

Oaxaca Trip Report - 2008

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With additions by Bev Shade and Aimee Beveridge.
Maps by Bev Shade.
Thanks to Vickie Siegel, Geoff Hoese, and Bev Shade for edits.
Picture of cycad Copyright Geoff Hoese; all other pictures Copyright Tone Garot.

Introduction

I returned from a two-week trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, where we searched for caves. Since our initial plan (Plan A) of backpacking into the mountains near Chimalapa to find the "big caves" was shot down due to political issues, we initiated an alternate plan (Plan B) to seek caves around Valle Nacional. Most of this area was new territory—i.e., few reports of survey have been reported around this region.

We found a veritable smörgåsbord of caves, flora, and fauna. The area is in the tropics, and this experience was my first time hiking through jungle. I saw and photographed some extremely interesting subjects. We even made it to the beach along the Gulf of Mexico. Walking around in the cooler weather of Veracruz was a treat after the hot, humid weather for the previous week.

I truly enjoy Mexico. The caving opportunities are awesome. The people are friendly and warm; the natural beauty is seemingly without bound, and the food is delicious. I hope to enhance my Spanish speaking skills and continue my travels there.

In all, I have over 600 images.

Protagonists

Peter Sprouse
Tone Garot
Geoff Hoese
Joe Datri
Paul Bryant
Aimee Beveridge
Bev Shade
Vickie Siegel
Jason Ballensky
Claudia Rosiles



Approximate location of exploration.

Pre-Trip

The excitement for a trip to Oaxaca began when Peter Sprouse and Geoff Hoes identified features resembling large sinkholes on Google Earth. Further analysis determined the presence of limestone, and, suddenly, an expedition was born.

Our target was located in the Chimalapa range, situated east of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the state of Oaxaca. The area is characterized by rugged, arid terrain with higher elevations within the oak and pine forests. As with any respectable expedition, planning to get permission to enter the area was a primary goal. Peter had arranged and received an official document from the state of Oaxaca, but we needed buy-in from the local ejidos as well; an ejido is communal land shared by the people of the community.

2008 April 14

Mike Sisson dropped me off at Peter's house. After running a few errands with Peter—including a stop to Zara Environmental, a bank stop, and H.E.B.—we hit the road toward Mexico. Peter and I were in his Toyota 4-Runner, and we met with Geoff, Paul, and Joe along the way.

We crossed at the McAllen, TX border crossing. I tried to renew my Visa because it would expire on the 23rd of April, five days before our intended return. What I found was this: I could not renew! The woman at the counter pointed to the back of the Visa where it said, in English, "Valid only for 180 days, with no possibility of renewal, starting at the date of entrance. Will be authorized to request an extension until completing 180 days of stay." Well, that certainly makes for an interesting trip. I guess I would take my chances and be renegade for the last five days of the trip.

En route, I made some high-tech fixes to Google Earth on Peter's laptop to get his solar powered GPS working with it. Once it was functioning, we realized that the Google Earth software automatically rezooms after each sample. So, getting the GPS to function with the software was sort of neat, but it wouldn't be very useful tool during the drive. While I was driving, Peter got the device driver for Geoff's USB/COM cable working, allowing us to transfer likely leads to Geoff's GPS for him.

Dinner the first night was at El Tinieblo, a mezcal distillery and museum on the side of the highway in the municipality of Jimenez. Terry, Peter's wife, was reported as liking their Mezcal. Therefore, when the owner proffered, we tasted the mezcal. I personally found it too smoky, and I passed on buying a bottle.

We spent the night in Mante in the state of Tamaulipas. Peter and I shared a room that had a deluxe balcony and a huge view screen at the next building that showed non-stop commercials. We met with Jean Louis Lacaille Muzquiz who specializes in orchids. Joe, Paul, and I walked around the town square (which was pretty dead that evening) hoping to find an open tienda—i.e., a convenience store. We found an Oxxo where I bought a bottle of reposado tequila that was pretty good.

2008 April 15

After breakfast, Peter and I looked for a farmacia to get the Avapena brand antihistamine and EpiPen I had read about on John Pint's website describing [What To Do About Killer Bees](#). Having had an altercation with bees in the past, I had read and reread John Pint's article . . . and outfitted myself with red shirts, head net, rain coat, and gloves. We were able to find the Avapena at the first farmacia, but the EpiPen was more elusive. The clerk at the farmacia suggested another farmacia, Bienevideos, down the road.

The woman at Bienevideos didn't think she had such a thing, and she asked for the name of the drug itself. An EpiPen is basically a single injection of epinephrine . . . AKA adrenaline. She looked both up on the computer but could not find them. Later we learned that Geoff had an EpiPen with him, so we were set.

We then went to the volunteer fire department of Mante where Geoff donated rescue gear. We shook hands, took pictures, etc. Apparently, the fire poles had been cemented shut when the building had been used to house the homeless, but they re-opened one of the two poles when they began to use the building for the volunteer fire department.

Continuing our drive deeper into southern Mexico, we passed by Cerro del Bernal in the state of Tamaulipas. This natural wonder is a volcanic mountain, and Peter said he knew someone who had climbed it. To me, that sounded like a trek I'd enjoy doing, or, at a minimum, saying that I had done it.

Along the way to the city of Acatlán, we stopped at a quarry along the roadside to see if there was anything interesting to be found. I discovered a bunch of orchids. Just hours before, I had learned about orchids from Jean Luis at breakfast, and here were some for me to recognize! Geoff picked an orchid and gave it to me. I kidded him at different points in the trip that no man had ever given me an orchid before.

We made it to the Emerald Coast of the Gulf of Mexico, which meant one thing: seafood for dinner! We ate at a restaurant overlooking the water. We relaxed, enjoyed the meal, and floated a rock in a glass of water. Joe, being vegetarian, struggled to get a meal without meat. They brought the pasta he ordered, but there was ham embedded in it. Then (to add to the injury) as Joe paid for his dinner, he was to receive 37 pesos in change; however, since the guys were arguing about it, he just told them to keep it.

