

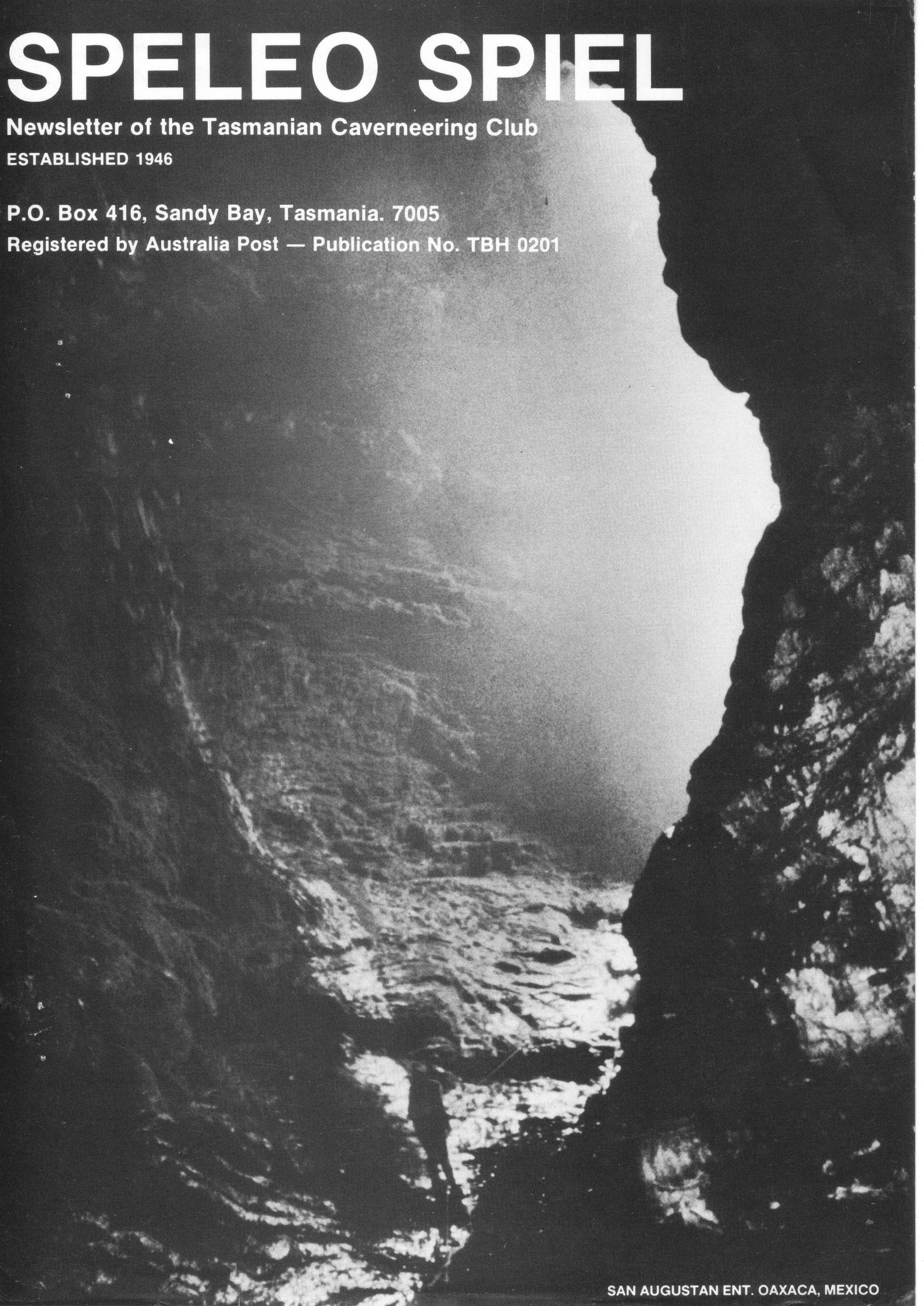
SPELEO SPIEL

Newsletter of the Tasmanian Caverneering Club

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NEWSLETTER OF THE TASMANIAN CAVERNEERING CLUB

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PRESIDENT / QUARTERMASTER:

Trevor Wailes 47 Waterworks Road, Dynnyrne, Tas 7005. Ph 344862

SECRETARY:

Stefan Eberhard 21 Queen Street, Sandy Bay, Tas 7005. Ph ??????

