

GOMEZ FARIAS CAVING – NOVEMBER 2005

By Peter Sprouse

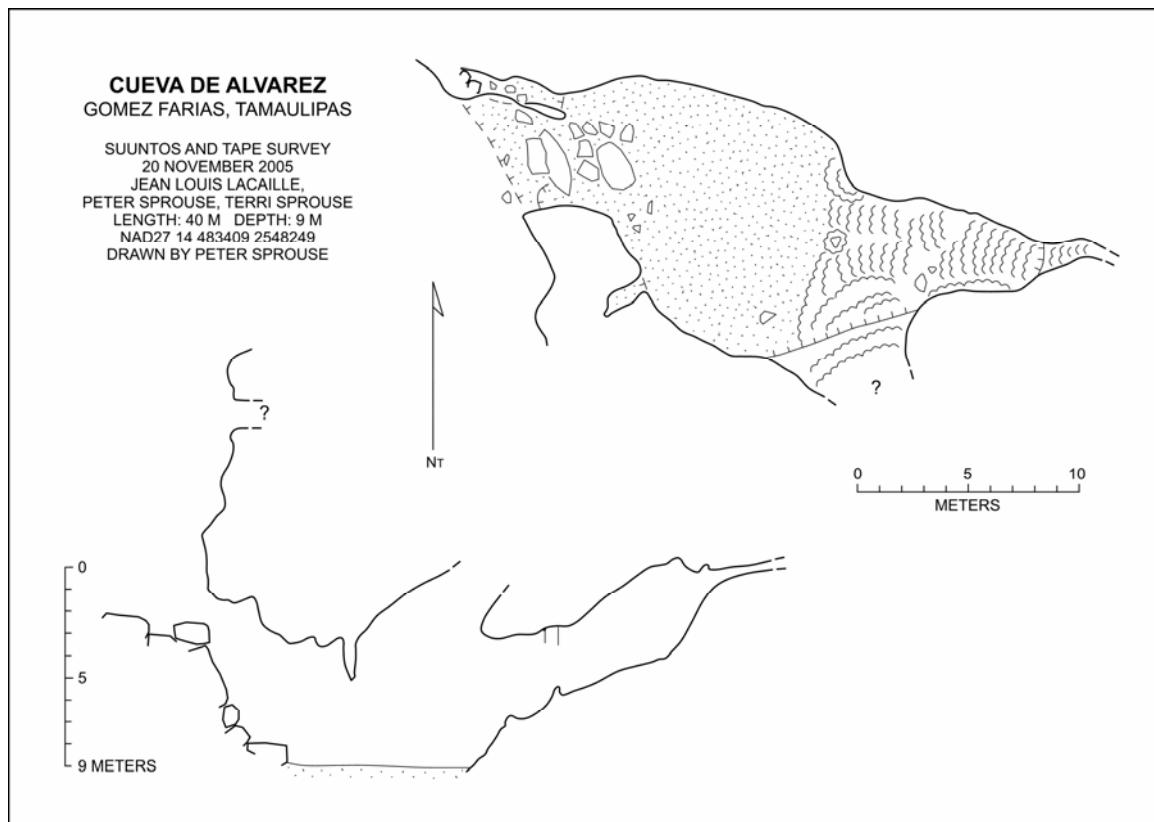


I had a number of goals in mind for this trip, and we met all of them: to share caving experiences with the cavers from Ciudad Mante, to map the caves of the Gómez Farías valley, and to further the experiences of the UT Grotto. An added bonus was the presence of more caving friends from DF, Saltillo, Wyoming, and Catalunya. Gómez Farías is the gateway to the El Cielo Biosphere Reserve in southwest Tamaulipas. Many cavers had ventured to the heights of the Sierra de Guatemala over the past 40 years with frustrated dreams of finding the deepest cave. But they were driving past some of the best caving in the area, right in the town of Gómez Farías. This town is strung out for several kilometers along a narrow basalt ridge that separates the Sierra Chiquita from the larger range to the west. On the west side of this ridge there is a narrow valley at the foot of the Sierra de Guatemala, or the Sierra de los Mangos as it may be called locally. Many small drainages leave the basalt, flow across a narrow band of shale to sink into pit entrances in the limestone. The resulting caves are multi-drop systems that reach sumps at around 150 meters depth, usually containing blind fish of the genus *Astyanax*.

