

ACROSS THE KNIFE EDGE AT MINAS VIEJAS

By Peter Sprouse



Minas Viejas has always impressed me as a great place to go to discover new caves. I have done a fair amount of ridge-walking on this ranch, and it seems like it is not hard to encounter new pits with a bit of looking. Of course there is always a chance of finding another Pozo de Montemayor, which is the closest 500-meter-deep cave to my home. It had been a number of years since I had been there, so May 2005 seemed like a good time to go back and do some mapping with some of the new cavers from the UT Grotto.

Leah Adams had to drop out of the trip at the last minute due to lack of an ID, leaving Andrew Carrico, Marlena Cobb, Ryan Reid, Philip Rykwaldner and me heading south on the 19th of May. We had our fingers crossed for the last 17 miles to Laredo as the low fuel light glowed. We didn't linger in Nuevo Laredo, lately a battle zone, cruising south to our turnoff to the ranch. We camped in the desert not far into the ranch so as to save the scenic drive for the morrow.

We stopped at the scenic limestone gorge which the road passes through $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up the mountain for a few photos and geology observations. Farther along was the equally worthwhile stop at the Buena Vista Mine. While preparing to enter the mine Andrew realized his backpack was not in the truck. So while the others did a mine tour he and I drove back down to mountain to see if we'd left it at our campsite. Soon we began finding bits of gear along the road and realized we must have left the back hatch of the Land Cruiser open. All was recovered save some smashed food. Once on top of the ridge we located a pit that Becky Jones had told us about along the alternate road that bypasses the mines. It is in a wide bulldozed area adjacent to the road. Philip, Andrew and Marlena went down this one while Ryan and I joined up with ranch hand Juan Esquivel to see another pit he had found. We hiked southwest down the gentle dip of the

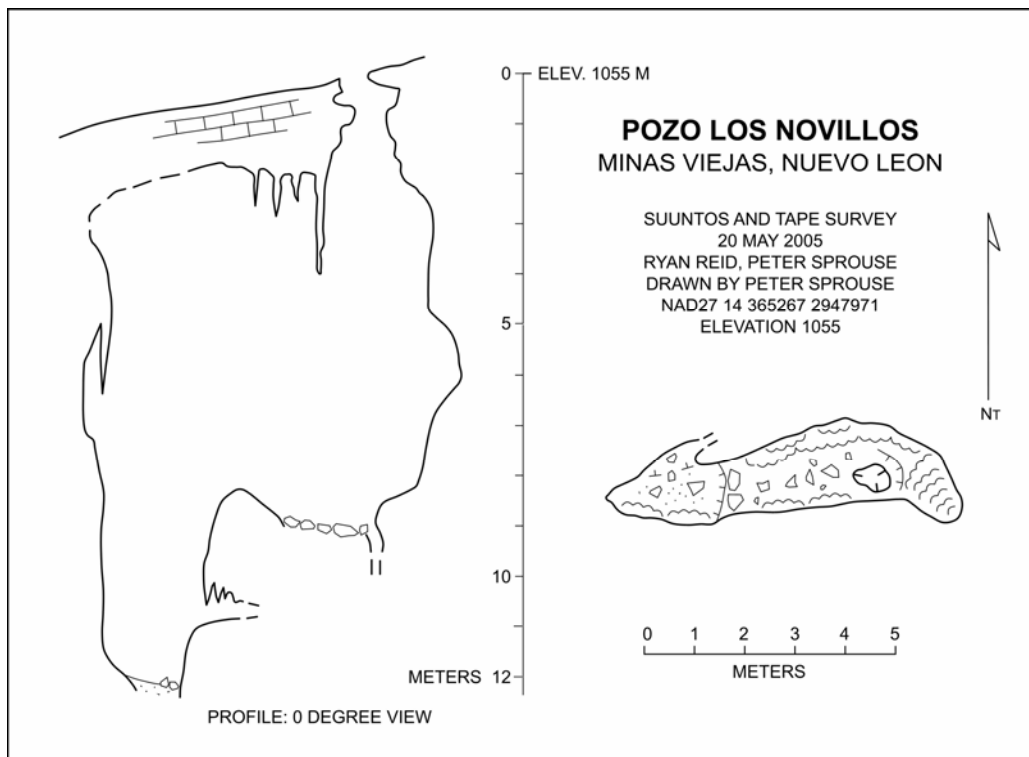
anticline for a kilometer. The pit was in an open bedrock area at the edge of a small canyon called Los Novillos. It was a little tight getting in, then dropped 9 meters in a flowstone-covered rift. Another 4-meter climb-down got us to the bottom of Pozo de los Novillos.



