widening to huge chambers that choked off in gravel floors. The partially baked limestone hereabouts was well drained and having not suffered any apparent glaciation in the recent past, was devoid of watercourses to further develop these otherwise promising caves. Even so, there was still the chance that somewhere, one rift might intersect an older bigger series and away we would go. We kept looking.....

The following day our group spread further afield, navigating to various outlying prospects that proved to be more two pitch wonders. Meanwhile, Bunty had discovered a "Chairman" sized mega-hole, adjacent a goat track, and proceeded to consume two days or so to rig it. Our curiosity was aroused by this, so we decided to pay a visit. Everyone got in on the act and we managed to survey, photograph and aid climb everything in it, down to about 190 metres. The entrance pitch series was outstanding and very pleasant caving. Bunty often discussed the possibility of jaguars being resident in Mexican caves, so we named his find "Sotano de Tigre", tongue in cheek.

Towards the end of our first week of exploration, only one major area was left to explore. This included a higher karst area that topped out at 11000 feet on a hill, distinctive for its white outcropping, possibly the

result of continued burnoffs. A small group of us headed off, with a minimum of gear for a day's reconnaissance of the place. We were soon exhausted by the altitude.

True to form we found a sizable shaft amongst the scree of the summit block. This eventually required a return trip with more gear, though I declined to suffer a second trip and left that to the keener types. Fortunately for me it didn't go phew!

We were itching to move to Huautla for some classic "deepies", so said goodbye to the "refresco bandit" and also a very attractive schoolmistress, amongst others and cleared the hill. This process was considerably simplified with the aid of more donkeys to carry the caving gear down.

A banquet back at Coyomeapan was very welcome. The drunken village bigshot acted as mine host and took a very keen interest in Anne who sort of played along for a while. We proposed toast after toast to assist Anne, until finally his amorous intentions were displaced with the need to collapse on the floor. He disappeared below the table which was a shame, for he missed some of Dave's affected acrobatics at the other end of the room - quite entertaining. A few more rugby songs and we collapsed ourselves.

We escaped to Tehuacan with our reputations barely intact. This trip wore out the brake shoes of our van and in fact sculpted the brake discs by several millimetres. Incidentally we were thoroughly searched by the "federales" just out of Teotitlan. Apparently there had been a big dope bust up in the hills and with Californian number plates, we must have looked like prime suspects. No, we didn't have any.

Huautla is further south of Teotitlan, up 60 kilometres of "road". Considerable work had been put into improving this path during the previous year. Even so it took us about six hours to negotiate it and arrive in the "magic mushroom capital" - just about jogging pace the whole way.

We made ourselves known to the local cop and were almost immediately thereafter propositioned to buy some cyclociban. The Presidente was not about, so we went ahead and rented a house at St Augustin de Jimenez, some 1 1/2 hours drive further on. This village overlooked the entrance to San Augustin, a byway into Sistema Huautla, which is fairly high on the list of the world's deepest caves.

Our house was spacious and we soon turned it into "home" by draping our nearly two kilometres of rope and other accessories over racks of drying corn. There was no electricity or running water, so we used our carbide lamps for lighting and fetched water from the local spring. As a precautionary measure we "killed" all water gathered by the addition of a few drops of chlorine solution. It tasted of swimming pools as a result. We had to dig a sanitary pit which made us wonder what the hell the local do about the problem - probably better not to think about it.

The rental for this place was an exorbitant \$20 a month which works out at roughly 50 cents per person per week. The shop downstairs ordered in a couple of donkey loads of cerveza (beer) immediately after our arrival. We were quick to take advantage of this coincidence.

Next day Al trotted off to locate the Presidente and was promptly told by him that no one could cave in his municipality without federal government approval. Possibly he felt that we were undesirable types out to rip off the archeological relics they believe are to be found in the caves, who knows? Obviously relics aren't going to be lying about in a flood prone stream-cave. However common sense probably had little to do with the decision anyway.

This pronouncement was entirely new and had not affected previous expeditions, by Americans or others.

Word of warning for all prospective cavers to Mexico: federal government permission to go caving is the "in thing". The problem is as more expeditions seek out that approval to make sure they can go to the areas in Mexico that interest them, the precedent now set will spread to all areas in Mexico. Eventually even to do a sporting hole such as Golondrinas, groups will have to apply to the Mexican government up to a year in advance, then write a little scientific paper afterwards. That is also a requirement of the permit. In addition, members of expeditions will have to apply for a visitante visa - the ordinary turista visa will not be valid for the Federal permit.

Prospects for bureaucratic rip-offs abound in regard to this matter. Americans we met talked of a sizable deposit requirement refundable on publication of scientific results. This makes our own confrontations with Australian bureaucracy seem tame by comparison.

