

Chiapas '98

Chiapas Diary

By Devin Kouts

Thursday, February 26, 1998

We departed from Lewis Carroll's house at 7 a.m. with Gordon Brace driving us to the airport. Caught a Continental flight to Houston where we changed planes. Our flight from Houston was delayed which caused us to be late into Mexico City where we missed our connecting flight on Aviacsa airlines. Continental put us up in 5 rooms at the Marriott Aeropuerto. Marriott had a great buffet. Exchange rates in Houston were 7.75 pesos per dollar. Exchange rates in Mexico City were 8.5 pesos per dollar.

Friday, February 27, 1998

Caught the 7:15 a.m. Aviacsa flight to Tuxtla. Flew past several extinct volcanoes on the south side of Mexico City. Flew past the recently active "Popo" volcano but noted no activity today. Somewhere over Oaxaca we flew over a series of calderas. Some flooded and a few more with cones. We then flew over some nice forested areas northwest of Tuxtla with nice limestone cliffs showing through the canopy.

We landed in Tuxtla where Ruben and Michelle met us at the Aeropuerto. Took a 150 peso taxi ride (very expensive!) in a large airport, GMC Suburban, taxi. Did a little shopping at a grocery store for supplies. Tuxtla reminds me of Korea, small homes and shops crowded together on narrow, dusty streets. We had lunch at the home of Ruben's mother before catching a taxi (20 pesos) ride to the bus station. There we bought tickets on the 2nd class bus to Yuerba Buena, a three hour ride.

Miles and Ruben went to speak to the local officials. Recent political changes require that we wait until Monday before going up the mountain to where we hope to find new caves. Arrangements were made for a camp guard to accompany us into the mountains and guard our belongings while we went caving.

Saturday, February 28, 1998

To pass the time, Miles, Fred Grady, Brian Pease and I hiked up the mountain above Yuerba Buena. We passed through a cornfield and into some woods where we found a couple pits alongside the trail. We came to a third pit, 80-meters deep, known as Grandfather's pit. We threw a rock in and it went down a long way, but they call this a small pit around here. We climbed further up the mountain, passed through another cornfield, into some more woods and passed another pit, about 40 feet deep, that moved a lot of air. Finally we entered a third cornfield where we crested the mountain. We traveled down the back side of the mountain a way where we passed some locals who were clearing cropland. We moved northerly until we ran out of field and then turned back uphill until we reached the cloud forest that crowns many of the mountains in this area.



Miles Drake, Fred Grady and Devin Kouts at the edge of the cloud forest above Yuerba Buena. copyright D. Kouts.

At the edge of the forest we found a small lizard and photographed it. We also found a small cave that didn't go. We followed the forests edge for a while and then turned uphill into the woods. We quickly found the trail that we should have been on with a landmark reservoir nearby. We followed the trail past this to our objective "virgin" cave that Ruben said needed surveying. He had neglected to mention that it was an 80 foot deep pit. Only Brian had brought vertical gear so most of us didn't get into the cave. Brian reported low going cave at the bottom of the pit.

We walked over to the next ravine and chopped our way through the bottom of it with machetes. We found a half dozen FRO's that seemed to hit sandstone very quickly. One going cave however moved god air. Brian and Miles pushed in and turned around after about 35 meters.

Sunday, March 1, 1998



Devin Kouts, Fred Grady and Brian Pease on their way to check a possible pit at the edge of town. Cierra Blanco, the expedition's goal, is in the background. copyright D. Kouts.

We went into Yuerba Buena and checked out the market. I bought a machete for 23 pesos, about \$4. We lunched at Restaurant Robert and walked through town to check out a potential pit near the air strip. We had seen this large hole from a distant ridge but it turned out not to be a pit, but a quarry instead.

In the evening, Drew, from Indiana, drove with Ruben and I up to the village of Rincon to see what the town counsel had to say about us visiting their mountain. We drove into Rincon after dark, past a group of indians getting drunk on the street and to the end of a dead end street. Not a good place to be. Ruben quickly ascertained that the Commissar had already gone home. We left quickly but our car still got pelted with a few stones as we drove back out of Rincon. We went to the Commissar's home, and while I waited outside Ruben went in to learn what had been decided. It had been a split vote. The commissar was willing to gather family members to sherpa and guide us up the mountain. We would have to be "stealthy", which meant departing at 4 a.m.

