After the vivid green mosses thick as a shag rug in the upper portions of the pit fade, beautiful black and thickly bedded limestone is found. The walls here are smooth and slick, and as I rappelled past them my feet stayed spread and planted as I skied down. With daylight fading in the pit's depths the shape morphed from a canyon at the surface into that of a well, and the rope continued to plunge into darkness. Faint light filtered down from the surface as I passed rebelay after rebelay; all the while the floor of the pit held amorphous shapes and colors that my eyes failed to piece into a picture. - Philip Rykwalder

Having rigged the pit earlier in the day, Charley Savvas and Philip Rykwalder were now relaxing back in camp, trying to describe the magnificence they found as they created La Escalera, a bolted route down the east wall of Sótano de la Culebra. Hidden high in a remote area of the Sierra Gorda of Querétaro, the cave had remained unknown to cavers until recently, when Mexico City cavers were told of it by the locals. The initial explorers had made several trips back to the cave early in 2004, but had underestimated its depth and ran out of rope before reaching the bottom. They had come back with stories of profound depth, possibly as deep as Golondrinas. In November 2004, the cavers returned with enough rope, finally reached bottom and then measured the rope length to determine its depth. A rough survey was made of the pit and its depth was estimated to be 337 meters. In order to make a detailed map, Gabriel Garrido invited Peter Sprouse to survey the new pit. In June 2005, Peter put together a rig team and survey team and traveled to the high mountain village of Santa Mónica de las Tinajas to join the
initial explorers for a survey of the cave. Now, back at camp, the rig team, Charley and Philip, confirmed to the rest of the crew: "It's as deep as they said it was." Next day, the survey team would go in to take measurements and make a sketch of the pit.

It was during the 7th Mexican National Caving Conference in Monterrey in February 2005 that Peter met Gabriel Garrido, a member of the IPN caving club of Mexico City. The club had put together a slick poster that described the discovery and contained a sketch of the pit. Gabriel and Peter maintained contact throughout the spring and discussed mapping the cave during the summer. In June, Peter, Philip, Barbara Luke, Charley and I loaded into Peter's Land Cruiser, and planned on visiting several caving areas as we drove south of the border before finally reaching Querétaro later in the week.

Our first objective was exploration of Cueva el Rutilo, a cave with an underground river that provided water for a ranch containing 2000 hectares. The ranch is located in Fe del Golfo, a small village near the town of Santander Jiménez in Tamaulipas. We spent some time locating our guide, who, once found, readily agreed to take us to the ranch. He took us down a long, dusty dirt road with many gates, only one of which was locked. We passed several neighboring ranches and made many turns, finally arriving at a magnificent ranch house with stained-glass windows and tiled patios, that perhaps was used as a weekend retreat. An untended cactus garden there thrived despite neglect. Our guide first showed us a water well that tapped into the river, and nearby was a trap door opening into a pit. Upon raising the trap door we could hear the roar of the flowing river way down the shaft. This got us very excited and we geared right up. Charley went down first, creating a rebelay over a steel beam that stretched across the pit. Then he zipped on down the shaft and was already on bottom when he noticed the pit had an extreme O2 deficiency: bad air. Lightheadedness had set in even before he had completed a change over to ascend. He stayed down just long enough to notice that the cave led off along a fissure that
extended only a few meters before ending at a T-junction. Beyond the fissure he could hear roaring water. Although the urge to explore the fissure was strong, the effect of the CO2 was even more so. When Charley started feeling shortness of breath, he immediately turned around and started climbing out. Not only was there bad air below, the cave was also very hot and humid, making it a little harder to deal with. At some point during the climb out, he ascended beyond the cloud of bad air, and stopped to make further assessments of the shaft. There seemed to be an upper part to the fissure, leading off towards the river, maybe an upper infeeder. When Charley emerged with the disappointing report of bad air, we realized that we would not be able to explore the roaring river, but most of us decided to go down the shaft to have a peek anyway. Philip actually made a quick dash through the fissure and was able to make it to the water before having to turn back. This exciting cave will need to be revisited in the winter.

