

## MUZQUIZ CAVING



*Bear skull*

by Philip Rykwalder and Peter Sprouse  
photos by David Ochel, Mark Sanders, Peter Sprouse

2007 was a wet year across Texas and Coahuila, and this was evident on our Labor Day caving trip to Coahuila. We loaded up 12 people in four Toyotas for the departure from Austin: Aimee Beveridge, Grace Borengasser, Joe Datri, Jubal Grubb, Geoff Hoese, Kori Jones, Saj Pierson, Patrick Rhoades, Philip Rykwalder, Mark Sanders, Peter Sprouse, and Matt Zappitello. That night (30 August) we got as far as the town of Múzquiz. The next morning we met members of the Enriquez family, whose ranch we would be visiting. They led us northwest on the highway toward Boquillas del Carmen. The landscape was green as far as the eye could see, and we crossed numerous clear streams coming off of the Sierra Santa Rosa. Our hosts said they hadn't seen it like this for 10 years. After we had passed the Río Sabinas, which emanates from a major resurgence called Kickapoo Springs, we took a left through a ranch gate.

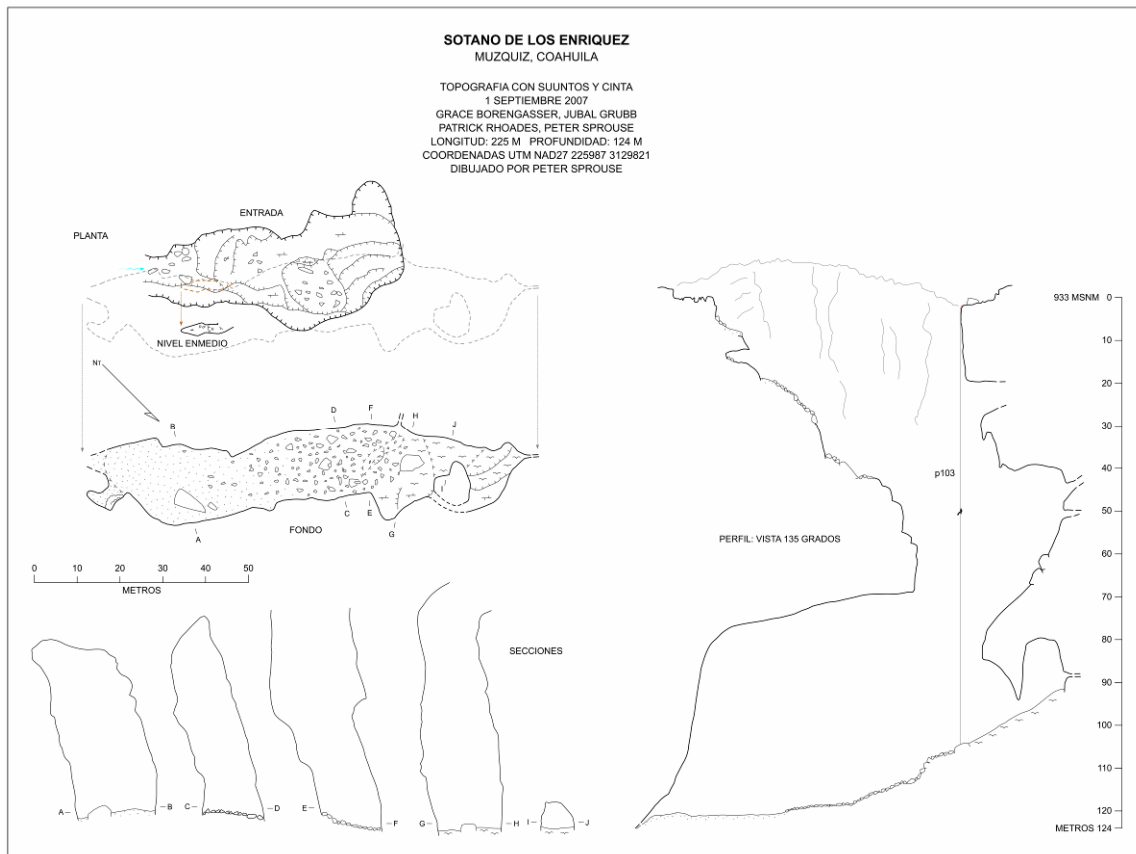
We then passed through many intervening ranches and gates on the 2 hour drive to the 5000 hectare Rancho las Aguilas. Entering the Cañon el Eje, we began to see scattered fan palms on the steep limestone canyon walls. As we climbed higher into the hills the vegetation grew taller. We stopped to look briefly at a horizontal cave in a cliff face that seemed to have good cave fauna. Mark took

