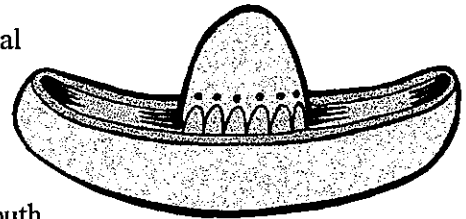


Tecolote 99

Pete Hollings

March 1999 found me returning to Austin to participate in the latest PEP expedition. On this occasion I joined 12 Americans and three Mexico City cavers for a six day camp in Cueva del Tecolote (Owl Cave). Despite the fact that the previous expedition had visited an area new to the Project, and left two extremely promising caves, it had been decided that 99 was the year to return to Tecolote. The PEP had not worked Tecolote for 8 or 9 years, when they had undertaken a 10 day camp at Camp Three, in the far reaches of the 32km long cave.

I arrived in Austin on March 4 and quickly became involved in the usual vehicle maintenance and gear sorting. The next day we packed up our gear and waited as everyone rendezvoused at the house of Peter Sprouse and Susie Lasko, the project leaders. Around 8pm four trucks headed out and soon picked up another as we were joined by California cavers Matt Oliphant and Nancy Pistole. We then drove south reaching the border crossing at Reynosa around 4am. After some brief confusion, when it turned out they had moved the visa office/customs house, we settled down for what turned out to be a long wait. It eventually took us four hours to get everyone's paperwork. We had a few problems as some of the rules appeared to have changed. Jack "Solo" White quickly found out that the birth certificate that had been sufficient to get into Mexico on previous occasions was no longer good enough. Fortunately the same certificate, when attached to a \$20 bill was acceptable.



We made it into Ciudad Victoria around noon and picked up the three cavers from Mexico City (Laura Rosales, Gustavo Vela and Antonio Soriano). From there it was only three hours of 4WD road to the village of Los San Pedros, and that included a stop at a swimming hole along the way. We parked the trucks in a field near the entrance to Tecolote, and while most of us stretched our stiff limbs, Solo, Charley Savvas, Ray Keeler and Bev Shade prepared to take Charley's Bosch drill on a rigging trip. Around midnight they were back at the trucks having rigged the first six drops down to Flowstone Drop.

Everyone was up early on Sunday (7 March) and duffles were quickly packed. While most weighed in around the 40lb mark, Ray Keeler managed a monster 52lbs (given the luxuries he was to produce in camp this was hardly surprising). We parked the trucks within the corral of the village jefe and wandered down to the entrance around noon. The entrance to Tecolote is fairly impressive, measuring some 20m square. The 15m entrance drop is permanently rigged with the tread of a WW2 bulldozer. This allows the locals to enter the cave for water in the dry season and makes for an interesting descent. Most of the early drops were fairly short and the low water levels in the entrance series meant that most of us dispensed with the wetsuits that had been used in the past, a good thing too as Tecolote is a very hot cave. In fact the water levels were so low that it was necessary to rig a rope to climb out of Soapsud Sump.

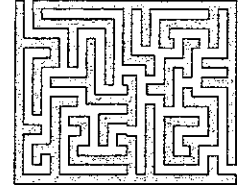
When we reached Flowstone Drop, we loaded up with the ropes and group gear that they had left there, and headed on in. Soon we were at the 25m drop into the Ides March, a nice section of walking passage with only Anxiety Canyon in the middle to spoil the fun (and even this isn't all that bad). At the end of the Ides March was another 25m drop into the Sal de Puente, from where a fixed rope up a flowstone ramp led us into camp. Just below the ramp was the Galactic Trash Compactor. It is here that all the debris washed in from the entrance ends up. Given that we counted at least 20 truck tires and too many metres of plastic pipe on the way in, this is one area that will likely always be choked with rubbish.

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Camp I turned out to be a pretty comfortable cave camp by any standards. We were spread out along ~100m of 5m square passage, with sleeping areas picked out on the flat mud banks to either side. The presence of a perched pool meant that we were able to set up a shower at one end of camp with the latrine at the other.

