

¡MATACANES!
By Terri Whitfield Sprouse



A group jump in Matacanes Canyon. Peter Sprouse photo

Yari was cold. It was just a little past midday, but the sun now only occasionally reached to the bottom of Matacanes Canyon. As the warm sun moved out of the canyon, a cold wind would begin to blow through the shadows. As the last of us climbed out of what was about the eighth or ninth plunge pool, we regrouped around Yari. Wearing shorts, a T-shirt and tennis shoes, all totaled she probably weighed little more than ninety pounds. Yari shivered slightly but otherwise stood motionless as we made our assessments. She definitely needed to put on more clothes. Some of us were wearing full wet suits over lightweight polypro. Most others had on neoprene shorty wetsuits. Our group of about fourteen was large, and was moving a bit slow, leaving time for her to chill. Now only one-third of the way through the canyon, we had yet to reach the first of the two caves that we came there to map. I pulled out the heavyweight polypro shirt that I had stashed in with my emergency gear, and offered it to her. She removed the T-shirt, pulled on the polypro and then covered it with her PFD. Charley dug into his drybag and pulled out a balaclava. Yari draped it over her head and then secured it in place with her helmet. Yari smiled and then nodded. We were ready to move on.

It was only mildly hot and dry in Austin, Texas, when Peter Sprouse started planning this trip to Matacanes Canyon in June 2001. But he knew that by August central Texas would be miserably hot and scorchingly dry. The grass would be crunchy and heat waves would be visible, radiating from the buildings and pavement. Peter had been reading about Matacanes Canyon for several years, and now anticipated that the spring-fed canyon plunge pools would offer a cool respite. He contacted Monterrey Tec caver Ramón Godina and asked if he would arrange to obtain the permit for our trip through the canyon. It wasn't easy. Being only a short

drive from Monterrey, Nuevo León, the canyoning trip had become perhaps the most popular one in North America. Due to numerous injuries and rescues, access to the canyon had recently been restricted primarily to professionally guided trips. For private trips, each group needed to have an EMT or some other person qualified to assist in a medical emergency. Personal flotation devices (PFD's) were required. Since there were two caves that the river passed through along the way that needed mapping, the trip would have an additional purpose besides just having fun, though fun was the main goal.



You will get wet in Matacanes Canyon. Peter Sprouse photo

With the assurance that the permit was in hand, we left Austin on a Thursday evening, driving south through Mamulique Pass, camping for the night in the desert near a microwave tower. The next day we drove along the Pan-American highway through Monterrey, turning on the Cola del Caballo (Horsetail Falls) road going west up the mountain. After a short way, we came upon a huge warning sign that marked our turn onto the canyon road that goes up to Potrero Redondo. "Recomendaciones Básicas de Seguridad en Recorridos Acuáticos Matacanes e Hidrofobia," the sign read. What followed was a list of do's and don'ts with the emphasis on the coldness of the water and tips for avoiding hypothermia. At the bottom of the list were the telephone numbers to call in case a rescue was needed. We turned down the road, first descending past our take-out point at Las Adjuntas, then up the mountain above Hidrofobia Canyon to Potrero Redondo. Before dark on Friday night we hiked down to Cueva de la Tía Rosa, a well-known local cave below the village. [AMCS Activities Newsletter No. 14]. We camped just north of Potrero Redondo at the Monterrey Tec cavers' usual spot, but we barely heard them when they arrived in the wee hours of the night.

Several kilometers of hiking got us into Matacanes Canyon proper. The initial rappel into the canyon is a magnificent 40-meter descent several meters to the left of a cascading waterfall. Our descent was delayed at the start by other canyoneers who had gotten there first and had claimed the usual rig points. We counted at least fifty people ahead of our group. After scouting around a bit, we finally found another rig point on the right side of the first drop. Looking down from the top of that first drop, the emerald plunge pool shimmered as both the waterfall and the canyon wind came crashing down the mountain, sending waves with whitecaps rippling along the surface.

As each of us called "Libre!" we maneuvered over to where we could turn and watch the next rappeller. Knowing that there would be no turning back once Charley pulled down the rope, a few of us watched attentively, waiting to consciously acknowledge that moment of commitment. Once we had descended into the canyon, we were committed to running its full course, following the river through the countless plunge pools, swimming its lakes, making our way through its two caves until it spat the river out farther down the mountain at Las Adjuntas. When I came to the first of many high jumps, I allowed the tips of my boots to jut unsteadily over the boulder's edge as I studied the water. It was flowing fast through a narrow slot in the canyon. I had to be sure to jump out into the channel and then not let the current slam me into the opposite wall, where the water crashes into the rock. It was only a 6-meter drop, but that distance seemed longer while looking down from the slick boulder's edge. I had my choice of which slick rock to jump from, but taking a plunge into the water was the only way on - the only way out of the canyon. I unclipped my drybag from my seat harness and tossed it into the river. After a few quick bobs, it was taken away by the current and jammed against the opposite wall, where it stayed, rotating counter-clockwise. There must be an eddy of some sort, I thought. Or the wall could be dangerously undercut. I watched it swirl. Suddenly, the wind picked up and blew a spray of cold mist on my face; a reminder to get moving. I focused on the darkest, deepest part of the channel, then jumped off the slick boulder, hanging suspended over the slot just long enough to position myself over my target area. Then, splash, I hit the cold, clear water at mid-channel and went under. The impact was stimulating. Buoyed back to the surface by my life jacket, I began to swim with the current, avoiding the swirling water against the rock wall as I grabbed my drybag and headed toward a downstream eddy.