pictures of a mother spider with young, and a *Myotis* bat. Soon we reached the ranch cabin, a unique structure built around an old bus. The ranch crew, which included some Coahuila state wildland firefighters, prepared a lunch for us of tacos with a spicy salsa made from native chile piquins, which grew in abundance. Then we drove up the canyon a bit farther to where the trail to several known caves took off. Our primary lead was a large pit that some climbers from Saltillo had been down the year before, as well as some other reported leads. Two of these were indicated on the topo map by contour lines. Our guides took us up a canyon onto a plateau, where they used machetes to open up the trail. The landscape was reminiscent of the Sierra de El Abra in Tamaulipas, not the desert we had come to expect in Coahuila. The thick scrub was topped off by oaks and tall yuccas. Soon we were at the deep pit, known as Sótano de los Enriquez. This was a very large entrance with a prominent arch in the south wall. Rocks dropped in fell a long way. Then we used GPS to reach the other sink, which was even larger. Along the way Geoff stumbled upon a small pit in the trail which sounded fairly deep. The big sink was about 100 m across, with sheer limestone walls that only allowed one walk-in route down to what appeared to be a dense oak forest. We left all of these projects for the next day.



*Philip rappels into Sótano de los Enriquez*

We got an early start and made our way back up the trail to Sótano de los Enriquez. We started clearing a spot over the high side headwall to rig what looked to be a nice clean drop. Philip dropped over the edge to work on rigging, but we soon became concerned about bees flying around. Below a sunny 20 m headwall the pit belled out to an inviting open air pit, but down below in the pit the sound of buzzing bees proved ominous and forced a retreat. We circled back to the north side and descended a steep gully down which surface runoff flowed at times. An 8 m drop got us to the real pit. Philip rigged several short pitches, drilling bolts with the hammer-drill to reach a ledge where a final spectacular 50 m free drop reached the floor, a wide canyon. Upslope to the south led to an abandoned bat roost with guano a meter deep. To the north the dimly lit gallery was 15 m wide by 50 m tall, ending at a silt plug where the recent water line from tropical storm Erin could be seen over a meter up the wall.



Meanwhile Aimee, Geoff, Kori, Mark, and Saj had gone to check out the oak forest sink, which did not go, and had been joined by Rick Enriquez and the firefighters, who worked on chopping a trail to another pit they knew about, but they failed to find it. But Geoff did come across a new pit in which rocks fell about 6 seconds, so we had a new lead for the morrow. After we hiked back down to camp some partook of swimming in a large 250,000 liter stock tank and the ranch owner invited us to dinner. We hadn't quite made it to the ranch cabin before the



sky opened up, soaking us completely, but we warmed quickly in the cabin. We had a nice slide show/party and enjoyed more fresh chile piquin salsa with our dinner. It rained for several hours into the night and when we returned to camp we all found our tents in various stages of flooding and some slept quite wet that night.

