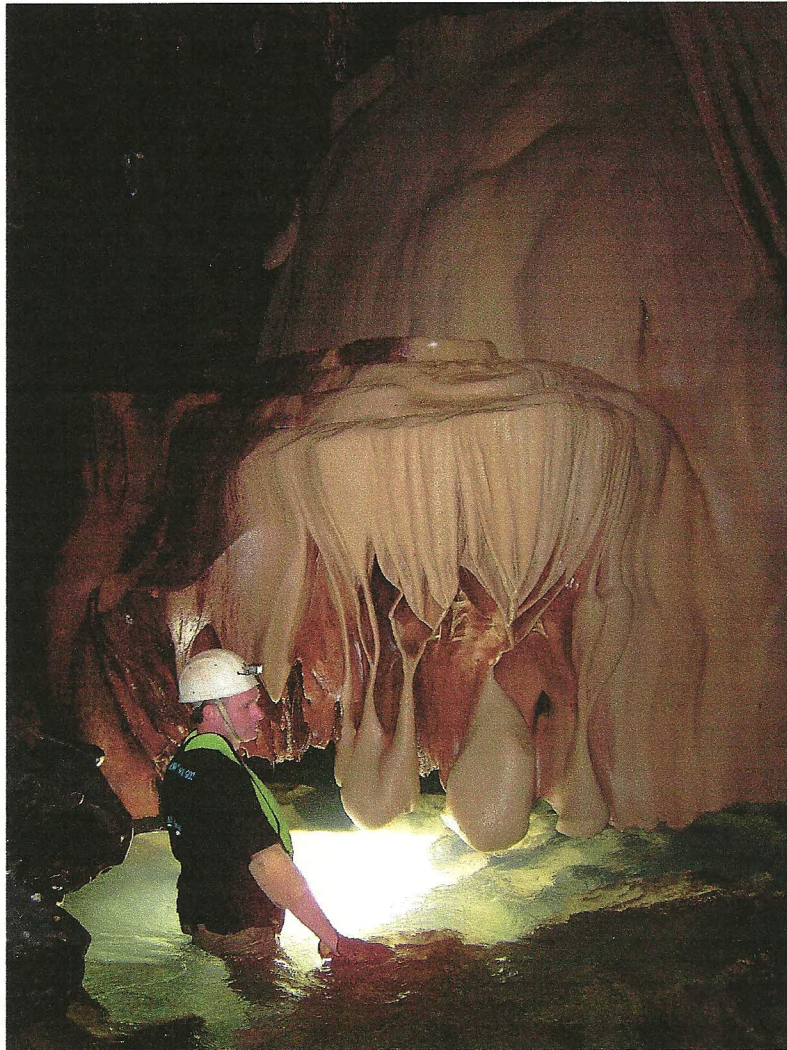


THE SPELEONEWS



February & March 2011



Editor's note

Welcome to the special extra-long February and March 2011 edition of *The Speleonews*. Aside from Grotto news, upcoming trips, and trip reports, this edition will also cover Part Seven of Ric Finch's epic: *Caving in Honduras*.

By the way, if anyone has information on how the Karst and Cave Working Group, it might be interesting to the rest of the group, too.

Good caving!

Email: news@nashvillegrotto.org/

Cover: Pete Miller in Cueva Quebrada Susmay --Photo by Mary Gratsch



News

2011 Election Results:

Chairman: David Wascher
Vice Chairman: Ed Yarbrough
Treasurer: Sara Garing
Secretary: Avis Moni

The Cave Management Committee:

2 year term: John Law, John Hickman, LaCresha Kolba

1 year remaining: Jody Bailey, John Hoffelt, Bill Overton, and David Wascher

Other Committee Members:

Conservation Chair: LaCresha Kolba

Safety Chair: John Hickman

Publications: Brett Campbell

Cave Property Management: TBA

Ongoing events:

Nashville Grotto regular meetings are held the 1st Thursday of each month at 7:00 pm at REI, Brentwood. 261 Franklin Rd. Brentwood, TN 37027 (615) 376-4248
These meetings are open to anyone interested in the club. You do not need to be a member to attend.

Nashville Grotto Executive meetings held on the 3rd Thursday of each month, and are open to all members of the grotto. Location is rotated amongst member's houses or other locations. Check the website for details.



You are invited to...

**40th Kentucky Speleofest, hosted by
The Louisville Grotto**

Memorial Day Weekend

**on May 26-30, 2011 at The Lone Star
Preserve in Bonnieville, KY.**

Please join us and bring old pictures, stories, and help us celebrate 40 years of wonderful caving memories with old and new friends. We will have a food vendor, on Rope 1, camping, warm showers, howdy party with DJ, banquet, live band, kayaking, hiking, cave social, orienteering, geocaching, many activities for children, two guest speakers, door prizes, wet-in-wild cavers decon, speleo-slide, burning cave man bon fire, party camp, and a vertical class.

This year we are offering several new caves!

