

MCG NEWS

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Christmas in Mexico.....again!

by Pete Hollings

The third year running I spent my Christmas in the Purification karst of Mexico, however this year was a little different as I took Jill, my wife, along for her first taste of caving. Following tradition, most of the group rendezvoused in Austin at Susie Lasko and Peter Sprouse's house, before heading down to Mexico. This Year, the house was even fuller than usual due to the large number of international cavers (10) who had taken up temporary residence.

Most of us spent Friday Dec 19 buying food and watching Charley Savvas install the new rear end on the Great Pumpkin, his orange 1953 Powerwagon bus. By evening, everyone was nearly ready, but in order to speed things up Peter decided we should split into mini convoys. Jill and I loaded our stuff into Kevin Stafford's truck and headed south with Bev Shade and Barbara Luke. Despite nearly losing each other five minutes after starting, we eventually straightened everything out and set off.

We crossed the border at Reynosa and made our way up into the Sierra Madre Oriental, arriving in Conrado Castillo late on Saturday afternoon. Gill Ediger, Bernhard Koppen, Jean "Creature" Krejca and Vivian Loftin had arrived a couple of days earlier and were already at work modifying the amazing new extension to the fieldhouse.

Soon after we arrived Bill Mixon pulled up with the British contingent (Dewi Lloyd, Kat Hawkins, Tim Palmer, and Peter Hambly of the NPC). On Sunday morning, Gill took us on an entrance orientation tour which fortunately coincided with the arrival of the Great Pumpkin and its cargo of cavers. Within a few minutes of arrival, Charley was putting on his cave gear and joining Bev, Kevin, Bernhard, Viv and Creature on a trip to the bottom of Cuchilla to map some of the leads above the latest 'terminal' constriction and enlarge the Hurricane Crawl.

An extensively engineered section of passage that finally became passable in 1997 after at least two years of effort. A lot of work is being put into leads beyond the Hurricane Crawl in the hope of avoiding another protracted dig.

The next day a couple of trucks headed up towards Revilla to check a few leads. Jill and I, along with Scott Schreiber and Bev, followed Peter on a trek up the hills and down the valleys in order to check a lead he had identified on some aerial photos, this proved to be a shadow. However, the cavers we left scattered behind us had better luck. Barbara, Kevin and Tim mapped Pozo Nueces in a karst pinnacle near the border between Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon, while Creature, Kat and Viv mapped a small pit below Revilla (Cueva de la Arana Verde). We then continued up to Revilla in our quest for lumber, but were only able to rummage for scraps that could be used to plug the gaps that had appeared as the new boards on the field house dried.

We had two main objectives on Tuesday. While nine of us headed off to the Valkyrie River to map some leads identified earlier in the year, nearly everyone else headed into the Brinco entrance and down into Batwing Boulevard, to continue pushing this extremely promising lead that was discovered last Christmas. Charley, Tim, Kevin, and Dan tackled a series of lead climbs in Batwing. They eventually stopped at a point where the passage changed from a vertical to a 45 ramp. The Valkyrie River crew made our way through the French Entrance, passed the Attic Room (the highest point in the system), onto Kerr Plunk (named after Chris Kerr, who fell and broke his leg there, resulting in the only major rescue in Sistema Purificacion in the last 20 years) and through the very awkward Grimbly Thrutch into the Valkyrie River.

We made our way downstream through a couple of nipple deep wades until we reached the sump. Here, a brief, low airspace duck took us to the start of the sump bypass where Cyndie took Steve and Patrick to one lead, while Creature, Bev and Scott tackled a virgin crawl. Cyndie's lead started at a hole in the floor which was too overhung to be freeclimbed, but led to a low, wet crawl that they mapped for 70m before stopping at a low airspace. Creature's crawls also pinched out, but were close enough to the other group that they could hear them moving around below. Peter, Susie and I returned to the Valkyrie River and took a few photos before heading into a side lead that we surveyed for a while before leaving it going-but-small, in order to check a more promising lead further upstream. This passage, the Embouchure Passage, had been identified by Peter on an earlier trip, but was not pushed since he dropped the hammer that was needed to remove some cave cancer. With some hammering and a lot of digging, Susie was able to get through a clay filled crawl into nice canyon passage. With some more digging, Peter was through and later, even I was able to follow. We mapped the passage to a sand filled crawl, before turning back at a going passage on the other side of the crawl.