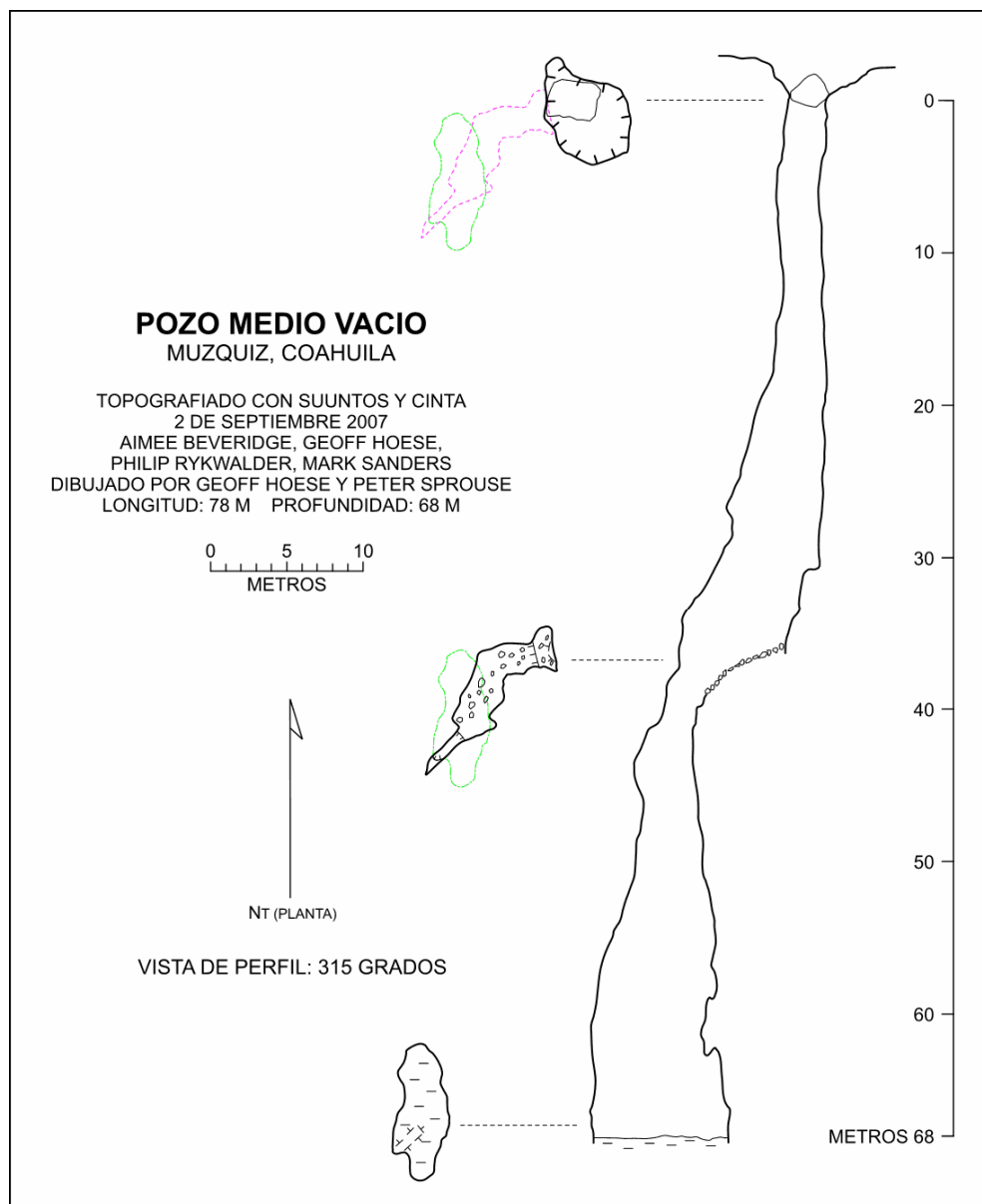


*Dinner in the bus shack*

Sunday we awoke to a muddy world and continued with more caving. Philip, Mark, Geoff, and Aimee went to do the 6 second pit, which ended up being called Pozo Medio Vacio. Finding little in the way of natural anchors on the surface, Philip tied the rope to some scrub, placed a bolt and set down a series of three pitches, placing rebelayes as he went. The first was a smooth-walled 27 m pitch followed by an 8 m pitch that led to a cobble slope. A slot on the south wall opened immediately to a free 30 m blind pit and the end of the cave. Philip, Geoff and Mark surveyed their way out of the 75 m deep cave.

Meanwhile, Peter, Jubal, Kori, Joe, and Grace explored the small pit near Oak Forest Sink that had been found along the trail on Friday. By the time they had cleaned loose rock from the entrance it was quite a bit larger. They rigged off a large boulder, and Jubal headed in with a pile of slings. He found a nice rebelay just inside, which got him down the first drop, then rebelayed off a large stalagmite to get down the second pitch. Kori and Peter mapped behind him. The

top of the third drop had a lot of loose rocks to be cleared, then Jubal rigged off a thread to get down a few meters to where a large bedrock horn provided a bomber anchor to get down what turned out to be the last pitch. The floor was composed of loose rocks which could be dug, but there was no airflow. Joe came down to photograph, and Grace made it partway down before we all started heading up, dodging rocks. We named this cave Pozo Cornucopia. We found our guides in the area still working on chopping a trail westward to the elusive third pit. They had run across a 20 m pit along the way, and some of us joined them in continuing the search effort. As the new trail continued west across intense karst, an 8 and a 21 m pit were passed. Finally a canyon stopped progress for the day, and the effort was abandoned. As the last of us made it to camp before dark, the rain started again, and had us huddling under a tarp while inches of water fell.