Back at Ruben's home near Yuerba Buena we briefed the others on the situation and most people decided they didn't want to do this, myself included. We made alternate plans at that point. Miles, Fred and I would survey leads in Aire Fresco tomorrow while Bryan, Page Ashwell and Lewis did a new pit and then looked for a campsite. I'm considering leaving at the end of this week, a week early.

Monday, March 2, 1998

We didn't get underground today but did move our camp. Fred, Miles and I caught a pasajero over the mountain to the village of Arroyo Grande. We stooped at Juan and Marta's house and made arrangements to camp in the entrance of Cueva del Tecalote (Owl Cave). Lewis, Page, Bryan, Ruben, his wife Michelle, Matt and Nancy went up the mountain to do a virgin pit, reported to be 400 feet deep. Fred, Miles and I have set up camp in an incredible entrance at the bottom of a tremendous sink hole. Tomorrow we'll go down to survey in Aire Fresca while Juan guards our camp. Don't know when we'll meet up with Lewis, Bryan and Page again.

Tuesday, March 3, 1998

We left for Aire Fresca this morning at about 8 a.m. Juan had showed up at about 7 a.m. to guard our camp. I got a scare during the night when I thought I heard foot steps approaching the edge of our camp. I couldn't find my light, Miles wouldn't wake up so I called Fred, who woke with a start. We didn't see anything and went back to sleep. I later found that it had been the sound of a slow drip of water hitting foliage that had unnerved me.

In Aire Fresca we surveyed a side lead that turned into a big loop, large stuff with pretties, about 190 meters long. We went further into the cave to a paleo trunk lead and began surveying it. Booming virgin trunk it was. We surveyed about 150 meters of 10 meter wide passage to the beginning of a sinuous canyon. It was at that point that Fred found the bones of a sea cow sticking out of the limestone wall.

The hike down to Aire Fresca is pretty spectacular. We followed a steep bouldery canyon that cut through sandstone and limestone. The Aire Fresca entrance is at the bottom of a narrow gorge, just below a 15 meter high waterfall.

I was hampered by lights all day. The lamp I'm using burns up batteries and the cells I have are very lame. I get 30 to 40 minutes burn time on each set of 4 so I have to cycle on and off a lot. We spent a total of 7.5 hours underground today and will go back again tomorrow. Lewis, Page and Brian are supposed to hike up to the top of Cierra Blanco tomorrow to scope things out.

Did another 7.5 hours survey in Aire Fresca today for a total of 240 meters. We got another 180 meters in the trunk we had started yesterday. We named it Sirinean Passage for the two additional sea cow skeletons that we found there. We pushed the trunk to its end, a mud plug. A low stream crawl might go on. The passage lost altitude sharply and we thought we would hit a pit but we got a few climbable pits instead. Much nice rimstone and some great formations. After finishing we left one lead and went back to check another lead we had left yesterday, a 7 meter pit with passage at the bottom. We surveyed in another passage to find a narrow, twisty canyon with milk-white rimstone and blood red to orange stals. We also located two more sea cows, one with many ribs showing. We couldn't finish the passage so we'll go back tomorrow.

We did note a huge cave spider, about a quarter mile in from the entrance, a crab in a pool in the entrance room,



Brian Pease descends through cloud forest canopy to check an 80 foot deep pit. copyright D. Kouts.

and a strange frog outside. We might spend three more days here.

Thursday, March 4, 1998

Well maybe I won't spend three more days in this camp. Miles, Fred and I returned to the end of yesterday's survey in Aire Fresca. We chased it upstream to a chamber choked with boulders. The only lead was in the ceiling and Miles said it was my turn to check. I stood up into the lead and put my right foot on a ledge about knee high. Just then either one or both of my feet slipped. My left went out from under me and I came down hard on the lower left corner of my back, right at the top of my pelvis. I hit so hard I was stunned and unable to move for a few minutes. We moved back down to the main trunk and I managed to hobble downstream as far as a place called "Little Dome". Standing up I could move well enough but anything requiring bending over was excruciating.