We made it to Acatlán, Oaxaca, where Peter's longtime friends Jaime, Vicky, and their family live. We stayed at an interesting hotel called Carrizales that had two sides: one side was a regular hotel, and the other was a "no tell motel" with carports where you could hide your vehicle.

2008 April 16

The plan of the morning was to visit Jaime's place for breakfast. Our destination was a short distance from the hotel, and we walked. On the way there, we met a man also walking named Carlos, and we chatted with him a bit. He was astonished to find a group of cavers in Acatlán until we told him about our breakfast plans. It turns out that Carlos is Jaime's twin brother! Carlos mostly lives in Germany, and his plan was to go back in a few weeks. He later told us that he was the first in the family to live in Germany, but now 2(?) sisters and many cousins are over there, too.

Arriving for breakfast around 8:00 a.m., we found that we were expected close to 9:00 a.m. We were let into the house by one of the daughters, Frieda, who had recently been in a bus accident on a school trip. Thus, she needed a neck brace. We sat around the large kitchen table and waited.

Jaime's wife came in soon thereafter and began the process of making a scrumptious breakfast of tostadas. While doing so, she chatted with Peter about various family news. I caught a word here and there, but my Spanish was still too meager to keep up. Carlos eventually dropped by to chat with us further. Jaime showed up much later because he was working his cane fields. Apparently there had been a strike, so he was way behind.

After breakfast, we met a group of people on the street including Jaime's sister Monica, who lives in Germany, her German husband/boyfriend (?), Carlos, and Claudia—a friend of Carlos. Some time ago, Peter had arranged to send a radiator to Monica, and since Peter was now in Acatlán, they wanted to show it to him.

Soon after, several of us went to a place to see 10- to 12-meter "cycads" (*Dioon Spinulosum*), seed plants characterized by a large crown of compound leaves and a stout trunk. Claudia, Carlos, Jaime, Vicky, and the dog, "Truco," joined us. Along the way, Carlos pointed out his ranch between two mountains. He invited us to stay there, but we had our plans. Carlos was invited to join our entourage to go caving, but he mentioned having some problems at the farm to which he needed to attend. I overheard that Carlos has a lot of plants that he grows on his farm as part of his hobby, but they aren't all native.

Geoff, who has a strong interest in cycads, was very pleased with the offering. The cycads we saw grew upon very rugged limestone terrain, pocketed by volcanic

activity. It was a sort of "sky island," surround by cane fields. This particular area had undergone a recent burn—a process that makes the cane easier to cut.



Geoff measures a large cycad.

Since it was starting to get later than earlier, we declined an invitation to see an area of cycads without burn. As we were heading back to drop off our new friends, there was an exchange of sentences in which we recruited Claudia to join us on our expedition. We went to Claudia's home to help her get her gear together. Claudia has dogs, a horse, and a variety of plants. Later in the trip, we found out that two of the pups had died. :-(

Claudia has a background in conservation and lived in the Oaxaca region for some time. Her contacts, background, and native Spanish speaking ability were later utilized to gain permission. Claudia spoke a little more English than I speak Spanish, which allowed us the means to chat a bit on the drive further south. She said she is 38, married 9 years, and enjoys all aspects of cleaning/cooking/eating fish. Claudia moved back to Acatlán after college. She said that the townspeople found her crazy to do so. She works on conservation projects, such as an initiative to grow tomatoes as a source of revenue for the town.

We hit the road at about 3:00 p.m., much later than Peter's original plan, but the sights and new friends made it worthwhile.

Our next stop was at a pyramid called a montículo, meaning a mound or hump. Since the mound was burned, it was easy to find a few pottery shards. At the top, I ran into stinging nettles, also known as mala mujer, or "bad woman."

That evening, we did a shuffling of personnel where I went into Geoff's truck, and

Geoff went into Peter's truck. Apparently, Paul never drives, but he sleeps a lot.

As we were heading south through the small towns, we hit a huge line of traffic. There were semis, autos, and trucks . . . everything. I just kept darting forward, thinking it would end eventually, but after a mile or two, I started to get a little uncomfortable. I asked Peter if he was awake. He replied "not really," but I roused him enough to suggest what we should do. We kept traveling forward, pretty much to the front of the line, then turned around. There was a rough side road that headed upward; we went to investigate, then decided to camp there. Geoff told me more about cycads, starting with prokaryotes, as I finished off my bottle of tequila.

2008 April 17

As we were breaking camp, a man came by who chatted with Peter. Striking cab drivers, he said, caused the traffic jam. Apparently a company was bringing in three-wheel motorized cabs, and the industry balked.

We stopped for breakfast at a restaurant. Eating on the road generally means a time for writing in journals, entering data into laptops, and otherwise planning the next leg of the trip. At this particular restaurant, Geoff took photographs of Peter's laptop to get maps into his camera. In practice, this worked fine; it's just that I found this brute force method funny in this day of technical advancement.

Geoff's vehicle took off one way, and Peter, Claudia, and I went to look at a lead. On the way there, Claudia received a phone call saying that Acatlán had a fire that might jeopardize her ranch. As she took the call, Peter and I poked around the area, finding that there weren't any likely caves in the immediate vicinity.

After checking out the lead, we went to "Playa Brava," or rather a part of the river nearby. Here we had a swim and cleanup before going to San Miguel Chimalapa, where we hoped to gain appropriate permissions for Plan A, the original purpose of the trip. A pineapple vendor came by, and Claudia bought one. We stored it in the river to keep it cool. Later we ate some of the pineapple, and soon after I became nauseous and slightly delirious. This reaction might have been due to something in the water, or perhaps my stomach simply couldn't handle the pineapple's acid. Since both Peter and Claudia had some of the same pineapple yet suffered no ill effects, it is hard to say what happened. Needless to say, it was not the most enjoyable experience. I lay back in the passenger seat of the truck while Peter and Claudia had lunch in Zanatapec. After a few hours, I started feeling well enough to travel.