Ryan Reid entering Pozo de los Novillos



Marlena Cobb passes rebelay in Pozo Clemente

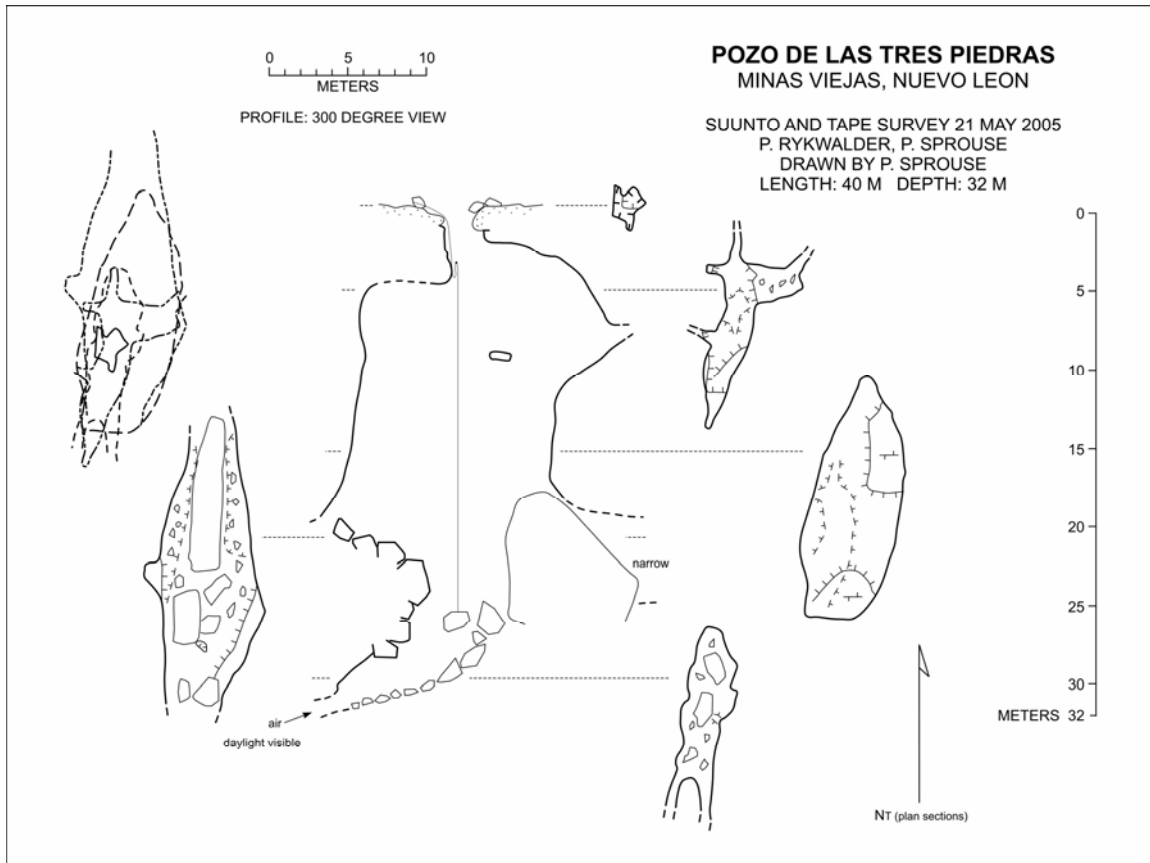


In further conversation with Juan I determined that the pit the others were in was Pozo Clemente, which had been mapped by Ed Goff in 2003. I managed to raise one of them on the radio to call off the survey. The summer heat led us to take a dip in a nearby water tank (Pila el Tanquecito). As we stripped down we noticed a game camera on a tree, which we covered with a shirt while we cooled off. Next we drove south on the Mesa la Gloria to the end of the road, where we could see the knife-edge isthmus leading southeast out to