

The Call of the Man Eater

Rescue in Matacanes Canyon

By Rob Myers



Rob goes airborne

After an uneventful night sleeping near the take-out point for Matacanes canyon, I was awakened by the wrenching metallic sound of Peter Sprouse crushing beer cans - a caver version of a wake-up call. We wanted to get an early start since we still needed to drive a short way up the mountain before starting the hike to the canyon. People slowly began emerging from their tents, poking through their gear and looking for breakfast. It hadn't rained much during the night, just a few sprinkles, which was good news. The canyon lakes should have very little runoff now. Once all were fed, we left most of the vehicles down at the take-out and loaded up the remaining trucks. With two people on the roof rack and one standing on the back bumper Peter's truck led the way, winding up the twisting and rocky canyon roads. At Potrero Redondo we finalized the arrangements for our trucks to be shuttled back down the mountain and began the short hike to the branch of the Río Ramos that carves out the canyon. Matacanes is a spring-fed cold canyon, so I suspected that after a few hours of dunking in the plunge pools I would feel really good about having sprung for the cost of a wetsuit. When we arrived at the initial rappel, we all suited up then strapped into our seat harnesses and prepared for the descent.



The first drop

There is a deep pool just above the initial drop that captures the water before it spills over into the canyon; a true negative-edge swimming hole, the kind imitated by developers. It presents the first leap, the first test - a sort of canyon calling card. A jump of three meters, followed immediately by a 40-meter rappel.

Monday must be a slow day at the canyon with the weekend warriors having cleared out. Although the sky was overcast and the water was a bit turbid, the thrill of descending next to a waterfall made conditions seem near perfect. The water fell in powerful, undulating waves against the rock, swelling the lake to start the flow down the canyon. Since we had the place to ourselves and our choice of rig points, we rigged two ropes just for fun. The full story about the short rope never got flushed out. Suffice it to say that it conveniently landed on a ledge which, although still some ways from the water, provided a fitting challenge

for the sporting – and jump number two. Welcome to the world of the canyon. There was no turning back now.

For the next hour we traversed rock over rock, leaped from high and low ledges, and sloshed, swam, waded and floated through collecting pools hemmed in by the steep canyon walls. One moment would call for relaxation, allowing me to float on my back enjoying the scenery, but the next call would be for a leap through the air and a cold dunk into the rushing water. Then came the call of the Man Eater.



Terri enters the Man Eater

The Man Eater looked like fun from the top. The fast-flowing water had carved a deep channel through some boulders and came rushing down like a natural water slide. Clutching rock with my hand and feeling for boulders with the tips of my boots, I braced myself against the rushing water and down-climbed into the chute. It bent sharply to the left then button-hooked back to the right, before bottoming out underneath a huge boulder. The water hit my back full force as it charged through the keyhole, smashed into the rock and turned into foam before crashing into a pool beneath the boulder. The Man Eater turned out to be a really hairy spot – a tortured, twisting five-meter chute with an inclination that seemed to be only a few degrees short of a minus-ninety.

After I cleared the chute, I had turned to watch the others negotiate the drop when Kara began descending. When she got spat out of the bottom end she disappeared from sight, then bobbed back to the surface in pain. She had continued to lie flat on the water, prompting someone to reach to help pull her from the current. Her face showed absolutely no doubt as she advised us all to take care because something was wrong. Kara seemed absolutely sure it was a break.



Concern shows on Choy's face as Kara is pulled from the Man Eater

As soon as she said that, I recalled that when I broke my arm years ago I knew it instantly. It's not just a sharp jolt, or even tremendous pain; the sensation of bone cracking just runs through your whole body leaving no doubt as to what

had happened. Then Kara started apologizing. Realizing what lay ahead and knowing that her pain was going to get a lot worse before it got better – she was apologizing. And all she asked was for someone to hold her hand.

