

# AMAZING MAZE – INTO THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

text by Philip Rykwalder and Peter Sprouse  
photos by Peter Sprouse



*Aimee entering Amazing Maze*

Amazing Maze Cave, the longest cave in West Texas, had been sealed for many years until November 2006. Following a renewed agreement between the Texas Cave Management Association and the University of Texas Lands, TCMA members installed a new cave gate to replace one that had been welded shut following attempted break-ins in the late 1990's. A project was initiated to make a new map of the cave. On 25 January 2007 Philip Rykwalder and Peter Sprouse drove out to the site in order to meet with UT Lands personnel on Friday morning. Geologists Tim Hunt and Jim Buice stopped by to discuss management and have a look at the cave itself. Jim accompanied Philip and Peter about 70 meters into the maze, then Jim and Tim left the site.

Philip and Peter set out to establish a spine survey through the main part of the cave in preparation for the many teams that would be working in the cave the next day. The entrance is a funnel that necks down 3 m below the entrance before opening up into a horizontal tunnel. They decided to work their way toward the back in order to figure out what the main route was to the back of the cave. Amazing Maze has two sections, the West Maze and the East Maze, connected only by a single passage, the Phantom Pass. They located this with no trouble and proceeded into the East Maze, passing through a number of junction rooms where passages emanated in many directions like spokes of a wheel. Once the main route through was determined, they set station A1 at what they called the Origin Room and mapped back toward the entrance. They passed through Assumption Junction but soon stopped at the Broken Spoke when a clinometer

got sticky. So it was back to the truck to get a replacement. It was a lovely day on the surface so they decided to hike up onto the mesa to inspect the massive wind turbines that cover the hilltops on UT land.



*Philip in the Broken Spoke*

Returning to the cave they carried a drill in order to set pins for permanent stations. These were also marked with reflective tape in order to help cavers in finding the way out of the cave. They mapped in to where they had left off, then proceeded to the Origin Room to continue to the east. More junctions were passed, then they intersected a tall canyon with passages at several levels. They followed the biggest way on toward the east, ending up in a powder-floored passage with what looked like sea urchin spines protruding from the ceiling. They called it quits there with 175 m surveyed for the day. Cavers arrived at the camp through the night, and everybody stayed up too late around the campfire as always. On Saturday morning two more vehicles arrived, these were cavers from the Permian Basin Speleological Society, joining our UT Grotto crew. We were now 17 strong, and divided up into six survey teams, three for the West Maze and three for the East Maze.

The passage of Amazing Maze consists largely of quite dry stooping and walking passage with a fair bit of hands and knees crawling. The passages are fairly uniform in shape and floored principally with small rocks and not much larger breakdown. The cave's chief feature and namesake is the number of junctions it contains. The cave is strewn with literally hundreds and hundreds of junctions within its many passages. From a single station a caver could choose to go in a number of directions. There are many simple T-intersections to negotiate, but there are also a number of four-to-eight way intersections in the cave. The sheer number of short passages and intersections initially compounds in one's head and leads to rather daunting navigation. But, though the cave is long, Amazing Maze's mazy nature lends to a small cave footprint. The

disoriented caver could travel on a bearing and find their way out through trial and error in little time.



*Philip sketching in a typical passage*

The first West Maze crew to get to work was led by Aimee Beveridge, who had Geoff Hoese and Gary Franklin on her team. They were running the D survey and became known as Team Donkey. They worked the area near the entrance, where numerous loops extended off to the left of the main passage. These reconnected back to the Phantom Pass. The other two teams took off from the beginning of the Phantom Pass toward the north. After about 30 m they were well into maze passage, so they set a joint station and split up. Charley and Kara Savvas mapped back toward Phantom Pass as the eBay passage, which inevitably looped back into Phantom Pass several times as Outbid Alley. Meanwhile F Team, consisting of Kerry Lowrey, Hunter Lowrey, and Peter Sprouse mapped northwest farther into the West Maze. They soon got to a wide intersection which they named Dirt Bike Junction. They did one long shot north from there to a T intersection, but decided to go left at Dirt Bike Junction, where they were in a passage trending southwest back toward the entrance area. Although Hunter was only 11 years old, he proved to very skilled at reading the survey tape. After doing several loops, they began to hear distant voices of another survey team. It was the Donkeys, and two closures were made to the D survey. Then Kerry and Hunter left the cave to head back to Midland, leaving Peter to join up with Team eBay for three final loop tie-ins.

In the East Maze, Team Alpha, Team Beaver, Team Cansado, entered the cave and assembled at The Broken Spoke. From there it was a short distance to Assumption Junction where Team Beaver, consisting of Chris and Jean Krejca and Mignonne Gros, began their day's survey. Team Alpha and Team Cansado pushed on to the Origin Room, where they both started their surveys at station A1. Wes Schumacher, Sandra Denney and Mike Gross of Team Cansado surveyed into the East Maze just north of Team Alpha. Alphas Philip Rykwald, Jacqui and Kel Thomas

surveyed into multiple junctions with six, seven and eight passages. They found the Octopus Room, Helter Sketcher and The Seven Way Room before calling it a day. The cave was originally found after a roadcut of I-10 intersected a passage, and their day ended in this area of the cave.

That night there was the classic caver revelry around a warm campfire just a short distance away from the cave. The night was chill and then it was cold, and the partying continued late into the night. The data were entered and it was found that 871m was mapped in Amazing Maze Cave on the first of which will be many survey trips. All of the mapping took place on the cave's very flat upper level, but lower levels still remain to be found and explored.

Overall, Amazing Maze is a complex and very remarkable cave to explore and map. Over the course of the mapping there will be hundreds of loop closures and sketchers will occasionally complain of headaches, but the challenges of mapping Amazing Maze will definitely raise the surveying skill of Texas cavers. And during the trips to come a good time will be had by all in one of Texas' finest and most notable caves.

