

Sierra el Coahuilón

by Peter Sprouse

After a bumpy start, five of us left Austin in my truck. Cathy Chauvin, Allan Cobb, Susie Lasko, Cathy Winfrey, and I set off for the highlands of southeastern Coahuila on 11 July 1990. Our first stop in the morning was at Potrero Chico, northwest of Monterrey, our favorite swimming spot in the area. However, it was closed until the weekend, so we climbed up to the overlook on the nearby cliff, and viewed **Cueva de la Virgen**, a shrine in a breccia shelter cave. Then we drove on south of Saltillo, and east to the cool passes near Mesa de las Tablas. We were somewhat surprised to see the high limestone ridges being covered with A-frame cabañas, vacation homes for rich (and hot) Montereños. On the ridge near Hoya de los Gringos they have even built a golf course. But we continued on past all that to the next range, the Sierra Coahuilón. A new logging road took us all the way to the top at 3200 meters. It was very beautiful and cool up there, with wildflowers, aspen, and hemlock in abundance. We set up camp near a log cabin settlement of potato farmers.



Taking a break on the hike up the sierra. 1990 photo by Peter Sprouse

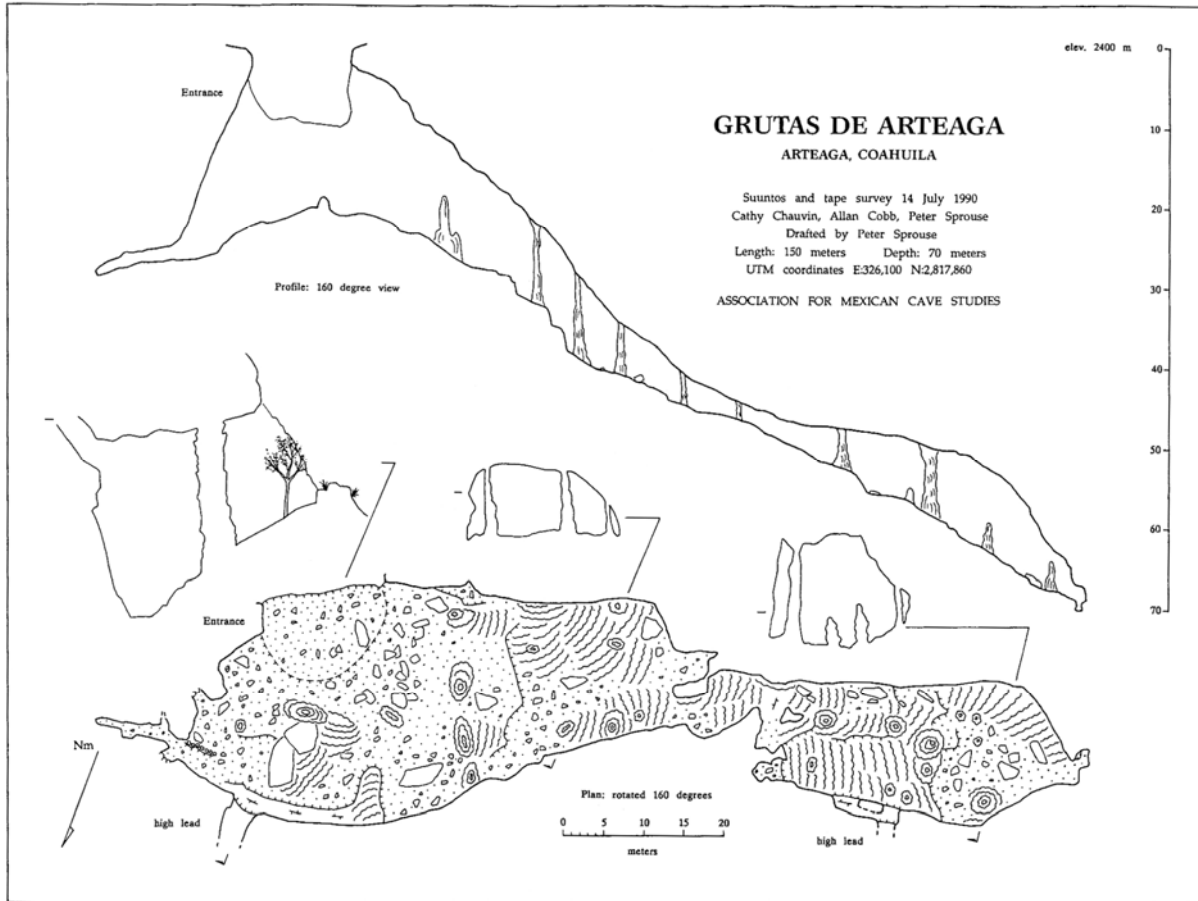
The next day a local named Julian took us to the only cave he knew of, a shelter in an escarpment off the north side of the ridge where they kept livestock during heavy snow. Although not a true cave by our standards, it did contain some Indian pictographs, and had a great view of the valley 1500 meters below. Then we hiked up to the higher part of the sierra at 3400 meters. We found a lovely meadow of yellow flowers and a herd of horses, one of which became quite fond of Cathy Winfrey. We also found a few small caves. One had a nice sink entrance, but ended immediately. Next we found a pit about 15 meters deep, but

quite narrow, so we passed on it. Last was a covered pit, which we cleared and climbed down into: all 3 meters of it. As rain settled in we left the Sierra Coahuilón in search of better caving elsewhere. Back down in the valley we got a lead on a sizeable cave at Los Llanitos, but were turned back when the road got too slimy. So we headed west looking for drier climates. We camped that night near Sierra Hermosa.



Allan considers lunch options. 1990 photo by Peter Sprouse

We heard rumors of caves in this area, but unable to come up with a solid project for the morning, we drove down to Arteaga, where we knew of the existence of the **Grutas de Arteaga**. We parked in the valley floor and were guided up the steep trail by a young man named José. Along the switch-backing route we found **El Volcán de Arteaga**, a pit measuring 1 by 2 meters in an exposed bedrock area. It plunged down at about 80 degrees for perhaps 15 meters, but we didn't have rope along to do it. James Reddell says they saw this pit on a trip in 1965, but he can't recall if they went down it. We continued up the steep trail, lined with nasturtium, biznaga, and piñon. Finally we reached the entrance, 440 meters above the valley floor.



We realized that the small opening we could see from below was actually only the top of the large entrance. It was 20 meters across, and led into a 50-meter-diameter room buttressed by numerous columns. The ample graffiti on the walls, some dated as far back as 1932, showed how much tourist traffic the cave receives. The main passage slopes down to the left, and we set about taking photos and mapping the cave. As we wound our way down through the columns, the cave narrowed down, then opened again into a sizeable final chamber. Susie climbed the wall to look at a high lead on the right, but didn't get all the way up it. We collected a few *rhadine* beetles and spiders, and headed out. We camped that night at Potrero Chico.

We awoke the next day to the magnificence of the soaring canyon walls. Potrero Chico must surely be one of the best rock-climbing sites in our area, with vertical beds of limestone zooming up to the sky. We were the first ones into the pool that day, enjoying the high water slide numerous times before beginning the drive back to Austin. South of San Antonio we hit a massive storm front which slowed us down with high winds, hail, and flooding.



Cathy peers down El Volcán de Arteaga. 1990 photo by Susie Lasko.