We eventually obtained this permission after two weeks of considerable stuffing about. Even though Al went through a major epic to speed the process, I suspect we were lucky to be successful in so short a time. Few of us expected any result at all. My sincerest gratitude and sympathy goes to Al, who was responsible for dealing with several government departments, none of which had the slightest idea of what they were doing. Al kept slogging away with little visible hope, but this eventually paid off.

Dave and Mark returned to Australia at this stage, leaving Huautla with Al who was off to battle the bureaucrats in Mexico City. Meantime the rest of us were left to our own devices, for what we considered at the time might be a long period. The following few paragraphs are our own story.

We turned our attentions to Cerro Rabon, a huge mountainous area east of Huautla. At least we were allowed to go surface trogging and this particular area had received little enough of that due to the lack of interest by the Americans for the activity. A stereo viewer I had made from toy lenses and cardboard revealed various karst structures on our aerial photos of the region. There were some positively huge holes at the furthest point on the range and we calculated that it would take three or four days just to get to them, ie helicopter jobs, and hence promptly forgot about them. Many of the features drained to a partially explored resurgence some 2000 metres lower down in the neighboring valley and indicate the considerable potential for depth here.

We made numerous forays onto the western slopes of Rabon where we found a number of entrances. Not being in a position to "bomb" these was somewhat frustrating. Though seriously considering breaking the rules, we were often followed around by money seeking villagers who did not allow us the privacy to do so. In the past, foreign cavers have been chucked in gaol for doing just this, so we were wary.

Perhaps the Americans were smarter than us in avoiding the area. We found lots of "New Guinea" size dolines choked with spiky trees and vines, which made them unexplorable for all practical purposes. Never being very keen on surface exploration, my enthusiasm waned after a few days. Various half hearted starts ended up as cerveza sessions, lazing by the Rio, or "canyoning" the Iglesia.

Steve and I navigated various bus routes to the city of Puebla, our intention being to climb "Popocatepetl" and "Ixtaccihuatl". We hitched to "Paso de Cortes", ascending from the scorching semi desert to alpine forest and snow! Our route followed that of a rather infamous European who passed

this way several centuries ago. Being typical climbing types we forwent the rigors of tent life and opted for the comfort of a sumptuous hostel located on the pass at about 12000 feet. This place had such self contained miseries as a restaurant/bar and hot showers. It was bitterly cold at that altitude and required a bit of effort to do anything. Several inches of snow fell during the night.....

Initially we decided on an acclimatisation walk up the slopes of "Popo", so we did not stir from our beds particularly early. Dawn saw us wandering purposefully but ever so slowly over the easy black volcanic sands, up to the permanent snow line. Steve had mountain boots, crampons and ice hammer, while I had to make do with lace up gumboots and Steve's spare ice axe.. I cut steps up the hard ice sections to a rock rib, which I then climbed to height of about 15500 feet. The rock and intensifying sunshine allowed my feet to thaw out somewhat, but I could go no further on the hard water ice above without crampons. Steve went on at this stage, leaving me to lie in the sun on the highest rock and enjoy the view. Two hours later he stood on the summit.

I borrowed his crampons when he returned and eventually got them on my feet by sculpting my gumboots with his Swiss Army knife. His feet were two sizes smaller than mine! Steve ran off complaining of a headache while I had my turn at the top. It was nice to be on crampons again and I thoroughly enjoyed negotiating a steepish 1500 foot ice slope to the crater rim. Here I had my first whiff of whatever it is volcanoes belch out, to the joy of my sinuses. The summit proper was on the other side of the rim, some considerable distance away. Traversing the edge was interesting and provided a very immediate view of the 1000 foot drop into the crater hole. At this altitude I was breathing flat out just to maintain snail's pace, occasionally stopping to consider whether I wanted to vomit or not. God knows how they do it in the much thinner air of the Himalayan peaks.

Wobbling drunkenly, I arrived at the highest point and took the requisite photos. Going down was considerably easier than the ascent and I moved cautiously, concentrating on my breathing in an effort to avoid the "shallow breath" headache often occurring during descent. I bum slid the lower ice slopes in a sort of "self arrest" position.

Returning to the hostel, I was feeling pretty good and befriended some tourists who had no English, but plenty of home made tequila. We toasted what I imagine was one of the few gumboot ascents of "Popo", then toasted Mexico, then Australia, etc..... Their ideas of toasting were fairly standard - ie sculling six ounce glasses of the vile stuff. I was in a fairly ripe old state when I met up with Steve again. He exclaimed, ".... what the hell happened to you???"

Our rest day was idled away in old climbers' tales, that is tales related by old climbers...! Mexicans aren't averse to this form of wasting time too, so they wanked on about 80 degree water ice on Orizaba, etc, etc, albeit in Spanish. We got on good terms with some Swiss climbers who gave us a lift to the base of "Ixtacchiuatl", our next objective. They made the decision to getup at 2.30am for the climb which was obviously a terrible mistake, but weren't really in a position to argue. This mega-early start had something of an effect on my stamina during the rest of the day - I loathe early starts.

