

# Proyecto Laguna de Sánchez

Expedition #15

11-19 March 2017

TRIP REPORT by **CRASH KENNEDY**



AcroYoga on the patio at Emily's casita - Photo by Bryce Smith

The lovely little mountain town of Laguna de Sánchez sits at about 5000' elevation in the Cumbres de Monterrey National Park in the state of Nuevo León, Mexico. It's about an 8-hour drive from Austin. The first visit to the area by cavers was in 1985 by a couple of Germans, Michael Denneborg and Andreas Emonts-pohl, doing field research for their degrees. They worked out a lot of the local geology and mapped three caves there, Abrißkluft Nördlich Laguna de Sanchez, El Infierno de la Camotera, and Pozo en la Camotera. They also mapped a few in the surrounding area, including Cueva Almazan over the mountain in El Manzano, Cueva de la Piedra Parada, and Cueva de los Hundidos, in both Nuevo León and Coahuila.

My first visit to the area was in 1996, assisting fellow bat biologist Arnulfo Moreno with his research on *Leptonycteris nivalis*. He wanted to descend the 55m entrance drop to El Infierno to study the bats inside, but wasn't a caver. I successfully trained him, rigged the entrance, and provided in-cave support. We still remain friends to this day. Besides visiting Infierno, we mist-netted over some ponds in the evenings. Naturally, everybody that walked by wanted to know what we were doing.



Jim's Expedition on the "road" at La Camotera - Photo by Jim Kennedy

When we mentioned the bats, they would say things like “*Oh, do you know about the cave up there (gesturing waaay up a ridge) that’s full of bats?*” Naturally, we were surprised to hear of additional caves. After the third or fourth person telling us of another cave in a different location, I vowed to come back on my own and start exploring and mapping them.

Since that initial bat trip, I have fielded 15 mapping expeditions, with over 90 individual participants. In that time we have discovered over 140 new caves, and mapped more than eighty of them. Activity slowed down about 8 years ago due to the Narco danger, but we have resumed trips in recent years, averaging about a trip each year. There is still so much to do before we are able to compile the information into an AMCS Bulletin, our goal.

This year’s trip was a small one. Lots of last-minute cancellations and conflicts left us with only four participants, with none (except me) ever visiting the area before. (One more caver, Hector Mejia, came up from Mexico City halfway through the expedition.) Rebecca Pokluda, Bryce Smith and I left Austin early Saturday morning, and picked up Kayla Weirich in San Marcos. Kayla was a friend of Bryce’s from school, but had never caved before. We had no trouble crossing the border or driving to Laguna. However, when we got to Emily Olson’s house, where we set up base camp, we had a little trouble. It just rained, and the mud and gravel from two years of neglect (and the last time I was there) provided no traction on the steep road to the house. Despite our caution, we slid into a wall and were stuck for two days until a backhoe could pull us out. Luckily it only rained that first day.

We spent a truckless day acclimating, buying provisions at the local tiendas, and hiking around town. Highlights included yoga on the patio and a guided tour of the local mezcal distilleries. Yes, we bought about 13 liters of mezcal for later, but avoided buying the 40-liter jug, since that would make us alcoholics. We also made a couple of nice hikes, and ate awesome food in the restaurant overlooking the namesake laguna.

After the truck was rescued, we began our adventures in earnest. We made an epic scenic drive through the mountains, through deep canyons, beautiful valleys, and over pine-covered passes. We must have surprised the hell out of two guys hauling a horse in their pickup coming at us on what could generously be described as a 4-wheel-drive road. *Pinche gringos!* We finally made it out of the mountains as the sun was setting, but still had to refuel and make our way back to LdeS, another hour away. But would we do it again? In a heartbeat!