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Christmas in Mexicoagain! continued by Pete Hollings

The trip out was not a whole lot of fun for me as I soon discovered that occasional soccer games in Saskatoon were insufficient preparation for a 13 hour caving trip. Still we all made it out safe and sound.

The combination of tired cavers and Christmas Eve made for a very lazy day, although Susie did manage to take Jill on her first trip into the goat filled Apprentice Cave. Dewi and Charley led a group to re-examine a possible resurgence near the monument that Bev, Dewi and I had attempted to open a couple of years ago. However, they never made it that far and instead worked on another dig. This led to a short drop, which they left undescended. For Dale, Bev, Cyndie, Melanie and Dan, Xmas Day was spent mapping the remainder of the leads in the bottom of Cuchilla. Just when they thought they had them all wrapped up and the only place to go was the 'terminal dig' dig, Dale spotted a small side lead, leaving Bev with one last chance to avoid numerous mud hauling trips. Charley, Bernhard and the other Brits returned to the lead of the day before, Pozo Weihnachten (German for Xmas) and dropped the pit, but were unable to push the cave any further. Instead, they headed up towards their original target and dug their way into Cueva Avispa Arana Viuda Negra (Black Widow Spider Wasp Cave) to the top of a short pit which they were unable to descend as the rope had already returned to the vehicle.

On Boxing Day we packed the vehicles and headed off for the Tinajas valley. As we travelled over to the valley the clouds rolled in and the weather turned nasty, leaving those outside the trucks scrambling for warm clothes. While we pitched camp, and Dale Chase kept himself warm by opening up a small drafting hole a few metres from his tent. It started to drizzle so we all went to bed early.

The first order of business on the 27th, was to continue the exploration of Sima Chupacabra. This is a very promising lead found earlier in the year by Charley and Bill Russell. Despite having a cast on his leg Charley had managed to push down to a second drop where he ran out of rope with the bottom nowhere in sight. Charley, Bev, and Bernhard loaded themselves up with ropes, drills and assorted metal ware and headed off, closely followed by two survey teams consisting of Creature, Steve, Kev, Barbara, Kat and Tim. They managed to get most of the way down the second big drop but were left hanging in space when they ran out of rope at -250m. Two other teams led by Peter and Cyndie, dropped a couple of pits up near the abandoned Sofia Mine above the village. One of these Cornish Pit, was only 50m deep but another, Pozo del Lantrisco, was mapped to over 100m with a possible dig at the bottom. Jill and I comprised the low land reconnaissance team which trekked north along the valley, where we located a number of small pits all less than 5m long.

The next day the same push team returned to Chupacabra with Susie, Peter and Creature taking over the survey. Due to the amount of rope being swallowed by the cave it was becoming known as Chupacable (Chupacable is Spanish

for Goatsucker, a mythical vampire-like creature that is reputed to stalk rural Mexico). The survey team reached a ledge at -340m while the push team dropped another 50m drop into a muddy canyon leading to yet another drop. Despite being tired and sick, Cyndie led Steve, Tim, Pat, Kev, Jill and I on a trip to the hillside near the Sophia mine with the hope of locating a couple of pits that had been found by Bill Russell, but never mapped. We never did locate them, instead spending the day aimlessly wandering the hillside.

On Monday new arrivals, Troy Lanier, Cheris Casselli and Christy Rogers, headed into Chucacable, along with Melanie and Kev in order to get a feel for the cave and refresh their vertical skills. Meanwhile Dan persuaded Scott and Dale to return to Lantrisco to work at the dig at the bottom of the 100m shaft. With the aid of pulleys and a z-rig they were able to remove a large obstruction. This led to a 50m pit with no obvious way on at the bottom. Peter led a group of us on another hillside quest for pits. While Barbara and Kat dropped a virgin 20m pit, Dewi impressed us all with his ability to impale himself on every available cactus.

