

Atepolihuit del Tepanahuas

"So about what time was it when that flood hit you guys last weekend? Oh, between 6 and 7pm eh? I guess we had better get going then, being just in front of the sump pool well past a duck is not where I want to be at that hour".

Two minutes later upon arriving back at the streamway...

"I have some bad news for you. The water has gone muddy, the stream is in flood".

So there we were in Cuetzalan in the midst of the dry season experiencing a typical, occasional, afternoon thunderstorm. Or at least the affects of one as Ramón and Ruth had been in the cave since 11am and it was now 5:30pm. Even I who had left the surface at 3pm had last seen mainly sunny weather. But that is only par of the course in Cuetzalan.

I can now feel truly baptized in the ways of Cuetzalan just like the long line of explorers before me - a list stretching back to the early 1970's when the area was first explored by some American cavers. Enthusiasm and cave lengths increased into the early 80's before it just died. Yet few caves were ever explored to their ends. Maybe this flooding thing put people off. Having now experienced it for myself I can see that as a distinct possibility. It certainly wasn't for lack of cave.

My first trip had been three weeks earlier to look for another infeasible to the Cueva de Guayateno that Ramón had mapped to 4.6km in a nice through trip. After trying one entrance in the second doline from the road we poked into a small entrance just above (but apart from) a small stream. It went into a long bedding plane crawl so we went to look for a nicer one. That led over to the next doling downhill to the left with a bigger stream going in. Unfortunately it was completely blocked by sand and other debris, probably from last years big floods. This led to us getting directions to a better entrance back over the hill to the right which turned out to be one that Ramón and gang had walked over to from a skylight in Sima Esteban a few weeks earlier in Feb.



Now this looked more like it. Two separate holes about 2m across each went down into the hill with the sound of running water at the bottom of both. After checking them both out Ruth suggested that we take the right one as it was the one going downstream, and connected into the other under the dirt we were standing on. A short downclimb popped us into a sizeable entrance chamber, a good 12m across and 8m high, with the stream going off in passage almost as big. While crossing the room we noticed fragments of what must have been Huasteca culture pots and later a leveled platform that was typical in their rituals. One team surveyed in while I photographed in behind. About 100m in we turned a corner and had a little downclimb into a pool that was just before a 6m undercut drop into another big chamber. We rigged a ladder off some dubious, small stal on the left wall and climbed on down.

The nature of the passage changed as the roof came lower and lower into almost a wide bedding plane passage with the water going to the right and us being forced left. A short hands and knees by-pass popped back out into more comfortable stuff before going low again. This time we popped up at the top of another drop with a [6m waterfall](#) on the right and an easy slope to put a ladder down on the left. More [sizeable passage](#) took us to yet another drop which we had no ladder for so we turned back with 350m surveyed and big passage beckoning.

Victor on ladder



The next day we did a bottom to top through trip of Sima Esteban and surveyed in a couple of the side leads that they had missed before. It is a very enjoyable trip up an active streamway with numerous [skylights](#) in the lower sections. In only

one place do you have to crawl and only briefly.

In another spot one must climb up a climb through a one meter diameter hole with the whole stream pouring right down in front of you. Emerging in the upper entrance is like coming out into Jurassic Park with all the lush vegetation including the rare (and strange) Fern Tree which dates back to the Cretaceous. Now the advantage of doing trip in reverse became apparent as we climbed up the bank almost coming out right at the car.

This first trip just wet my appetite for more, so when Ramón called to say he had re-located the 100m wide entrance to Sumidero de Yonotla, I was ready. While it is not really near Yonotla at all, it had been explored and mapped to 6.5km by some Americans in the early 80's. No article or map was ever published and a request for the survey notes was only met with a line plot and some photos (the computer age strikes again). Here was a cave begging to be documented and like the main Cuetzalan

system, if it means re-surveying it to find out where the new stuff begins, then that is what we will do. Ramón had already done that for the 22km of cave explored up to the early 80's and also never published and now the system stands at 36.2km long. While this cave doesn't appear to have that potential, who knows what awaits us inside.