*Philip drops into Pozo Medio Vacio*

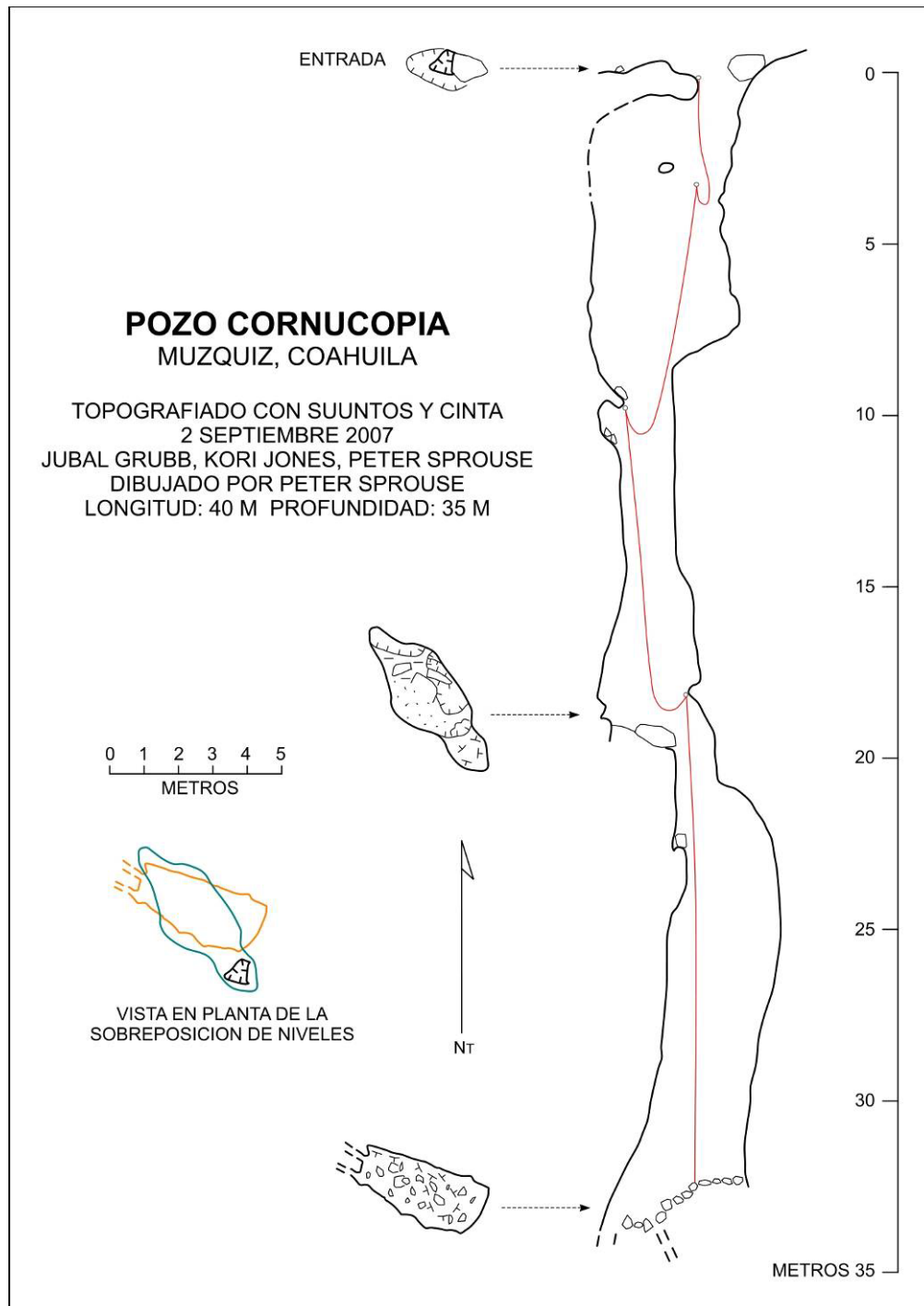


*Excavation of Pozo Cornucopia*





*Bottom of Pozo Cornucopia*



The next morning we packed up our soggy tents and drove back down to the cabin, where our new friends made us chilaquiles with (what else) chile piquin. Then we started the 2 hour drive back to the highway as the rain returned. This made for a very muddy road with lots of slipping, sliding, and a few stuck moments. But we eventually reached the highway, and made a swimming stop at the Río Sabinas before heading for the border and the long holiday queue to end a wet and enjoyable weekend of caving in Coahuila.



