

EspeleoCoahuila 2007

By Terri Whitfield Sprouse



Crossing the Río Aguanaval into Durango state. Peter Sprouse photo.

One would think that a Fourth of July excursion to the Chihuahuan desert would be unbearably hot and dry, with blinding sun and with dust devils coating clothes and camp with gritty windblown sand. Even though it was the rainy season throughout Mexico, Coahuila, much like Texas, had experienced an extraordinary amount of rain. Instead of the 100+ degree heat we had expected, we were greeted with a cool, inviting desert landscape. We took advantage of the wonderful weather by visiting the desert aquariums of the Cuatro Ciénegas valley and taking a short exploratory canyon trek before heading south to the town of La Flor de Jimulco near the Durango state line.

EspeleoCoahuila has been hosted by the Asociación Coahuilense de Espeleología, A.C. (ACEAC) for the past four years. As a fledgling caving club, ACEAC staged its coming out party at the Museo del Desierto in Saltillo with the first EspeleoCoahuila in 2004. ACEAC president Monica Ponce organized the event, as she has done each year since, alternating field camps one year with a lecture format the next. This year Monica and the ACEAC selected the Reserva Ecológica Municipal “Sierra Y Cañón” de Jimulco as the location for the EC 2007 field camp.

With the field camp set for July 5 – 7, Peter Sprouse decided to encourage cavers to leave Austin early enough to spend the Fourth of July camping at Poza la Berra, which is one of the largest and warmest aquariums of the Cuatro Ciénegas area. Most of the other cavers were able to get away early on Tuesday the 3rd, but our truck did not leave Austin until about 8 pm. There were four cavers in Peter’s 4Runner, including two of Peter’s business associates, biologists Mark Sanders, with the City of Austin, and Kathleen O’Connor who works for Travis County. We

headed down to Eagle Pass and crossed over to Piedras Negras, stopping for the night at a hotel in Allende. After breakfast the next day, we stopped to get visas but an official at the aduana refused to issue Mark, Kathleen and me the free 7-day visa. The official complained about Bush's politics and about Mexicans having to pay for US visas and said it was only fair – so he charged us for a full 180-day pass at about \$20 dollars each.

After we got our visas, Peter decided to try to locate a spring he had noticed on the map that was just outside Allende called Ojo de Agua. We drove slowly down the highway then stopped to ask some locals about the pool. They directed us to an unlocked gate. After entering the property, we proceeded through several unlocked gates until we came upon a residential compound. Not seeing anyone, we drove on past what appeared to be the main house until the road stopped at the poza. The pool was shallow and clear and seemed to flow, with little fishes darting about. It was not long afterward that the owner came down accompanied by five or six dogs that looked like Australian shepherds. He was extremely nice, as are many locals in Mexico. He invited us up towards his house to view the main spring-fed pool. It was a fairly large, deep and dark pool that continued on around a bend. He explained that a big flood came through several years ago and wiped out his 28 fish pens that he used to grow tilapia. His residence was well-designed, with natural stone masonry around the front and sides and ceiling-to-floor windows creating a wall in every room along the back of the house. From where we stood at the main spring, we could look back towards the house and see from room to room. The dining room led to the kitchen and then to the den and then, at the other end of the house, we could vaguely make out a huge king-sized bed in the bedroom. Magnificent. The windows provided expansive views from the house of the dark, spring-fed pools below.

Next we arrived at the hot springs of Hermanas. This place consisted of various separate rooms that each housed a private bath spa, where the hot water was channeled directly from a hot spring that percolated into a gated pool behind the caretaker's house. Warning signs advised that 30 minutes was the maximum time allowed in the hot spas.

Afterwards, we stopped for lunch at Nadadores, where we witnessed a puppy getting run over by a car. Kathleen was heartbroken when we realized that the frightened pup seemed unable to walk. She picked him up and held him for a while, but we had to move on. Reluctantly, she laid the little golden-haired pup down on the sidewalk and watched it as we drove away.

As we traveled on towards Cuatro Ciénegas, we decided to stop at the Río los Mezquites. This wandering spring-fed river is quite bizarre, just appearing out of nowhere and flowing through the desert. We pulled the truck under one of the palapas, then the wind kicked up and blew my hat into the water. When I dove in after it I discovered a wonderful aquatic ecosystem with many fishes darting about. Soon we all pulled out our masks and snorkels and enjoyed swimming with the fishes in the wandering river.