All caving will be based on the most current information from the KY Fish and Wildlife. For more information check out our website:

louisville.caves.org



Caving in Honduras, Part VII: **Diary of a Hard Luck Trip**

By Ric Finch, NSS 5560RL

As I recall, it all began with an unexpected phone call from Gerald Moni....
"Ric, are you leading anymore caving trips to Guatemala? I'm retired now and need to find something to do before I get too sedentary." Well, the answer was "No, I am not planning to lead another caving trip to Guatemala, but another trip to Honduras is a possibility." I was thinking of returning to Cueva Siete Quebradas (see CIH, Pt. VI); it deserved being mapped. And I had a hot lead on a deep cave in conglomerate that needed to be checked out.

April 11: Gerald and Avis Moni and I flew out of Nashville to Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. However, I nearly didn't make the flight due to the "pipe bomb" in my luggage.... I was carrying a cave register constructed from a segment of 4 inch diameter PVC pipe, and if its suspicious shape wasn't enough, the mercury in the thermometer I had stored in it lit up the TSA scanners like a Christmas tree. Luggage passage through the scanner jammed, excited phone calls were made, extra agents arrived, and a gloved inspection of my luggage was gingerly begun. When I saw it was mine (I always wait to see my luggage clear inspection, especially when carrying caving gear), I let them know I was the owner. Immediately I was made to produce identification and both my passport and driver's license were photographed. They took so much time checking me and my "bomb" out that I would certainly have missed my plane had not a TSA agent taken me personally through security. Whew! Near hard luck. And wouldn't Gerald and Avis have had a fun time had they landed in Tegus on their own!?

April 12: Gerald and Avis and I were joined by my Honduras/Guatemala caving stalwarts, Mary Gratsch and Pete Miller from Ohio. This was their fourth trip to Central America with me.

We were delayed a bit getting out of town by taking in a show of historic air craft put on by the Honduran Air Force. Neither Pete (who is a pilot) nor I (a history buff) could pass this up. One of the wonderful old warbirds was the very Corsair fighter flown by Honduras' hero pilot during the so-called "Soccer War" with El Salvador in 1969. I probably saw this very plane in flight in a 1970 air show, but nowadays it looks completely grounded. In spite of the non-flying state of many of the planes, it was a fascinating display of air relics.



Honduran Air Force Corsair --Photo by Ric Finch

By late afternoon we were headed north out of Tegus in our rented Nissan Pathfinder bound for beautiful Lake Yojoa in western central Honduras, and right on the edge of good cave country. We settled into the rustic Motel Los Remos on the south shore of the lake.

April 13—Headed underground, finally. Or were we? First we had to modify the entrance to Siete Quebradas. When we visited and partially explored this cave in 2006, broad-shouldered Pete couldn't get in, the entrance being a tiny crack between giant boulders. Gerald wouldn't fit either, so we were going to have to "Moni-ize" the entry. But this time we had come prepared with hammer and chisel.

When we arrived at the entrance we saw evidence that the locals have now found the cave—the remains of a three-step notched log ladder. As of 2006 the natives were unaware of this cave, but our visitation inevitably drew some attention to it. Hoping that this did not mean we'd find the cave vandalized, we set to work on getting Pete and Gerald in. It took a full hour of beating, prying, digging, and cursing, but finally we moved a key rock which crashed down into the cave below, leaving an opening just big enough for the big guys to slide through.

By quarter after noon we were all in and ready to start surveying. Here's where Gerald gave me some unhappy news: neither he nor Avis are surveyors! What? Mr. TCS doesn't survey? Nope, he just records and files the caves that others survey! Hard luck for my survey hopes.



