

**Rancho San Judas Tadeo**  
April 2005  
text by Terri Whitfield Sprouse  
Images by Peter Sprouse



*The crew*

Every now and then Peter Sprouse and Charley Savvas start thinking about waking up the Power Wagon buses and taking them out for a spin. Waking up cranky 50-year-old buses usually means at least a day or two of mechanic work - replacing carburetors, charging batteries and grinding out frozen lug nuts - then a drive or two around the neighborhood to round out the tires. Then they go at least a half-days' drive somewhere south and west towards a hole in the ground surrounded by dried-out cow pies on some dusty ranch in the desert. This time they aimed the buses for the caves created by the sulfur water that flows toward the Río Bravo through the Rancho San Judas Tadeo, which is located just outside of Cuidad Acuña and within sight of Lake Amistad reservoir and dam.

We arrived at the ranch well after dark, met the cavers from Saltillo, and soon headed off-road following GPS coordinates. With night vision shadowed by wind-blown dust and the occasional agave and sage, we closed in on the waypoint. Obscured by the brush, the pit entrance remained elusive as the buses circled eerily through the desert. There is something surreal about riding off-road through the desert in a lurching and lumbering four-wheel-drive bus. Stranger yet is riding in such a bus at night towards a pit. Sensing that the entrance drop was near, those who could bailed out of the buses, offering to work as "spotters." Some of us who remained braced ourselves, anticipating that one or both of the buses might locate the pit first and go barreling over the lip. But soon the cave was spotted, and the buses inched close to the edge so that the bumpers could be used as rigging points.



*Entrance to Cueva de Casa Blanca*

Next morning we saw that one of the buses was in primo position for rigging the entrance drop, so a rope was dropped from the front bumper. This was the second trip in as many months to Cueva de Casa Blanca, which was named for an old abandoned ranch house nearby. The entrance drop appeared to have been caused by a collapse which plugged the dry stream passage on one side, creating a dig lead, but which was open and going on the other side. On the previous trip, two survey teams had pushed the going passage, which warmed considerably as the cave developed into a multi-level canyon with a hydrogen sulfide stream flowing at the lower levels. The stream was hot and smarmy, containing gooey biomats, aquatic isopods and a small mystery organism. Dry passage continued large above it, where the teams collected some small, pale, interesting-looking scorpions. The two teams had eventually tied their surveys together, with the front team calling it quits with a 15-meter shot waiting ahead.

The plan for this trip was to continue the survey in the going passage, and then have a dig team work through the breakdown on the other side and try to open the plugged passage. During the first exploration of the cave, a colony of owls was found perched in the entrance drop. This time, the first cavers to rappel noticed a nest of owlets located off to one side of the entrance drop. The call went out for our trip's ornithologist, Rob Myers, to scurry down the drop to assess the impact our presence would make on the owls and to ensure their safety. He determined that the nest was well away from the rope and the drop zone, but we were advised to minimize our intrusion to ensure that our presence would not cause the nest to be abandoned.

Bev Shade and John Fogarty each led a survey team down the going passage while Charley, Andy and Philip worked on the dig. After several hours of digging, the dig team appeared to be pooping out when Andy emerged from the hole all dusty and sweaty. Several hours after that, the remaining diggers climbed out with long faces and immediately started complaining about how

hot it was down there and how hard the dig was and how tough it was going. Charley and Philip insisted that Andy needed to go back down and finish the dig. After an hour or so of whining and complaining, and just as Andy was heading down the hole to finish the dig, Charley and Philip sprung back into action, jostling to get back down into the pit to claim their going lead. They had not let on that they had broken through the breakdown and all the while they were goading Andy they actually had virgin, open passage waiting to be scooped. They had come to the surface to get the instruments, to rest up before the survey, and to try to get Andy's goat.

The surveyors in the canyon passage suffered the common fate of many follow-up expeditions: the dreaded fizzle-out. The upper portion of the passage was no longer roomy, but became a narrow meander constantly changing shape and direction. They only got a few survey shots before the canyon got too tight, and extremely muddy. Survey tapes could no longer be read, or reeled up. The only way out of the muddy glop seemed to be to drop down to the bottom of the canyon, but they had no vertical gear or inclination to try. The canyon survey teams returned to the surface with their instruments and their clothes thoroughly covered with mud, desperately needing a ride down to the river.