Then our guide led us over to a bat cave on the ranch next door, about a one-kilometer hike. The locals called it Cueva del Guano. Fortunately, a cool breeze beckoned. The cave was in a 25 x 40 meter sinkhole that also contained large, elegant higuerón trees and cooing motmot birds. A short climbdown opened right up into a large chamber, with a borehole going straight ahead toward a bat colony. Although I am not certain that it had anything to do with the bat colony, it was here that the sketcher acquired her moniker of "Borehole Barbara" which I do know had something to do with her borehole sketching technique. The cave contained many tarantulas, and other spiders as well. Charley collected a pair of tarantulas and, not having a large enough specimen jar with him, he deposited them into his small camera bag. This would provide some entertainment later when Charley would offer to show his collection, and then a big hairy leg would come clawing out when the bag was unzipped. Team Borehole first mapped to the right and left in passages that circled the collapsed sinkhole entrance. Straight ahead the main passage of the cave was 25 meters wide and 15 meters tall, and went a ways to a small skylight. The cave continued smaller and wetter from there, but it got too wet and too full of bats to continue.
We hiked back to the house and left the ranch, saying goodbye to our guide in Fe del Golfo. Just north of Jiménez we stopped at the Tiniebla mescal museum. The museum turned out to be a real treat. We entered through the restaurant, and were presented with shot glasses and were allowed to sample the mescal. We tasted the young, the middle and the añejo versions. We then entered the museum and were pleased to discover that, in addition to the brewing vats and ageing barrels, original artwork lined the walls of each room, highlighting various artists. The paintings bordered on the surreal, incorporating agave in many of the images. We bought a bottle of the middle aged mescal (this mescal was so smooth, we realized way too late that we should have bought a case). We continued on into Cuidad Victoria and got a room at the Posada Don Diego which was not far from the town square. There we showered and then had a late dinner at the Café Canton.

The next day we drove on to Gomez Farías where we waited on the square awhile for our friend, Jean Louis Lacaille Múzquiz. We passed the time by visiting Sótano de Gómez Farías, but we had only just located it when Jean Louis drove up. He warned us that a jaguar had been heard lurking in the area, so we were advised to be on the lookout. Although it is a crime punishable by jail time to kill a jaguar, some farmers have no choice but to hunt them when livestock are killed. He then offered to take us to a newly-found deep pit. We drove north of Gómez Farías toward El Azteca and stopped on the ranch of Don Pablo Berrones. First he showed us a nice looking 15-meter pit on the left side of the road, which is probably Sótano del Fin. We then geared up and started the hike, and saw that Jean Louis had done quite a bit of work in preparation for our visit; he had already chopped a path through the dense vegetation and flagged the trail to the pit. It turned out to be a wonderful discovery. The entrance drop to Sótano de Berrones was 12 meters wide and 67 meters deep. We rigged from a tree that extended over the entrance, making an easy free rappel. The pit belled out into a sloping borehole passage covered with breakdown, leading to a level mud floor. Team Borehole mapped the passage as it circled to the left and, after a short muddy drop, ended in a muddy room. We climbed out and de-rigged just as it got dark, and hiked back to the trucks. We rented the only room that had clima at the Posada de el Cielo, www.posadadeelcielo.com, which has a great eating and cooking area, and space for camping if desired.
Before we were out of bed the next day, Jean Louis had already talked to the locals and obtained information on two new pits for us to explore on a future trip. We met him for breakfast in a restaurant surrounded by native palmas and plantas. The restaurant doubled as a nursery, serving up muchas gorditas and a great display of local flora. We did not go into the first pit that Jean Louis took us to, which was owned by the Alvarez family, but it looked real inviting. It took an arroyo and had a natural bridge formed over approximately a 22- meter drop. We marked the location and later determined it to be Sótano Escondido, which was mapped in 1974. Next, Jean Louis took us to Sótano de los García, which is a two-drop, offset well, 35 meters deep. It was located south of the highway near Sótano de Gómez Farías. The pit had recently been used as a trash dump, with a mattress and twelve tires having been thrown in. The pit walls contained skid marks from the thrown tires, causing it to be known as the "Tired Pit." A bolt was set at the top of the second drop, just below a natural anchor, then there were two redirects. Afterwards we loaded up the trucks and headed down to the Río Frío for a swim at La Florida. The water was wonderfully cool, and many people went off the rope swing. We bade goodbye to Jean Louis and drove south toward Mante. We stopped at Cueva de El Abra, then drove on to Xilitla, where we got a room at the Hotel María Dolores.
Early the next day Peter stopped in to visit the municipal offices above the library, then we went on to Cruztitla, where we got permission to explore in what they called Huatecán. Peter, John Fogarty and a local guide had surveyed this cave the year before, calling it Cueva de la Chuparrosa, and had gotten only a short ways from the entrance when they came upon the first drop. Since they had no rope they left well-placed flagging at their last station, hoping to make a return trip. When the survey was plotted, Huatecán seemed to be a possible through-trip connection with a resurgence that was surveyed on last year’s trip, Cueva Vidal Ramos. The goal for this trip was to bring more rope into Huatecán to determine whether the two caves would connect.