Avis and Gerald in Cueva Siete Quebradas --Photo by Mary Gratsch

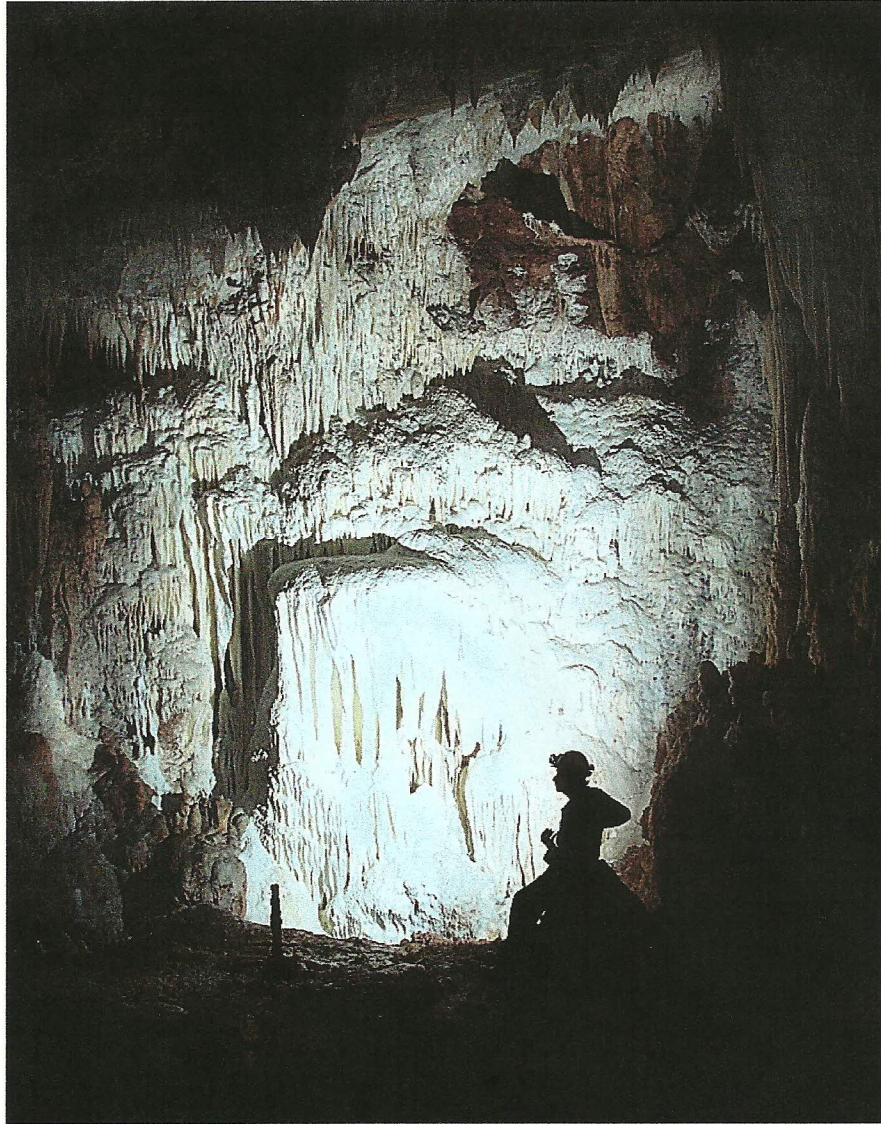
Well, Gerald and Avis became surveyors, against their wishes maybe. As a survey team we certainly did not have our act together, but we managed 31 stations by 4 PM...stopping in the first large room in the cave, a breakdown room above the stream level. The front portion of Siete Quebradas is a wide stream passage, meandering as streams will do, with very irregular walls and variable ceiling height, often 3 - 5 m, and equally often down to one meter or less. It clearly floods to the ceiling in many places. It was quite difficult to sketch. Lots of formations, and, to our considerable relief, no obvious signs of vandalism by whatever locals may have ventured in. Our total for the day was a mere 355 m (1165 ft) of survey. Not a very impressive start on a cave believed to be about 3 km long.




Signing in on the new cave register. —Photo by Mary Gratsch

We installed the bomb – oops, I mean, the register, well above flood level in the breakdown room at station 31, which, with great imagination, I named the “Register Room”. The register contains a sign-in book and also a laminated sheet describing the history of the discovery of the cave and a page of cave conservation information. Because the conservation info cites the great beauty of the cave, and mentions its intriguing thermal stream, we decided not to place the register at the entrance, where it might entice more people to enter, but rather a goodly ways into the cave.

April 14: We were back at station 31 by mid-morning. The breakdown in the Register Room forms a steep pile on the right hand side as you face into the cave, and Pete had found a lead at the top of this breakdown, a virgin passage decorated with beautiful snow white flowstone cascades, draperies and stalactites. We took an hour here to survey nine stations, and photograph the beauties. The formations included what would be called "Frozen Niagara" on a typical commercial cave tour in the U.S., so I named this area the "Pulhapanzak Room" after Honduras' most famous waterfall.



"Frozen waterfall" in the Pulhapanzak Room --Photo by Mary Gratsch



Back at the main stream level, we continued surveying upstream to station 50, still without meeting any tributary streams. I had forgotten how far back into the cave one has to go to begin to encounter the multiple side streams that give the cave its name "Siete Quebradas", i.e., "Seven Streams".

At 3:30 PM we turned back, hoping to get out of the cave and hike back to our vehicle before dark. Unfortunately, the first major hard luck event of the trip occurred as Avis was crossing a breakdown room...a rock turned under her, and down she went in pain. A sprained ankle we thought. Damn, it would be hard to carry anyone out of here. Fortunately, she was able to make it out on her own steam. In pain, but she never complained. She not only negotiated the lengthy cave, its crawls and climbs, and semi-vertical entrance, once out she had to cross the Río Jaitique twice, and hike an hour uphill and down to get back to the car. And yes, it was dark again by the time we got to the Nissan, but Avis is a real trooper!

April 15: By general consent, we did some sight-seeing. Gerald and Avis had told me they weren't going back to Siete Quebradas; Avis couldn't with her ankle painning her so. And the rest of us were tired, too. So we drove a few kilometers to a well-known hot spring site primitively developed for tourism. We paid our admission (less than a dollar), and one of the caretakers thoughtfully provided Avis with a walking stick, and we made our way down into the small stream gully to the thermal springs.