Everyone else had arrived at La Becerra by midnight Tuesday, July 3rd, and pitched tents in a howling wind. That evening's entertainment consisted mainly of fishing Joe Datri's tent out after the whole thing had been blown into, and was sinking to the bottom of the poza. La Becerra is located in a park-like setting, with showers and palapas and tall grass surrounding the poza. In many places, water can be seen percolating from cracks in the limestone rock at the bottom of the clear, deep blue pool. Our crew finally made it to La Becerra around 5 p.m. on Wednesday. After mingling for a few minutes, Peter offered to lead us to a nearby canyon that looked interesting on the topo map. Pete and Jocie had not yet returned from their trip into town, and Wes' group had just returned from a hike up a nearby ridge, and were not up for another hike, so most of the rest of us piled into the two 4Runners and headed for the canyon. We stopped along the way at Poza la Churince, which is another poza that has much cooler water than La Becerra. We realized that we could possibly have camped there instead and would have had the place to ourselves.



Cool camping in Poza la Becerra. Ernie Garza photo.

Along the way we noted a series of gypsum sand dunes off in the distance which looked interesting, but a sign at the gate there indicated that arrangements for access must be made in advance at the visitor center. As we continued on down the highway we saw an interesting looking travertine mining operation that had shaved off part of the top of the mountain leaving a large wide flat area on top that was surrounded by massive bare travertine walls. This impressive-looking place could pass as the palace of the mountain gods. We continued on past the quarry and soon came to the turnoff, which was just a dirt trail going off into the desert. We followed this road to the mouth and then began the hike into the canyon.

Geoff Hoese tells a story of having deciphered certain pictographs he had come across in the past, finding a pattern in certain images that were used as directional signals leading to a water source. He was anxious to test his theory out on any new pictographs we could find. We could see many cave-like openings along the left canyon wall. We hiked up to the first cave which appeared to have rocks stacked up blocking the opening. This space turned out to have been used as an animal pen, possibly for a small goat herd. Then we came upon an Indian shelter cave that did not have any pictographs, but it did have incised lines on the rock boulders that could have been places where they sharpened their arrow points. We later found out that this cave had been visited previously by pictograph-hunter Terry Sayther. Unfortunately, there was also a very large bee hive hanging about waist-high on the wall. The hive was noticed by the first group that passed through, and a warning was passed along to the others. But as is often the case, the message had gotten corrupted as it was passed down the line. While exploring the shelter (and looking in the wrong place for the bees) Geoff unwittingly walked too close to the hive. The bees came buzzing out and began attacking our group. Peter yelled for everyone to "Run"! Aimee, Kathleen and Ernie ran towards the cars while Peter, Geoff, Mark and Rene ran the other way, farther into the canyon. In the end it was Ernie who caught the brunt of their wrath, ending up with 25-30 stings covering his shoulders, back, face and head. Since Ernie's group was close to the car, they hopped in and radioed to the rest of us that they thought the best thing we could do for Ernie was to rush him to one of the springs to try to soothe the stinging. The poza with the coolest water, La Churince, was closest. We agreed that was a good idea so the rest of

us hiked out of the canyon and drove over to the cool springs of La Churince. Luckily, Ernie appeared to be having only a mild reaction with no respiratory distress, just pain where the stingers were. Aimee and Kathleen began pulling the stingers out while assuring him that the bees fared worse – each one doomed to die.

We came back to camp with our bee story, prompting Joe Datri to pull out his video camera to document the stressful event. He first interviewed Ernie and got shots of some of the stings, then got other versions of the story from Aimee, Peter and Geoff. Joe has been filming caving events for a couple of years now, with the intent of providing a film to be shown at the upcoming caving Congress. While Joe was filming we were able to pull together a delicious pot luck dinner. After dinner, Peter and Geoff went for a night-time swim with waterproof headlamps drawing the fish in closer. They described a very different experience from daytime swims. The fish seemed to be sleepy, so they were able to get close enough to touch them. Also, they were able to spot an elusive soft-shell turtle.

We got an early start the next day hoping to get to Jimulco by at least 2 p.m., but we could not resist stopping at the travertine quarry site. Since it appeared to be vacated, we drove up the steep road to the very top, where the mountain had been carved into gigantic limestone blocks. Peter should have realized that taking more than one geologist on a side trip to a rock quarry might provoke a little dust-up. Someone claimed that a small, seemingly inconsequential feature was a palmetto fossil, someone else swore it looked like a stromatolite. Then the geologists weighed in, and a lively discussion ensued. By the end of the debate, the geologists and the biologists and every other interested person had chimed in with an opinion.