The three of us drove up into the mountains to a small township called "San Antonio." Along the way, the truck's transmission started to overheat—which made sense since we gained considerable elevation in a short time. The scenery was changing from cane fields to pine and oak forests. We saw forest fires in the upper hills. I also saw a most unique sight—a dog munching like crazy at a whole, fallen cow.

In San Antonio, we met a representative to the ejido we wished to go. We also talked to many of the townspeople. We learned the size of the ejido to be 134,000 hectares! Since this particular representative wasn't the jefe (boss or leader), we waited for the jefe to return. Eventually darkness fell, and we were invited to have dinner at this man's home and to camp in his front yard. His family consisted of

him, his wife, three kids, a black dog, and various chickens.

Dinner consisted of some sort of eggs scrambled with chicken(?). There were also freshly cooked corn tortillas used to "pinch" the egg mixture in the bowl. It was quite delicious! The fresh, hot tortillas were indescribably good. After dinner, Peter treated the family to a slide show of Texas caves followed by a slide show of his trip to Venezuela. There were a few images of the "pond party" that he quickly passed by. If you have never been to one of Pete Strickland's Pond Parties, you really must attend. Peter also translated the 5-finger piggies story to the kids after I said each finger's line in English. The kids loved it.

While setting up my tent, a large group of children accompanied by our host mother gathered around me. My command of the language was meager, but after I was done setting up the tent, I teased the children by suggesting that they go inside. One child in particular giggled with glee. I also asked their names and ages, most of which I have forgotten.

2008 April 18

After a good night rest, Peter, Claudia, and I went to talk to the leadership at the town hall building. After some discussion, and the showing of the official Oaxaca letter, Peter gave a slide show to the townspeople. They seemed OK with the idea of us backpacking on their land; we just had to clear it with the leadership in San Miguel Chimalapa.



Cute Mexican girl from the small town of San Antonio in Oaxaca looking into my tent. San Antonio would have been our launch site if Plan A had transpired.

Our host family made us breakfast, which was similar to the fare from the previous

night. During the breakfast, the little boy would sometimes leave the room, and as he did so, he would poke me in the back. Peter later told me that the boy did the same to him. I asked Peter what we should do about payment to the family. We agreed that Claudia understood the protocol best and was best suited to make that determination. Eventually, Claudia brought up the notion of compensation, and the sum agreed upon was 150 pesos total.

We headed back down the mountain, then back to San Miguel Chimalapa to talk to the jefe about permission. He was in a meeting, and we waited. The temperature was a blazing 99°F. While waiting, we stepped into the public library. The librarian was a very pretty Mexican girl. Finally we met with the jefe. He read the letter that Peter had from the state of Oaxaca. He jotted down some phone numbers. The plan was for him to send the comisariado of the ejido to our hotel the next morning to go up the mountain with us and to tell the townspeople that we have permission to go on our expedition.

After the meeting with the jefe, we headed back to Zanatapec to meet with the others of our group. The vehicle containing Bev, Aimee, Vickie, and Jason had arrived from the pickup at the Oaxaca airport.

2008 April 19

Not having a clear idea of when the comisario would arrive, Peter and Claudia decided to head back to San Miguel Chimalapa to intercept him. The hotel was at least an hour away. While they were gone, the rest of us had a lazy morning and breakfast. I started to assemble the gear to take on the backpack. A few hours later, Peter and Claudia came back to inform us that the guy was drunk and argumentative. He wanted to show his drinking buddies that he was boss. Thus, Plan A to find the "big caves," was down the tubes, at least for now. On to Plan B . . .

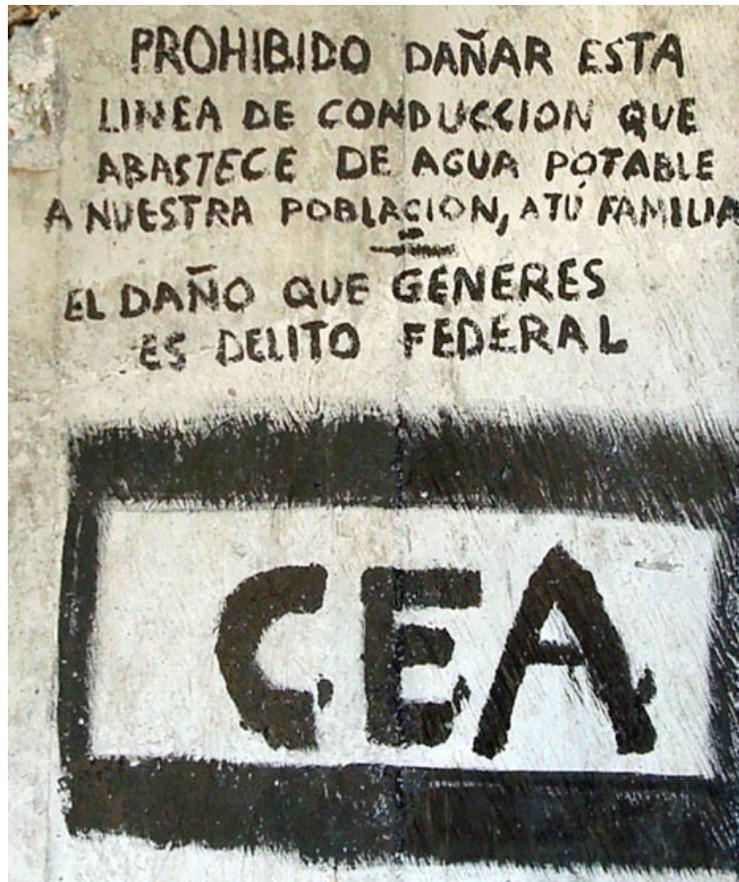
The three vehicles went to an area nearby our hotel in Zanatapec. We hiked up the Rio Zaopte streambed in two teams. Bev, Geoff, Vickie, and I found a gated cave that gave no access. The writing on the wall said:

Prohibido dañar esta linea de conduccion que abastece de agua potable a nuestra poblacion, a tu familia.

El daño que generes es delito federal.