Monday the 8th was our first chance to push some of the many leads that Peter had identified for us. While most of us were heading into an area known as the Mickey Mouse Maze, Solo was keen to lead a group out to Jelly Bean Junction so he headed out with Charley, Matt and Nancy. Jack had identified this lead on a previous camp and had been anticipating his return for many years.



For the rest of us it was an easy trip out into the maze area. Much of the route took us down the spectacular Fantasia Borehole, which was typically 10-15m high and at least 20m wide. Only the dark, light absorbing mud spoiled the beauty of this passage, but as we were to learn over the week the mud is everywhere in Tecolote. We turned off Fantasia into the Yucky Poodle Trunk and from there into the maze proper. One feature of this area is the extremely sharp yet brittle nature of the limestone, every hand or foot hold must be checked twice as a slip would be painful, to say the least. We spent the next hour or so orientating ourselves in the Goofy's Borehole area, a complex section of fracture controlled passage. Eventually Peter had everything straightened out and was able to find the leads he was looking for.

We split into three survey teams; Bev, Tim Stich, Kevin Stafford and Laura headed into an area of north trending passage, the Missouri Crawlway, that opened out into what became known as the South Park Series (continuing the cartoon theme of the Mickey Mouse Maze). Ray, Bill Stephens, Soriano and Aaron Addison climbed into the Gargoyle Gallery and pushed leads near the top of Slimy's Pit. Peter, Susie, Gustavo and I mapped a couple of small loops in the main maze area, then headed off to Bullwinkles Borehole. Our first lead (Pugwash Passage) was mainly walking passage and after around 90m popped out into some significant borehole. However, my excitement was short lived as this turned out to be known borehole in the vicinity of Dumbo Junction (which marks the end of the Yucky Poodle Trunk). We mapped a total of 170m before meeting with the other teams to navigate back out through the maze, and head back to camp.

Bev's crew mapped 140m with the passage still going strong with numerous side leads, while Rays team picked up 200m and also left going passage. Around 6am, about 5 hours after the rest of us, Solo's team returned having mapped 740m upstream in what was to become known as the Jelly Bean River. They had been mapping in large trunk passage, making their way upstream through occasional swims and heading south into a blank area on the map.

The following day saw the start of the time distortion that became a feature of this camp. Bev and Ray led their teams (with the exception of Tim who wasn't feeling too good) back to the same areas, leaving camp around 3pm and planning on a 15 hour trip. Peter, Susie, Gustavo and I headed to a different area, the Spine Line. We left camp and headed through the Russian Dancer, a wide but low section of passage. Before entering the Fantasia Borehole we turned off into the Spine Line where we almost immediately began eliminating leads. Most of the early ones were too small to warrant surveying, however about half way along we checked out one side lead that had ended in a breakdown choke. Peter wanted to relocate the survey stations towards the end as he hoped to connect into this from a different lead. By closing this loop he hoped to improve the accuracy of the survey in this area, which currently has a large loop error. Once that was done we headed on to a two metre square lead that appeared to be heading south into a blank area on the map, unfortunately it quickly looped back into the main passage. Next we headed to the other end of Peter's loop, the lead had been mapped for five stations and for a while continued as nice walking passage before closing down and becoming muddy shortly before the breakdown. However a little work saw the connection made and we headed back to camp with most of the Spine Line leads mopped up. We made it back around 1am with 280m of survey in the bag. Bev's crew were a couple of hours behind us, having picked up 200m in the South Park series, in a section of south trending borehole. Ray's crew were the last ones back having mapped 410m in the Tasmanian Trunk which they left with plenty of going leads.