Our next stop was at El Hundido, a large gypsum sink that was just off the road behind what appeared to be a roadside truck stop with a vulcanizador. We pulled the five-car caravan up to the pit, and just as we reached the edge Jocie hollered out for us to take our time looking because Pete's Trooper had just gotten a flat tire. The pit was interesting enough, but Pete Strickland is one of the few persons that I know who can make changing a flat tire more interesting. We all took a quick look at the pit, but then wandered back over to the Trooper to listen to Pete's stream-of-consciousness debate as he weighed his tire options. Someone advised Pete that there was a vulcanizador (tire shop) just on the other side of the bushes. His response, "There is, huh? Well, I could probably just put a plug in this thing. But I doubt if that's gonna work. See, the air is coming out really fast. There's a good chance that it might not hold. We could get going down the road and have a really serious blowout. Now, I've got a spare, but I don't want to use that because then I wouldn't have a spare if I needed one." Pete convinced himself (and us) that he should at least try using the plug so he wouldn't have to use his spare. So he got to working on that, gooping it up and then curling the plug around the push-tool. Then he forced it into the hole and moved it around a bit, finally leaving a big chunk of it poking out of the hole. We had gotten about a mile down the highway when Pete radioed that the plug just blew out and he needed to pull off the road. Our caravan found a pull-off and circled around in the desert, stopping to check Pete's tire. Sure enough, the plug was gone and the air was going out fast. Pete high-tailed it back to the vulcanizador, who decided that the old tire was shot so they mounted Pete's second (well-used) spare tire onto the old wheel. The Trooper was good to go.

We took the long winding backroads to get to Jimulco Reserve in order to avoid the traffic of Torreón, finally reaching the ranger station that was to be the site of our camp. The reserve rangers were housed in what appeared to be an old hacienda that had an open interior patio and garden and living quarters and meeting rooms around the exterior. One side of the building contained an outdoor garden area that made a perfect setting for the makeshift men's showers. The other side of the building contained a dirt parking lot that abutted what appeared to be an old outdoor theater stage.

After introductions Thursday evening, cavers split into teams. We had 26 cavers registered, 15 from Austin and the others from various areas of Mexico. Our guides, the rangers and other helpers, including the local 4x4 club members, increased our numbers to around 50. We had to

be prepared to leave camp at 6:30 a.m. the next day to meet our guides. Team 1 would be taken to pictograph areas. Team 2 would survey a pit that local legend claimed was used for dangling wayward criminals for a few hours until they agreed to mend their ways. Team 3 would be taken to Cañon de la Cabeza which had been carved through the mountains by the Aguanaval River.

The Aguanaval River flows north from the state of Zacatecas into Durango to form the Durango/Coahuila state line. Plans for the construction of El Tigre dam south of Jimulco in Durango is the subject of local discontent. The locals are concerned that the dam would plug the north-bound flow and minimize the amount of water that would be available for use in Coahuila. Team 3 would have to wade across the Aguanaval River and then hike through what was described as “fierce lechuguilla” to begin the recon of the many cave entrances that could be seen from the bottom of the side canyons.

We had all been warned about the abundant lechuguilla so many of us had scavenged a pair of gaiters to wear on the desert hikes. Rene won the style points for gaiters. Hers were vintage 1940s lace-up numbers that she acquired from the Quonset Hut in Austin. Worn with shorts, she made quite the hiker. At the other end receiving style demerits were Peter’s camouflage “snake bite” gaiters that he had gotten at Cabela’s and which he convinced me that I should wear. By the end of the week I had ditched those and appropriated Kathleen’s spiffy Travis County-issue gaiters, which worked well until the lechuguilla started to shred the straps. It certainly was fierce lechuguilla. During the hikes we also discovered a variety of the stinging plant Mala Mujer. This plant had smaller leaves than the familiar large-leafed tropical Mala Mujer, looking more like a stinging nettle. But the guides referred to it as Mala Mujer, and its sting was immediate, feeling a little like getting popped with a rubber band. Although the puncture site would ooze and itch, we discovered with relief that this plant did not cause us to blister and fester; nor did it spread like the tropical Mala Mujer.



Geoff counting the bends on ancient map. Jean Louis Lacaille photo.