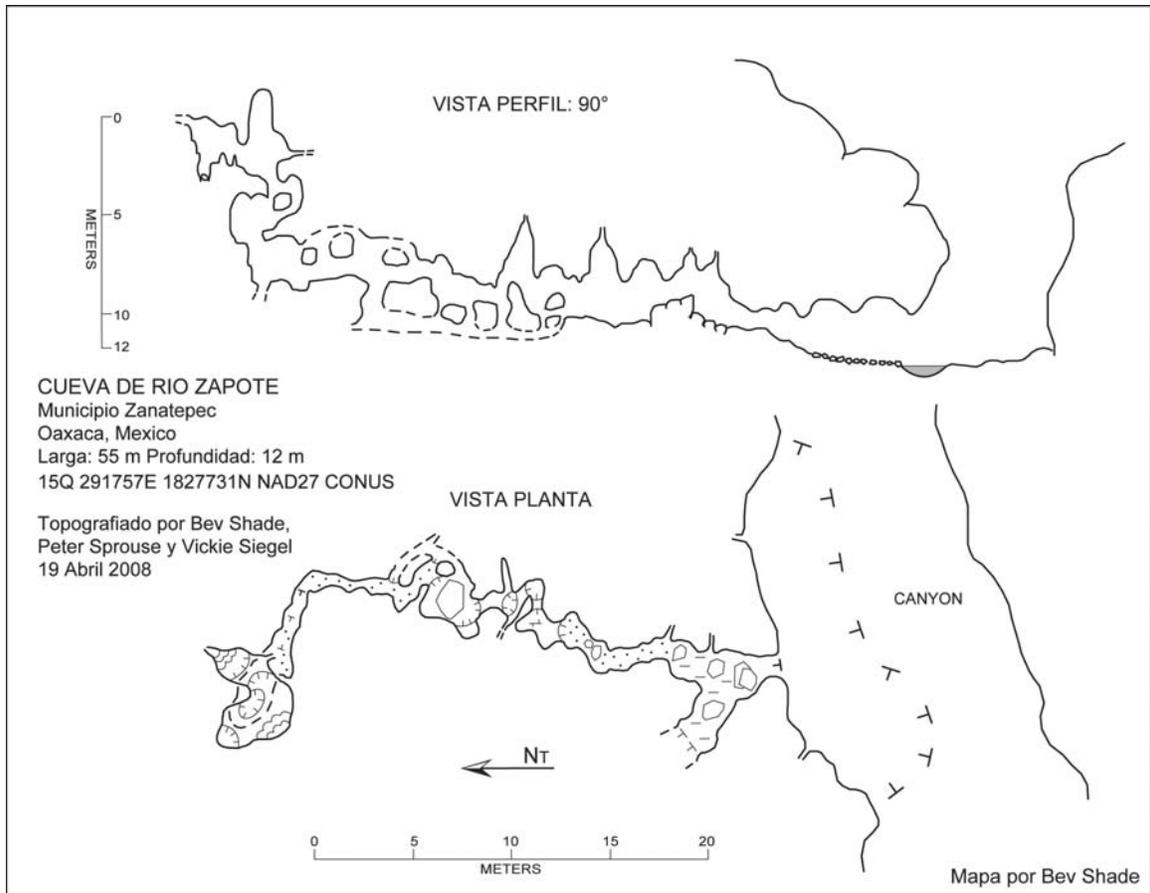
Which roughly translates to:

It is prohibited to damage this line of conduction that supplies of potable water to our population, to your family. The damage that you generate is federal crime.



Wording on wall of gated cave used as water source.

Upstream, we found two pools of water, one that was entirely worthy of swimming. Joe and I tested out a lead to Cueva de Rio Zapote. First inspection suggested a minor cave, but as we became a little more serious about it, the cave went and went. Well, it was only 55 m, but it was our first cave of the trip, and we did have fun in the narrow passages. While Joe and I continued scouting, others surveyed. There were roots, formations, vampire bats, amblypigids (tailless whip scorpions), and other interesting objects and creatures to see.



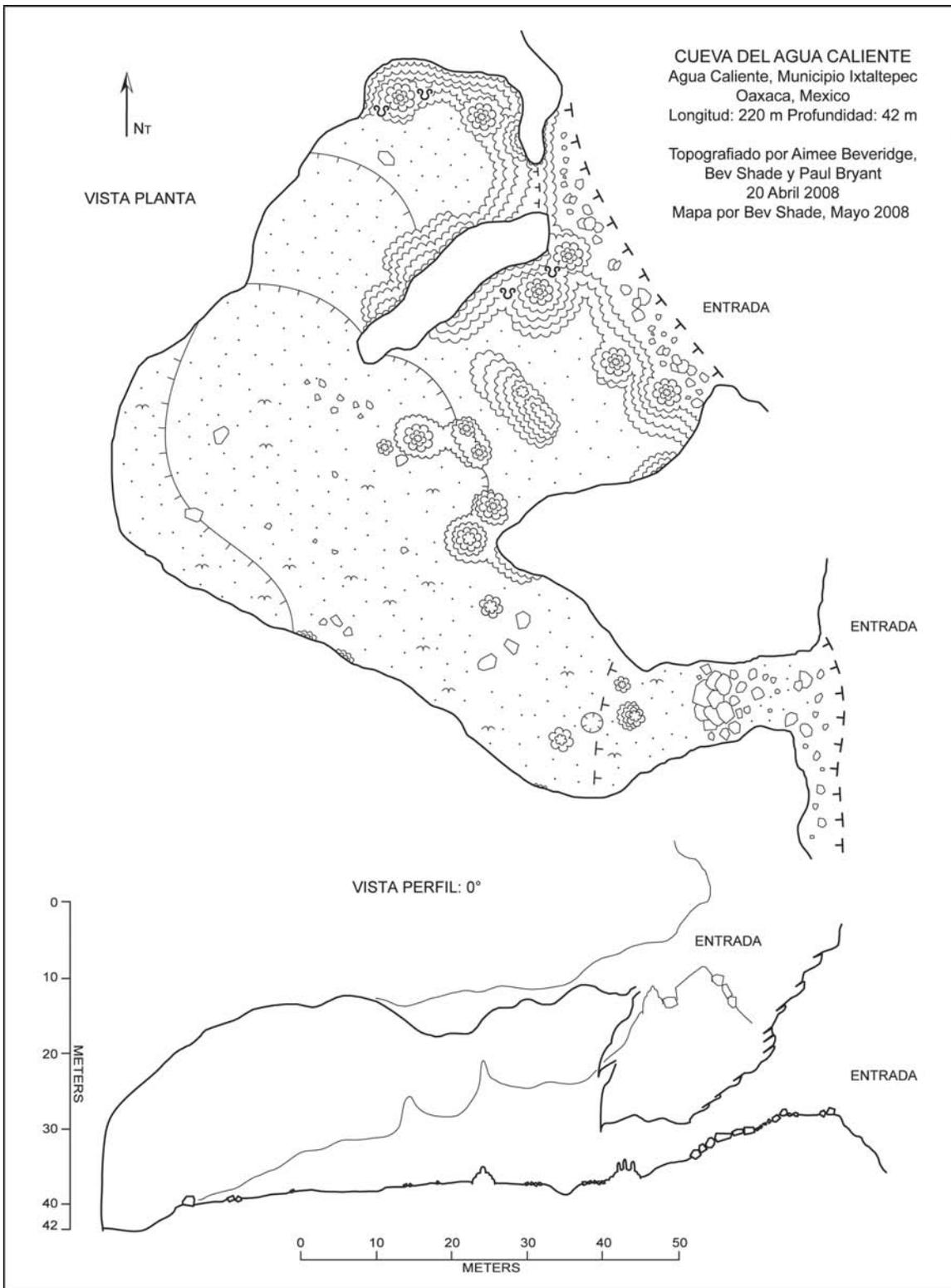
Mapa de Cueva de Rio Zapote.

