

2022 Thanksgiving Caving trip to Laguna de Sanchez, Mexico

By Virginia Price

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In the heart of the Mexican Sierra Madres, south of Monterrey, nestled between soaring limestone cliffs, a big, sexy, miles-wide dolina-like feature adorns the topographic maps. This “Laguna” occasionally fills with water, becoming an ephemeral lake, before mysteriously disappearing. Several decades ago, a team of German karst scientists made an enthusiastic foray to the laguna- only to find that it was not a dolina leading to a massive cave system, but a natural dam caused by a landslide.

Fortunately, there was a major consolation prize. The abundant beds of limestone of the area yielded numerous small caves; a day’s walk around any of the high plateaus surrounding the laguna was liable to yield several new finds.. The result is an accessible area rich with virgin caves, 4 hours from Laredo, TX, set in a friendly Mexican mountain town, and surrounded by spectacular scenery. Jim Kennedy of the Underground Texas Grotto maintains a house in Laguna, and runs bi-annual “light expeditions” to the area.

The Thanksgiving 2022 expedition left Austin, obtained visas and truck import permits at the border, and traveled down the Nuevo Laredo-Monterrey highway. An advantage of this highway is that tolls pay for patrols by the heavily armed National Guard, providing protection for daytime travelers. South of Monterrey, we continued up winding, daringly engineered mountain roads, cutting through the high limestone cliffs of the Cumbres de Monterrey National Park. Many stream crossings were freshly

repaired from recent wildfires and debris flows. Once in Laguna de Sanchez, we shooed away a lone house tarantula, and grabbed assorted crash spots on mattresses, floors, and the new flat roof that boasts dazzling views. The next morning we grabbed huevos and cafe de oya at the local restaurant, watching as clouds poured like milk over the surrounding mountain passes.

We first headed down to Mesa del Oso, to find a new-to-us cave. This involved a rough 4wd road through Mexican villages, a steep hike down the mountain, and me getting charged by a bull. Our reward was a short cave at the bottom of a 2000' sheer cliff, as well as views of nearby unmapped mid-cliff cave entrances. The rest of the expedition was dedicated to exploring and mapping a number of new and old cave finds above town, a 40 minute hike up onto Llano Grande.

I was excited to complete my first 2 drawn-to-scale cave sketches - one of a 200' deep multi-level fissure cave, Rotten Root- and one of Cedar Pit- a newly found 60' deep cave, covered in old, chalky flowstone. In the evening, we entered our data into Walls and generated a 3D cave image.

Other teams explored and surveyed several other caves, both old and new. Caves in the area tend to be paleo-karst, often developed along faults, and sometimes located in large limestone blocks that are detached from their original place on the mountainside. Passage varies from tight crawls to good walkable canyons. Many caves are decorated with old flowstone, and a few have active formations. The high-altitude desert setting, frequented by clouds, creates beautiful epiphyte-draped pine forests, with an agave-mix understory. The open understory has many interesting plants, and makes finding new caves relatively easy. Caves are inhabited by an array of fauna, including harvestmen, spiders, crickets, and pseudoscorpions.

The great thing about Laguna de Sanchez trips is that the work pace allows for learning. If you are new to bolting, sketching, rebelay, etc, this is a great place to hone skills. The Underground Texas Grotto fielded three simultaneous Mexican expeditions this Thanksgiving; Laguna is a great place to make new exploration-oriented caving friends. Another big plus is that expedition members tend to be a mix of Americans and Mexicans. There are plentiful opportunities to practice Spanish, and talk about life and caving in Mexico..

We celebrated Thanksgiving with a survey trip, followed by sopa de estrellas, courtesy of a friendly local grandma, Paula, and tacos at a local restaurant. We wrapped up the trip, having surveyed 5 caves, bringing the current Laguna total to over 150 surveyed caves.

A spring trip is planned for Cugahon, a karst plateau in the wild country out beyond Laguna de Sanchez. New members (especially those with 4wd trucks) are welcome. There will be plenty of surveying and ridgewalking to be done.





