

# El Volcán

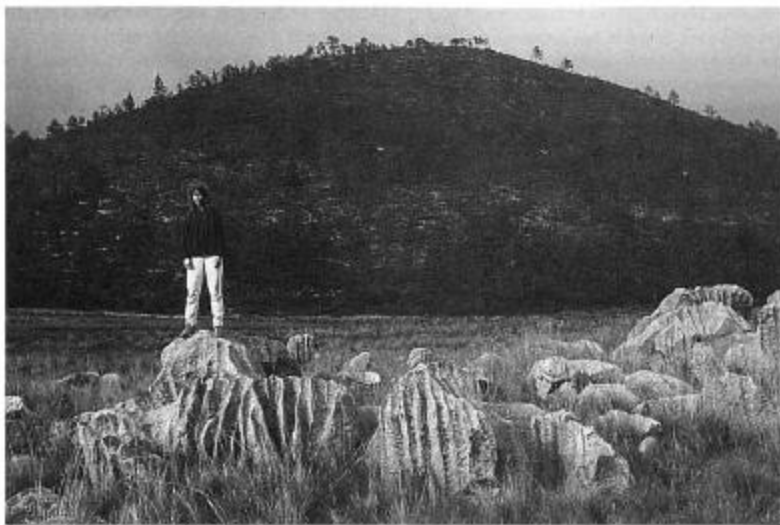
article and photos by Peter Sprouse

The state of Coahuila is generally not the first place that comes to mind when cavers discuss the major caving areas of México. Being the middle of the three border states adjacent to Texas, many trips have been made to Coahuila to search for and explore caves over the decades, but nothing had been found to compare with the monster long and deep systems located farther south in the country. Nevertheless, the highest limestone in México is found on peaks in the southeast part of the state, a tantalizing prospect for deep caves.

Coahuila is mostly desert, composed of wide alluvial valleys between linear limestone ridges. A typical find in most of the state would be a dry, dusty bat cave or a pictograph shelter. East of the capital, Saltillo, the desert gives way to temperate and sub-alpine climates with the ascent into the Cross Ranges. Here the north-south trending Sierra Madre that runs up the east coast of México turns west, uplifted in great crustal folds. This can be seen very dramatically near the city of Monterrey in Cañon el Huasteco park, where nearly vertical beds of limestone thrust skyward in México's answer to Yosemite Valley. Around Monterrey this folding is so severe that the bedding simply snapped into chevron folds. Three ridges to the south into Coahuila the folds form large graceful anticlines, a little better for cave development.

Prior to 1995, I had taken four trips to the Coahuila highlands to look for caves. We found very little at first, and as a result these trips were somewhat of a low priority, just a change of pace from more productive projects farther south. As a respite from the oppressive Texas summer heat, the cool highlands were worth a visit in their own right, and who knows, if we kept at it we were bound to get lucky. By the fourth trip to the area we were finding some caves, and heard about a blowing hole high on the Sierra las Alazanas known as El Volcán. At long last this sounded like the kind of lead we were looking for.

We had the chance to pursue this on Labor Day weekend 1995. Along for the trip were Allan Cobb, John Fogarty, Susie Lasko, Libby McConnell, Charley Savvas, Bev Shade, Cathy Winfrey and me. We had driven most of the night from Austin, and camped by an apple orchard. As we awoke to a grand view of the high valley surrounded by forested ridges, I heard a woman calling to us from across an arroyo. What are you doing over there, she wanted to know. Camping, we said. You don't have to stay over there, she said, next time we should come stay at her house. This was typical Mexican hospitality that we experienced across the area, and fortunately we had the freedom to explore where we wished.



**Susie Lasko on rillenkarren**

Our first order of business was to find someone who knew where El Volcán was. After inquiring of passersby, we headed into the small town of Mesa de las Tablas. This was a pleasant village of dirt streets around a town square. The stuccoed adobe houses were occasionally punctuated by satellite dishes. Soon we had picked up two young men, brothers in fact, who could take us to the cave. We drove back over the ridge to the south, through the tourist cabañas popular among weekend urban refugees. The route to the cave even took us by a golf course, something we weren't used to seeing in the karst. Soon we left that behind as we drove our trucks up the spine of the Sierra las Alazanas, and down into a valley known as Hoya los Gringos. This is actually a large sink formed in the shape of a V, filled with barely enough soil to allow agriculture. At 2800 meters elevation oats and potatoes were the choice of the local farmers, one of whom was our guides' uncle. We jumped out of the trucks at the sight of large rillenkarren spiking out of

sinkholes. The first of these sinks revealed a shock: empty 20 liter drums of fungicide, labeled with skull and crossbones. "You dump it, you drink it" was apparently not a well-known slogan around here.

