

# MCG NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDIP CAVING GROUP

NUMBER 260

MAY 1997

## TO HELL AND BACK - CAMP ONE, INFIERNILLO

*by Pete Hollings*

With March in Saskatoon typically bleak, I took advantage of surplus Airmiles and headed for Austin to join the latest PEP expedition. This time the plan was to spend some time at Camp One, located only a few hundred metres inside the Infiernillo (Little Hell) entrance to Sistema Purificacion. Only the boulder hopping down the arroyo and the 35m upclimb into the entrance make it worth camping! We arrived at the entrance around 6pm on the evening of the 8th of March, some 32 hours of continuous travelling from Saskatoon. We had to rebuild one section of road and remove three or four large trees, but as all this could be done wearing shorts and it was -28°C at home so I was happy.

The following morning we packed our duffels and trekked down to the entrance, where we sat around for an hour or so while Peter Sprouse and Troy Lanier finished the bolt climb up to the 25m high passage heading into the cliff. Previous visitors had free climbed another route, but erosion and caver traffic had made this almost impassable. Soon we were all encamped in the relative luxury of Camp 1.1, the original Camp One being too small for all fifteen of us, the only drawback was the short crawl required to get to the latrine.

On Monday five teams headed out to map the Tubes. The area around Camp One contains an incredibly complex set of passages that form a three dimensional maze varying from walking passage to belly crawl, appropriately named the Confusion Tubes. I was part of one of two teams surveying in the western portion of the Tubes. Jack Kehoe, Kevin Stafford and I made up one team while Dale Pate, Paula Bauer and Bill Stephens were the other. To get to the Tubes, we followed the Western Loop, a predominantly boulder floored borehole that ends up at a steep flowstone slope. At the top of this, after the customary rest stop, we headed into the Thru Tube, marking a couple of leads along the way. The Thru Tube opens out into the impressive Balcony Borehole from which many of the other tubes take off. Our route took us into the Shoe Tube where we started to survey. Dale's crew took one high level lead, while my team mapped a short section of walking passage before it connected into known passage. We then backtracked a little and started mapping our way up a steeply inclined body sized tube which got steadily smaller before breaking out into walking passage at a T-junction. The upslope route soon broke out into big walking passage at yet another junction. Following the right hand route allowed us to connect to the Eastern Tubes. As this was the first connection between the eastern and western tubes we named it the Detente Tube with the crawling passage becoming the Berlin Tunnel. We then followed the route to the left until it came to a fork at which point we stopped for the day after mapping 185m in 50 stations. Back at camp Dale's team had managed to map 110m complaining that they could hear us throughout. By midnight all the teams were back at camp with nearly 600m in the bag.

The next day we headed back to the same area, not leaving camp until 2pm. We started by mapping a walking lead below the Seventeen Hour Tube. Considering that this is a major route through the cave, it was surprising that this lead had been left for so long. We were hoping that the lead would head towards one of the passages we had mapped the day before. We managed to map 90m of nice walking passage before it degenerated into a low crawl. Instead we decided to push a steeply ascending tube, which eventually connected back to the western end of Detente Tube. This made for a much faster route, hence the name Seventeen Minute Tube. We then headed back to the two way junction and mapped the left hand fork until it connected into the Rio Shumate. As we mapped our way to this connection we were haunted by the eerie sound of the Star Trek theme wafting through the passage, to the accompaniment of frenzied hammering. We discovered the source of this when we bumped into Carl Fromen who was caving with Dale and Paula (the beguiling chanteuse). We first encountered Carl when he stuck his hand through an otherwise impassable tube. We sent Kevin off to find them and were most amused when he managed to get lost for 10 minutes; it really is an incredible maze of passage!

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Back at camp we totalled up the survey and found that we had managed to map over 250m. Peter Sprouse's team, John Cradit and Troy, had produced a similar amount, having completed a bolt climb in Napoleon's Dome, at the western limit of the cave that lead them into 270 metres of walking passage. They left the survey at a 15m pit, having run out of rope. Susie's team, Robin Cope and Bill, had also had a good day in the Arrakis area, which was named after the desert planet in the novel Dune. It is possibly one of the oldest portions of the cave and now consists of dry, dust-filled passage. Susie's crew mapped over 200m heading into a blank area of the map.

Almost by default, Wednesday became a rest day. Groups had straggled into camp between 1 and 4 in the morning and consequently most of us did not stir from our sleeping bags until late in the afternoon. So we spent the rest of the day eating, talking and drinking beer. Some adventurous souls even wandered back to the entrance to watch the sunset.... unfortunately it was overcast.