A number of these caves were explored and mapped in the years surrounding 1970. Caves with names like Molino, Jineo, Escondido, and Plan caught the interest of the AMCS cavers for a brief period, mostly due to the blind fish. I visited Gómez Farías a few times in later years and mapped Sótano de Gómez Farías and Sótano de Laksi, but it wasn't until a chance meeting with Mante caver Jean Louis Lacaille Múzquiz at EspeleoCoahuila 2004 that the stars aligned. We decided to collaborate on a caving project, which we began in June 2005 on our way to do a deep pit in Querétaro. We joined Jean Louis to map two pits, Sótano de Berrones and Sótano de Los García. A larger trip was then planned for November, and I had lined up a large crew with the idea of resurveying some of the old caves that still lacked good maps, and also finding new ones.

As usual for such trips we headed south from Austin in a fleet of (mostly) Toyotas on 18 November 2005. Terri Sprouse, Juan Laden and I stopped to pick up Barbara Luke who had flown into San Antonio. Unfortunately she had forgotten her passport, so we visited a famous local caver to borrow her voter's registration. But they wanted a photo ID as well at the border, so she couldn't get across. We left her at a Laredo hotel and forged on, she would find her way to us in a few days. We found a good camp spot right before the toll road junction.

The next day we headed south through Monterrey and visited Cueva de la Boca. Juan and I made the steep hike up to the entrance. It was impressive as always, although the chain link fence installed by ProNatura to protect the bat colony had been breached. The walls of the entrance passage were decorated with vast murals of graffiti. The rest of the drive was uneventful, and we arrived at Gómez Farías to be greeted by Charley Savvas, Vickie Siegel, Kara Dittmer, Mónica Ponce, and Javier Banda. We settled into the Posada Campestre, our headquarters for the week, and soon there arrived Aimee Beveridge, Nathan Parker, Marlena Cobb, Ernie Garza, David Ochel, Pat Rhodes, and Shannon Summers.



The next morning we found that Philip Rykwaldler had arrived in the middle of the night. It had rained all night and several people had soaked tents and sleeping bags. Aimee, Monica, Patrick and Ernie went to Cueva del Ojo de Agua, a large resurgence cave on the east side of the Sierra Chiquita for which we lacked a map. They mapped about 20 stations in large passage, with lots of biology. Jean Louis joined Terri and me to locate various caves, first taking Charley, Juan, and Kara south to look for Cueva del León. We spent about 40 minutes locating it. Charley's crew went down several short drops in a semi-wet canyon, with airflow. They stopped at a deep drop. My crew went off to a cave in the valley west of the plaza. It had no name, so Jean Louis suggested we call it Cueva de Alvarez, after the landowner. It was next to a not-yet-open tourist cabin Jean Louis had commissioned, with a new stone stairway going into the sink. The cave opened under a headwall, with a climb-down into a flat-floored room. There were three aboriginal

hand prints underneath 20th century graffiti. I collected schizomids and terrestrial isopods. Philip, Marlena, and Shannon went to look for Resumidero de Jineo, but found a different stream sink instead. Marlena located it, a small hole with airflow. David, Nathan, Vickie, and Javier went to the north along the road to El Azteca and mapped Sótano de El Fin, a cave by the road which had been sketched by William Russell in the 1960's. They were also shown a cave that they named Sótano de Don Pablo, after the landowner Pablo Berrones. My crew came across them hiking back and they joined us to look at two pits JL knew of. The first one was just south of Sótano de Berrones, and it looked nice, maybe 20 m deep. We named it Sótano del Pájaro Vaquero after an odd-sounding bird we heard calling. The next one was north of Berrones, a smaller pit we called Sótano de las Espinas. When we got back to the posada we found that Gustavo Vela and Sergi Gómez had arrived.