TREASURER:

Chris Davies 1 Fingerpost Road, South Hobart, Tas 7000. Ph 391419

EDITOR(S) / TYPIST(S):

Leigh Douglas, Nick Hume & Stuart Nicholas C/- Ph 283054

EDITORIAL

Huge sigh of relief - the August exams are over for all three editors which is the reason for the current proliferation of SPIEL's. With all this free time on our hands we may even get to do some caving as well. Though come to think of it, having to write a trip report is a bit like doing an assignment.

Speaking of essays, the lengthy Mexico 1985 narrative concludes in this issue, with a return to more normal SPIEL format. The series probably cured a few cases of insomnia, but the article was "lounging" in Stuey's word processor, waiting to be churned out in one form or another.

Nick Hume et al

PEOPLE, HAPPENINGS AND TRIVIA...

Captain Horatio Wailes R.N., intrepid navigator of the good ship "TCC", is planning a voyage to Precipitous Bluff over the summer of 1987/88. Could be a re-enactment of the first fleet arrival and I'm sure Trev has something of the sort in mind to attract sponsorship funding from the Bicentennial Committee. Trev's already "press-ganging" some shipmates from the local taverns but, be warned, deserters will be keel-hauled this time. Plenty of buried treasure at P.B., they tell me, so contact Trev (or Able Seaman Hume) for a birth to fame and fortune.

Meanwhile, Stefan's off to find his El Dorado in Mexico, with Al Warild's CHILCHOTLA 87/88 EXPEDITION. He leaves circa December of this year for four months of caving in the grand style. Cortez would be envious, what a lucky sod! What with Spanish lessons and borrowing travel books from a certain person, he seems assured of the -1000 metre depth goal. Hope the first Aussie mil metro does go to a Senor from TCC...

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Certain club members have been getting into the Piste rather heavily of late. Andrew and Janine Briggs have been posing around the ski tows. Leigh Douglas has been tackling the intermediate slopes in her caving suit. Pete Cover, true to form, has blitzed the competition on the Summit Run by doing it in cross country skis! Rolan unwisely followed the editor down some icy gullies below Legges Tor, both of us ending in a heap. Even Stuey is off to the "Land of the Long White Ski Run" shortly and some of the SCS bods are as well. Maybe this extracurricular enthusiasm could be tamed with a slalom course down Ice Tube.

Mike Edwards, renowned for ludicrous birthday parties, Serendipity trips and epic sea canoe voyages, has returned from his sojourn in the Real Estate wilderness, to take over the management of the Paddy Pallin shop in Criterion St, Hobart. Another great allrounder and a nice guy as well, Mike's knowledgeable guidance will set a cracking pace for the retailing of Caving + Climbing + Canoeing + Bushwalking gear in Tasmania and probably for Australia as well.

His offsider Richard Marshall is an expert in the climbing field and our very own Leigh Douglas works there on a casual basis. Nice to see them all established in a business close to their hearts. Great place to buy some radical gear (they've got heaps of new stuff in), like pink Karabiners(!) and have a complementary friendly chat...

The Editors want to become University lecturers when we grow up! Albert Goede is currently having a respite from the Geography Department and is attending a Geomorphology Conference in Europe. The conference itinerary will no doubt take in some famed karst regions, so we look forward to some great slides at the next Tas Cave and Karst meeting.

Martyn Carnes' band "Lowlife" has been belting out some wild vibes at the Dog House Hotel (alternate Wednesday nights). This is possibly becoming their regular home with the recent contraction of alternative live music venues in Hobart. The addition of keyboards and a "real" drummer has lent a richer and raunchier style to their music, already strong on instrumental and vocal delivery. Their repertoire is great listening value and includes some excellent new songs, covering what many of us (selfishly!) regard as the quintessence of caving music. Impresses the editors immensely, despite their frequently impaired senses on such occasions.

Gadzooks! Someone must be reading the SPIEL. That mighty English publication "Caves and Caving" has reviewed some of our recent issues, summarising the findings in the Florentine, Precipitous Bluff and Ida Bay areas. They even congratulated us on providing a new cover photograph, at last!