*Entrance to Cueva la Manga*

Meanwhile a number of teams set out to locate other entrances, including some that Joel King had found on the first visit to the ranch some 16 years previous. Peter, Rob, Nancy, Matt, Leah, Monica, and Bradley piled into Joel's truck and they tried to find Joel's leads, but time had blurred the locations, so they went and collected Mando the ranchhand, who had been the guide on the February trip.

Mando first took the group to Cueva la Manga, which had a spectacular entrance that took the drainage of an arroyo, dumping down a climbdown into a large passage. A traverse along the narrow edge of the right wall got them in without rope, although a disgruntled owl collided with Monica, almost knocking her off the ledge. From there a slope led down into a borehole passage, with a few mazy tubes off to each side. Unfortunately the borehole soon ended, leaving the occasional floodwaters slowly sinking into silt and leaves. We spent some time here, introducing some of the newer cavers to surveying techniques and guiding Monica through her first survey sketch. We also surveyed the second cave we visited, Cueva Pasto del Chivo, which was a low room that soon pinched. Another small cave (Cueva de Nancy) was visited and sketched by Joel, Matt, and Nancy. Joel was not convinced that any of his three previous cave leads had yet been discovered, so more work remains.



*Leah and Monica mapping in Cueva la Manga*

**CUEVA CALAVERA DEL CHIVO**  
MUNICIPIO DE ACUÑA, COAHUILA

SUUNTO AND TAPE SURVEY  
3 APRIL 2005  
JAVIER BANDA, PHILIP RYKVALDER,  
PETER SPROUSE  
DRAWN BY PETER SPROUSE

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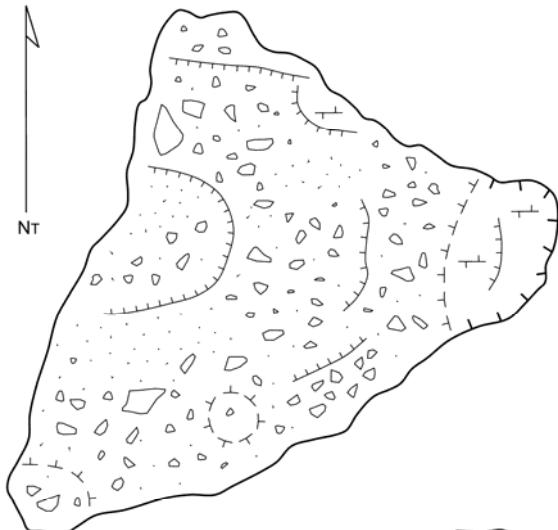
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**CUEVA DE LAS ARAÑAS**  
MUNICIPIO DE ACUÑA, COAHUILA

SUUNTO AND TAPE SURVEY  
3 APRIL 2005  
JAVIER BANDA, PHILIP RYKVALDER,  
PETER SPROUSE  
DRAWN BY PETER SPROUSE

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*Javier Banda in Cueva Calavera del Chivo*

A grand party took place that night around a roaring campfire, celebrating the first true joint expedition of Texas and Coahuila cavers. Songs were sung and caguamas emptied. The next day Nathan convinced a few hardy souls to accompany him back into Cueva de Casa Blanca to collect data on the sulfur water. Matt and Nancy went to look for Mando, who was going to inquire with friends about more cave locations, but he wasn't to be found. Peter, Philip, and Javier went to map two small caves seen on the previous trip. Cueva Calavera del Chivo looked like a typical Hill Country cave, and ended after about 15 meters. Cueva de las Arañas was about the same length. It had a small skylight and looked like someone had dug in the floor.