The thermal springs are located along a major normal fault, and flow into an ordinary surface creek right at its junction with the Río Jaitique about three kilometers downstream from Cueva Siete Quebradas. I assume that the thermal stream in the cave is related to the same thermal source as these springs. But whereas the stream in the cave is just pleasantly warm, the springs here are truly hot—boiling, surging, spurting, with temperatures over 100C in some pools. Obviously, we weren't bathing in these pools. But you can bathe where the hot water flows into the Río Jaitique and mixes there with cool river water. Here you can lie in the water and relax...except when a swirl of current happens to vary the flow just so that you momentarily scald one cheek or the other.

To get to the bathing area you have to do a little caving...passing through a natural tunnel perhaps 30 – 40 m long, made of talus and alluvium cemented together by the mineralizing thermal waters. A crude path winds between hot steam and boiling water vents, crossing the creek, now quite hot, on a plank bridge. Sulfurous steam swirls up in clouds, frequently completely obscuring the trail, which is slick. Best take care, a slip here could result in a quick parboiling. It's a Dantesque scene!



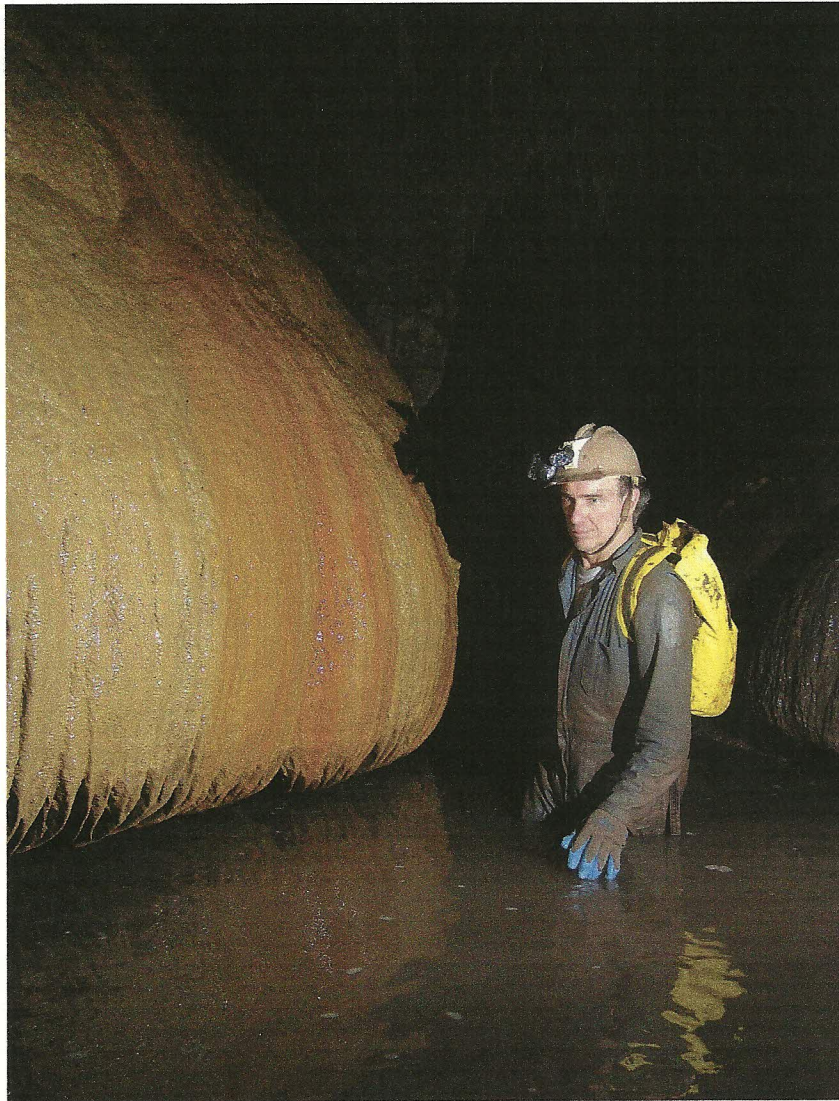
Pete Miller in the tunnel at Azacualpa hot springs –Photo by Ric Finch

After bathing, taking photos, and sipping some *Cuba libres* we returned to our car and headed back to Lake Yojoa, via the “scenic route”...up and over a high limestone mountain fault block, then down into the Mochito valley (home to a major lead-zinc mine that I worked in back in 1973). At the north end of Lake Yojoa we stopped at the run-down resort of Agua Azul for a late lunch/early supper. They still cook a good meal, and the setting on this huge veranda overlooking the lake is truly fine.

We were back at Motel Los Remos by 4 PM. Here we let Mary off, while the rest of us continued another 10 km south to the little town of Taulabé, where we hoped to be able to buy a pair of crutches for Avis, whose ankle was painning her a lot. No ready made crutches could be had, but we found a carpenter who was willing to make a pair! It would take two hours he said, so we headed for internet to while away the time.