I must admit that I thought Ramón was exaggerating when he said we would be camping out in an entrance 100m wide, but sure enough after hauling down a pack full of gear, there it was. It still didn't look that wide as it is obscured by vegetation in front and by a breakdown pile, but after surveying it the distance checks out. It even has a few sandy areas that are dry (not under drips when it rains) that made for a comfortable campsite. The clear flowing stream that sinks under boulders in the entrance gave an idea of what we would be following inside.

The first day we surveyed our way in and I never did get a look at the far wall of the entrance

chamber to get it into my sketch.



After the enormity of the entrance chamber we finally dropped down into the active stream in passage that was still some 10m wide. The floor and much of the wall is composed of xxx Fm conglomerate, as was Sima Esteban and many of the other caves in the area. Here it is was polished smooth with long grooves attesting to the velocity and volume of water that must flow over it at times. Hopefully we wouldn't run into one of those times.

The description of Nevin Davis from 1973 was reasonably good up to the point they turned back

where the water goes under a large flowstone coming in from the left. We passed this obstacle by climbing up it and traversing across on the rimstone dams about 8m above the level of the river. A bold step there is required which forces one to have confidence in the traction of the flowstone. That is shortly followed by a steep downclimb to get off the rimstone dams back into a pool that continues down the increasingly bigger passage. It wasn't apparent at first that it was getting bigger as the lower part where we were walking was actually getting narrower, and we were forced into a short swim which protects a 6m high waterfall. Dave Jones and Vicente Loreto rigged that and dropped into the narrow canyon below while we surveyed in after them. We were now in a 2m wide, very tall canyon with a

ragging river below and the waterfall pounding down just around the corner. Some tricky moves on an exit traverse led for a request for a bolt to protect things which we didn't have. After much humming and hawing I decided to go back and get the bolt kit as we weren't all that far in.

By the time Ruth and I returned with the bolt kit Dave and Ramón had scouted around and found a high traverse which avoided the waterfall and dropped in past the traverse. The presence of a bolt at the start of it and a piton along an exposed ledge were obvious markers of previous explorers. While waiting for Dave and Vicente to rig the new drop point the survey team headed up the 40(slope above into a huge "side" passage. It was after adjusting my sketch several times that I finally realized just how big the main passage was at that point. I had originally estimated 25m to the ceiling, but it turned out to be more like 60m, once we had the vantage point of being in the upper side lead and still having 25m to go up to the ceiling.

We were now up above the sound of the river below in passage that was about 35m wide and 25m high. Mud still covered all the big blocks as we wound our way through them looking for the easiest way on. After passing two depressions in the floor we came to another one that went down to where the sound of water could be heard. On a prominent boulder above this a yellow survey tape was located with the number 039 on it, which we used as our number 36. Obviously we were following the old route pretty closely. We continued on in the main "side" lead Borehole another 100m before there was another passage taking off on the right with more sounds of water. This went in 60m in a 2 to 4m wide canyon before coming to the top of a 20 to 30m drop which we left for another day. Onwards in the Borehole it quickly stopped down to be only 2m wide with a large slab blocking progress. By coming over or under this the passage continues pinching and swelling between 2m wide and 10m +. There is also a profusion of gypsum crusts and occasional flowers along the walls as well as numerous lovely formations, including a couple of mediocre shields. The rounded, bulbous nature of it suggested phreatic development, unlike the active streamway we left far behind. Numerous small side leads were noted, until we called it a day at station 65 and 1340m of survey. Not a bad first day in what we were told is Atepolihuit de Tepanahuas. Atepolihuit is a Huasteca word that breaks down as: Atepa = water and lihuit = sink. Some of the early American explores mistook Atepolihuit to be the name of the cave, rather than another name for a stream sink (or Sumidero in Spanish).