the Mesa Matias, where many pits were reported. We found several pits right where we were parked including a deep one, Pozo de las Tres Piedras. The crew set about checking it while I drove back to Minas Viejas to try to talk with the ranch owner, Pedro Elizaldi. Eventually I found him and we loaded into his truck to view some entrances way below us in the canyons. We worked our way over to Tres Piedras and Ryan and Andrew were still down in the hole. Marlena rode back with us to the ranch for a shower, then we drove back to camp and cooked dinner, then bed.



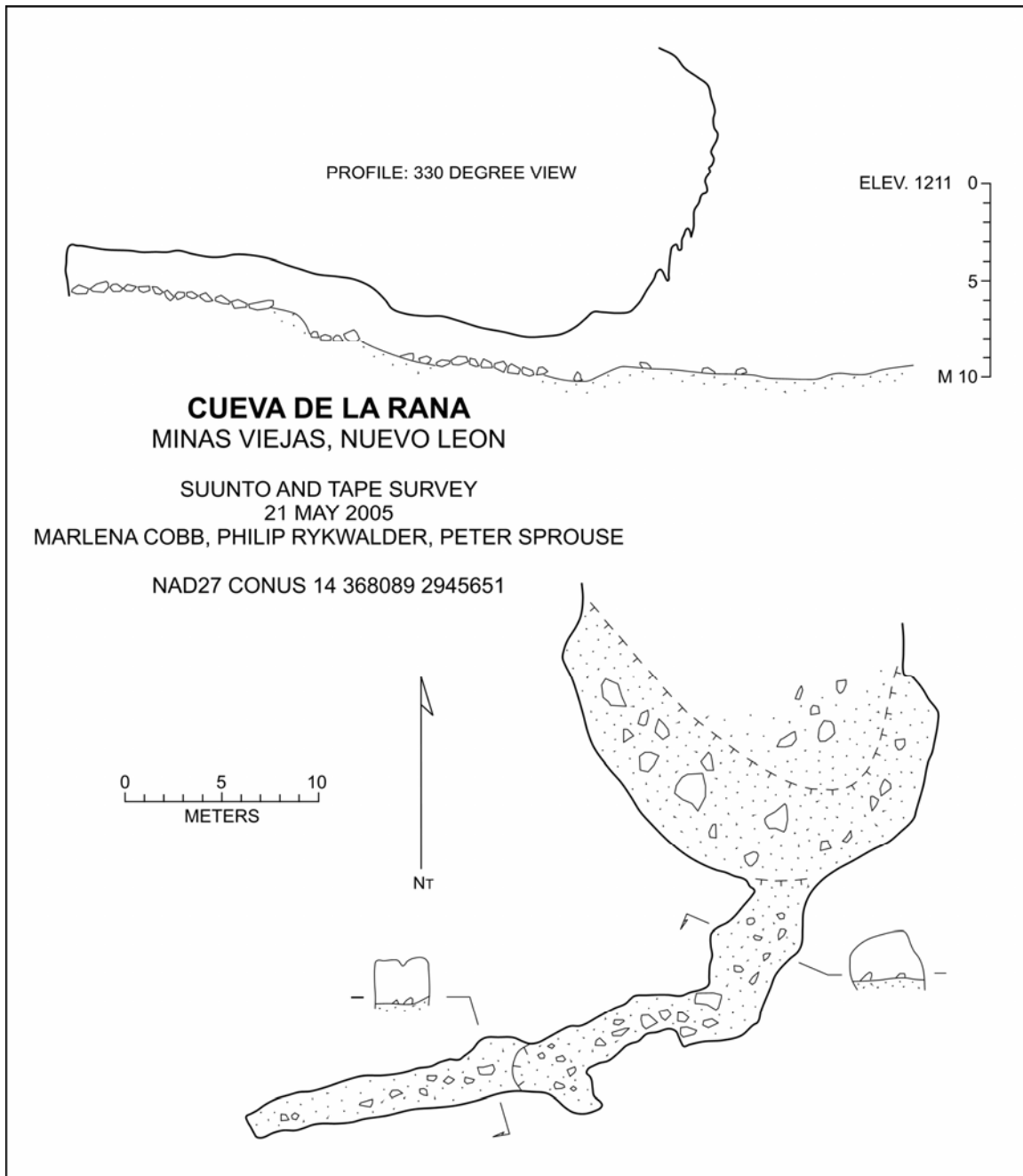
Philip Rykwald climbs out of Pozo de las Tres Piedras