Wednesday, March 3, 1998 Survey was over, I headed out while Fred and Miles went downstream to look at stuff. I had to stop pretty frequently because of the pain. With a good rest at the entrance it took me 3.5 hours to get from Little Dome back to camp. I changed clothes, hobbled up onto the hillside and checked out the view; what a beautiful valley.

We haven't received any messages from the other three guys in our party. Don't know if they hiked up to the cloud forest on Sierra Blanco or not. We need to get one of them to replace me on the survey. While Miles hasn't said it he'll also need someone to replace Fred. who's getting tired after 3 days surveying and 4 days camping in this cave. Miles talks about returning to Tuxtla on Sunday and doing touristy things until our plane out on Thursday. That could be o.k. but I don't have much to do between now and then. Just recuperate I guess.

Friday, March 5, 1998

Juan and his brother-in-law packed our bags back up the hill to Arroyo Grande on horseback. While waiting for a pasajero to carry us back over the mountain Juan's wife Marta served us café (locally grown) and tortillas stuffed with frijoles. After four days of water based camp food they tasted like heaven.

Across the mountain we stopped at Restaurant Robert's for lunch and then proceeded to Yuerba Buena. Once there Ruben informed us that Lewis, Bryan and Page had abandoned the cloud forest idea and hiked down the Rio Arroyo Grande to the Villa El Toro. About an hour later the trio hiked back into camp. They had been gone a little more than a day and had slept overnight in a shelter cave.

Nerves were getting pretty frayed by this point in the trip. The other three had not contacted us in over three days and that left us with no choice but to abandon the Aire Fresca survey. At the same time many of us were frustrated with Ruben for not doing sufficient ground work ahead of our arrival. Waiting until the last moment to ask for permission from the village elders was pretty irresponsible.

Fortunately Ruben chose that moment to tell us he'd contacted another group of indians in Rincon, including the son of one of the local leaders. This guy, Guadalupe (Lupe) Lopez, said he could guide us to where we wanted to go. We met him later in the evening and he seemed really straight and honest.

Page's tooth is absessing so he left for home today.

Saturday, March 6, 1998

We got an early start today when Lupe, his friend Luis and a driver picked us up in the strangest Ford 4x4 any of us Gringos had ever seen. They drove us up to the village of San Jose Chamulla where we started hiking. The trail was steep but not all at once. The elevation gain was spread out over 3 or 4 kilometers. Still, in all we climbed almost 500 meters in just an hour. We had a great view as we crested the mountain but I was sorely tired. We skirted the back side of the mountain to a point where we had to chop through brush with our machetes.

It was nasty going but Lupe was a pro with a machete. We finally intersected a fence line which led us to a foot trail. That dropped down through some trees and broke out into the clear on the rim of a huge sink. We were all wowed by its size. From the rim we could see where the water drained but there were no large or obvious holes. The sink had been cleared for agriculture and Miles said that commonly caused any leads to become choked with silt. We skirted along this sink and soon found another nearly as large but with a nice headwall at one end.

The first sink had been 80 meters deep and several hundred meters long. Our plan was to push as far into the cloud forest as possible till noon, then turn back and take a close look at the things we had passed.

Longing to look at those headwalls we pushed on by and came to a third huge sink. This time we had no choice but to chop our way off the rim and into the sink. Our trail had turned southwesterly and we wanted to go north. After Lupe chopped a trail through hideous brambles we were able to inspect the headwall at the bottom of the sink. We only found a little rat hole drain.

We climbed back out of the sink and noticed dried poppy stems in places on the ground. Back on the rim we spotted a landmark knob that was proximate to the edge of the cloud forest. We climbed up to the top and had a commanding view of the jungle to the north and the mountains and valleys to the east. It was 10:30 a.m.