That night, we stayed again at the hotel in Santa Domingo Zanatepec.

2008 April 20

After a few calls this morning, Plan A was officially shot to hell. We got a late start, packed up, then headed to a different area just north of the windmills at La Ventosa, close to a village named Agua Caliente. Someone at breakfast suggested a cave to Peter.

We found some abandoned buildings that looked like a tourist area around a spring. I started poking around in some limestone, then went higher and found a cut path. I kept following it and following it. Eventually I found the "big" cave (Cueva del Agua Caliente) we had been referred to. It was a section of old borehole, with several entrances, with passages up to 30 m wide. There were a few bees buzzing around the entrance, and I needed water, so I headed back to gather my crew before entering. I think Paul went in first—he said there were no bees when he got there. Cool. A survey was made of the cave, and we found some interesting pictographs. We stayed in this cave until about 2 p.m.



Cueva del Agua Caliente



Mummified bat.

Along the hike back to the vehicles, Geoff found a hole in the hill that he, Paul, and I went into (Cueva de Treinta Metros ?? I'd check with Peter on this). Inside was a steep dirt hill that made it difficult not to raise dust into the air. Further inside, Paul scaled up a hot, smelly climb to see if the cave went. There were bats, but this lead didn't go.

Continuing the hike back, Geoff found another short cave up above the trail with bats and two leads (Cueva de los Colembolos). This locale was proving to be a good area for finding caves.

We had dinner in a small town. The food was called "Tlayudas." Mmm! These were basically large tortillas filled with cheese, chicken, and other goodies . . . then seared over a hot fire. This fare is native to Oaxaca.

We stayed at a park called Zuzul in Vega del Sol, hosting a huge swimming hole, and we were allowed to set up tents for the whole group for only \$100 pesos total.

2008 April 21

Two guides came to us at Zuzul at 10:00 a.m. to take us to a cave on the Rancho Gavilan. This is what we named the cave we found. The hike had much elevation gain through hot jungle terrain. Somehow the two guides became three as Antonio joined us. The cave was 0.7 miles as the crow flies from the vehicles. This cave was the most biodiverse of those I saw. There were crabs and crayfish, a tree frog, bats, amblypigids, spiders, and many other insects. Paul and I scouted the cave first with one of the guides. We eventually came to water, which suggested the end of the cave. We checked out a bunch of other leads, but didn't find anything further. Then

we helped Geoff collect samples. Geoff decided to try to push the cave. He immersed himself fully into the water and poked around, but he didn't find any obvious duck-unders.



Geoff H. takes a dip in Cueva de Rancho Gavilan.

Back at the swimming hole, we waited for Peter who had gone with Claudia to obtain more permissions from local ejidos. Peter arrived as I had been writing E-mail at a local Internet cafe. He had found another campground, and we were all supposed to go there. I didn't get the full details, but there seemed to be some urgency to go now.

2008 April 22

I went with Peter and Jason today. Aimee/Joe/Geoff caravanned with our group in the other 4-runner. We went to an ejido office in Valle Nacional where we received four guides to show us to caves. Yes, four. They first brought us down a hot jungle trail to what can only be described as an indentation in the ground. Someone claimed that the hole had been blowing a lot of air at some previous time. Along this hike, I smelled a coffee plant for the first time, and it had an amazing aroma! The day was getting quite hot. Our guides then showed us two roadside caves that we could have easily spotted ourselves. Jason and I went into the first cave for a look around. It was smallish and didn't go far. Jason popped into the second cave. It was dirty, and he reported it didn't go anywhere.