I suppose that we all experienced some kind of reality shift at this point and a shuffle of priorities. We had expected to be out of the canyon by dark, and on the way home the next day. The focus of our new reality had shifted to first assessing and stabilizing Kara's condition, and then towards safely moving her over the difficult terrain and out of the canyon. We had a large group of seventeen, which proved to be a blessing. We had several presenters from the EspeleoCoahuila Conference on the trip. Whether it was by luck or by design, included in our group was the team of instructors for Sunday's vertical and rescue session - ropes trainer Becky Jones and Special Operations Tactician and Austin fire fighter, DJ Walker. Their years of training were about to pay off.



Rescue practice the day before the canyon trip

A plan was devised. We had rope, so Becky set to transforming the rope into a series of loops to make a stretcher. She needed two sticks of good wood about six feet long and at least an inch and a half in diameter. Teams were disbursed in the hunt for good saplings, while DJ set about stabilizing Kara. He removed her left boot then cut off her sock and the bottom leg part of her wetsuit. He checked for movement and capillary refill, cushioned her left leg as best he could, and duct-taped the broken leg to the good. We inventoried the group for

painkillers, coming up with a collection of Ibuprofen. Meanwhile, a rigging team had been sent ahead to rig the upcoming 20-meter drop into the first cave so that Faith and Choy could be sent out of the canyon to alert the authorities of our situation and location.

Bev and Memo returned from their search with two perfect saplings, and a story of at least one of them having been cut down with a rock. We stripped them of branches as best we could. With two nice poles and a skillfully knotted rope Becky was able to construct a decent stretcher. She lashed the poles to the knotted rope with webbing, and when this amazing stretcher was finished we even had webbed loops to use as handles. Wes and Vico donated their life vests as padding, an effort I thought was rather noble since it meant struggling to keep themselves afloat. We strapped Kara to the newly made stretcher and we readied the group to move on.



Rescue litter improvised from rope and saplings

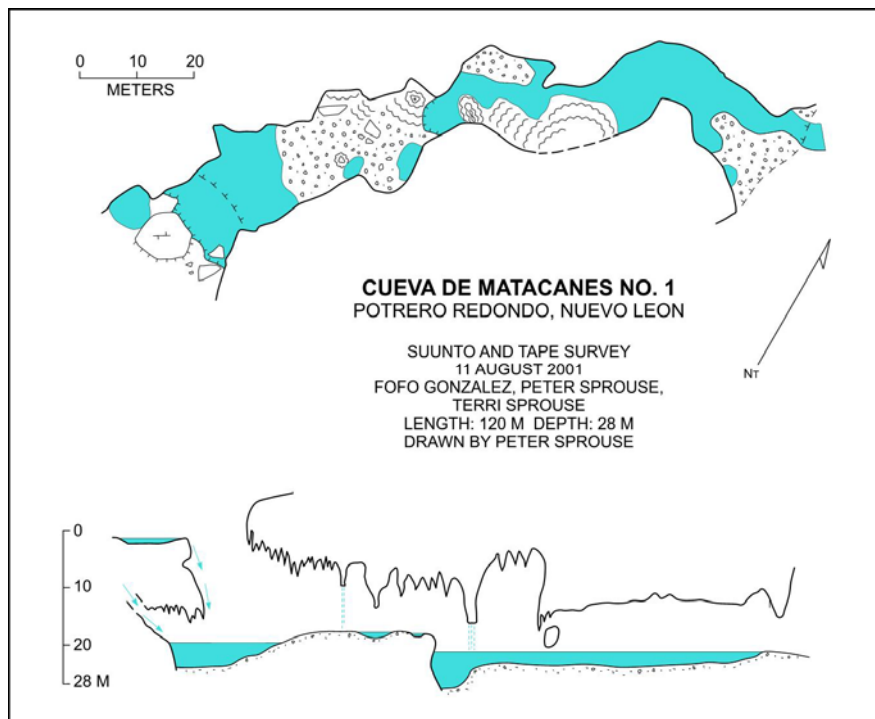
By this time we were all anxious to proceed. Action provided more comfort than just sitting around and moving the stretcher would give us all a feeling of accomplishment and progress. It was late afternoon, and we were still in the upper part of the canyon. We had yet to traverse two caves and negotiate many swims and jumps before we could begin the long walk to the trucks.