We chose this spot as our rendezvous. Miles and Bryan would take Lupe and swing west then north. Their goal was a large sink hidden under the jungle canopy. Lewis, Fred, myself and our guide Luis would head straight north and try to reach another deep sink hidden in the forest. Both teams agreed to turn back at 12 noon and begin checking the leads they had walked by.

We struck out and found our trail leading us past the lip of another huge sink which was on our lead list. I was discouraged looking down into the void. It had been cut back once and was now thickly forested with 3 to 5 year old growth. We followed the trail through similar growth where it entered the cloud forest. This part of the trail was new and had been recently cleared. Fresh logs lay all about. We followed it through the cloud forest and along a series of deep sinkholes.

Eventually we broke out into a large cleared area obviously intended for agriculture. The clearing exposed the bottom of a long sink with many smaller sinks within it. We hiked to the far end, which had recently been burned over, thick ash covered the ground. I calculated that our goal was still nearly a kilometer away so we

pushed into the jungle. But this time there was no trail. We chopped for a half-hour through incredibly dense undergrowth and made only a couple hundred meters distance. Finally I checked the time and found it was past our turn around time. We headed back and started checking leads.

I found a lead almost immediately, a small pit that was moving air in the burned over section. It was narrow and I could see floor 3 meters below but I chose not to enter. I got a GPS fix and we moved on. The next two sinks looked very promising but when checked there was nothing in the bottom, a rat-hole drain at best. I started examining the karst in the area and found it to be very sandy. The dip was easterly toward Soconusco and Miles had mentioned there was a sandstone cap up here somewhere. Apparently the axis of the anticline was somewhere to our west and we were on a limey sandstone cap. Certainly every sinkhole we checked showed the same alluring appearance with a disappointing drain at the bottom.

We worked our way back to the rendezvous point and checked a very intriguing feature we referred to as the duck head. It was a narrow ravine, littered with sinks in sandstone, with little rat holes at the base of each. Thusly discouraged I couldn't really motivate myself or the others to chop our way to the bottom of our last sinkhole objective. It was to the west of us and would require a serious climb up and then back down. I wished we had checked it. Miles reappeared at 4 p.m. and reported that they had been in the limestone, to the west of us, and had found two small caves.

At this point entries in the diary ended. And it is necessary to reconstruct the following day's events from memory. After regrouping on top of the mountain we followed our guides down a trail that lead through corn and bean fields. At one point we spotted a large sink with headwalls to the left of the trail. Upon checking the sink we located a largish entrance that gave access to a cave with a respectably sized entrance room. Water flowed in through another obscure entrance elsewhere in the sink and disappeared down a pit in the entrance room. Having no rope we were unable to pursue the lead but noted it for another day.

Continuing down the mountain we noted that our guides became more apprehensive as day light waned and we approached the outskirts of their town. As we neared the edge of the village out-right fear was visible in their eyes and they almost galloped down the narrow lanes of the town. We moved so quickly that I was afraid we would lose Fred Grady who limped from a recent hiking injury.

I watched the houses and their occupants as we passed. Upon seeing us more than one person would duck into their house as we ran by. On at least one occasion I looked back over my shoulder to see one of those people return to their doorway with a gun in hand. Now I understood why our guides were scared. I had heard stories of intertribal wars and we were passing through enemy territory. The rate at which we moved through the town allowed us to take the local inhabitants by surprise, they didn't see us coming so we were able to get through safely.

At one point our guides stopped to confer with each other on which street to take. It was the longest few seconds of my life as I was sure a group of local hostiles would come running up from behind us at any moment.

Eventually we did make it back to friendly territory and had no further run ins with unfriendlies, but the event would remain yet another vivid highlight of the trip.

Over the next few days we contented ourselves with checking leads in a small valley near by the friendlier parts of Rincon. During these walks we found a sinking stream and just down from there a cliff face with multiple cave entrances. One of those entrances dropped into a cave with several meters of passage and a large population of fruit bats. The bats were quite agitated by our presence. Time was short however and we

were unable to do any survey in the cave.

In short order we bussed ourselves back to the capital city of Chiapas and spent a day relaxing in hotels, touring the local "Grand Canyon" by boat and even visiting the zoo. It was very good to get home.