The next day we drove up to my friend Paolina’s house. We were welcomed like long-lost relatives. Shouldering our packs, we made short work of the hike up to Llano Grande, stopping only for the obligatory photos at the precipice overlooking the town. Our goal for the day was Guides Cave (Cueva Guía), where Matt Zapp, Steph Davlantes, and I were stopped by three pits during our survey in November 2014. We kitted up and I showed Bryce how to set bolts, which he did well. We dropped the first pit, and it led to a jumbled maze of collapse passages. Eventually Kayla



Ready to distill a new batch of goodness - Photo by Kayla Weirich



Gerardo’s farm at La Camotera. LdeS is over that pass in the background - Photo by Kayla Weirich



Bryce says “This scenery definitely doesn’t suck!” - Photo by Bryce Smith



Rebecca befriends the magueyero's burro - Photo by Jim Kennedy

found a way on, and learned that it connected to the second pit that I pounded open in 2014. After that was surveyed, it was off to pit 3, which I was able to freeclimb. That mapped back towards pit two before pinching out. Bryce climbed the terminal dome, only to find there were no leads. It was good to be able to wrap up this survey. That evening Hector finally found us (we expected him four days earlier). We made a great dinner, prepped gear for the next day, and partied until late.

In the morning we packed the truck and headed to La Camotera, a large karst plateau over the Tejocote pass from the laguna. The roads are marginally better than when we recovered the truck after 2010's Hurricane Alex, but a far cry from the late 90s, when we drove a mini-van back there. High ground clearance is an absolute necessity, and even the Expedition bottomed out a time or two. Two-wheel drive is OK as long as it is dry, but woe unto thee if it rains!

After an hour or so of bumping along and spinning tires, we made it to my friend Gerardo's house. He and his family are the only living souls on the entirety of Camotera. He told us they found two more caves, and that the boys could show us one the next day. We took a short hike to El Infierno so everyone could be impressed, then drove on to the awesome campsite we have used the past 6 trips or so. After setting up camp we then drove to the trailhead\* and hiked to Cueva No Se Grande ("I Don't Know if it's Big" Cave). I started the survey of this one on Expedition 9 (December 2008 to January 2009) with Tone Garot and Devra Heyer, but was stopped by lack of time and bad air. Matt, Steph, and I (with Kathryn Huchton and Sara Cline) tried to push past the last pit in 2014, but could not find any natural anchors, and neglected to take a hammerdrill. This time we were prepared. We rigged the pits easily and Bryce and I made it to the bottom of the cave, only to find that the air quality was horrible. We managed to set a single bolt before routing, so the pit is still undropped. Someone needs to go back there again in the winter to finish the survey, but after three trips to the bottom, I'm done.



Gerardo Torres and his family - Photo by Hector Mejia

We enjoyed a fine campfire that night, more incredible food, and excellent camaraderie. The next morning we packed up, and started back. We picked up the boys at Gerardo's and drove down the road to the stream crossing. From there we hiked up towards the Mesa Seca caves to a new pit the teens found while looking for their goats. It was obscured by thick brush, but definitely requires a rope. We'll have to hit it on a future trip. We named it Cousins Cave (Cueva de los Primos) after the discoverers. We said our goodbyes and headed back up the road, only to be diverted by a swim in the icy mountain stream on the way. It was another one of those "can't pass it up" opportunities. Once back at the casita, some of us took a little hike to White Rock Cave (Cueva Peidra Blanca) and Styrofoam Cave (Cueva Poliestireno), just across the valley from Emily's.



Making dinner (and drinking) back at base camp - Photo by Hector Mejia

The last day we packed the truck, cleaned the house, and gave all the remaining food to the neighbors (and the pig up the street). We made a little detour to Bustamante on the way home, to have lunch with Nico Escamilla and to take a quick tour of Gruta del Palmito. We had no issues crossing the border, and made



Kayla seems to like this caving stuff! - Photo by Hector Mejia



Rebecca is ready to tackle the second drop in No Se Grande.  
- Photo by Hector Mejia

it home safely. I hope to schedule another trip in the next six months, when the temperatures are low. Bryce also wants to lead a death hike to a large cliff-face entrance way up on a mountain.

Proyecto Laguna de Sánchez has a website at [www.garot.com/LdeS](http://www.garot.com/LdeS) with the project archives,

and a Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/lagunadesanchez/](https://www.facebook.com/lagunadesanchez/) for announcements. We need help updating the website, and also drafting up maps from the surveys.

Please let me know if interested in any of the above, [cavercrash@gmail.com](mailto:cavercrash@gmail.com) 🦋



Hector, Kayla, and Bryce washing off the stink - Photo by Jim Kennedy



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