12th July 1987 - IB 86 to Valley Entrance through trip

Those involved: Trevor Wailes, Chris Davies, Rolan Eberhard, James Davis, Paul Merhulik, Andrew Baine and Nick Hume.

This cave has a hell of a lot of entrances. You can now take your pick, modifying your options to exclude any part of it that you

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don't particularly like. Anyway, Rolan and Trev went in via Old Ditch Row, chosen because nobody had done a through that way, I suspect. It meant they had a few ropes and SRT gear to cart about the place; something of a handicap in the squeezes prior to Valley Entrance. They survived Old Ditch which indicated that the bolt placements were still OK. The rest of us were more pedestrian, going in via IB 86. We carried a bit of photographic gear, which helped fill in a bit of time and provided something of a break during the five kilometre slog underground. The seven of us regrouped just before the rockpile, making good time along the streamway with some diversions thrown in. We made such good time, that we were absolutely sweltering by the time we reached Kellers Squeeze. This feature shortcuts Camp Pie Circuit, that confusing labyrinth of ancient breakdown chambers.

It quite amazingly cut two hours of tedium from the exercise. Something I thought that would be impossible to do via such a scungy and short bit of gravel. I was convinced soon enough as only some ten minutes beyond the squeeze, we took the side passage leading to the ladder pitch.

I ascended this gingerly, remembering Martyn's forebodings about the rigging from the last trip. I didn't end up in a heap though and in fact the rigging seemed fine, rub points and all. Trev and Chris derigged this, so any future trippers note - there ain't nothing there no more. Remembering the spot to climb out of the rift towards the entrance breakdown is perhaps a bit tricky. Grubby walls are the clue to look for.

We were on the surface by 4 pm. Little more than four hours for the whole trip. This contrasts with six hours for the last through trip, but then, that time we didn't have a clue where we were going! Great caving, mostly because of the straightforward nature of the passage, with only a minimum amount of tortuous stuff. Rolan was so impressed I can only remember him yawning once.

The return over the hill wasn't all that bad. We all needed the exercise anyway. A few cars were shuffled just on dark and Trev tracked down a Pub that was still open. (Is this the reintroduction of early closing?) Trev managed to entertain us and a few locals with some dissertations of an involved nature, but perhaps the less said about that the better.

NICK HUME

AUGUST 1987

RECENT INVESTIGATIONS AT IDA BAY

PARTY: Martyn Carnes and Stefan Eberhard

Martyn and I set out to traverse the upper contours of limestone, on the southern aspect of Marble Hill, between Mini Martin and the Western Creek Swallet area. Immediately beyond Mini Martin/Skyhook Pot, we encountered some features marked by SCS, during their recent explorations of this area. In this locality is IB 61, a multi-pitched pot presently terminating at a draughting slot.

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Further west we entered some new territory, following distinctive karst features along the limestone/permean overburden contact. We explored a small pot with two well concealed entrances leading to an approximately 9 metre pitch. We also marked with blue tape, an intermittent stream sink entrance, with a 30 metre tall rift passage that lead to a constriction to the head of a shaft.

At the major gully, some 500 metres south east of Western Creek Swallet, we relocated Great Expectations Cave, initially explored by TCC in May 1974. We came across several promising shaft entrances in this vicinity, other than the known Thun Junction Cave.

THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND...

PARTY: Rolan Eberhard, Trevor Wailes, Martyn Carnes and Stefan Eberhard

We returned to explore Great Expectations Cave. Following a streamway and a dry upper level each with a short pitch, that lead to a draughting dig. We moved around the hill to a series of shaft systems. One large rift entrance contained an approximately 20 metre pitch, a streamway could be heard beyond an impossibly tight constriction. However we managed to gain access to this system through a nearby swallet, itself containing three vertical entrances. Two pitches of 40 metres and 8 metres, led immediately to the brink of another shaft, which was not explored. We stashed some gear beneath a convenient overhang. Coincidentally, this same area was traversed by Andrew McNeill (SCS), the following day.

YET AGAIN...

PARTY: Stefan Eberhard!