The next day we got up early, and Philip, Marlena and I mapped Pozo de las Tres Piedras. Hanging from a bolt that Philip set, I could see the others below me in a long rift. The bottom of the pit was dominated by a huge linear boulder. A squeeze gave access to a short drop into a breakdown room where daylight can be seen through a narrow crack. It seemingly connects out to the nearby cliff face. Like many caves on the ranch it seemed to be tectonic in origin, the result of a large block of limestone beginning to fall down the side of the mountain. We later found out that at least two groups had explored this pit before us, but apparently no one had mapped it.



Next we set off for Mesa de Matías along the knife edge ridge. We hadn't hiked far when we came across a very large entrance, it was more or less a shelter but it did have 25 meters of mine-enlarged passage, so we mapped it. We named this Cueva de la Rana, for a small frog we saw inside, possibly a species of *Eleutherodactylus*. Continuing along the trail we soon saw the ground drop off into deep valleys on either side of us. We picked our way along the rocky crest leaning this way and that to avoid the cactus and agaves. We were relieved to reach to oak-covered mesa on the far side.

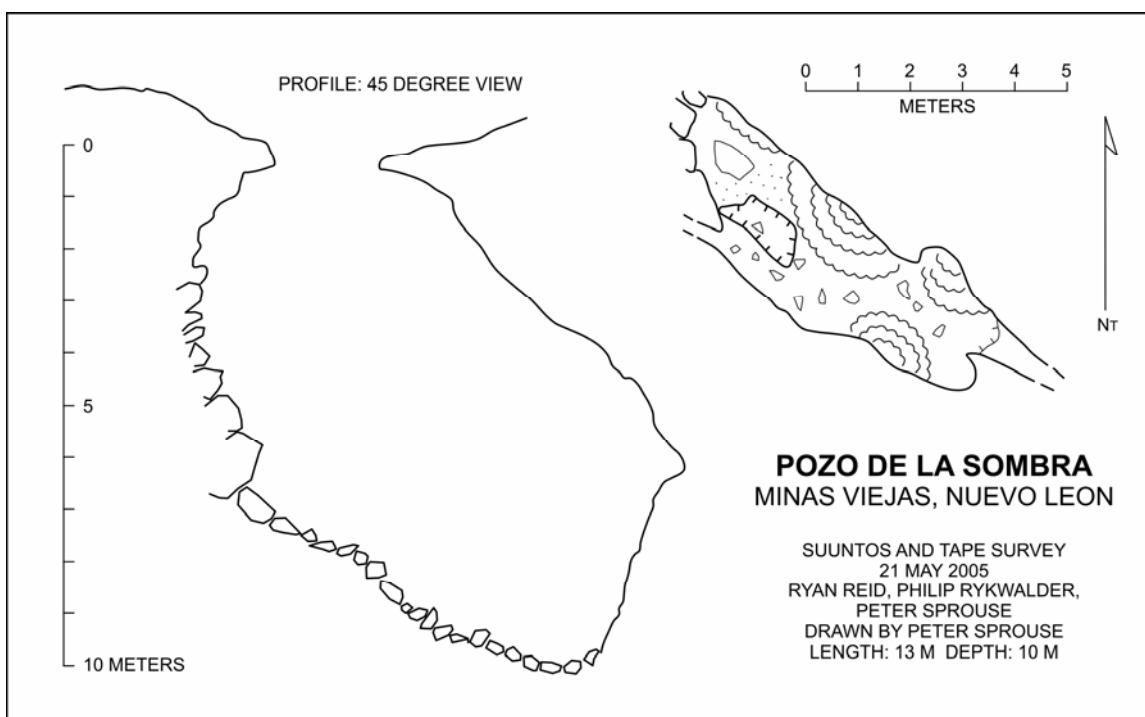
We spread out to search for cave entrances. It wasn't long before we found one, which we named Pozo de la Sombra due to the nice shade provided by large oaks. It was only 10 meters deep but had good biology in it. Of special note were an enormous (20cm) geophilomorph centipede, and a scorpion, possibly *Pseudouroctonus reddelli*. We hadn't walked much farther when Andrew called that he'd found another pit. Grieta de Andres was formed on an extensive fissure with at least another half dozen entrances in a line related to it. The entrance we rigged was a 20 meter drop into a going fissure. To the east we mapped 16 stations, pretty much wrapping it up. To the west it went 25m to a 5m drop, going two ways below. But we were out of time, so we had to leave. Most of our hike back was in the dark, but very spectacular with views of city lights in the distant plains below.