Avis’ crutches were ready when we returned to the carpenter’s shop, and he had done a neat job. Cost: just over \$10. An unusual souvenir from Honduras, to say the least.

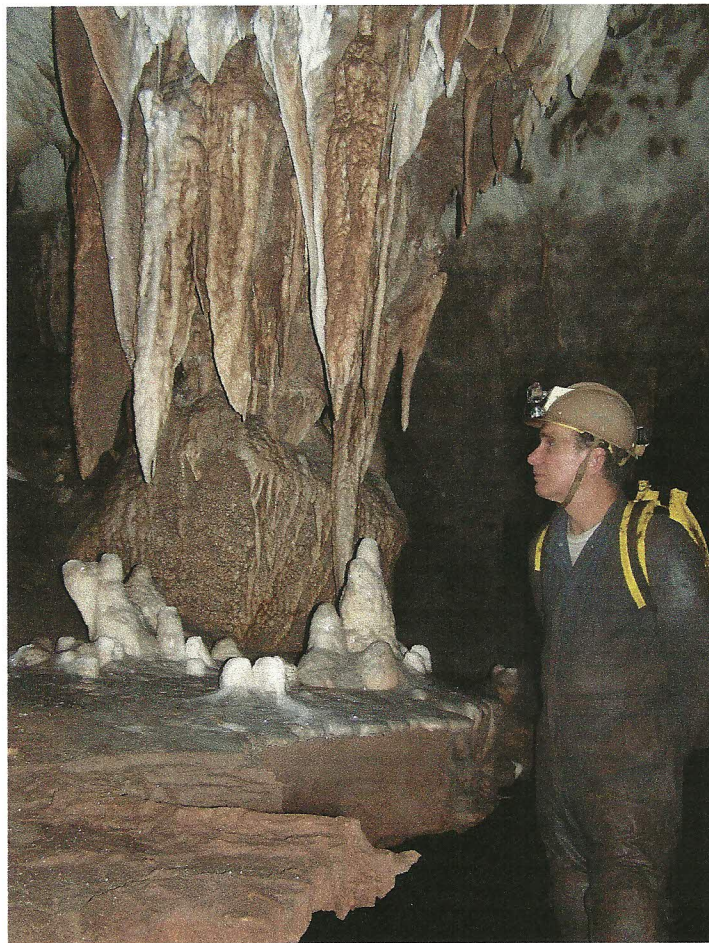
April 16: Today Pete and Mary and I returned to Cueva Siete Quebradas to continue mapping, while Avis let her ankle rest at the motel and Gerald kept her company (waiting on her hand and foot, we hoped!). At station 62 we finally reached the first side stream. The smaller volume left fork ended in a nasty stream crawl just three stations later, siphoning a few feet beyond. Back at 62, the right hand stream (which is the main stream) issues from a low crawl about four meters wide. Beyond this crawl lies the main cave we explored in 2006. We decided to suspend mapping and show Pete the main cave, do some photography, and re-measure the temperature of the thermal stream.



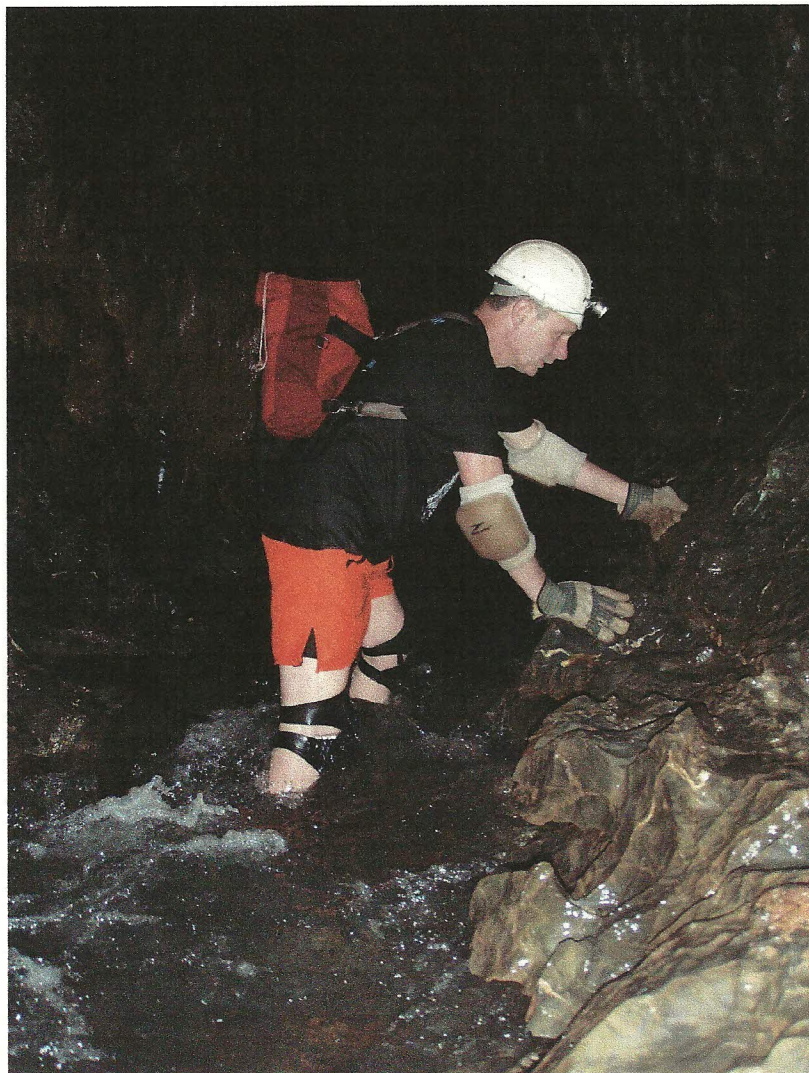
Ric Finch by the Pumpkin Flowstone --Photo by Mary Gratsch