On Wednesday Solo's crew, having rested for a day, headed back to their lead with enough food and light for 24 hours. For many of us it became a rest day, however Peter, Susie, Tim, Kevin, Bev and Laura headed out at 5pm to check some leads in an area known as the Dungeon Maze. Unfortunately Laura pulled a muscle in her back and returned to camp with Susie, who instead of surveying took me on another of her pyjama photo shoots in the borehole around camp, the last time being during the Infernillo camp. By midnight Solo's crew was back in camp. Their going river passage had sumped out after 300m of survey and the second injury of the trip. Solo had managed to slice up his hand pretty badly, when a hold peeled off. Peter's crew came back in the wee hours of the morning having cleaned up a lot of the leads, but not found any significant extensions.

On the 11th all of us headed out from camp together with the intention of pushing the Tasmanian Trunk and the South Park series as hard as we could, as this was likely to be our last survey day. We set out around four in the afternoon and in two hours reached Station 73. At this point three teams headed into the Tasmanian Trunk while the rest of us went into South Park. Bev's original lead had started at the end of the Missouri Crawl an unpleasant piece of passage reminiscent of some of Mendip's nastier offerings. However, they had mapped most of the nasty stuff and Bev, Matt and I got to start our survey in nice walking passage, while Susie, Kevin and Laura leapfrogged ahead. After 130m of survey (not the 200m Kevin had claimed when he scooped it) we met up with Susie who had stopped while her crew checked a muddy crawl. They came back reporting that it soon opened into bigger stuff so leaving them the crawl, we leapfrogged ahead to survey the Worcestershire Zombie passage. The others soon overtook us but by the time we caught up with them the passage had gotten nasty so we called it a day, getting back to camp around 5 am. Between us we added 450m of survey

Peter, Nancy and Soriano came into camp right behind us. They had mapped 380m of loops off the Tasmanian Trunk. Ray, Aaron and Gustavo made the connection between the Tasmanian Trunk and the Chihue Frihue at the Weird Place, while Charley, Bill and Solo had mapped 380m in an upstream side lead off the Trunk, which they named Seven of Nine Borehole. It looped back into the Trunk near the climb into the Gargoyle gallery, significantly shortening their trip back to camp. It was while tackling a fairly nasty downclimb in this area that Solo managed to take a significant amount of skin off his back, his second and more significant injury.

The group remained dormant until late the following afternoon when we all gathered up at Peter and Susie's spot to eat the rest of our food and watch the "Peterplotter" at work. This amazing device consists of Peter plotting the survey notes onto the line plot to give us an idea of what we had achieved (when this was later done with the aid of a computer, the Peterplotter proved to be amazingly accurate). This task was greatly eased, the watching that is, when Ray appeared in shirt and tie with a quart of Jack Daniels. These items, and the walkman he brought down, went a long way to explaining the monster duffle.

After a nap and more food it was time to pack the duffs and head for the surface. Unfortunately our plans to stagger departures did not really work, so after leaving camp at 1am I spent the next hour waiting at the bottom of the drop into Sal de Puente. This did allow time for us to attempt to waterproof Solo's back with duct tape, in order to try and stop it getting infected by the polluted water in the entrance series, which serves as a local sewer. From then on everyone was pretty much caving solo, except for brief chats at each successive rope drop. With a lighter duffle and a week of caving behind me the trip out was fairly painless and I found myself climbing the bulldozer tread around 7am. We recovered the trucks, lit a fire and enjoyed beer and cookies while waiting for everyone else to exit. The derig crew surface around 11am having left camp at 6.

We regrouped, sorted out the gear we had carried out, and then headed down the mountain to dirty up the swimming hole. That completed we had time for a meal in Victoria before the group split up. While most of us were heading north, Matt, Nancy, Charley and Soriano were heading down to another caving trip in Chiapas (in fact Matt and Nancy had two months of caving ahead of them before they would return to the States).

All in all it was a very successful expedition, we mapped nearly 4km of passage pushing Tecolote to 36km. As is often the case with PEP expeditions we found more leads than we mapped, but perhaps most importantly for me I got to enjoy my annual cave trip with a great bunch of folks !