Though there are a few rappels, Matacanes is all about jumping. We jumped so much throughout the day that, for fun, we began to work on earning style points. A jump, with a twist. A jump with one leg front, the other back. Arms and legs spread out on one, cannonball on the



The first drop. Ernie Garza photo

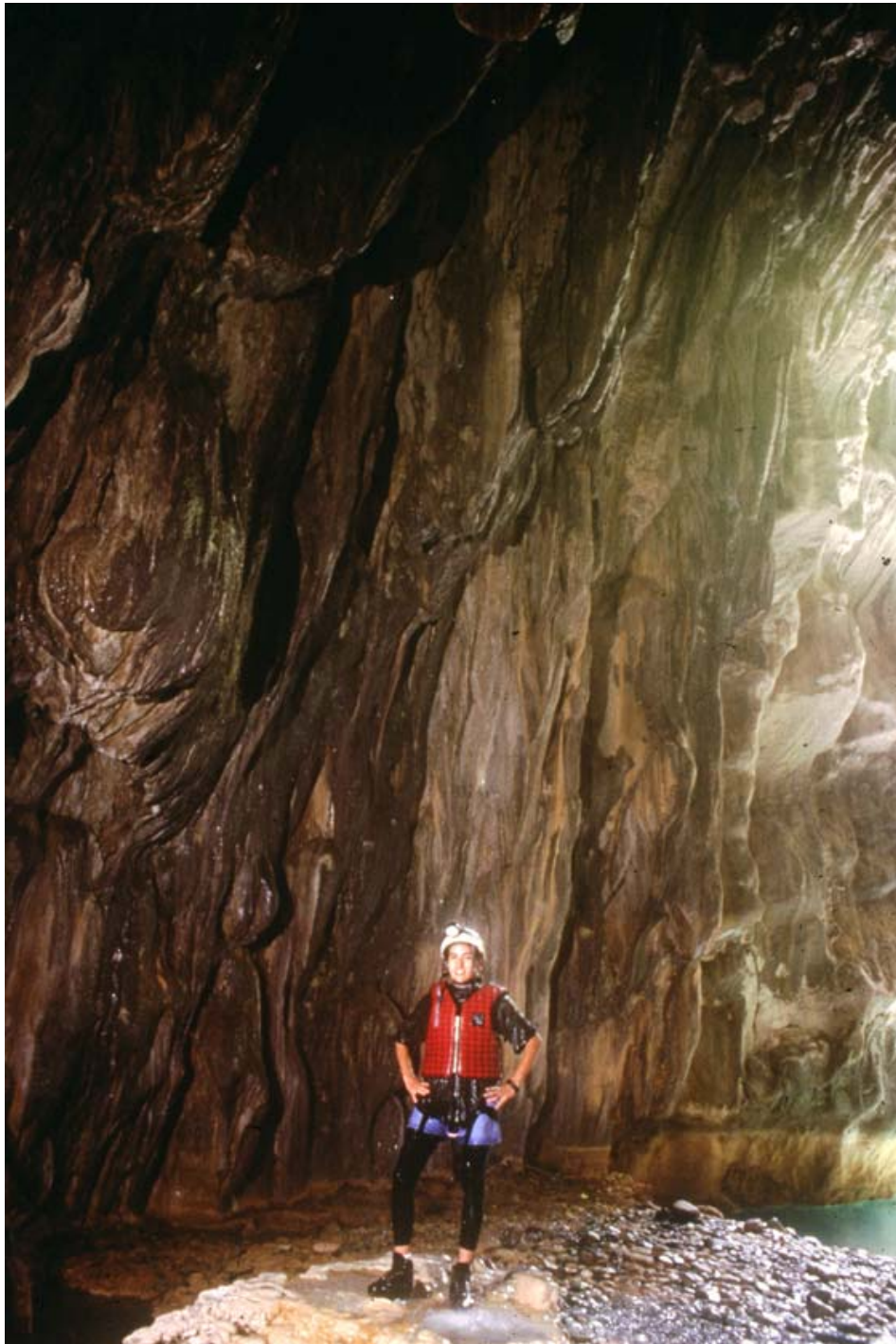
next. Fofu had started doing flips. There were several uncoordinated but interesting-looking group jumps. Before long, we came to a series of chutes. Peter started going head first, so the next guy one-upped him by running the chutes head first on his back. We were having so much

fun with the chutes and plunge pools that we had almost forgotten about the caves until we reached a series of massive boulders that suddenly appeared around a bend in the canyon. When we arrived at the entrance to Cueva de Matacanes No. 1, we found that the professionally-guided group already had the entrance drop rigged and were sending the last of their clients down. We took a break for lunch, giving the other group some time to clear out. We