I have to admit, the crawl at the junction made me nervous. It extends just about 15 m before suddenly opening up into big borehole, but it is very low and the skies this morning looked like it was going to rain. Sure would be easy to get trapped back here...a rise of just 10 centimeters or so would do it! But in we went.

We made quick time through the big passage, crawling only once at a duck-under where the third stream joined the second; again the righthand stream is the main flow. Upon reaching "Thermal Junction" I measured the water temperatures: 86 F in the thermal branch, 73-74 F in the normal cave stream. While Pete explored, Mary took photos. I ventured up the main stream through a passage floored with boot-sucking mud, explored by part of our group in 2006, but which I had not seen.

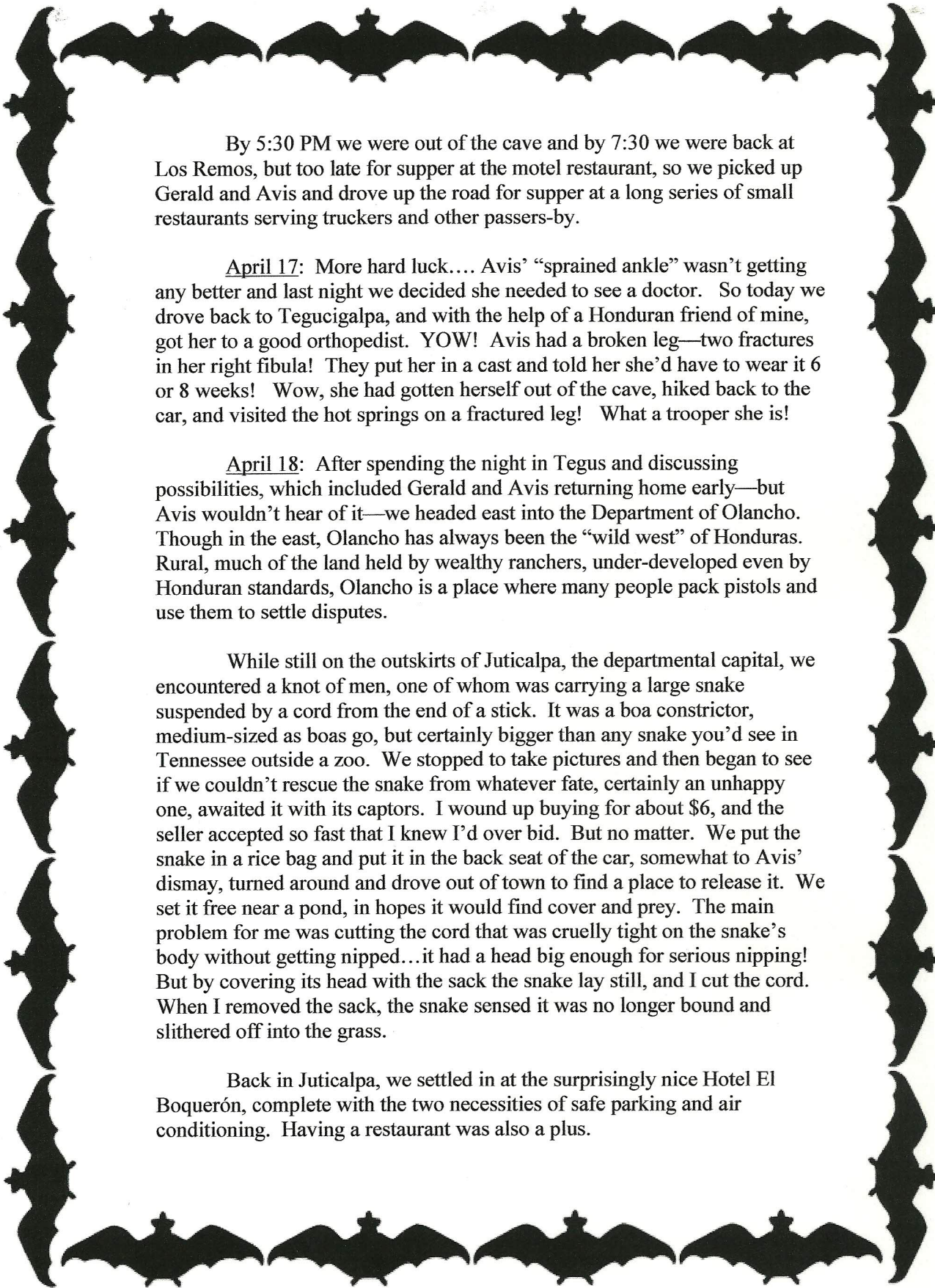


Ric admiring formations in a side passage --Photo by Mary Gratsch



Pete exploring an active stream passage --Photo by Mary Gratsch

On the way out we climbed up into a high collapse dome on the edge of a large bend in the stream passage, some 30 m or more below. The climb was up loose rubble, very steep, and precarious. This was virgin cave apparently, and probably the highest point in the cave. A lot of white formations decorated portions of the walls, but nothing as spectacular as Pete's discovery above the Register Room.



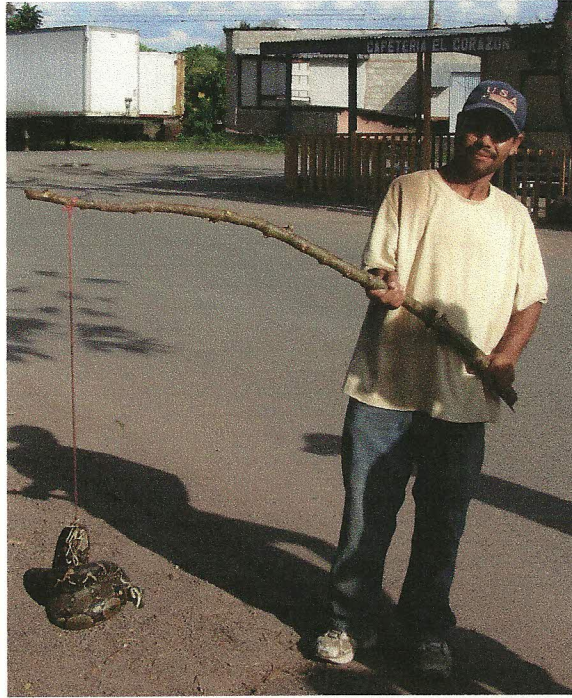
By 5:30 PM we were out of the cave and by 7:30 we were back at Los Remos, but too late for supper at the motel restaurant, so we picked up Gerald and Avis and drove up the road for supper at a long series of small restaurants serving truckers and other passers-by.

April 17: More hard luck.... Avis' "sprained ankle" wasn't getting any better and last night we decided she needed to see a doctor. So today we drove back to Tegucigalpa, and with the help of a Honduran friend of mine, got her to a good orthopedist. YOW! Avis had a broken leg—two fractures in her right fibula! They put her in a cast and told her she'd have to wear it 6 or 8 weeks! Wow, she had gotten herself out of the cave, hiked back to the car, and visited the hot springs on a fractured leg! What a trooper she is!