Our guides led us across the fields, pointing out various sinks with good prospects for



**Susie at the top of the Pretz drop, El Volcán**

digging. One of the better looking sinks had a large boulder at the bottom. As we approached this boulder I could hear our voices echoing down a clean-washed shaft. There was a body-size opening below the boulder into which rocks fell a good ways. This was the "volcán" that reportedly blows steam from time to time. A most excellent lead to be sure, but our guide had some more to show us so we continued on up the valley. Meanwhile Charley had lagged behind to answer the call of nature, and when he came upon El Volcán he immediately slipped into his seat harness. John and Allan joined him to form a survey team for this one, while the rest of us set about investigating two other pits a little farther west. One of these other pits went quickly down to a dig, but the second, which we named Pozo de la Neblina (Steam Pit), we were able to push down three drops. Out of rope, we climbed out, figuring to get the rest of the rope supply from the Volcán team. But Allan had come back reporting that their cave went also, and that he had left John and Charley 100 meters down, pushing on without rope. Bev decided to go in after them. Late that night they resurfaced, having gotten down about 150 meters. The initial vertical part of the cave went down five pitches to about 100 meters depth. From there a small passage continued down a steep dip, at times requiring hammering to continue. When they turned around they could see a 20-meter survey shot awaiting. Interestingly, several self-drive bolts (or "self-stripping", as I call them!) found in both El Volcán and Pozo de la Neblina indicated we weren't the first into these pits. We didn't know of anyone having mapped anything in this area, so we decided to proceed with our surveying. The area is a popular draw for visitors from Monterrey, so it seemed likely that it had been visited by local cavers or climbers. In any event the digging in El Volcán had now put us in virgin territory. As for Neblina, a subsequent trip proved the fourth drop to be the last.

The next day we derigged Neblina to free up push ropes for the last push of the weekend in El Volcán. I headed into El Volcán by myself some time after John, Charley, Susie, and Bev had headed in. With the entrance series rigged I had a blast soloing down the initial five drops. A few pitch-head squeezes and mid-pitch knots slowed my rhythm, but overall the drops were large and impressive. The lower part of the second drop had a large Pleistocene (?) bone deposit in a sediment, perhaps 8 meters tall. I could picture the grassy alpine meadow above 20,000 years before. Large mammals would have flocked to the fine grazing. I left the visions of camels behind when I hit the floor of drop 5 and saw the narrow canyon going off.

I ditched my vertical gear and headed off after the push team. The route from there involved quite a bit of crawling and several hairy freeclimbs, which we later rigged. The



*Susie Lasko illuminates the 21 meter-deep Pretzel drop*

most impressive feature of this was the steady 40° downward dip of the passage. Like some tilted mechanical bunny, it just kept going and going. At one point the passage jogged right along the strike, creating a low mucky spot which they had dug out - Club Mud. Finally at about 250 meters depth I reached a rope where I made voice contact with Susie. They seemed to be on their way out, but as I waited at the top of the drop they seemed to take forever. Apparently Charley was exploring ahead, and John had to holler for awhile to reel him in. Since Charley had the only set of vertical gear along, everyone had to wait for him. Before he reached them, however, he had trouble getting back through a tight squeeze. A hammer was passed to him in exchange for the vertical gear. We derigged, shot photos, and generally suffered from the