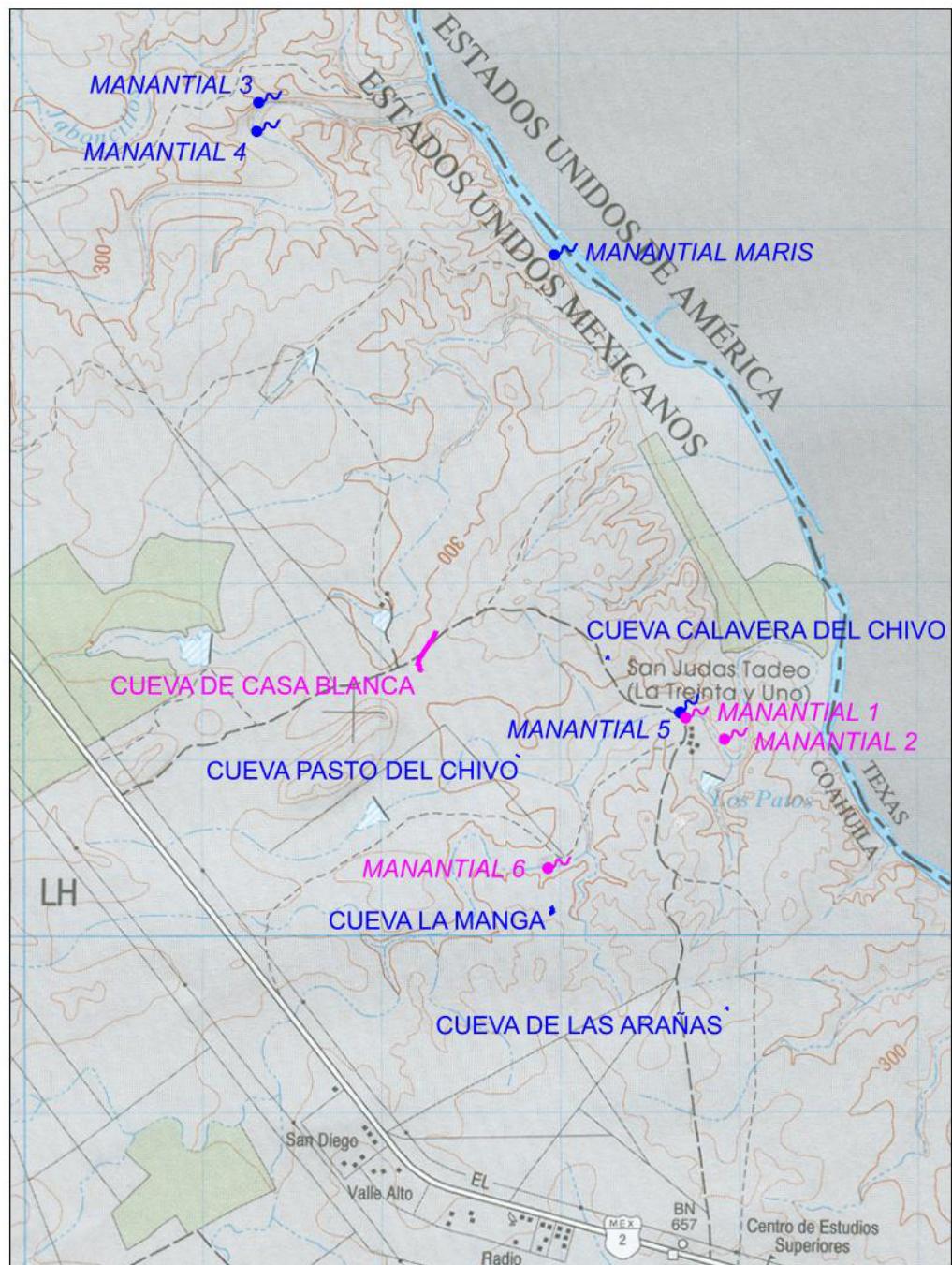
By the time Sunday afternoon came around it was time to pack up the buses for the trip home. Before leaving the ranch, we were all more than willing to make a side trip down to the Río Bravo for a dip in the spring, named Manantial Maris. None of us expected that Andy would dive head first into a submerged rock at the spring. But that is exactly what he did. He sliced his forehead open right between his eyes forcing the trip's paramedic to go into full medical emergency mode. John Fogarty pulled out his monster wilderness first aid kit, stopped the bleeding with compression, cleaned the wound with betadine then butterflyed and bandaged the slice shut. Needless to say Andy was initially chastised, but then was coddled and comforted and ended up happy as a pig in slop since he got to snuggle in the bed deck all the way back to Austin.



*Manantial Maris, on the Río Bravo del Norte*

After photos and farewells, the Saltillo cavers headed south, and the rest drove a few kilometers west to cross into Texas on Amistad Dam.

Participants: Andy Gluesenkamp, Bev Shade, Bradley Lingold, Charley Savvas, Francisco Farias, Javier Bandas, Joel King, John Fogarty, Leah Adams, Matt Oliphant, Mauricio Perez-Gomez; Monica Ponce, Nancy Pistole, Nathan Parker, Peter Sprouse, Philip Rykwalder, Rob Myers, Saul Rodríguez, Shannon Summers, Terri Whitfield, Vickie Siegel, and Vivian Loftin.



SAN JUDAS TADEO KARST

SULFUR WATER  
FRESH WATER