April 18: After spending the night in Tegus and discussing possibilities, which included Gerald and Avis returning home early—but Avis wouldn't hear of it—we headed east into the Department of Olancho. Though in the east, Olancho has always been the "wild west" of Honduras. Rural, much of the land held by wealthy ranchers, under-developed even by Honduran standards, Olancho is a place where many people pack pistols and use them to settle disputes.

While still on the outskirts of Juticalpa, the departmental capital, we encountered a knot of men, one of whom was carrying a large snake suspended by a cord from the end of a stick. It was a boa constrictor, medium-sized as boas go, but certainly bigger than any snake you'd see in Tennessee outside a zoo. We stopped to take pictures and then began to see if we couldn't rescue the snake from whatever fate, certainly an unhappy one, awaited it with its captors. I wound up buying for about \$6, and the seller accepted so fast that I knew I'd over bid. But no matter. We put the snake in a rice bag and put it in the back seat of the car, somewhat to Avis' dismay, turned around and drove out of town to find a place to release it. We set it free near a pond, in hopes it would find cover and prey. The main problem for me was cutting the cord that was cruelly tight on the snake's body without getting nipped....it had a head big enough for serious nipping! But by covering its head with the sack the snake lay still, and I cut the cord. When I removed the sack, the snake sensed it was no longer bound and slithered off into the grass.

Back in Juticalpa, we settled in at the surprisingly nice Hotel El Boquerón, complete with the two necessities of safe parking and air conditioning. Having a restaurant was also a plus.