I returned the subsequent weekend and rerigged the unexplored shaft. A bolt was placed for the next pitch, which turned out to be a 33 metre one. The stream at the bottom divided, one branch dropping 8 metres to a sump whilst the other disappeared down a flattener with no draught and evidence of sumping. Total depth of this fine pothole, was estimated at 97 metres. The entrance is located on the contact, some 100 metres or so north west of Great Expectations Cave (Leprona 871.5 867).

STEFAN EBERHARD

MEXICO '85 - continued.....

Our house was perched on the very edge of the San Augustin doline (incidentally, there was a 500 metre deep cave at the bottom of the neighbour's back yard!). This "doline" was really a long blind valley, at the end of which were located a series of three dolines. At the bottom of the third depression was a shaft which at first appeared about 30 to 40 metres deep. The scale of this cave was very deceptive, for the shaft actually required 90 metres of rope and was some 50 to 60 metres in diameter. This was the first pitch of San Augustin and there were more than thirty pitches below this, before the bottom.

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San Augustin is definitely a fine weather cave. It takes a fair amount of murky looking water ordinarily, but during rainy spells becomes floodprone and dangerous. I thought Le Nita was possibly the best bit of caving I had ever done, but SA turned out to be even better. A magnificent stream cave, offering a paradise of variety and experience. How European caves compare to this I can't imagine, though they would be very hard pressed to better it.

On our preliminary rigging trip (to -500 metres) we had to bushbash down the 90 metre pitch (it was something of a jungle affair requiring Tarzan tactics!). At the bottom of the first shaft was a massive rift, more in the style of a proper cave entrance, draining the runoff from the waterfall. Within the rift was a second pitch also of 90 metres and this was rigged from an American bolt, placed interestingly enough, atop a massive boulder.

The second abseil crossed myriad pools of writhing nematodes (a sight that tended to diminish everyone's thirst), and led to the aptly named "Salle Grande". Here, almost 200 metres below the entrance, small plants still grew in profusion on the chamber walls. More wonders were to follow in this immense place, the photographers amongst us had something of a field day. Frustration was the order of the day for any brightly clad caver unlucky enough to be seconded as a model.

At the end of Salle Grande, Al rigged several awkward technical pitches through a wet section of polished limestone. The whole area was shiny, having the character of rocks wrapped in cellophane. We arrived at a porch above a very wet series of drops - the beginning of The Fissure.

I rigged down several stepped pitches using my 180 metre rope. This just reached the top of the 120 metre pitch, which was then rigged by Mark. The others continued on down a further 60 metre drop, plus a few more short ones to reach Camp One at -500 metres, where we turned around and headed out.

I met up with Jorge on the top 60 metre section of The Fissure. He was attempting to jumar past a sidepull without the benefit of any light. I sat around, and sat around, and eventually, after a mere 20 minutes he managed to negotiate this "obstacle". I was almost on the verge of applause when Anne and Bunty caught up with me. They immediately rolled around the place in fits of laughter, the joke largely centering on me being jinxed with the company of Jorge, yet again..... I failed to see much humour in all this and launched myself up the pitch in pursuit of our Mexican colleague. Catching up with him at the pitch top, I told him off in my poor Spanish "... no bueno, Jorge.... " which reduced him to a whimper. Zooming off, I left Anne and Bunty to do the babysitting, the three of them emerging some three hours behind me.

Around this time, some American cavers began trickling into the village from various parts. Scott and Brent (pronounced with suitable accent....) turned out to be really great guys, but were totally indoctrinated to the American way of caving. They were rather appalled at our skinny ropes, preferring "Cartwheels" and "Duffels" instead. Both had hoped to meet up with the American expedition (the so-called "Project Huautla"), which was at that time held up in Mexico City battling with the permission thing. Lacking permits, they could not

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join us in San Augustin, so decided to go "hiking" (bushbashing) on Cerro Rabon, just as we had done previously.

We wandered down into the doline on a very hot day, leaving Jorge to keep house. I was wearing a sleeveless wet suit, much to the amusement of the locals (though once underground in San Augustin wet suits tend to come into their own). I brought my camera along this time to assist the other photographers in their hindrance of all things caving wise.