The approach to the cave is a steep climb-down into a sink formed in an arroyo. It was obvious that the cave took a lot of water, since the rock at the entrance was washed clean. The entrance was a maze of sky-lighted rooms, then it took off in a series of down-climbs, but soon came to the first drop. Charley and Philip rigged in while Borehole Barbara and Terri surveyed. Peter had gone back into town to get gear we forgot, but soon followed them in. Peter passed the surveyors and carried rigging gear in for the riggers. He found them below drop 3 at a low airspace.
Then Peter went back to rejoin the survey crew, and we mapped on to the low airspace. We knew early on that we probably would not be able to stay out of the water. After the first drop we waded a shallow pool, then one a little deeper. About this time, Charley and Philip came back through, reporting that they had located the last survey station and made the connection. The rig team then left the cave while the survey team mapped on through the low air and into bigger passage beyond. At the fourth drop the survey tied in. Although the plan was for the survey team to climb back out after the survey was completed, Barbara and Terri decided to go for a through trip, while Peter de-rigged. Later that night we were surprised to find a road side taco stand still open as we drove back to town. We must have had five or six tacos each, then made it back to the Hotel Dolores. We decorated the room with smelly, wet gear, and crashed well after midnight.

We got an early start leaving Xilitla the next morning, not eating breakfast until we had reached Jalpan. We needed to meet Gabriel, Alejandro Villagrán and Gustavo Vela across the Sierra Gorda in San Joaquin in mid afternoon. This drive through the mountain was scenic up until the part where we saw a dead horse on the side of the road with a dog feeding on the carcass; his head fully buried in the horse’s ass. This, right before lunch. We made a brief stop at one of the highest passes in the range, the Pinal de Amoles, after which we noticed that the vegetation began to change dramatically on the western slope. The landscape changed from verdant forest to dry, dusty topsoil with fewer tall trees, less vegetation and occasional arroyos. After a full morning spent traversing the long, winding mountain roads, we met the D.F. cavers in San
Joaquin and joined them for lunch. We picked up a few supplies, then got back on the mountain road for what we thought would be a short trip.

We were excited to learn that a new road had just been cut through the mountain, reducing our travel time to camp considerably, but the new road turned out to be very sporting. Cut three hundred meters above the canyon floor, the winding road was so narrow in places that you did not need to get out of the car to enjoy the scenic overlook. The new road still had loose rock above, but had already been scarred by massive rockslides, the remnants of which were visible down below. The road was in good shape because it was new, but we wondered how long it would remain stable since it was apparent it would need a lot of maintenance. After a long, winding trek around the mountain, we made it to the top, where the new road merged into an old one that continued on through a considerable number of villages. After many turns and much route finding, we finally made it to Santa Mónica del las Tinajas, which is a very remote village nestled way back in the mountains. Gabriel had befriended some of the locals, who arranged for us to camp in one of the few, vacant flat areas in town. Before setting up camp we all decided to hike down to get a quick peek at Sótano de la Culebra.

Hidden among the karst and dense vegetation in an arid, high mountain dolina, the long and sinuous entrance to Sótano de la Culebra (Pit of the Snake) gives no hint of its depth. There is no gaping hole wide enough for swallows to swoop or that would move thrill seekers to jump. In places, the narrow entrance could almost be jumped across. There is no dragon’s breath of fog ascending from the pit’s deep well. There is no ray of sun that illuminates the full length of the narrow shaft. Even the first few rock tosses were inconclusive, seemingly lost in the void. But our pulses raced when the last tosses were answered with a much delayed, quite muffled, but very definite and echoing - BOAAAAM!