Monica Ponce in Cueva del Ojo de Agua. Aimee Beveridge photo.

Nathan and crew went back to the Azteca Road area the next day and went to the ostensible marked location of Cueva de Ask Patty, vaguely reported by Patty Mothes and Roy Jameson in the 1970's, but found only a shallow crack. So they returned to Cueva de Don Pablo and began mapping it. It was a large room that went about 60 m deep, with little fauna. Charley's crew went back to Cueva del León and it kept on going in clean-washed passage. They found a tube maze area 6 drops down with multiple pits going off, with air. Lots of fauna were seen. Philip's crew pushed the pit Marlena had found, Sótano del Brinco de Alicia (Alice's Plunge), rigging down 4 drops through canyon passage. It kept going. Aimee, Pat, Gustavo, and Ernie finished mapping Cueva del Ojo de Agua. Terri, Jean Louis, Mónica and I were taken by Gustavo Berrones to see the deep pit he had found just west of town. We did a jungle chop through the karst to get there. It was a nice pit 4 seconds deep, and we named it Sótano de Gustavo in his honor. After lunch we left Mónica to catch the bus back to Saltillo while we went off to meet Rogelio, whose friend took us to a pit near Sótano de Gomez Farias. It was a small pit on a hill, not very impressive looking, however we knew this was a good area.

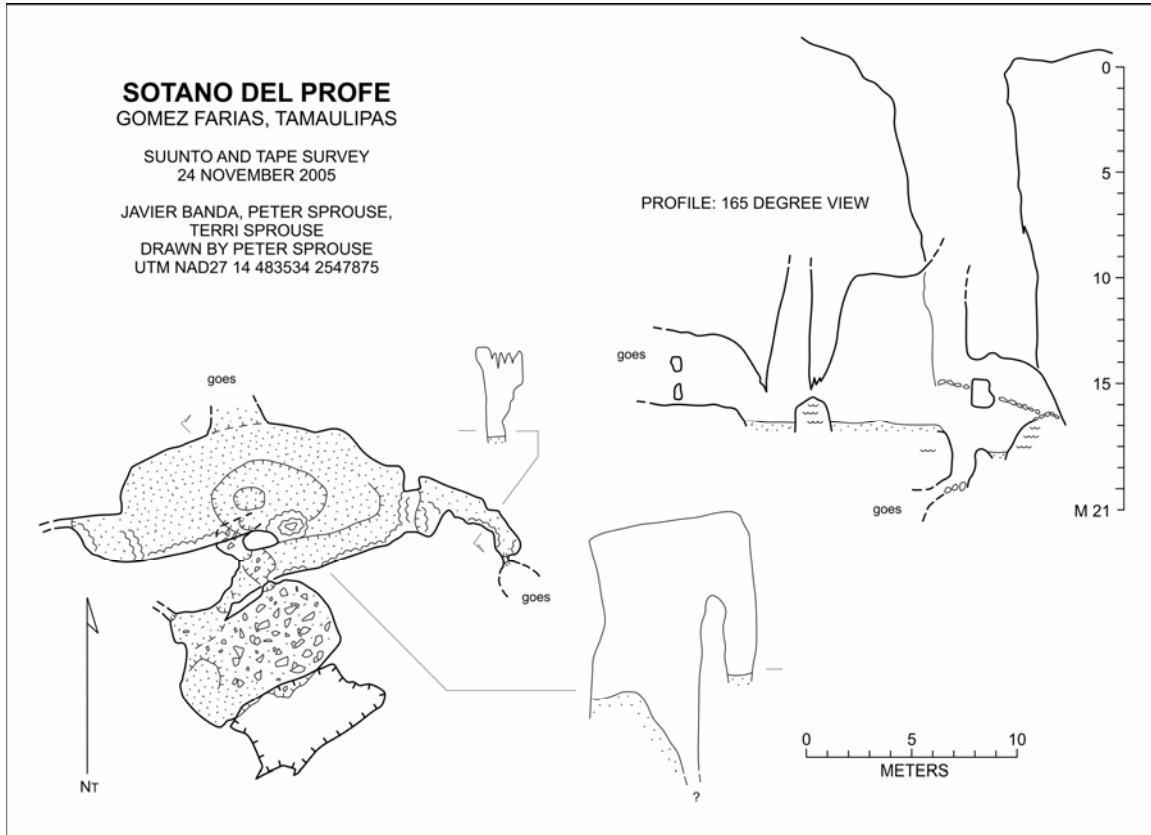


Jean Louis Lacaille entering Sótano de la Tinaja. Peter Sprouse photo.