Then our guides were to show us Peña Blanca. Looking at the limestone cliff face from below, I suspect that this might actually have been a worthwhile cave, but we never got inside. We got part way up when Peter hacked into a beehive with his machete. Peter, of course, bolted down the hill. One of the guides was reported to

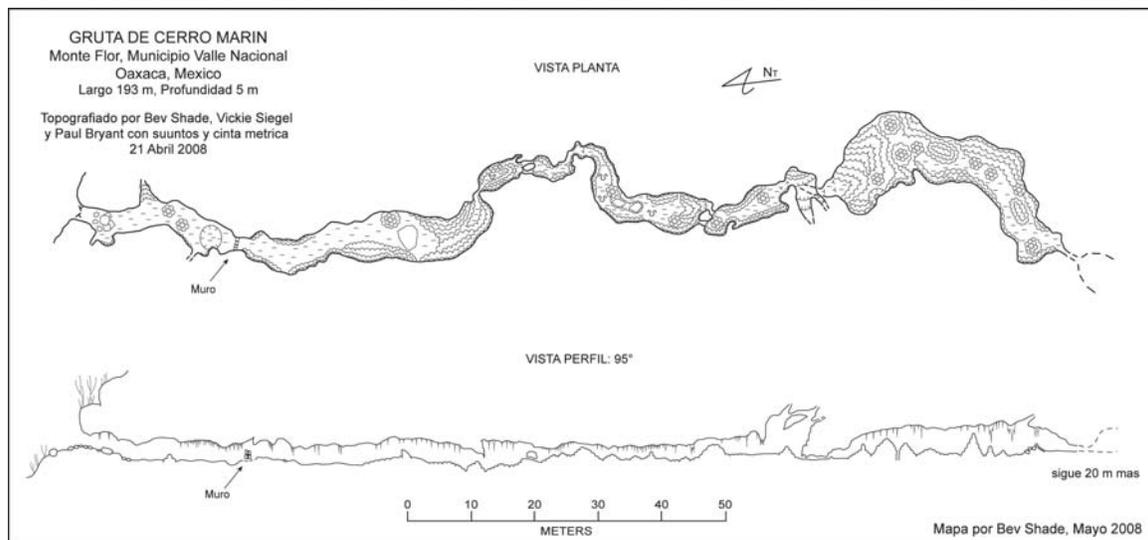
say, "these bees don't sting." Later, Geoff removed twenty to thirty stingers from this guide's face and neck. Another guide, Tino, didn't come off the mountain with us. He was further ahead of the group, and he apparently ran upward to escape the bees. After waiting some time for Tino to come down, Peter's vehicle and troupe went to wait at a sports field in case Tino came down another way. Eventually we heard via hand-held radio that Tino had come down the original path and was fine.

Going back to Valle Nacional, our guides suggested that they had one more cave for us to see. They brought us to an old pyramid, and at the top was an indentation. Something went very wrong in the translation here.

In the afternoon, we went to a nearby river to check out another camping spot named Yetla. While there, we forded the river, then took a hike toward a cave lead. We had a guide who wore a shiny metallic helmet and shorts. We never did find the cave in question, but Geoff found a smaller cave hosting a few vampire bats.

On the way back, before fording the river, we checked out some old graves that had been looted.

While we had been marching through the jungle, Bev, Paul and Vickie had surveyed a cave just across the highway from our campsite (Gruta de Cerro Marín). The local museum curator showed them the cave and apparently felt the need to guide them through it. They surveyed up to a restriction the guide could not pass, and were then free to survey the rest of the cave without "guiding". They surveyed through four restrictions, and encountered extensive pre-Columbian archeological deposits. The cave certainly warrants archeological study, before the artifacts are further damaged or looted, as do many caves in the area.



Mapa de Gruta de Cerro Marín

2008 April 23

Peter, Jason, and I went cave hunting in another ejido. We drove up a mountain to a town that was actually having a town meeting right then, and we checked it out. There seemed to be two town meetings running concurrently. Peter stood up and explained why we were here and what we hoped to do. We were informed that they

would think about it and that we should come back tomorrow.

Then we drove to another small town where we talked to the jefe who owned the blue house—although Peter actually met him at a building near the basketball court while Jason and I hung out in the truck. Peter came back to the truck in a hurry and said that he found a guide and we had to go "right now." So we went.



Jason with a large green fruit over his head.

The cave we found, *Cueva de Arroyo Seco*, was a pretty good find. It had extensive archeological artifacts (human bones, pottery, a copper hatchet head), insects, bats, and a spider that had just mated and was eating the male. We surveyed about 200 m of passage this day. I read instruments, Jason did smart end, and Peter sketched.



Pot shard inside a cave near San Rafael. Probably part of a burial ritual.

As Peter and I were looking at insects, pottery, bones and other interesting miscellany in the supposed "end" room, Jason took off down a hole. He returned saying that the cave goes and goes! Excellent!



Human skull inside same cave as pot shards.
Further into the cave, we found piles of bones with intact pots on top of them.

On the way out, Peter took some pictures with my assistance on the slave flash. The goal was to acquire some decent images for the jefe, whom we promised photos for purposes of ecotourism or what-have-you. After we got out, we went back to the jefe's blue house. There we were offered cold drinks containing tamarind, which Peter gratefully accepted. Both Jason and I declined. We didn't want to be rude, but we didn't want to take the chance of becoming sick on untreated water.

Peter burned a CD-R for the folks, but it didn't work in their drive. As I used their restroom, Jason was able to supply them with the images through their USB port. The downside was that the monitor burned out!

Bev, Vickie and Paul went to the village of El Faisan, which looked karst-y on the topo map. Sure enough, they drove into town and talked to a couple of people, and soon had a guide. They were led about a kilometer north of town to a nice cave whose origin is unclear (Cueva de El Faisan). It may be a paleospring that occasionally still acts as an overflow route. This cave had several nice examples of pre-Columbian architecture in the form of walls and a platform, but since the cave is heavily visited by locals, there were almost no artifacts remaining. The cave had over 250 m of nice passages, with a fun water section at the back.

2008 April 24

My Visa has officially expired! I am renegade.

I went with Geoff and Aimee today on a death march. Our guide, Samuel, wanted to show us two caves—a smaller and a larger. On the way to the smaller cave, we went off path to see a "spring entrance," or some such entrance. It turned out to be a pretty nice-sized cave that we surveyed. The name of the cave was based upon the nearby ranch name, but I forget the name now.

Then we headed to the smaller cave. Geoff went in first to do some collecting. I went into the cave about ten minutes later to the edge of where the water started. The cave had a lot of zig zags, and we decided not to survey this particular cave, hoping that the "large" cave would prove better.