Peter sketching in Cueva de Matacanes no. 1. Ernie Garza photo

donned our vertical gear, organized the survey team and began setting stations. The entrance chamber was 20 meters wide and high with beautiful showerheads sprinkling streams of water from circular shields that had formed on the ceiling. The first shot spanned a shallow lake to a rock set up on a nearby beach. Beyond the beach was a blind jump.



Adriana under the showerhead. Ernie Garza photo

Of all of the jumps taken that day, for me, the blind jump inside the cave was the most challenging. Amidst the roar of falling water echoing down the passageway, this jump would be

illuminated only by the feeble headlamp of someone working as a spotter. The spotter's job was to shine a diffused, weak and basically unfocusable headlamp into the still-very-dark hole and say, "You want to aim for that spot where the light is." All the jumper could see and hear from the top was that there was churning water down there somewhere. The details of the jump were absorbed by the darkness. Not being able to judge its height, the intensity of the hydraulic action, or whether there were submerged rocks or any other obstacles - it would literally be a leap of faith. And I suppose that for many of us who have done a bit of vertical work in caves, free-jumping into the black void is . . . counterintuitive. All of those thoughts that I have had while standing near the edge of a drop, warning me what would happen if I jumped, or fell, were now being revisited. Those warning thoughts were quite unnerving. It took a while for me to shake them off. Meanwhile, I got passed up in line, forfeited all of my accumulated style points, and was relegated to the role of spotter. My comfort level increased somewhat as I watched the others jump and heard them each acknowledge "Clear!" as they continued downstream with the flow of the river. Eventually I made the jump, more than anything due to the desire to go ahead and get it over with one way or the other. If this trip turned out to be nothing more than a delusion on my part and I came to my senses after having actually jumped into and already fallen halfway down the entrance drop in Sótano de las Golondrinas, at least at that point it would (almost) be a done deal.

We continued with the survey downstream of the jump, setting stations where we could. Running tape was easy, as there were many dripping stalactites hanging mid-stream in the fast-flowing channel. Reading instruments wasn't so easy for Fofu, though, as the strong current seemed to knock him off station a lot. He seemed to be having a hard time keeping the instruments dry, too, while having to dogpaddle to stay afloat. But we got the survey and sketching done, nevertheless, then returned to play time on the river.



Peter slides down a chute. Terri Sprouse photo



Fofu makes the jump into Cueva de Matacanes no. 2. Peter Sprouse photo

The entrance to Cueva de Matacanes No. 2 seemed staged; arranged like the beginning of an adventure ride at an amusement park. On the left was a massive moss-covered flowstone mountain, seeping water from top to bottom, with clumps of maidenhair ferns growing in patches where the water ran. Off to river right, the flowing emerald waves formed a channel undercutting the limestone rock. Wedged in the middle of the narrowing canyon there was an enormous tree that must have been 9 meters long. It was a fallen tree, with a thick, black trunk, seemingly lodged near the cave entrance for effect. Perhaps it had fallen from the top of the mountain, perhaps it had floated down the river only to be stopped at the cave entrance, but its presence seemed ominous. It was obviously distressed with its limbs and branches still clinging to the

trunk, being buffeted by the current; a river runner's nightmare - half exposed, but with the more dangerous half still submerged. Imagine entering this open chamber that had an enormous, fern-covered mountain seeping rivulets of water on river left, a fast-flowing emerald-colored channel under-cutting the stone mountain on the right, and a huge, contorted and quivering strainer-of-a-tree, all leading into a bend in the river that marks the entrance into the second cave.

We were running late, so we decided not to map the second cave. We still had a long way to go to reach our take-out at Las Adjuntas. In addition to Yari, others in our group were beginning to get cold, so, while we were still tinkering with the first survey, a group of them had broken ranks and forged their way on down the mountain. Anyway, leaving the survey of the second cave for later would provide justification for making a return trip. The second cave was mostly swimming. As we swam towards the light at the end of the river tunnel, the sunlight filtering through the deep, aquamarine lake that marked the exit was quite spectacular. From there it was mostly walking alongside the streambed and out of the canyon to the trucks.

Participants: Ernie Garza, Ramon Godina, Rudolfo "Fofo" Gonzalez, Doug Heyden, Adriana Montemayor, Xavier Salinas, Charley Savvas, Peter Sprouse, Terri Whitfield Spouse, Yari and other Monterrey cavers.