From camp one a superb passage barrels off to an atrocious pitch of some 90 metres. This pitch achieved some notoriety in 1980 when a member of a Polish expedition took a screamer after rope failure - it took seven days to get him out..... Lots of spent Polish bicycle batteries and piles of their unique "coreless" rope still litter the area, and indeed much of the rest of the cave. Anyway, the pitch is rigged from a "Pole" bolt in the ceiling, which makes it very difficult to regain the ledge on the return. Further pitches drop into a deep lake series that require something of a swim. This part was negotiated using wine bladders and even a tyre inner tube for floatation. A three inch long scorpion watched us, in some amusement, as we floated past.

Once through a floodprone rockpile we entered an immense chamber below Camp Two and Anthodite Hall. Thereafter we rigged myriad short, wet pitches to a canyon zone. This seemed endless and required considerable effort to avoid being washed away in the awesome flow of water. A few kilometres of smooth steep sided pools yielded, at last, to the terminal sump at -860 metres. Here, eight and a half kilometres from the entrance we ate sardines and pondered what caving was all about.

We began the long haul out - prusik, prusik and yet more prusiking. One guessed when the rope was free, for shouts of "...off rope..." were lost in the crashing of the water. I derigged The Fissure, fortunately avoiding the task of carrying out the rope, once again. Thanks Dave!

I managed to get lost in the enormity of Salle Grande, there being no guide from the entrance glow due to the time of day, or more correctly, night! I scrambled back down the slope to the river and eventually found a gear stash that was close to the base of the second pitch. Ascending the Jungle Pitch was awkward because of the slippery, mud coated slope - a rope walker seemed to work best of all.

I suspected exhaustion for when I looked up in hope of seeing the anchor point, I noticed myriad moving lights swimming around me. My tired eyes failed to focus on any one of them, before they faded away. The whole effect was extremely eerie and the hairs rose on the back of my neck before the sluggish brain provided an answer - fireflies! Twenty four hours underground brings about a sense of exhaustion and euphoria rarely experienced elsewhere..... The climb out of the doline, into the dawn, was very testing but it had been a marvelous trip.

Our rest day was spent shopping in Huautla. On the way back we visited Agua de Cerro, hoping to get the nod from the Presidente to explore this promising area (nearby is the upper entrance to Nita Nanta). Once in the village we were quickly mobbed by a crowd of drunks. One particularly offensive type kept bouncing off me as I

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stood by the car, arms folded and Dave found some amusement in this. The drunken sod was raving on about something unintelligible - Mazatec is one language I hope I never have to learn.

The Presidente initially told Al that we could poke about in "his" caves as long as he was given some help, ie booze money. This we were actually prepared to do, however, after much consultation and claptrap with the sniggering assembled populace, he changed his mind to "no" and left it at that. I tended to feel some relief at this conclusion to things, for who would want these lunatics running around above you?? Rope chopping would probably be one of their nicer habits!! We left the place quickly as some tension seemed to be developing; a more disorderly rabble would be hard to find.

Jorge left us to be replaced by some new liaison officers in the form of Yolande and Alfredo. Yolande was somewhat attractive but preferred to sleep with Alfredo in the back of their government vehicle, rather than share our spacious house. This left some of us speculating on what might have been. Together with Al they had one more try at persuading Agua de Cerro, but were once again unsuccessful. A soberer Presidente suggested that our safety could not be guaranteed while in that area.

Our next possibility was an area behind and below Agua de Cerro, governed by more friendly types. A reconnaissance trip to the village of Marie Louise got both permission and a promising karst area worthy of intensive exploration. Ed Garnett left for Yosemite Valley at this time, so it was seven of us who made the move from San Augustin de Jimenez to Marie Louise. We rented a portion of a house for an exorbitant \$1 per week including electricity (one light bulb!). A waking up service was provided by screaming kids in the next room.

Mark's greeting of "Hi there, septic tanks" signalled the arrival of "Project Huautla" in town. We became good friends with the American cavers - they were mostly modest types from Tennessee, Arkansas and Georgia, ie good country people. Being either poor students or other resourceful forms of humanity, they were in stark contrast to the usual American image of loudness and arrogance. Amongst their number were some well known figures in the international caving scene - Jim Smith, Bill Steele, Richard Schriver, Dino Lowrie (first woman to -1000 metres), Ron Simmons and so on.