The following day the customary Chupacable push team returned ready to scoop booty in the borehole they were sure to find and Cyndie, Susie, Pat and Steve were going to survey (yeah right!). Dan led Carlos, Barbara, Dale and Tim back to Lantrisco to survey the new pit while the rest of us headed back up the hill to relocate Charley's pits and hopefully find some other pits we had heard about. We left Troy, Melanie and Creature to map Tiro Limon (Lemon Drop) which was only 13m long. Peter, Kevin and Christy wandered further up the hill and relocated Sima de las Malas Mujeres which had originally been dropped by Bill Russell and Charley. Peter rigged the pit and the rest of us then surveyed while Peter went to rig another small pit nearby (Pozo Punchado, which was named in honour of another Dewi cactus incident). Mujeres proved to be a beautiful pit with a 50m free hang down an awesome shaft. The only down side was watching the rig point, a large tree, move alarmingly as everyone climbed out, making the Jingling tree look positively safe. We surveyed Punchado and then ran a surface survey down to Lemon Drop.

As it was getting dark Peter abandoned us to go and locate the Lemon Drop crew who were working on another pit Dewi and Kat had located (Tiro Chocolate). This proved to be a good idea as the rest of us would never have found it in the dark. We settled down around a fire at the entrance while they mapped the cave. The chupacable push crew were back at camp and looking distinctly muddy when we returned. The cave had indeed flattened out but it had also sumped in the process. The sump itself being on the cleaner side of a liquid mud duck, affectionately known as the Mud F#*k. The survey crew returned at dawn having stopped on the cleaner side of the mud.

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On New Years Eve Dale, Tim, Dan and Carlos went into Chupacable to derig. Susie and I gave Jill some vertical training and then took her into Pozo del Epidote where she descended her first pit. Back at camp the rest settled down to welcome in the New Year, Gill, Bev and Bernhard earned two hero points by returning to Chupacabra to help the derig team carry rope back to camp, even more importantly perhaps, they took beer to the tired cavers.

The alcohol abuse and deep caving left many people looking for projects around camp. Bev led a crew to map a small pit near the site of the old sawmill (Cueva del Monto de Madera), which not surprisingly was sawdust choked. Meanwhile Peter, having tired of wandering the hillsides aimlessly arranged for Oscar, one of the locals, to show us some pits. The first of these was named Pozo sin Sexo, where a 15m entrance drop led to steeply dipping rubble slope in a winding canyon to another drop. It took seven "interesting" deviations to reach this point, so Kevin, Christy and I decided to return another day with the hammer drill. Kevin and Christy then surveyed Pozo de Dos Ojos, a short pit originally dropped by Bill and Charley. Kat, Dewi and Susie had perhaps the best lead of the day, a horizontal cave north of camp (Cueva de Katarina) that they mapped to a restriction. They returned later that night to enlarge this and were able to squeeze into a sizeable room with a way on in the floor that was never descended.

On Friday it was time to leave the mountain. Some of us prepared to traverse the new road across the mountain to Zaragoza. Despite this being one of the better roads I have travelled on in the Purificacion area it still took about six hours to travel the 30 miles to town. On arrival we invaded the only restaurant with enough chairs to seat us all and proceeded to drink their entire supply of Coronita, while they figured out what on earth they were going to feed 17 noisy gringos. The rest of our trip was spent touring in Zaragoza and Saltillo, as well as visiting one of the deepest gypsum caves in the world (Pozo del Gavilan). This is a 50m deep pit some 30m across with a lake at the bottom which has been plumbed for another 20m. Finally it was time to return to Austin where after a few short hours of sleep, we boarded a plane for Saskatoon, ~~Canada~~