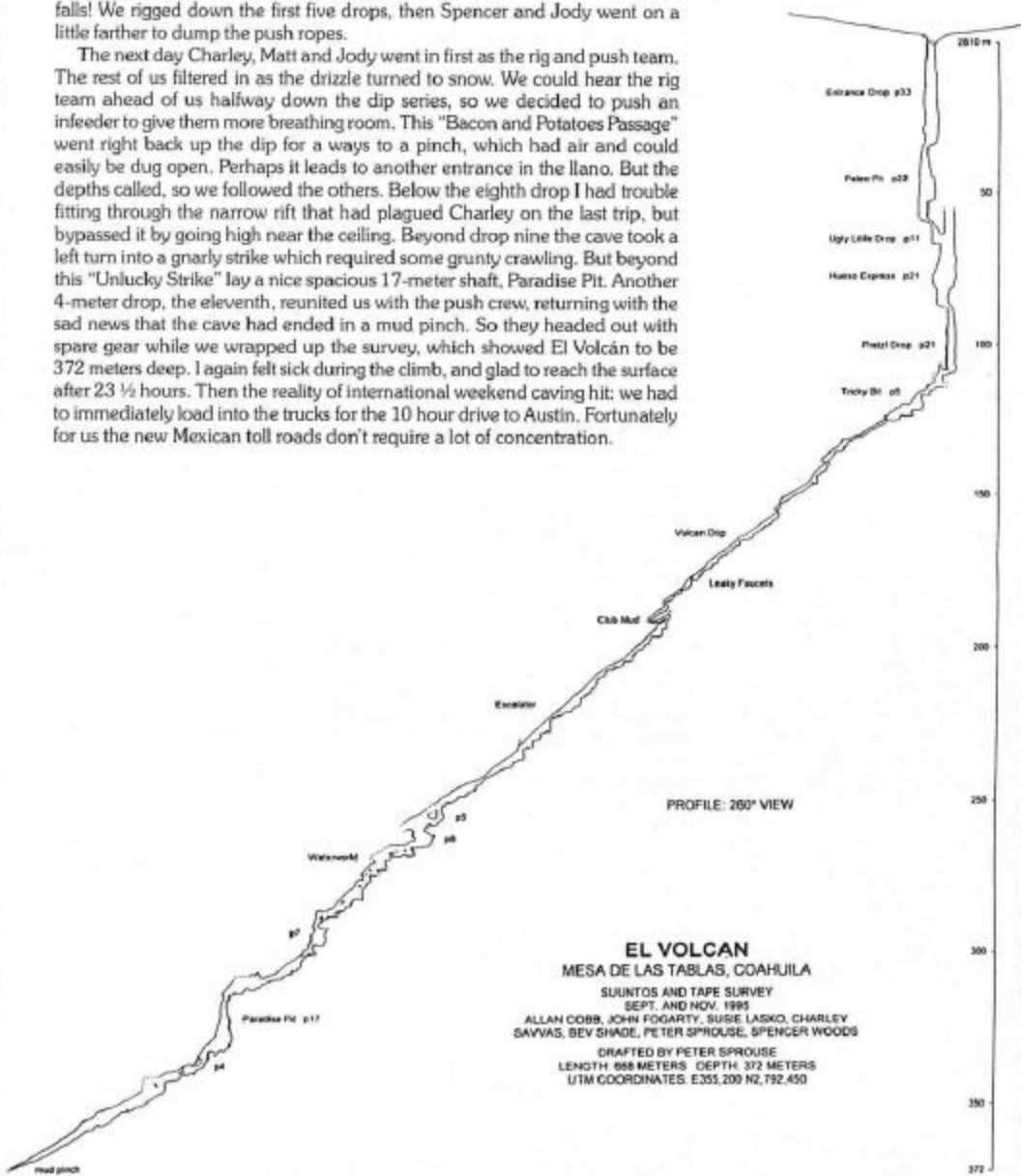
altitude on the way out. Living near sea level and weekend caving at 2800 meters might not be the best way to operate, but cavers do crazier things. We surfaced tired but exhilarated, as we now had the deepest cave in Coahuila, and it was going. We had no idea where the possible resurgences might be, but the potential seemed great.

Once back home I combed my files for any references to this pit. I turned up an e-mail posting to the Cavers Digest dated 16 March 1991 from Francisco Hernández Mijares of the group Espeleo-ITESM, from Monterrey Tec university. He described visiting several pits which sounded similar near "La Siberia", a name which didn't appear on the topo map, but upon local inquiry turned out to be in use. Attempts to reach this group via e-mail weren't successful, and hopefully they will see

this article and make contact.

needless to say we were anxious to get back, which we did in early November 1995. Along on this trip were Susie, Bev, Charley, Jody Horton, Spencer Woods, Matt Schram, and me. Matt, Charley, and Bev were a little late in arriving at the hoyo due to an unplanned encounter with Nuevo Laredo police, plus an inadvertent detour to Monclova. Susie and I headed into the cave first to rig the entrance series and install a few bolts. An accidental drop test of one of the hammer-drill batteries showed that they don't stand up too well to 40-meter falls! We rigged down the first five drops, then Spencer and Jody went on a little farther to dump the push ropes.

The next day Charley, Matt and Jody went in first as the rig and push team. The rest of us filtered in as the drizzle turned to snow. We could hear the rig team ahead of us halfway down the dip series, so we decided to push an infedder to give them more breathing room. This "Bacon and Potatoes Passage" went right back up the dip for a ways to a pinch, which had air and could easily be dug open. Perhaps it leads to another entrance in the llano. But the depths called, so we followed the others. Below the eighth drop I had trouble fitting through the narrow rift that had plagued Charley on the last trip, but bypassed it by going high near the ceiling. Beyond drop nine the cave took a left turn into a gnarly strike which required some grunty crawling. But beyond this "Unlucky Strike" lay a nice spacious 17-meter shaft, Paradise Pit. Another 4-meter drop, the eleventh, reunited us with the push crew, returning with the sad news that the cave had ended in a mud pinch. So they headed out with spare gear while we wrapped up the survey, which showed El Volcán to be 372 meters deep. I again felt sick during the climb, and glad to reach the surface after 23 1/2 hours. Then the reality of international weekend caving hit: we had to immediately load into the trucks for the 10 hour drive to Austin. Fortunately for us the new Mexican toll roads don't require a lot of concentration.



**EL VOLCAN**  
MESA DE LAS TABLAS, COAHUILA

SUUNTOS AND TAPE SURVEY  
SEPT. AND NOV. 1995

ALLAN COBB, JOHN FOGARTY, SUSIE LASKO, CHARLEY  
SAVVAS, BEV SHADE, PETER SPROUSE, SPENCER WOODS

DRAFTED BY PETER SPROUSE  
LENGTH 698 METERS DEPTH 372 METERS  
UTM COORDINATES: E355,200 N2,792,450