*January 2008*

With the success of the Labor Day trip we were soon planning a return to the Rancho Kikapú. Fifteen cavers met up in Múzquiz on the night of 17 January 2008. Monica Ponce, Pedro Ramírez, and Cristina Vélez came from various parts of Coahuila, while the rest of us were from Texas: Don Arburn, Grace Borengasser, Joe Datri, RD Milhollin, David Ochel, Linda Palit, Ryan Reid, Mark Sanders, Vickie Siegel, Peter Sprouse, Drew Thompson, and Heather Túček. The following morning we gathered for breakfast at Martha's Restaurant, where we met several people who told us about caves in the area. We picked up the keys from the rancher and head out the highway to our turnoff. After awhile on the ranch roads we took a detour to Rancho la Mariposa, where Peter had seen what looked like a resurgence on Google Earth. We parked at a stock tank and walked 1000 meters across scrublands to an arroyo. We followed this upstream and soon came to a large depression, the source of the arroyo. It was about 20 m across and 15 m deep, with slopes of dirt and slumped slabs. At the bottom was a knot of clean, rounded cobbles. Warm air blew out of these and pebbles bounced down through them. We soon began removing rocks, some of them perfectly shaped like dinosaur eggs. But the bigger ones were impossible to budge without tools, and there was little space to put the rocks at the bottom of this funnel. So we reluctantly left the Embudo de Huevos for another time.



*Embudo de Huevos*

We got back on track and soon entered the Cañon el Eje and Rancho las Aguilas. We set up camp at the same spot we'd used a few months earlier. The next morning we split into various teams. David Ochel led a team consisting of Mark, Cristina, RD, and Drew back down the canyon to map a cave we'd been

shown by the rancher on our previous trip. This is a horizontal cave in the canyon wall about 85 m long. It turned out to have some interesting biology in it, and a bear skull. This was initially thought to be a wolf, and the cave got named Cueva del Lobo as a result. RD and Drew chopped a trail up onto the ridge above the cave to look for a lead we'd seen on aerial photos, but they ran out of time before reaching the spot. The rest of us hiked up the trail toward Sótano de los Enríquez. As we crested the mesa we veered to the right off the trail to look for more aerial photo features. We located and dug in several sinks, one with airflow, but didn't get into any caves there. We headed on over to look at the spectacular entrance to Sótano de los Enríquez, then we split up into two teams. Vickie, Heather, and others went to check a pit we'd found on the previous trip that was estimated to be 8 m deep. Peter, Monica, Pedro, and Don chopped a trail to the east to look for an aerial photo lead. They didn't get as far as the aerial lead, but did run across a small pit. Cueva de la Bolsa went down two climbdowns and a pit to pinch at a depth of 18 m.



*Foothills of the Sierra Santa Rosa*

The next day teams split up for various objectives again. Ryan, Linda, Peter, and Grace drove up the ranch road to the north, aiming for some aerial photo leads. This road climbed a steep gully to end on a ridgetop at the foot of the Sierra Santa Rosa. There were spectacular views of the palm-covered flank of the sierra. The ridge they were on was riddled with sinks and karst features, but after a long hike and trail chop up to the aerial lead, it turned out to be merely a meadow. On the hike back they checked a small pit in the karst area. Pozo de Ryan was a climbdown to a small room, 6 m deep. RD and Drew went back to



the ridge they had chopped up the day before, accompanied by Monica and Pedro. They checked a number of small caves and pits: Pozo del Lobo, Cueva Pinche Uña de Gato, Pozo Pierna de Perro, and Cueva Centeno, but none went. Don, Vickie, David, and Cristina went back up to continue Don's chop of the day before, still not getting to the aerial lead but finding a pit nonetheless. They got about 50 m down this, but there was another drop and they were out of rope, so this would have to wait for another trip. The next day the crew made the long drive out of the ranchlands and the short drive back to Texas.



*Cristina does her first pit*