We named it Sótano de la Tinaja, after the name of the area. The 14 m entrance pit was followed by a 2 m climb up to a stal-constricted window which we enlarged a bit using a rock allowing us to squeeze through into the next 6 m drop. This dropped into a spacious room with two pits going off, plus a climb down into breakdown. We fed the rope on down the pit closest to our landing point. JL went down to see if the rope reached, but it didn't. So I checked the breakdown route, but couldn't get too far before it got vertical again. JL agreed to go get another rope, so Terri and I collected and took pictures until he got back. When he returned Terri and I surveyed down. It was a 23m drop, followed by a 4 m climb-down to a mud plug with bad air. We climbed up and rigged the rope down the parallel shaft. After 12 meters, the shaft landed in a flat floor but had an offset pit that continued down. I rappelled this pit to a bridge that had pits on each side. Since it was getting late, we left it for the next day. That evening Andy Gluesenkamp, Leah Adams, and Geoff Hoese arrived from caving in Querétaro.

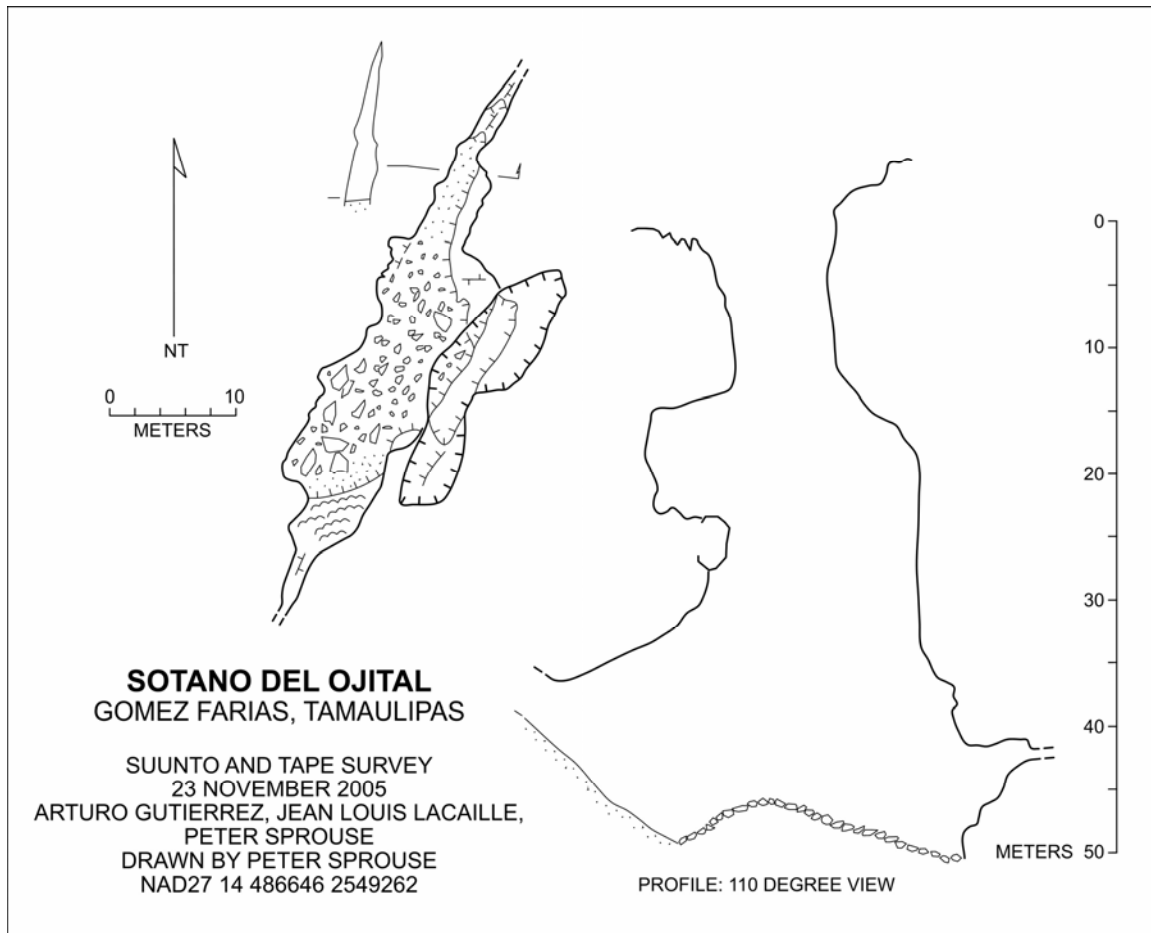
Nathan's crew got an early start the next day to the Azteca Road caves. They finished mapping Cueva de Don Pablo, then mapped Sótano de las Espinas. It had a short second drop to it. To our delight, Barbara Luke arrived just in time to join us for breakfast. She had taken a bus back to San Antonio and had arranged to have her passport shipped to Chris Vail's house there. Tucked inside her passport she found a 180-day visa that she had acquired in June, which was still valid. She hopped on a bus to join us in Gómez Farías and, ironically, was able to cross the border on the bus without ever having to show her visa. After breakfast, Barbara joined Charley's crew to help survey the tube maze in Sótano de León. Aimee and Geoff joined Philip's crew in Alice's Plunge. They bottomed out the cave at 113 m depth, but still had some side leads remaining. Sergi, Arturo, and Patrick joined me in Sótano de la Tinaja. Later, we were joined there by JL and Gustavo. We re-rigged the cave, with Sergi (Dimoni) setting some self-drive bolts. He rigged the fifth drop with a natural over a horn. It dropped 26 m to a ledge, another bolt was set to get down a sixth drop of 21 m. Only Sergi and I went down that, where the air was getting poor. A sloping