Since jumps were out for Kara, we needed at least two alternate-route finders scouting in front. Then the stretcher slowly began to move, seemingly in six-inch steps, four on a side and sometimes two in back. Becky had also suffered an annoying ankle injury at the Man Eater, but was making her way ahead of the group with the assistance of a crutch made from a tree. We maneuvered our patient with care. That was no small task to undertake in a difficult canyon like Matacanes. We would be carrying our patient through rushing water that cascaded down a boulder-filled canyon containing two caves. DJ taught us how to move with the stretcher - sliding it over our laps as we perched on the boulders. As we came upon deep areas the people at the rear would cycle to the front so we could pass the litter along. When someone would slip, another person would be there to grab the free handle. The stretcher was lowered down drops, hoisted over boulders, but the worst times seemed when we had to swim with the stretcher. We had no choice but to occasionally immerse Kara into the cold, cold water.



Stretcherless lowering operation

There are innumerable details about the action of the following ten hours that I could share with you. The way carrying a litter in turbid water becomes dangerous since you can't see where you are stepping. How Matacanes seems to prefer growing poison ivy to any other plant. The frustration of taking six inch steps when you know there is a lot of distance to cover. The cold that seeps in during start-stop progress as we paused to rig ropes or plan how to pass Kara over boulders the size of cars. The one thing that gave me some confidence was how well people pulled together. A dire circumstance can make you feel very close to people who are in it with you, but that does not fully explain how proud I became of our team. Immediately after the break I became worried about how capable this group of people were. Despite the hardships no one broke down, there was no snapping or sharp words exchanged. When someone slipped another person was there to grab the litter, everyone was focusing on the immediate tasks at hand and ignoring the hardships they couldn't change. I was extremely impressed with the selflessness of that group of people, and I now trust them immensely. Proceeding was exhausting but was more comforting than our breaks. At least when we were moving there was something to focus on and distract me from fatigue and cold. I knew there were two caves in the canyon, and when I reached the first one DJ was already rigging a system to lower Kara down the 18 m drop that led to a deep pool. As Kara was descending a few of us were shivering and pulling out on the rope, trying to prevent her from bumping against the rocks. When she made it to the water people detached the line and swam her to a small beach in the cave. We wrapped a space blanket around her and proceeded about 20 m further before we had to rig another lowering system, once again dropping her into a pool of frigid water and swimming her to the far bank.



When we made it out of the cave I realized that the sun getting low. It was so tempting to try and push on through the night because the thought of sleeping in the canyon seemed much more unpleasant than what we had been doing. This is a dangerous situation though, it is easier to slip or make mistakes in the dark, and as we became more fatigued the risk of an accident grew exponentially. Talking amongst ourselves we realized that our progress was extremely slow. There were several more spots where DJ would have to rig ropes for lowering Kara, as well as a whole other cave to contend with. It appeared that even if we moved throughout the night we would not make it out of the canyon until after dawn. We made the decision to stop overnight. I worked ahead of the group, scouting for a place to camp that offered some shelter. I found an area with a slight overhang and a little level ground between the canyon walls and the river and built a fire. Kara was set down next to the fire, Becky perched on rock ledge opposite her, and people ate and drank a bit, settling in for what was going to be a long night. Peter and Terri continued down the canyon to notify any rescue team of our location and condition. We had not planned on staying overnight and so had limited food and even less warm clothing. As the hours drifted by people would shuffle around, occasionally sleep a bit, get up to warm themselves by the fire, and go back to searching in vain for a comfortable spot. Bev, Wes and I were awake most of the night feeding the fire and talking with Kara. I had only met her a few days beforehand, but now feel I know her pretty well. The pain seemed to pounce on her in the early morning, what I think was four or five o'clock.