We engaged in a bit of cultural exchange with the Yanks this took the form of a drinking competition with a few strenuous party games thrown in. It was generally agreed that we won these "Norm Olympics" although we had the advantage of making the rules....

The Americans ensconced themselves in our old digs at San Augustin while we were now settled in at Marie Louise (some distance away) thus losing day to day contact with them, which was a pity. However we did do a few joint caving trips with them over the subsequent weeks. One of these was to the 500 metre "backyard" cave, beyond the house's sanitary pit!

The karst area above Marie Louise was extensively cultivated and the criss-cross of footpaths gave us easy access to some quite impressive dolines. On the first day's exploration we were helped by some "quite religious" villagers, interesting people whose features reflected a different racial origin to the standard Mazatec indian.

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They led us to a cave that they themselves had entered in search of water during drought. Apparently they had used fire torches for illumination, but had turned back after ten metres or so when they became "a bit scared" (the cave contained some archeological relics). We found extensive horizontal development in this cave, perhaps up to a kilometre. Passages intersected some very high avens in places.

Anne and I found a large shaft in an apparently abandoned cornfield. This was located under a mantle of dense vegetation in the bottom of a huge doline. We were somewhat awed by the scale of the entrance, it having a cathedral-like atmosphere. A return trip with heaps of rope turned a bit sour when the "owner" appeared and demanded money. We declined to give any, referring to our blanket permit to explore the area, at which he became a bit irate. We were in the process of rigging the first pitch when a few (thrown) rocks came hurtling our way. This freaked us out a little and we decided to leave. On the way I told the aforesaid farmer, in my feeble Spanish, that we would be back with reinforcements. Subsequently, this cave bombed out after a few more pitches.

Al found a huge shaft that swallowed up my 180 metre rope, with little left over. Over a few follow up trips, no major extensions were found. Leaving a cave rigged like this presented a special problem of its own. Overnight, one ingenious crowd of locals managed to lift the rope (with a bamboo pole) and made off with a bag of caving gear left by Mark and Al. Fortunately they left my rope intact.

Dave, Carey and Buntz developed their own special area, "bombing" surface shafts before finding one that eventually went to over 250 metres. They got really serious and even surveyed the thing. Naming the cave "Sotano de Barlow" was strongly suggested from one quarter.

Never being particularly keen on surface exploration (especially in hot weather), I jumped at the offer of doing "Nita Nanta" with the Americans. Anne wanted a change of scenery too, so decided also to come along. We started our caving trip by catching numerous crowded buses back to San Augustin where we joined the Yanks on board their "Project Huautla" vehicle. On the way to the cave, various side trips to markets and so on were made during which time a few beers were enjoyed amongst pleasant company.

It was interesting to watch the American interaction with the Mexicans; it was certainly less than respectful. While they were the friendliest people imaginable to us, they treated the locals like idiots and because of this there was a distinct coolness between the two sides. This was disconcerting to Anne and I, for our Australian group treated the people with cheerfulness and also humility where it seems appropriate, and it made quite a difference. Children mistaking us for Americans, would occasionally taunt us with "cinguado gringo" and the odd thrown stone. That example gives some idea of the Mexican opinion of their northern neighbours.

We geared up in the evening sunlight. The Americans wore rag tag wetsuits, over incongruous looking panty hose - this prevented chafing, I was told! They laced up moderately good quality mountain boots and either donned "Trevor style" raincoats or went bare armed.

We let them enter the cave first, figuring that they would be fairly slow manhandling their peculiarly American type of oversize cave

pack called Duffels. Anne and I gave them a two hour start, during which time the obliging shopowner across the road opened his store. We sipped Coca Cola, barely fifty metres from the entrances of two separate 1000 metre deep caves.

We were surprised when one guy came back out of the cave. Apparently his duffel split when trying to pass a squeeze. He then walked back to San Augustin for a new one, a return trip of some three hours. Later on, this new duffel got stuck in the same squeeze and he had to do several ferries to get the load through in bits. Anyway, he must have had boundless enthusiasm, or something!