We headed for the big cave. It was getting to be the hot time of the day, and I ran out of water. This situation was entirely my mistake, having brought only 1.5 liters in my pack. Since I was getting used to a certain style of caving where we drove between caves, I had left half my water in the truck. Again, that was no excuse on my part—I should have been better prepared.

However, all was not lost. On the way back to the truck, we found a hole and went inside. It just kept going! I scouted a bit, and I think I might have found the very end of the cave, but I didn't push every possible passage. This cave should be surveyed . . . most definitely. Perhaps a return trip. Aimee first dubbed the cave "Cueva de Refresco," but then changed it to "Cueva de Refugio."

Samuel brought us back. We stopped at a shed that had some sort of fruit tree in front. He climbed into the tree to gather some of the fruit. They were tart, but the moisture was welcome.

In El Faisan the previous day, Bev, Paul and Vickie had gotten a lead up the road in La Florida. So off they went! They were shown four caves, three of which they surveyed. The first, Cueva de La Florida, had a smaller cave nearby. The original intent was to survey both caves, but the discovery of a large and noisy beehive near the entrance prompted them to move on. Good thing – the next cave, Cueva de Gran Trabajo, was way better. Large-scale pre-Columbian walls in the entrance led to a pleasant horizontal entrance passage with additional architecture. A short climb down that was totally slimed with vampire bat guano led to a beautiful section of fossil borehole: well decorated, 70 m long, 12 m wide and up to 14 m tall! Too bad it didn't go... They hit a last cave on the way back to town (Cueva de Bote Alegre), just a single collapse chamber.

2008 April 25

The weather was a little cooler on this day, the last caving day. Early this morning, revelers shot off fireworks, or so I thought. It turns out that the river was used as butchery in preparation for a fiesta the next night.

Two teams assembled and went to the same cave, Cueva de Arroyo Seco, that we had surveyed two days prior. Bev, Geoff and I were on one team; Peter, Joe, and Aimee were on the other. We did a leapfrog survey that consisted of our team

zipping ahead some 100 to 200 meters to start our survey, leaving Peter's team to tackle the distance between.



A dead rat inside a cave hosts a variety of cave insects suitable for collection and analyzing.

Around 2 p.m., Bev, Geoff, and I stopped to eat lunch. Bev brought into the cave bread, beans, and chilorio—a canned pork paste. Well, we thought we were eating in style, and it was indeed delicious, but my stomach started to reject the chilorio. I needed out of the cave, and I needed out fast. I made it—whew! —but it took me 30 minutes, and I wasn't feeling too well along the way.

I went back into the cave to rejoin my group and to grab my cave bag (containing my supply of water). Going back, I went more slowly because I still wasn't feeling too well. My team was further ahead than my pack, and I had to belly crawl over a nasty section of sump containing sharp, jagged limestone immersed in water. It was an interesting section, though, containing shrimp floating in the water. I assisted with two more survey shots, and then realized that I could do no more. Heading back out and over the nasty sump section of the cave, I realized that I still had the flagging tape and marker in my cargo pants pocket. D'oh! I headed back over that nasty crawl section yet again to deposit the equipment. Of course, it meant I had to crawl over it one last time to get out again.

By now, exhaustion started to creep up on me. I was wiped out. It took me quite a while to get out of the cave this time. I was most of the way back when I found a spot that looked level and inviting. I decided to close my eyes a bit. Cave sounds are very interesting when surrounded in total darkness and you are totally quiet. Bats flying overhead made a low rumbling sound. Cave crickets chirped, as well as frogs. It was a rather unique experience.

At the sky entrance, the second entrance to this cave, I sat waiting for the survey teams to come out. It was around 7 p.m. when I heard chittering noises from above. A little brown bird popped into the cave making a ruckus. I clapped my hands, and it flew away. Five minutes later, I heard the chittering again. Realizing that this bird really, really wanted to come in—and that it was probably the mother of the big egg I saw—I decided to back toward the first entrance out of sight. The brown bird, which resembled a kiwi, popped in, jumped around, looked, and chattered. It didn't see me and soon quieted.

Around 7:30 p.m. it was getting dark, and I decided to head toward the truck. Since I had a GPS point, I knew I couldn't fail; however, I wanted to find the path because trail blazing through a jungle without a machete was a bit more ambitious than I wanted to try. I poked around for a bit looking for the path, but I then heard voices; I headed back to the cave. My peeps were emerging.

Bev, Joe, and I headed to the trucks where locals immediately surrounded us. The three of us were pretty muddy and sweaty, so we started to clean up a bit. Eventually Peter, Geoff, and Aimee came down the trail, but by then, it was dark—all we could see were the three headlamps approaching.

A guy in a nearby house wanted to buy one of our headlamps off of us. I had a spare Energizer [LED Essentials Headlamp](#) in my cave pack as a backup. I sold it to him for \$100 pesos. Heading back to camp, Peter, Bev, and I stopped for dinner at a restaurant while the other truck went continued back to camp. After we had finished eating—and while Peter and Bev entered cave data into the laptop—rain came down heavily. The sky basically opened up and dumped. Oh, no! All the tents were set up at camp! It turns out that the people back at camp took care of putting on the rainflies for the tents—except for mine. Joe said he thought mine had a rainfly on it already. These things happen. Vickie and I later lifted the tent to dump out over a liter of water. The tent needed a good cleaning anyway. I wasn't going to use that tent for sleeping, however. My first inclination was to sleep in the truck. This option sounded good in principle, but it failed in practice. As I was in the truck, windows closed to avoid mosquitoes, I started getting too hot. Since Bev had decided to sleep in her truck, her tent was fair game. So I crashed in the restaurant, in a tent, alongside Jason, Vickie, and Paul, who had also opted to put up their tents in the restaurant.

Oddly, there was a guy sitting in a chair next to the beer cooler all night long. Vickie said she found this to be a little creepy, but I was too tired to worry about it. We were supposed to leave by 6:30 a.m. to allow the breakfast crowd to come in. At 6:22 a.m., I woke up, broke camp, and then finished snoozing in Peter's truck.