With a good night's sleep behind us, we were able to make an early start. The plan was for three teams to head towards the lead above Napoleon's Dome, rig the drop, and then leapfrog survey down the borehole that was sure to be there. We headed along the Eastern Loop up to the Balcony Borehole. There, we traversed over the 30m drop over the entrance, listening to the sound of cavers entering the Thru Tube below. We then worked our way through the Octopus Tube, into Silly Rabbit Tube, then through Mrs. Lubner's Tube which opened out into the Misty Borehole. From there, the Hose Tube and the Banana Tube took us into Napoleon's Borehole which we followed to the base of the climb. While some people headed off to rig the drop Susie, Maria, Tehrany, Jack and I took some photos, marvelling at the incredible draught in the passage. By the time we caught up with the others the pit had been rigged and typically, there was no way on at the bottom. Troy and John had already started working on a dig at the bottom in an attempt to follow the air, while Peter was tackling a nasty climb in order to examine a possible lead. Despite gashing his leg when a large handhold pulled loose from the wall, Peter made it to the top and reported 'going' cave. Consequently we divided into three teams and set to work. Susie, Troy and Kevin were to map the pit; Jack, Maria and I surveyed up the climb and into the passage beyond while Peter, Bill and John became the designated push team. We surveyed 75m up the steeply ascending mud covered passage before we heard the unmistakable sound of frenzied digging. The great air we had been following all along had disappeared into a maze of impenetrable tubes and rock-filled digs. By the time we got there, the push team was already on its fourth dig! While we continued poking away at various holes, Susie's crew returned to the top of Napoleon's Dome to check out another lead but unfortunately this didn't go either. We got back to camp after a 14 hour trip to find that Wayne Bockelman, Mary and Carl had mapped 100m of tube while Dale, Robin and Paula had mapped nearly 200m.

Friday was to be our last day of surveying. A quick look at the results showed that we were only 500m short of making Sistema Purificacion 90 km long, so as each team headed out into the tubes, they knew that 100m each would be enough. I went out with Kevin and Jack to a portion of the Confusion Tubes off the Eastern Loop. Peter pointed out a couple of leads then headed off with Troy to survey some tube. Our first lead led off the Original Tube, this was a fairly short one that soon connected into known passage and was named the Plagarist Tube, because it was not very original. The Tubes in this area were very different from those in other areas consisting of clean-washed rock with beautiful scallops. We next backtracked a little to map a passage off the Seven Way Junction. It took us a little while to get started on this survey, as Jack struggled to sketch his way out of the Junction room. Things didn't get any better as we progressed down the passage with nearly every station having two or more leads coming off it. We eventually mapped the Chimichanga Tube for 70m until it connected into the First Tube. As we were a little short of 100m, we decided to map a couple of side leads before we were eventually stopped by sketcher failure, when Jack was finally defeated by the complexity of the passage.

We headed home stopping along the way to watch Troy tackle a dome climb near camp. He and Peter having stopped surveying some time before us. The presence of the power drill and a motorcycle battery meant that Troy was able to make good progress up the climb, much to the amusement of the peanut gallery below who offered 'helpful' advice while finishing off the last of the beer. Unfortunately, Troy ran out of bolts before he got to the top, but a smoke test had shown that at least some of the air was going in that direction. Susie's team was the last group back, the lead in Arrakis having been mapped for over 150m and left still going. We totalled up the survey for the trip only to find that we were 19m short of the 90 km mark. While there was some talk of going out again to find a few more meters of survey, nothing came of it.

The next morning Peter woke up unusually early and proceeded to sort through his entire collection of plastic bags, eventually forcing us all to get up far earlier than we had intended. Apparently it was almost possible to hear the whole camp roll over in unison as Peter shone his light around the room. As a result camp was packed up fairly quickly and people started making their way back to the entrance. Carl was the first to descend. While we talked him out of abseiling down with his frame pack on his back, he instead decided to lower it down on the end of the rope. He enlisted Maria to do the actual lowering, while he abseiled down the other end to stop it getting stuck. About half way down, he told Maria to let go, and the next thing we heard was the pack tumbling free. We later learned that the frame had fallen apart, but Maria assumed it was her fault, a view supported by the peanut gallery. The last we saw of Carl he was hiking down the arroyo hauling his mutilated pack behind him. It was Maria's turn next, and she looked very organised as she clipped in her descender, grabbed hold of the tether to brace her pack, and then pushed her pack over the edge only to find that it was not clipped in. Once again the peanut gallery was vastly amused. The rest of the descents were uneventful and we were all back at the trucks by noon. We took advantage of the easily accessible water to wash up for the first time in a week, while inspecting the damage in the two tumbling packs. Apart from the pack itself, Carl had only broken the filter on his camera, although Maria's disposable camera was pretty mangled.

From there, it was all downhill, literally. The fact that it was raining made the roads a little treacherous with the rebuilt section causing a few problems. But we made it down to the tarmac in good time and stopped for supper at the Hacienda, a beautiful Hotel in the middle of nowhere that did not even flinch at catering to 15 smelly cavers. From there we drove through the night back to the States getting into Austin at dawn, and from there it's only 12 hours to Saskatoon.