seventh drop down to a muddy constriction was pushed by Sergi, to end at a mud plug at -104 m. We wrapped up the survey and de-rigged. Once back on the surface our guide showed us another cave nearby that blew good air. Jean Louis dropped 5 m down into a chamber, but couldn't find a good way on. We never got back to this lead. Charley's crew finished up Cueva del León at -84 m. They got back to camp last. Ed Alexander and family showed up from Real de Catorce to join us.



On 23 November Terri, Jean Louis, Profe and I went to look for some caves with local guide Moises. First we found Sótano del Profe. This had been previously descended by Arturo "El Profe", who said that it didn't go at the bottom. But with an arroyo dumping in it looked too good not to go, so we decided to go back and map it during this trip. Then we drove over and found the entrance to Sumidero del los Mangos, which had been reported by William Russell back in the late 1960s. It had an arroyo going into a walk-in entrance under a big headwall. Terri, Jean Louis and El Profe went in and checked it out as far as the top of a 30 m pit. The cave started down a fissure, then led to various side passages, some with skylights. Next we went back into town to look for Sótano de Laksi, but we couldn't find it since the area had become quite overgrown. Then we found a guide to take us to a cave up on the Sierra Chiquita. The guide indicated that the hike would take an hour and a half up the mountain, so Terri decided to hike back to the Campestre while the rest of us hiked first down into the valley. After about fifteen minutes our guide led us to a pit that looked to be about 12 m deep. We named it Sótano del Rincón, after the place name. Right below it was a cave entrance blowing cold air. But we never got back there, since there was so much else to do. Then we hiked over the Sierra Chiquita and we tried to find the pit that the guide intended to take us to, but we couldn't find it. But we ended up stumbling across another pit. Even though it was almost dark, we decided to do it anyway. It was a forty-five meter pit, and Jean Louis got to cross his first knot. The pit was ample, fifty by ten meters at the bottom, but plugged. We named it Sótano del Ojital, after a local plant. By then it was dark and we had to bushwhack down the mountain so we could find our way home. Meanwhile Philip had taken a large crew to Alice's Plunge, where they finished mapping and derigged. Sadly, it was later

determined that this cave was actually Sótano del Plan, previously mapped by the Speleo Club du Paris. Then they started mapping in Resumidero de Jineo, which had been surveyed years ago but still lacked a useable map. Nathan's crew went to Sótano de Gustavo, which turned out to be 65 m deep and blind.