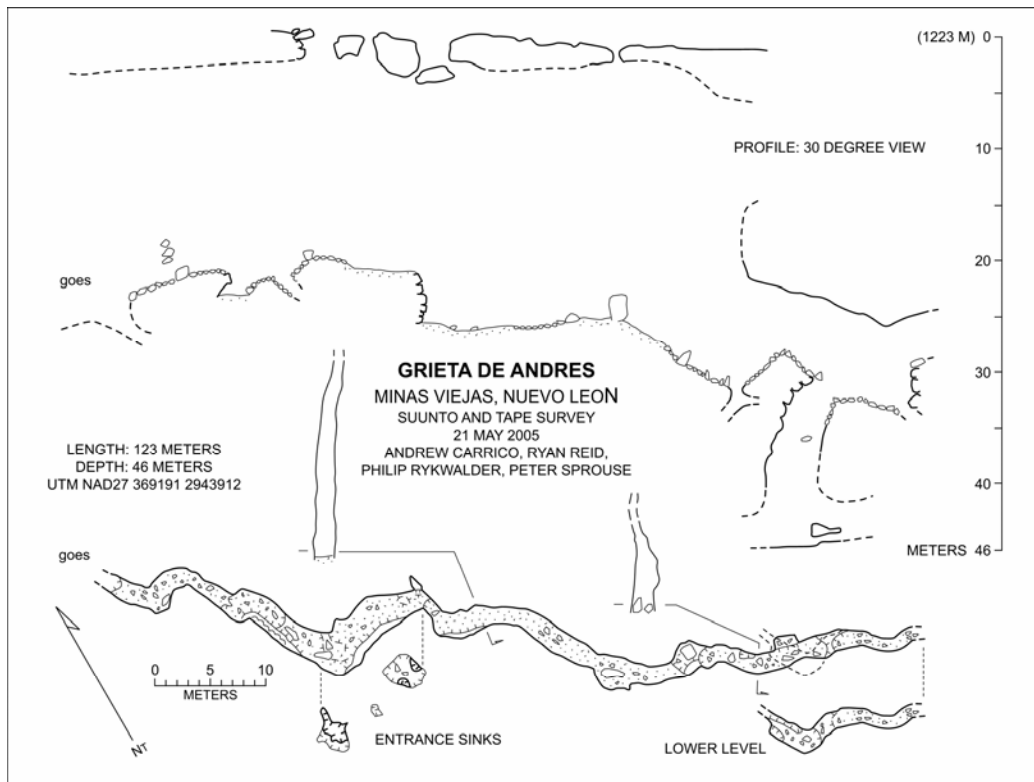


When we awoke on our last day we packed up our camp at Tres Piedras and drove over to Cueva de Cuchillo, which is a must-see tour. We rigged the entrance drop and walked around the big room shooting pictures. This cave is still pristine with the loveliest shield I've seen. Then we climbed out and headed down the mountain, bound for a meal in Lampazos and a swim in the refreshing waters of the Ojo de Agua. We came back to Texas via Colombia and the toll road.



Rigging off an oak tree at Pozo de la Sombra





Ryan entering Grieta de Andres