Anne and I stashed spare gear within the cave to prevent theft, then headed on down. Photographing on the way, we passed through reasonable sized stream passage including numerous short slab pitches, very similar to nearby Le Nita. The cave had been described to us as being "difficult", but that was not really so.

The American style of rigging is interesting - they use very stiff 11 mm PMI rope which would only reluctantly pass through Petzl descenders. Rub points are usually neglected with any rope abrasion being overcome by the simple expedient of tying a knot in the rope to isolate the shredded part. It was common place to negotiate three or four of these knots at the head of pitch! On one 60 metre pitch a one foot long protector was actually used. This consisted of three overlapping sections of two inch tape, held by Velcro. On another, a very oblique sidepull was utilised, some two or three metres from the anchor point. The sidepull was clipped directly to a bolt hanger with just a carabiner - I was not impressed! In fact, this did not result in a freehang at all, but merely redirected the rope over some smoother rock.... But why should Americans bother with careful rigging? They were given some two kilometres of rope by the PMI company just for this expedition.

Anne got sick of my photographing and barrelled off in search of the others. I followed slowly through a particularly wet bit, then sat down in drier passage and promptly fell asleep. An hour or so later I awoke and took off hurriedly to try to catch up, but needn't have worried for they were queued at the head of the 60 metre pitch. Descending this revealed a massive breakdown chamber that was the site of Camp One at -600 metres.

Here the Americans intended to stay for up to five days. Their aim was to complete odd bits of surveying and attempt to make the important breakthrough into Le Nita. That link, if found, would yield the third deepest cave known in the world, so understandably the Yanks were somewhat fired up with enthusiasm for the days ahead.

I watched them unpack their duffels and noted the large quantities of complimentary freeze dried food they had brought along. I warned them of the apparent absence of indigestion tablets, a joke they mostly failed to appreciate. We shared a brew of coffee and idle chat.

Jim Smith reflected on the past twenty years of exploring Mexican karst, covering some interesting history of the area. He referred to Nita Nanta as the cave they love to hate. Remembering our own modest Growling Swallet, I guess I could appreciate what he meant. The Americans crawled into their sleeping bags as it was "getting late",

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and being good guests, Anne and I departed. In retrospect I would have dearly loved to have gone to 1000 metres again, but lacking camping gear ourselves, it wasn't a very a practical proposition.

We emerged from the cave about 4 am and grabbed some sleep in a pine forest near the roadside. A bus top ride through San Augustin afforded an excellent view of market day, though we had a wild ride back to Huautla over the atrocious roads.

Unfortunately my time was up and I had to return to Australia. I bade farewell to the remaining five, noting with some satisfaction that they still had three or four cartons of sardines to get through ".... so long Al, and thanks for the fish.... ". I caught the bus back to Mexico City, arriving well after midnight.

After a few days sightseeing, I attempted to leave the country with my existing travel documents. The immigration official pointed out that I had overstayed the ninety days allowable and would have to get clearance from the bureaucracy located in a labyrinth of offices downtown. I went there, assuming this would be a mere formality, however things move very slowly in Mexico and it soon became apparent that the process might take weeks or even months... I walked back to the hotel, while somewhere a radio blared "... its no fun being an illegal alien ...".

Returning to the airport next day, I was prepared to try a bribe, or anything, to get out of the place. Fortunately I found a very rare commodity in the form of a helpful bureaucrat. He had some form or other, typed in quadruplicate, and it all looked so easy. Why this wasn't suggested the previous day I'll never know. Chatting to an American girl on the flight out, the gin and tonics tasted very nice....

A few days expensive "high life" in Beverley Hills preceded the long flight home. Phoning Trev a few days later, he told me about "New Feelings" in Growling Swallet - I was green with envy.

Nick Hume

POSTSCRIPT

The remaining group of five left Marie Louise a week later, their permit having expired. At that stage, they had one cave still going at -450 metres. Al and Coy. returned in November 1985, turning up "Guixani", at -940 metres (see WILD, March 1987 for the full story). A re-return is planned later this year, hopefully to bag the first "Australian" 1,000 metre deep cave. Lets hope they do and have heaps of fun into the bargain.