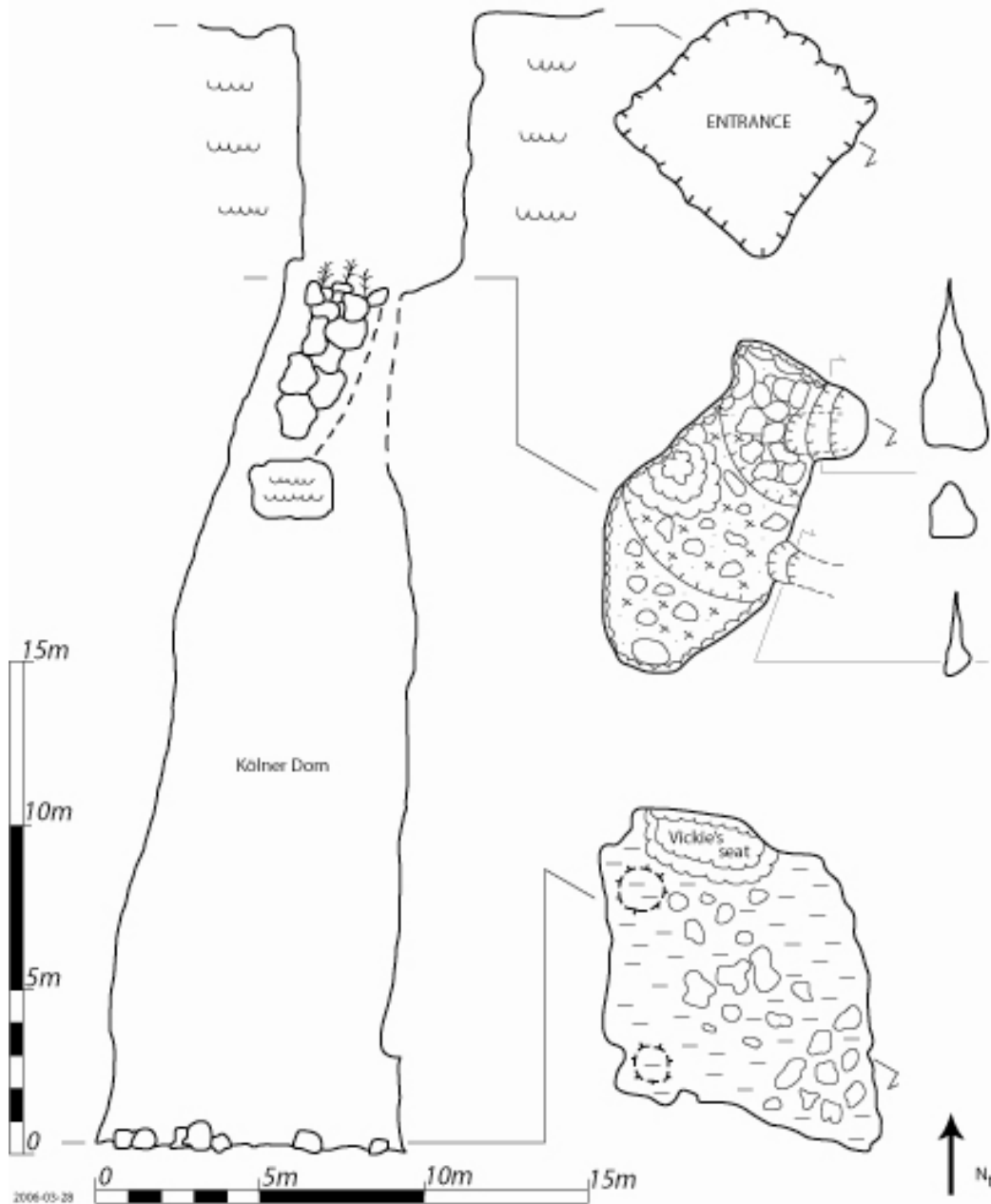


The next day Aimee, Geoff, and Jean Louis hiked east from the hotel and were shown several small caves and some Indian mounds. They mapped two caves, Cueva de Goyo and Sótano Vidrioso. Vickie, Nathan and David derigged Cueva del León. Actually the part that got surveyed this trip seems to be the sótano, the cueva next to it went uninvestigated. Charley and I accompanied them there, and were taken by a local resident to see two pits a kilometer down the hill toward the nacimiento. They appeared to be about 12 and 15 m deep, and were 25 m apart. Charley, Philip, Andy, Sergi, and Gustavo went to Resumidero de los Mangos and surveyed through the fissure maze. Left at a T-junction led to a small pour-off that dumped into the main pit. Philip and Sergi rigged until they ran out of rope. Terri, Javier, and I took Gustavo Berrones, a local guide and Posada Campestre employee, down his first drop as we surveyed Sótano del Profe. It was a 23 m pit which at first appeared to be blind, but had a small debris-filled drain. When the debris was cleared Terri was able to squeeze down the tight passage, which dropped to a flat mud area before the drain continued on down. From there she could see a large room, but first had to do a small traverse around the drain and then climb up a mud slope. The passage then opened up into a large room with a very high ceiling and a mud funnel, which sloped down on one side into what appeared to be a deep muddy drain. At the far end of the room there was a low crawl that Terri went through and discovered another large room with a thick muddy floor. A muddy passage continued on. Terri then retreated and crawled through a stalactite window to more passage on the other side. Meanwhile, Javier was attempting to squeeze down the tight