Arriving at the roadhead, we found it to be particularly cold and dark. The Swiss wandered up an obscure track that may or may not have been the correct way to go. We puzzled on this for a short time before Steve announced that the correct route lay straight ahead. I was physically and mentally numb enough to go along with this and off we went in total darkness. Eventually the "correct" track petered out in animal tracks and we became

sort of, well, lost. After an hour or so we regained the carpark, both short of temper and enthusiasm, almost convinced of giving up the whole idea.

We followed the "Swiss Route", panting and puffing, humming "Midnight Oil", switching off, up, up and up. Our efforts were amply rewarded by the spectacle of a sunrise on neighboring "Popocatepetl", a truly memorable experience. Both massifs cast enormous shadow cones onto the inversion layer above the far horizon. Photo stops provided welcome rest.

Overtaking the Swiss, who were content with acclimatizing on the lower slopes of the mountain, we continued up to a sizeable rock band. We negotiated the friable rock here, before arriving at a sharp ridge that continued for some considerable distance to the summit plateau. I lagged some distance behind Steve.... He shocked a party of Mexican climbers when he climbed through them with his hands in his pockets, a slouch hat and camera bag being his only other accoutrements. By contrast, the Mexicans were scrabbling away on the ice, complete with ice axes, crampons, balaclavas, mittens and rope! What they made of my gumboots was difficult to tell, but they appeared quite excited and insistent on something or other as I drunkenly meandered to the summit proper.

I carved "TCC Rules" in the snow at the highest spot, for no obvious reason, before retreating down to a waiting Steve. We met up with the Swiss again. They were sunning themselves amongst an outcrop of climbers' memorials and promised us a ride back to the "Paso de Cortes". After a considerable wait at the pass, we scored a free lift to Puebla on a bus laden with drunken holiday makers. Our poor Spanish brought on a heavy session of songs and home made mescal, the last thing you need when you're completely buggered. We survived long enough to get to Puebla late in the evening. A very long day.....

Next day we caught bus after bus, resting briefly at Teotitlan where a friendly type of person greeted us with the announcement "I am marijuana.". We introduced ourselves briefly before ducking off through the throngs of federales, to catch the bus to Huautla. Due to a breakdown on the Teotitlan to Huautla section we spent eight hours in an ancient overcrowded vehicle, bored stupid.

Steve and I were somewhat delirious on arrival in the town. It was lam and rain was pouring down, turning the mud streets into a quagmire. We still had an hour or so of uphill type walking to reach our house and with the heavy packs we were shouldering, I wondered whether we would make it. Two drunks were supporting each other in crablike motion ahead of us. We overtook them when they eventually collapsed in the murk. Our spirits soared when we spotted the expedition vehicle. Racing down, we heard the great news that everything was now OK and that we would be rigging "La Nita" later that morning.

UNDERGROUND AGAIN.....

Al was the only one of us who had been to -1000 metres before and had in fact soloed Le Nita the previous year in a 40 hour epic involving the use of cord technique. Le Nita entrance is located a mere 10 metres from the road. The entrance series is not as imposing as one would expect for a deep cave and comprises a short section of dry serpentine passage leading to the much larger stream passage that dominates the rest of the cave.

Thirty metres from the entrance of Le Nita is "Nita Nanta", an entirely separate system of over 1000 metres depth. There is a higher entrance to NN in the hills towards Agua de Cerro. A connection between these two systems would yield the third or fourth deepest known cave in the world. At one

point, by survey, they approach to within 20 metres of each other! Le Nita itself links to San Augustin via series of dives. LN and SA are collectively known as the Sistema Huautla and combine to give some 1200 metres depth.

After a few hours sleep we were off to do a partial rigging trip down to Camp One in LN at beyond -600 metres. We got down to -500 metres in just a few hours, a trip involving thirteen fairly easy ramp pitches. This brought us to a large breakdown chamber above the 130 metre pitch. Mark rigged this with my 180 metre 9 mm rope that I had carried in. A few of the others rigged another couple of pitches beyond this point which made a late return home for them.

Jorge was our liaison officer, come caver, donated to us by the Mexican Government as part of the permit setup. He had come as far as the breakdown chamber for the fun of it, but was clearly inexperienced in this sort of thing. He had very little English and followed quietly behind Anne and I during the return to the surface. Anne and I were chatting away, moving slowly so Jorge could keep up. However we eventually lost him. There were two minor inlet streams on the way out and I figured he had probably strayed up one of these. Shouting up the second one, I heard some distant whimpers and "returning" sounds, followed by a despondent Jorge. Thereafter we stuck very close together indeed, finally exiting LN about 1am. We left the vehicle for the others and decided to walk the several kilometres back to the house. Our spirits were very high despite Anne's total disbelief that we were on the correct road to San Augustin de Jimenez.