2008 April 26

We started our long trek back home. Cleanup started early—and due to the mud from the previous day as well as the rain from the previous night—it took some time. For me, it entailed taking down Mike's drenched tent and washing yesterday's caving clothes and gear.

We said our goodbyes to Bev, Aimee, Jason, and Vickie—who were off to the airport—then tires hit the pavement.

We stopped at a restaurant about half an hour from Acatlán in Amate, Oaxaca to meet with Vicky and Karla to return Claudia's gear. They hadn't heard anything from Claudia either. Vicky was in the city to run some errands, and she suggested this restaurant as being very good. I had a bowl of shrimp soup, camarón sopa, and it was excellent. Geoff had a shrimp plate that looked fantastic too.

We chatted with Karla while Vicky was attending to her errands. Karla was finishing up high school, and she had passed the test requirements to go into University. I believe this means she scored in the top 10%. It was her wish to major in English. Her command of the English language was quite astonishing considering that she had learned it through songs and the computer, and she has had no one with whom to converse. Vicky eventually joined us, we finished up lunch, chatted some more, and I showed a few choice images from my camera.

We were off again. Next stop: port at Veracruz. We walked around the historic zone. The architecture was interesting, and we saw some of the history of the Mexican Navy.

Then we took a seaside drive to Boca del Rio and stopped at a little oceanside bar for refreshments. Geoff had the idea of jumping into the ocean for a swim. After a short snooze in the vehicle, I caught Geoff's idea, and went into the drink. The water was salty and luxuriously warm! I body surfed for a while, then headed back to the table. We were waiting for Guillermo, a caver friend from Veracruz. Eventually we departed because he didn't show up and didn't answer his phone. We found out later that he couldn't find the restaurant.

We stopped to dine at a place where there was already a large party of people at the restaurant. There was a tour bus outside of the encampment, and there was entertainment after dinner. This scene suggested that a tour was set up in advance. The establishment was rather nice and had two swimming pools. Negotiations for camping here ensued, and while eating dinner, the guy came back to inform us that he would charge us \$100 pesos each to set up tent. Therefore, we decided to try something else. We headed toward the ocean. There we found cabañas but no one attended them. Peter called the phone number on the sign, and a couple came about 15 minutes later. They gave us the nicer cabin for the price of the cheaper cabin—\$500 pesos. The nicer cabin had a downstairs and upstairs . . . and an attached bathroom. It wasn't posh, but it worked. Paul and I set up our tents on the concrete basketball court.

That night we all walked along the beach searching for crabs and enjoying the bottle of 100 años I brought along. There were plenty of crabs to be found, and the cooler temperature was really quite nice after the heat we had faced for the past many days.



This crab wasn't in a cave.
We found these along the beach of the Gulf somewhere in the state of Veracruz.

2008 April 27

Peter got a few leads on local volcanic caves. Since the guy who told him couldn't take us to the caves himself, we headed in the general direction to see what we could find. Peter saw a guy on the roadside, and we stopped to ask him. He took us over to his friend—a ranch hand named Juan. Juan needed to finish milking cows, then he took us to the caves.

On the way to the caves, we saw in the distance [Laguna Verde nuclear power plant](#), which is Mexico's only nuclear plant.



Mexico's nuclear power plant.

The first cave was smallish but hosted a wide selection of wildlife, including a tarantula (*Schizopelma* Sp.), vampire bats, a lizard, huge golden ants, etc. Peter and Geoff surveyed this cave in three shots.



A tarantula inside the cave.



While Geoff takes a distance measurement, a bona fide vampire bat flies out of the cave.

The second cave was much larger in height, but didn't have much extent. There were bottles, a cooking pot, a pan, and a spoon. I went up a crack and saw some

brownish-looking animals moving. I couldn't make out what they were, so Paul came up to join me. They moved, and we both bolted. Paul suggested they were both vultures.

After looking at the cave, we headed back down a roadway, and we got a ride on a passing truck. As we were going along, an American poked his head out and spoke to us in English. Apparently he's been in Mexico six months working twelve-hour days looking for gold.

Lunch was at a roadside restaurant where we dined upon seafood. The daughter who assisted in the cooking was apparently an out-of-work attorney. While we were eating, Claudia called to say that she was all right.

After lunch, we walked along the gulf to look for sea caves. The woman at the restaurant said there was a large one about ten minutes away. The rock was volcanic in nature. We saw a few sea caves and took a few waypoints. The big one was in such a position as to make it impossible to enter due to the force of the oncoming waves.

We then drove for some time toward home. It was dark when we stopped for one more cave Peter had found some seven years ago. He knew that it had a colony of vampire bats, and since it was night, he hoped that perhaps they had emerged for the evening. We were not sure when vampire bats prefer to emerge. I have since asked two bat specialists, Jim Kennedy and Dave Dalton, who both said to me "That's a good question." Peter and Paul suited up to check out the cave. I opted to stay behind. The story I heard was that the smell of ammonia kept them for going further into the cave than just the first section. They did say they saw about 40 or so bats.

2008 April 28

This was the last day of driving out of Mexico. Peter and I hit Austin around 8 p.m. or so. Customs hassled us only a little, having us get out of the truck and look around. I chatted with one of the officials, showing him a few cool pictures of our trip on my camera.

I was able to catch up with some of my E-mail on Peter's laptop while driving. It was a long drive, and it was good to be back to the US. Yet I am ever considering my next trip to Mexico.

Summary

The most novel part of the trip, for me, was walking around Veracruz. After two weeks of small towns and camping, we were in a city rife with heritage and history . . . and also along the gulf coast.

There were two serendipitous parts of the trip for me. One was hearing about and learning about cycads, then happening to see a stand of some of the biggest in the world. I believe Geoff said there was one species taller. The other was to meet Jean Louis who specializes in orchids . . . then actually come upon some the very same day.

I have been to Mexico several times on caving trips, and each one is different from the previous. Mexico is a remarkable place with amazing limestone. It has an allure that makes one wish to keep going back.