drain passage, but could not work his chest through the constriction. He exited, then I came down and we continued on with the survey. Since it was getting late and we wanted to be back in time for a Thanksgiving feast, we surveyed down only one of the passages to a room with a small window, but the passage continued. We left this cave with three going leads that would have to be explored on a future trip. The climb back up the constriction seemed a lot easier than the climb down. We exited the pit and made it back to the Campestre in time to help prepare a fantastic pot luck Thanksgiving feast of turkey, ham, pastas, salads, stuffing, green beans, and host of side dishes, along with delicious grilled chicken and flautas prepared for us by the hotel.

Sotano del Catedral Gomez Farias, Tamaulipas, Mexico

Suunto & Tape Survey, 25 November 2005
by David Ochel, Nathan Parker, and Vickie Siegel
Drafted by David Ochel, March 2006
Projected Profile 210°



On our last caving day Philip, Charley, Andy, Sergi and others returned to Resumidero de los Mangos and surveyed it down to a mud fill. It was about 103 m deep. Nathan, Vickie, and David went to map Sótano del Pájaro Vaquero. They were also shown another pit, which David named Sótano del Catedral, this went down two drops. I joined a large crew in Resumidero de Jineo. Shannon and Juan went in first to continue rigging. Barbara and Ernie followed to resume the survey, and a bit later Jean Louis, Javier and I headed in after them. The cave was a superb series of clean pitches in smooth blue-gray bedrock, expertly rigged Bosch style. My crew dwindled as we got deeper: JL climbed out after drop 7 and Javier left his shoes behind and had to go back and get them. When we got to base level I recruited Shannon to help me map the right hand passage to the sump. This was very muddy and included the last pitch, "Diarrhea Drop". There were lots of inverts down there and *astyanax* in the sump. I headed out first with three ropes and ran into JL at the top of the 4th pitch. He had come back in to help de-rig. When I got to the entrance I could hear live music drifting down from town. I had a pleasant walk back to the hotel. The others came in a few hours later.

Saturday morning everyone packed up and headed north, south, or west toward home.



Jean Louis descending Resumidero de Jineo. Peter Sprouse photo.