Geoff Hoese joined Team 1 that initially went to a pictograph site in Cañon los Mimbres. As luck would have it, one of the pictographs seemed to be a prime candidate for testing his water source theory. Geoff found an image that looked a little like a vertical snake, with a small crescent drawn across the top. According to his theory, the bends of the image indicate the number of bends in the canyon to a water source. The image drawn at the top of the snake indicates the water source. In this case since it was a crescent, and not a full circle, this was taken to mean that the source was an intermittent water source. So Geoff pointed out the image to the other cavers on the trip and then they proceeded up the canyon, counting the bends until they had met the number of bends on the pictograph image. Sure enough, at the last bend there was a tinaja. Since it had been raining quite a bit, the tinaja was filled with water and also with lovely, delicate fairy shrimp. Fairy shrimp spring from eggs left in pools in areas where water is present for only part of a year. The shrimp come to life when the pools fill with rain. In this case at least the theory proved correct. The image in the cave had directed the cavers to an intermittent water source, a tinaja that was full of water due to the recent rains.

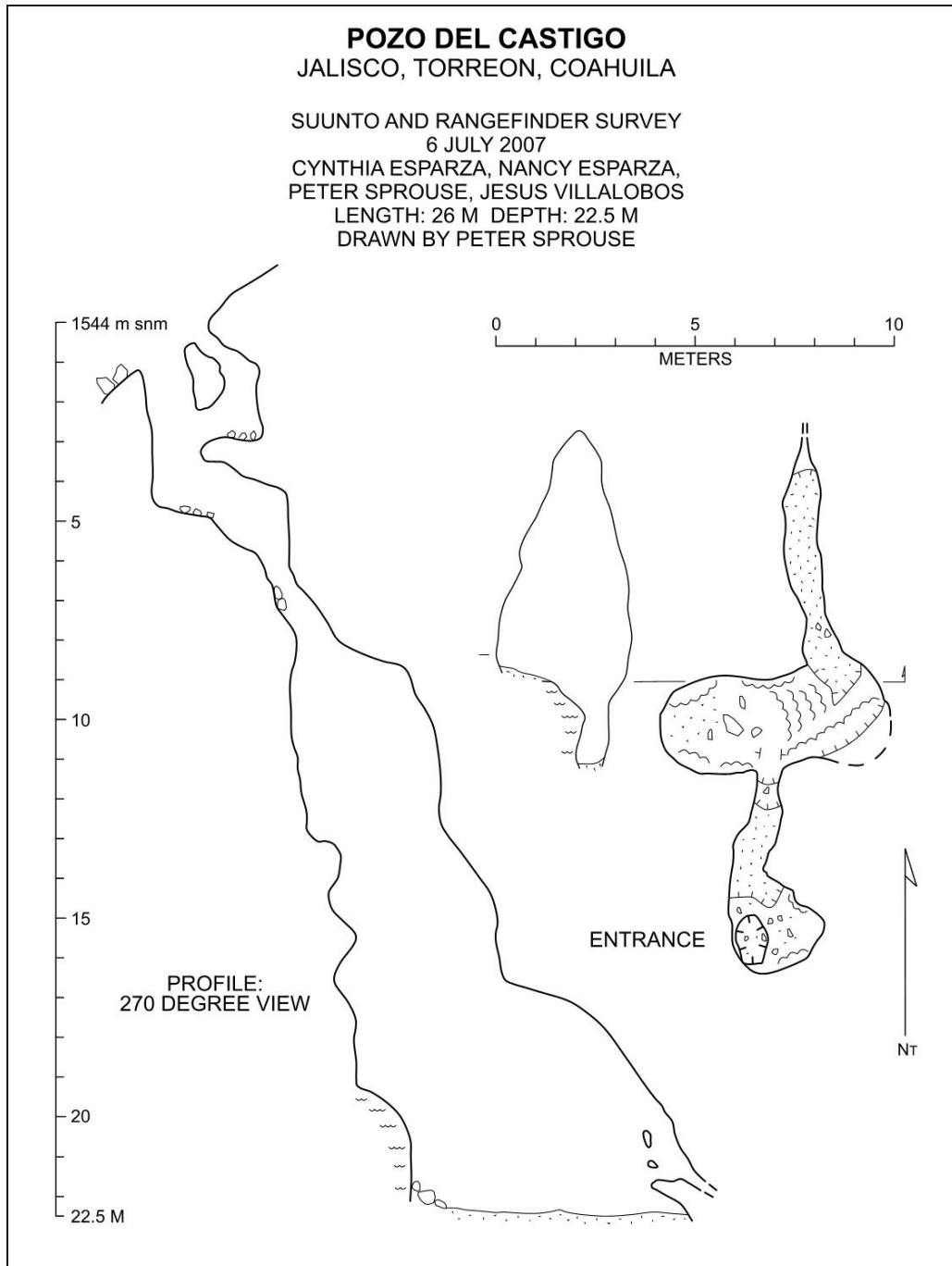
After the tinaja discovery a subgroup of Team 1, Team Asno led by Aimee Beveridge, headed for Cueva Gatera, which they surveyed to a length of 12 meters.