Another great day was spent sunbaking and boozing by the Rio. Many locals gave us a shy visit, no doubt having heard through the grapevine that we were regular skinny-dippers hereabouts! We correctly decided to exclude Jorge from the bottoming trip to LN, to take place the following day. He was a great guy and a master chef but a 1000 metre caver he was definitely not. His participation would have not only jeopardised the whole trip but likely would have endangered everyone. Jorge agreed to stay in camp that day and in fact had a glorious meal waiting for us on our return, the poor sod.

The day we bottomed Le Nita just happened to be my birthday, a superlative gift for any caver. An ever thoughtful Bunty presented me with a bowl of the usual porridge (my least favourite food) complete with floating candle.

We raced down to -600m in just a few hours thanks to the prerigging of the top half of the cave. The 130 metre pitch was wet but well rigged, a good effort considering its complexity. My 180 metre virgin rope left a tad to spare and this was rigged as handline around a deep pool at the base of the pitch. We still had 25 pitches to go!

The passage was moderately sloped and of such dimensions as to permit easy strolling about. What a contrast to caving back home. As we went deeper we encountered fantastically sculpted canyons, formed by the sheer power of the water. Latter sections were very similar to the waterworn sculptures found on the Franklin River and would have made excellent photographic subjects. Alas, I left out the camera gear for this epic.

The entrance to Sump One distance (sump one is at -1020 metres depth) is about 6 kilometres, a considerable distance to have to travel in a vertical cave. Lower sections tended to be more horizontal however, consisting of interminable downclimbs, deep pools and very short pitches. We wandered for ages along moderately sloped stream passage to a beach at the terminal pool. There we ate and reflected on what its like to be that deep...., though in fact the area felt no more remote than any other part of the cave. Thoughts of the long return journey to the surface did not seem to register, fortunately.

Returning to a large chamber, we followed a previously noticed side passage to a lake series that was swum to the "Mil Metro". This was an "Exit Cave size" chamber, so called because of its depth at exactly -1000 metres. Exploring the slopes of this revealed a 20 metre section of PMI, hanging down from the ceiling. This novelty was the result of an aid climb by the Americans some years previously, and eventually led back to yet more interminable stream passage to sump two at -1030 metres. A few of us wandered down this, encountering a few prerigged pitches with interesting rub points, to the sump. Al checked a lead hereabouts but it "ox-bowed" back to the streamway. The five of us regrouped and headed out to the main streamway, meeting the other five still returning from sump one.

The second team were meant to be derigging the lower portions of the cave, but I somehow ended up giving them a hand. The mind still did not want to come to grips with the long trudge out. It was a case of being "right here at this moment in time" and keep plodding along, resting occasionally and then keep going. The Americans had exaggerated the necessity for rigging drops on the survey. This resulted in us "accidentally" freeclimbing a number of these "pitches", leaving us with several unused ropes. We always seemed to be carrying the stuff somewhere or other.

After collapsing back at Camp One, it just seemed a matter of a hop, skip and jump to reach the entrance, some 600 metres above. I began derigging the very wet 130 metre pitch. Near the top I attempted to pull up this massive rope but it snagged. I went back down to sort out the mess during which time my carbide lamp and back-up electric both expired under the harassment from the water. One disaster led to another and I definitely lost my cool and almost ended up back down the bottom of the pitch in a tangle of PMI. I shouted out to Al for some light and he appeared at the pitch top just as things seemed to be going right again. Always the way, according to Murphy.....

We both pulled up the rope for a waiting Bunty to carry out. He had been relishing the prospect for some time and deservedly so! The slog back to the surface from -500 metres was desperately slow and consumed five hours. The thirteen pitches above were on steep water smoothed ramps of rock that could mostly be free-climbed or muscled up using only one ascender as a self belay.

I smelt something up ahead and passed Ed and Mark who were having a "stop". I also passed Anne who, unknown to me at the time, was lost somewhere up a side passage. The last few hundred metres drifted by in a delirium. I staggered a pitiful distance, a few metres, then sat down to doze for a while. Talked myself into going on a bit further. Then, the entrance, after 27 hours underground - we had actually reached it!

Carey was waiting in the van, dispensing some welcome fruit juice. We waited some more and eventually Mark, Ed, Dave, Bunty, Al and even Anne surfaced, in that order. We were all too stuffed to congratulate each other on what was a very memorable trip. Jorge went unthanked too, for after swallowing his magnificent feast, we all crashed out.

Nick Hume

The second and final part of this epistle will appear in Speleo Spiel 230.

SISTEMA HUAUTLA

OAXACA