Kara leaves the canyon

Kara had been lying in the same position on the litter for over ten hours and it had been about 18 hours since the Man Eater. We would try to make her more comfortable by repositioning her, propping up her legs, putting a fleece cap over her swollen toes, tucking the space-blanket under her, but there was only so much comfort one could hope for. Distraction worked better, and we talked for hours trying to pass the time. We sang drinking songs, recalled old jokes and stories, anything to pull our minds from the fear that pain and fatigue carried with it. Near dawn Vico woke up, gathered more wood for the fire, and sat down with Kara. I drifted off to sleep and was later shaken awake to find the canyon filled with sunlight. The dawn brought clear skies, allowing the sun's warmth to bake the chill out of us and give us a bit of optimism. Without any ceremony and little discussion we picked up the litter and continued down the canyon as before, three or four people on each side with a few scouting the path ahead. As we came upon boulders or deep areas the people at the rear would cycle to the front so we could pass the litter along. The footing was unsure at best and created a hazard for everyone. Vico ended up spraining an ankle and I considered the group lucky for not further injuring itself. Becky had a crutch made out of a tree with some webbing tied across a V at its top and with its support pushed ahead of us.



Awaiting the ambulance at Las Adjuntas

At one point the scout group called for DJ, there was a particularly tricky obstacle that would require some creative ropework. The river cut a narrow channel between the vertical canyon wall on the right and the steeply angled rock slab on the left. It fell several meters into a pool where the current looked treacherous. There were few anchors and no way to move the litter on such a steep angle. Kara would have to be connected to a rope then traverse most of the slab under her own power, pulling herself along with her arms. We set Kara on a boulder and DJ began rigging the rope system when a new face appeared from upstream. A member of the Protección Civil named Joel had started down the canyon during the night and reached us right before we were ready to attempt the next obstacle. As we were strapping Kara into the litter that Joel carried I felt amazement at how functional that sheet of plastic with metal grommets was, especially compared to our rickety litter. I began to relax a bit knowing that we had a real splint on Kara's leg and more stable litter, plus some additional help. I checked on DJ and as I returned to the group a helicopter flew overhead. It was only visible for a few seconds between the canyon walls before it disappeared and we continued strapping Kara in. All of a sudden the helicopter re-appeared, trailing two men and metal litter beneath it on a long steel cable. I did not think it was possible, but the pilot guided those men down the canyon and deposited them right next to us. As they were being set down, with wind shaking trees and throwing water in all directions, the whole event seemed surreal to me. Before this point I had not felt like an observer, I was too caught up in the activity.

But now my role was all but complete and as I watched a helicopter rescuing someone from a canyon it seemed almost unbelievable, like a story you hear about but never expect to witness. They disconnected from the cable and waved the pilot off. At this point we noticed that the cable was tangled in a tree and as the helicopter lifted up we scattered. I know Becky took off downstream, as for the others I am not sure what refuge they sought, I was busy finding a nice tight crevice and was ready to squeeze into it as I watched the cable strain a bit and then break free from the tree limbs. One of the Protección Civil handed me a bag with Gatorade and some food. They gave us small cans of sweetened condensed milk to drink, but I could only take a few sips before I vowed to never touch the stuff again. I plan on keeping that vow and advise anyone to avoid drinking such sludge, it's too unnatural. The rescuers gave Kara a shot of painkiller, put her in the metal litter, and when the cable reappeared they all clipped into it. Right before they lifted Kara, who had up to now been extremely brave but by no means jovial, pointed out that this was kind of fun and exciting. With the painkillers obviously working she was pulled out of the canyon, leaving me with a confused feeling. All of a sudden there was nothing to do, no one to care for but myself and no emergency to focus on. It took me a while to begin having fun, we were all pretty timid with the first few jumps, but eventually we relaxed and started having a blast. Climbing, jumping, swimming, over and over, again and again. There are limestone waterslides flowing into emerald pools, scarlet flowers, bright turquoise lizards, and endless other beautiful bits of nature in that canyon. The second cave was almost entirely swimmable, with

showerheads over a foot across pouring water down on us. It seemed like paradise again and was the most fun thing I have ever done.

Participants: Choy Tamez, Kara Dittmer, Fofó González, Tom Haile, Becky Jones, Vico Jones, Nicole, Memo Burelo, Rob Myers, Monica Ponce, Javier, Wes Schumacher, Bev Shade, Peter Sprouse, Terri Sprouse, and DJ Walker.