The next day Ramón, Ruthi and Dave headed in to continue in the main streamway, while Vicente and Sergio headed up to explore the end of the side Borehole and I stayed behind to guard camp for the morning. Unfortunately the side Borehole shut down after only 150m more so they contented themselves photographing the beautiful formations there. The downstream was another matter. Having rigged the new drop from some of the boulders on the left slope the team descended about 25m to the stream where they immediately had to swim. The first pool went for about 30m before a rock pile had to be surmounted. The second pool turned out to be the biggie at 130m long and only the occasional rock to rest on while still in the water. About mid way through the roof comes down to within 10 to 20 cm of the surface which makes one remember those scour marks on the floor in the upper part of the cave. It won't take much of a flood to raise the water level 10 or 20cm and seal the river shut. Being on the downstream side took on a new meaning.

After a shorter third swim one exists onto a gravel bank that pops out into another huge passage with a climb up breakdown blocks the size of small houses. At the start of this section a large black hole was noted up on one wall but not explored. Dave headed out at this point allowing me to catch up to the two remaining surveyors. Wandering in there on my own I saw no trace of their passing and heard, more than saw, the two inlets pouring in on the left wall (no doubt one of the ones we heard the previous day up in the side Borehole). After much scrambling and backtracking I caught up with Ramón and Ruthi where the stream came out from under the boulder pile in a now much smaller passage. They had climbed out on the right into a large stal filled alcove to by-pass yet another boulder pile and after cleaning the sand out of my boots in the stream I joined in to hold the survey tape. Two more shots and we were looking into what looked to be a sump pool. With nobody wanting to swim again at this point Ramón climbed up and around on a huge rock in the center of the room and discovered an easy climb up that would provide a sump by-pass. This must be the one featured in the photo from one of the articles that mentioned this cave. Ramón wandered around up there and sure enough found a drop into another pool as well as seeing up into what appeared to be yet another side Borehole.

We decide to call it a day at this point as we had no rope to protect the climb let along do the next drop. Upon returning to the streamway is when I noticed that the water had changed from the clear flowing stream that I had cleaned my boot in, to a muddy flow that was already higher on the gravel beach. Obviously the various clouds I had left behind at 3pm when I came in had opened up leaving us with a race to see if the duck in the swim was going to close. Memories of Pete Hollings flood story in the main Cuetzalan System, as well as various flooding stories I had read keep me moving to try and get out before we were trapped in for who knows long. Ramón managed to set a new record in changing his carbide lamp while I headed forward into the first swim. There was no noticeable difference at first so we hoped that the flood was just in the inlets and not the main drain. At the duck the water was noticeably higher and I had to push my nose up into the ceiling to sneak my way through. But that was it and we were on our way. Getting out of the water proved a little more difficult as there was now noticeable current pushing us away from the exit rocks, as was the same in the pool below the rope drop. It was a good thing that we didn't have to try and climb up the narrow canyon and past the waterfall. Once above and past the traverse we abandoned my plans to take some pictures in our desire to get right out of the possible path of a flood pulse. As all the pools in the stream were now full any pulse that arrived would just ride over everything on its way down to the sump. It wasn't until we were in the entrance chamber that we stopped to take a few pictures of the Huasteca platform walls we had noticed there. Working our way back up to camp all kinds of drips and waterspouts had to be dodged in the main chamber that weren't here in the morning. Once safely arranged around the campfire, we all agreed that was the closed we wanted to be to a flood in a cave.



It turned out that about 30 minutes after I had left the surface it had rained hard for about 30 minutes and then rained on and off for another 2 hours. Fortunately that wasn't enough to create a flood pulse that would close the duck in the swim. The boulder pile in the entrance was probably a good block in diffusing that kind of reaction and was it sometime in the night that the new showers in the entrance chamber finally subsided.

The next day the enthusiasm levels were varied. Everyone wanted to do the through trip but those of us almost caught in the flood were cautious about going through the duck. Dave decided to go in first (as the rest of us were still lollygaging around) and see what the duck looked like. The rest would catch him up in a while. Sergio decided to guard camp and dutifully requested some contact phone numbers in case we didn't return. Back in the streamway we noticed that the water level was still high and all the pools were overflowing. We were hoping to see that the water levels had dropped back to the previous day's position. All the way in it was same. Each rock that we had been using to step across the stream, or traverse around was still underwater. With conditions like that any new amount of rain would instantly flow right into the lower part of the cave, without being absorbed by any of the pools as it had been yesterday. By the time we were at the drop past the waterfall Ramón and I were convinced that we didn't want to be on the other side of the sump today, especially with so much still to explore on this side. Unfortunately Dave had obviously gone on and was expecting us to follow. Vicente volunteered to go find him while the rest of us decided to go up into the side Borehole and survey one of the side passages.