Our guides for Team 2 took me, Peter, Cynthia and Nancy Esparza, and others to the dangling pit, Pozo del Castigo. The cave was located just below the summit of a high mountain ridge that was reached only after much searching by the guides and several hours of scrambling through agave, lechuguilla and Mala Mujer. The climb got so steep that the guides had to abandon their burros and continue, like us, on foot. As we gained elevation, we came through an area containing bright-green giant ocotillo, with stems 5 meters long. The recent rains made most of the ocotillo leaf-out. Many of the other flowering desert plants were also in bloom. The cave had a

3 meter pit entrance, followed by a squeeze to an 8-meter drop, but it ended after about twenty meters. We were accompanied by photographer, Armando Monsivais Saldaña, who took lots of photos, and writer Raquel González, both of whom were on assignment for *Nomádica* magazine. An article covering EspeleoCoahuila 2007 should be coming soon.

The team leaders for Team 3, Monica and Wes, marched their teams through the fierce lechuguilla up Cañon de la Cabeza to survey two caves, Cueva del Borrego and Cueva Guano 2, plus a small shelter cave. That evening we gathered in the conference hall at the reserve headquarters and watched slides of the day.



On Day 2 for Team 1, Pete Strickland had another flat tire. Again, this prompted onlookers to gather around. From this incident Kathleen acquired a dead-on mimic of Pete's drone, hilariously declaring now and again "Well, *that's* not gonna work!" After changing the tire, Pete bailed on the pictograph trip, deciding instead to look for a vulcanizador to patch the tire. Pete got one new tire from the vulcanizador, and then put on his old (well used) spare that he had obtained in Xilitla about 8 years ago. The others continued on to the site where Jean Louis photographed many images of pictographs. This team also found the best cave of the project, Gruta la Llanta. This cave was 96 meters long and 50 meters deep, with a rope drop in it.



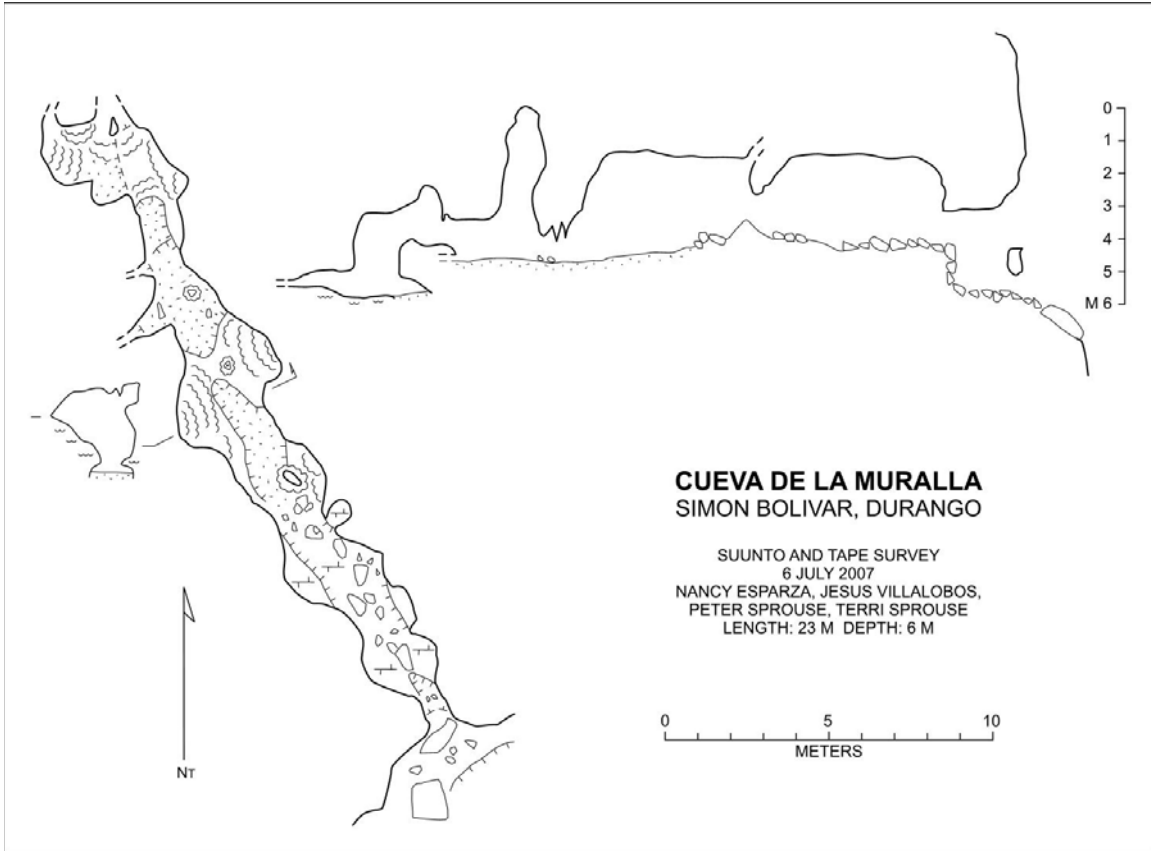
Nancy Esparza in Pozo del Castigo. Peter Sprouse photo.