We got up early the next day and headed off to the sótano. The survey team of Barbara, Peter and Terri began the perimeter survey while the rig team, Charley and Philip, scouted for a good rig spot. The rig team decided to drop a rope on the low side just to get down into the pit in order to get a better view of the entrance drop and to determine where to place the main rope. In order to survey and sketch a pit of this depth, we needed rebelayes which would be used to set survey stations. We looked for a route along the wall of the pit that would not produce an overhung drop.
The low side was rigged, but soon dropped to a leaf and rock covered slope, which then poured over into the main well. Rigging here would cause major debris and rock fall on anyone climbing in the pit. The rig team briefly considered bolting a traverse line over the debris slide, but decided it was still too risky a place for rock fall, and would take too much hammer drill battery juice. When those of us at the top heard Charley exclaim “it’s not gonna work, dude,” we realized the rig team would have to abandon this placement for the main rope. However, the rope was in perfect position for the survey team to gain access to a side passage going off on the north end of the pit. So the rig team came out and started looking for another rig point while the survey team surveyed down the side lead to a small room.

While this side passage was surveyed, Charley and Philip then chopped a path along a high ridge that was covered with maguey de peña and solid limestone boulders. The rope was tied around a huge boulder, then 300 meters of rope was gently fed over the drop. It went slowly at first, hanging up a time or two, and then it started to whiz. Soon the rope was taut and Charley and Philip (who carried the coiled 60-meter rope) began the arduous task of bolting the drop, setting rebelays so that the survey team would be able to set stations. The drop began with a long moss and lichen covered rock wall that ended in a fin, then changed to smooth rock, making it difficult for Charley to brace himself in order to drill the bolt into the rock. In places he was able to use bedding plane gaps to wedge a finger inside to provide enough pressure to drill a hole in the rock. After tapping in a bolt and placing the hanger, he then had to lift the heavy rope with one arm to release the tension and then hold it long enough to tie a knot with the other hand and then slide in a mallion and attach it to the hanger. At the end of the moss slope, the pit narrowed into a deep well, allowing the route to continue down the rock wall. Charley and Philip put in fourteen rebelays, using three 10 mm Cancord ropes (183, 115 and 60 meters) with the last rope tied to the second midway through the last long drop, leaving 15 meters on the floor. So, what could
have been a daunting task for the survey team was transformed by the creation of a climbing route that came to be known as “La Escalera” meaning “the ladder.”

The next day the survey team had a hearty breakfast and then headed off to the cave. Taking the high trail past the school along the fence line we soon reached the dolina that led to the pit. We were anxious to see the shape of the culebra, looking up from underground. The pit was magnificent. Negotiating the route was easy with the skinny rope and use of an SRT descender. For part of the rappel, the route flowed down a ridge that formed a curve of the culebra, allowing the rappeller to pull himself across the ridge to view around a bend as it snaked around the canyon wall. After a while the pit air started to cool. The bend in the canyon walls smoothed out and dropped into a deep, dark well, defined by massive flowstone columns along the south wall. The pit depth was hard to judge as we continued to pass down the rebelay. At some point towards the end, the rope hangs free, leading to one final knot to cross before descending towards an enormous flowstone slope. Beyond the slope, the pit bottoms out at 336 meters, one meter deeper than the short side of Golondrinas. At the bottom of the flowstone slope, the well was quite cool, sending the survey team on a search for polypro. Beyond the flowstone slope, the rock and leaf covered floor slopes steeply down to a small room, then ends. Total depth of the cave was 360 meters.
The cool temperature and forced stops at the rebelays made for perfect conditions for climbing back out. I was really stoked about making this climb, not because of the depth of the pit or the technical challenge of crossing 14 rebelays and one knot. But I mainly anticipated the powerful spiritual experience of climbing towards the light from such a deep, dark place. La Escalera is a gloriously intimate route, revealing the crags, crevices and many colors of the rock face. In some places, the rock wall was smooth and dry, in other places, algae grew. Some cracks had small ferns, others just composting leaves. Only a few ledges had rocks, which the rig team had placed out of reach. As I climbed, I developed a growing sense of satisfaction - for being able to see the pit walls, up close, slow and relaxed enough to feel the natural air, to be in that space, suspended, - yet, not. I felt safe and secure, on a short pitch of rope. No bounce. No dangle. No tandem climb, just me, on rope, in a deep, dank, cool-ass pit. I established a rhythm as I felt my mind, body and spirit all engaged in negotiating the climb. I slid into the zone and, with my senses heightened, climbed toward the ever-widening circle of light.