After changing out of their wetsuits Ruthi decided not to join Ramón and I as we went into the big stuff above. Hearing that the local family where we had parked our car had sent in their son to tell us that it was going to rain reassured us that our decision was good one. From our station 36 we checked out the hole with the sound of water and found a small stream. Heading upstream the passage was a comfortable 3 to 6m wide and at least as high. After passing one large inlet we decided to have a quick look up the second one as it didn't look like it would go too far, but was pretty. Here the stream trickled down the flat, calcite covered floor, though mud banks were evidence of past flooding and blockage. While it may have looked at first that the 4m diameter passage would peter out, it just keep going and occasional got bigger. Twice it went down while a bigger by-pass was visible up above one side. The formations also began increasing in number and the stream disappeared. In the second lower route straws were abundant everywhere, especially where they had speared themselves in the mud floor, which had now calcited over. Gypsum crusts were here and there as were beautiful flowstones. One drip point in the mud had some spectacular splatter cones all oriented around the drop point - looked like a sharks mouth wide open, teeth projecting everywhere. After passing this straw gallery another? stream (maybe the same one?) was passed and then regained in 8m wide passage. It was followed to its source in a lovely flowstone lined gallery with a small lake blocking the way on. The water could be seen to be flowing out of a small hole on the far side of the lake so I plunged on in to check it out. The triangle shaped hole was only about 30cm high but the water was swimming depth below. I followed this about 13m to a little belling chamber that had a too tight rift heading off it and what looked to be a blind alcove above. No more to be had there.

Retracing our steps to bigger passage we decided to have a look at the high by-pass and worked our way up into what looked like a smaller version of Lechuguilla's Tower Place. Tall, white stalagmites were

scattered all over a sizeable chamber that we couldn't see the back wall of. Once we got used to the size we notice three huge columns, about 8m in diameter. Dry and active pools had 2 to 5cm long dogtooth spar calcite crystals, some with flat island tops on them at the water surface level. In behind one of these was hidden what Ramón described as the most beautiful chamber in all of Cuetzalan, if not Mexico. Water trickled over the coarse crystals of pure white flowstone, surrounded by numerous stalactites and stalagmites, all framing an aquamarine blue pool. Picture postcard perfect.

After the requisite ogling time we continued on into the ever-bigger chamber, taking some time to figure out a way up over the huge breakdown slabs. Eventually we sat atop the highest slab and could look out over the rest of the room beckoning in the distance with the sound of water once again. But as dinnertime was calling we left the 60m wide passage for another day. After all we had to leave something to come back to.

Back in camp we found Dave and Vicente who claimed that the duck actually had more airspace today and that they had gone on to complete the through trip coming out in an entrance (exit?) that was significantly bigger than the one we were camped in. But as it turned out the way on was actually swimming in what we correctly thought was the sump. It went the 25m that we could see before squeezing down to 1m wide, but still continued for another 30m before opening up again into a larger pool with another climb up on one side. This climb came out further along to where Ramón had been and dropped back down into the main passage at the downstream side of the sump pool. They easily rigged a rope off a big stal, rapped down and walked 100m to where they could see daylight. The entrance chamber was a highlight to an already spectacular through trip.

Our survey total for the three days including the 1000m Ramón and I did up "just another side lead" is 3.14km, so we still have over 3km to go before finding all of what was explored before. Undoubtedly alot is still waiting up those "side" leads, but Dave also found a passage at the top of a climb he did before going into the sump pool, near to but separate from the one Ramón looked up into. It appears that the present cave may be intersecting an older fossil cave and that potential remains very intriguing. We'll be back.

Chris Lloyd, March, 25, 2000

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