Also on the second day our team surveyed two caves that were located on steep mountain sides tucked way above the Muralla canyon floor; Cueva de Cutberto and Cueva de la Muralla. To get to this side canyon off of the main Cañon de la Cabeza we had to wade across the Aguanaval River into Durango state. To maneuver our group through the canyon required two impromptu rope climbs. Although the guides scrambled up the exposed climbs, since we had rope we decided to rig hand lines, and then back that up with a top-rope belay.

Team 3, Monica's team, started at a bridge across the Aguanaval River and walked around the mountain up an arroyo looking for caves. They hiked through until their canyon met Muralla canyon then teams 2 and 3 merged and bunched up at the rope drops. Then we all exited Cañon de la Cabeza together. They did not find any caves.



Kathleen O'Connor prepares to enter Gruta de la Llanta. Mark Sanders photo.



Entrance to Cueva de Cutberto. Peter Sprouse photo.

Since we had been experiencing evening downpours that soaked camp, and since Strickland's group wanted some time the next day to check out the new gondola at Grutas de García, several cars carrying Texas cavers decided to leave Jimulco around dusk on Saturday. Of the Texas group, this left only Peter and Geoff and their riders in the 4Runners. Strickland's goal was to make it to a familiar campsite somewhere around a gas pipeline near Saltillo. Unfortunately, Pete ended up having a third flat shortly after leaving the rangers' station causing them not to reach their camping destination until 4 a.m. Meanwhile, back at the rangers' station, Monica presided over a closing ceremony where we were presented with diplomas to recognize our attendance at EC 2007. Although most of us had turned in early in anticipation of an early start Sunday morning, some stayed up late Saturday night saying their goodbyes and watching the last slide show.

At 7 a.m. Sunday morning, Peter and Geoff loaded up their trucks and headed for Peter's "secret route" to Puente I, one of the Laredo international bridges. We had a mere thirty-minute wait to get to the bridge, and it took another thirty minutes to get across, not bad for a holiday weekend. Many thanks to Kathleen for convincing the customs officials that we were "not the droids you're looking for!" We arrived back in Austin at about 8:30 p.m. and got pummeled by more torrential rain.

EC 2007 Texas participants: Aimee Beveridge, Sandi Calhoun, Joe Datri, Ernie Garza, Devra Heyer, Geoff Hoese, Jocie Hooper, Gary Napper, Kathleen O'Connor, Mark Sanders, Wes Schumacher, Rene Shields, Peter Sprouse, Terri Sprouse, and Pete Strickland.

Mapped caves at EspeleoCoahuila 2007

	Coahuila caves	Length	Depth
1	Cueva Podarohe	28	4
2	Cueva del Guano	24	11
3	Gruta de la Llanta	96	50
4	Pozo del Castigo	26	20
5	Cueva de las Arañas	5	?
6	Cueva Gatera	12	6
7	Cueva del Guano 2	10	7
8	Cueva Delgada	28	5
9	Cuevita del Borrego	8	2
10	Shelter cave	?	?
	Durango caves		
11	Cueva de la Muralla	23	6
12	Cueva de Cutberto	14	3



Kathleen O'Connor admiring the view of Cañon de los Mimbres. Jean Louis Lacaille photo.