

**MEXICO:** *by EARL and Lannis:*

We had a chance to combine some caving with a wonderful and simultaneous opportunity to see the workings of a sacred cave. The interest in seeking caves in this area is because of its remoteness, and its nearness to some of the greatest pit caves in the world; Golandrinas (1154 ft), Guaguas (800 ft) and Cepillo (450 ft). Along the Pan American Highway cavers have noticed a hole in the ridge of the Sierra Madre mountains, and always with the resolve to go up there someday. Decades have passed. Jim Sherrell has been seeking permission to visit these caves for 2 years without success locally. All the Federal and State agencies OK'd the permits, but the locals denied him. Finally he was granted an audience last Monday with almost the entire community in attendance, dressed in their finest. After two hours of negative discussion, they all voted no, then the judge read Jim's prepared letter and they all voted yes. They gave him a One Time permiso to visit their sacred caves, escorted by 4 Vigilantes who watched that we did nothing to disturb the gods who lived within. Jim understood that their fears were that we might disturb the "Money". All we ever saw were a few worthless coins, but...? Our hike was about 1 1/2 mile, but it gained over 1000 feet in elevation. We had packed food and sleeping gear for 2 nights, hoping that we would explore for more caves after mapping the 3 known caves up there. The first half was not too bad, but when we reached the "escaleros" and then the "ladder", I was whipped. Some of the guias offered... and in a blink, we surrendered our packs to them. They were not even breathing hard! \*\*\*\* This first ladder was skinny like the second. But if this old man with a ton of firewood on his back can make it up and down, along with two dogs which did the same... we can make it without our packs. At the entrance of the cave Jim had suggested that we light a candle before entering, and act like we were being respectful to the gods. The guias responded favorably, and carried our packs up and across a spindly bridge of saplings into the small opening. I was supremely respectful to the gods after looking at that ladder, bound at each joint with barbwire. I wished I had a boatload of candles. Never leave home without your candle. This cave was only a short distance from the summit of the mountain, having been formed when the whole area was a flat plateau. Erosion and thousands of years have left these cave remnants, only a couple of hundred feet long, with a window on each side of the ridge. The

large rooms are heavily decorated, but are so old that calcite has oozed onto the surface and hardened into a 1/2 inch thick layer of very white calcite. Bright and beautiful, it is easy to understand that they worship this place. They call this cave "Dos Pilas" or "Two Tanks" because the tops of two of the tallest stalagmites have been eroded into ponds holding about 20 gallons of the ONLY water up here. It will be our only water, but the guias have cautioned us not to cook with or boil it. It is OK to drink but if it is boiled that we might be struck by lightning... or that we will surely perish shortly in some other way. Also, that water was pretty good. As Earl was filtering water into our containers, I dropped the lid to the filter into the water and my head spun 360 degrees, certain the vigilantes would be on us in a second. Earl retrieved it from the holy water and his hand did not fall off or anything. That was close. Those guys watched our every move. One of them took Jim's "holy water" that came from a liquor store. He gave it to the fellow as a gift as the Indian was so nice to point it out (being against the cave rules and all). The Medicine Man, or Shaman, or as known locally... Brujos (BREW-hoes) repeat an old legend that these caves were formed when two of their ancients on opposite ridges, fought with Lightning Bolts and these caves were the result. They were poor shots, as they kept hitting the tops of the mountains. The cave was not complicated and we mapped it quickly. That gave us time to visit two other caves nearby. One entrance was beyond a scary ledge that worried the locals more than us. They KNEW their capabilities and worried about ours. There were several feet of very narrow ledge into the cave, a matter of falling a mile or so. Almost made me nervous. When you don't get much sleep, your muscles are not up to par. Last night, Jim snored so hard he sounded like a 400lb. boar laid out from eating fermented corn. And when he stopped after 4 hours, Earl started in. Maybe it would've been good to light a pack of candles, but it's past now. Jim noted that the down sloping entrance could resemble looking down someone's mouth... a row of teeth above and below the drip line, molars at the sides, and an uvula where it should be. A perfect name until one of the locals said it already had a name "Cueva los Maizcitos" as the uvula resembled little ears of maize, or corn. Regarding corn: Boiled Field Corn is sold on a stick in the marketplace. You can pick your own ear of corn out of the hot water, usually. It is slapped all over with mayonnaise, rolled in parmesan, sprinkled with chili powder and spritzed with limon. Friggin' awesome. Below the cave is a slab of mountain that broke

away and slid down, forming a triangle shaped cave 600 feet long and 300 feet high. Leaning out to get a better view I noticed the gleam of candlelight from a crack, a perilous journey across the canyon. The guides chose not to notice. I didn't notice it either, Kemo Sabay. Daylight was a premium now and we cleaned up and headed down. They had insisted we park the van in the open aired Assembly Hall where we all enjoyed some Milwaukee's Best, sodas, chips and snacks. Not to mention the better part of my cabernet sauvignon. All this snacking was going on while waiting for El Presidente. I am not sure he would be happy about giving alcohol to the Indians. One of the guides, Valente, had on a yellow PRD shirt and I asked him where he bought it. He wrote down the name of the store here in Valles, but no street address. PRD is the equivalent of our far left Democrats. It holds sympathies for the Zapatista Army of Resistance (Indian revolutionaries). Earl asked him a question about politics. On an impulse, I shouted, "Vive Las Zapistas!" and Valente laughed out loud causing all the other people to stare and laugh as well. So glad they didn't frown. We gave out two of our caving calendars. Valente rode back to Huichihuayan with us and Jim hired him to fix the roof on his mother-in-laws house. We are in awe of the physical condition of our guides and the reverence they hold for their caves. The village chief showed up for a report of what we did and found. He seemed pleased with the results and we hope this will lead to more adventures.