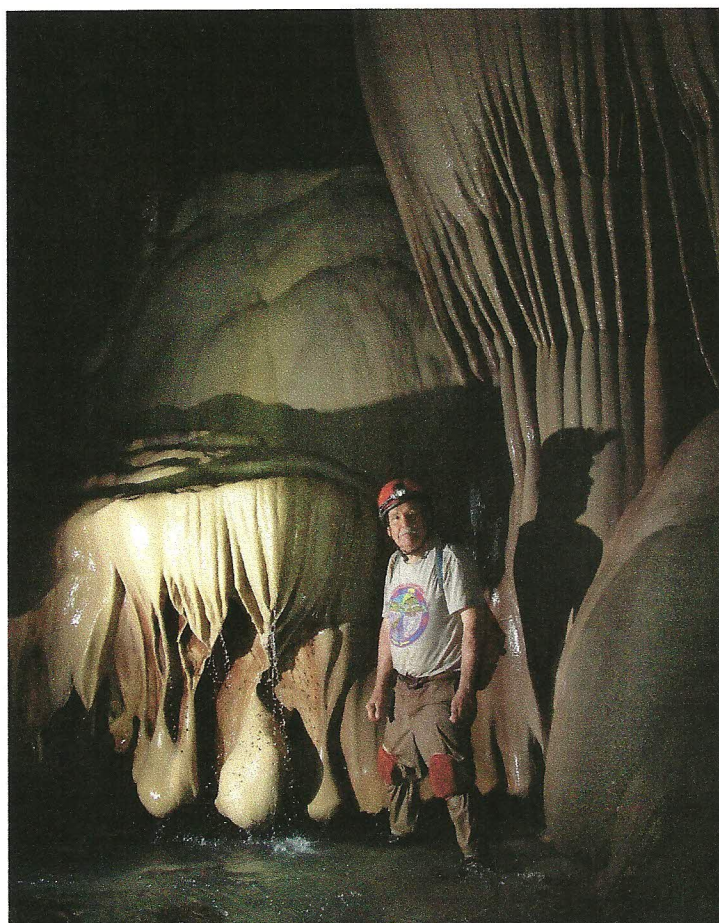


A boa and its tormentor in Juticalpa --Photo by Mary Gratsch

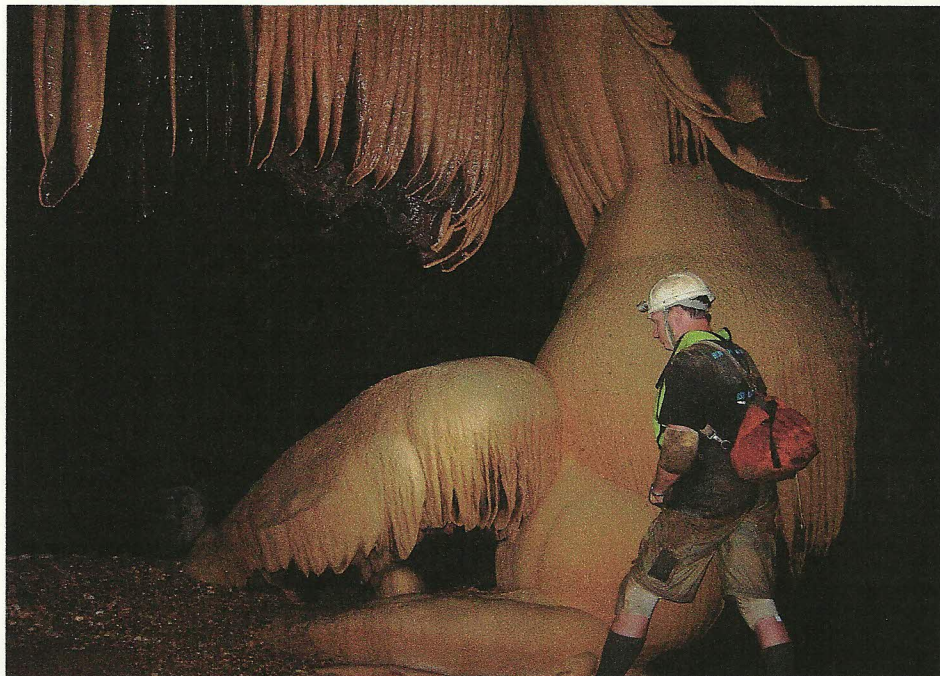


Released boa, can't believe its good fortune! --Photo by Mary Gratsch

April 19: Today, while Avis rested and read magazines at the hotel, Gerald, Pete, Mary and I drove an hour and a half up into the mountains to visit Cueva Quebrada Susmay, the longest known cave in Honduras (6.6 km, first explored in the early '90s by the same Brits who discovered Siete Quebradas, and mapped by Italians in 2005), and an exceptionally beautiful cave. Pete and Mary and I had visited this cave in 2006, and Mary especially was eager to return for more photography. The cave is a resurgence cave, carved out of very dark grey to black limestone dramatically shot through with white calcite veins. Its location is remote, and the locals do not seem to have any interest in entering it; they know that the stream flowing out of the cave can flood seriously. During Hurricane Mitch this stream flooded the large sinkhole valley into which it flows, creating a lake that inundated the village of Susmay for over a week. For whatever reasons, the cave is not visited by locals, and its great beauties are pristine, such as this lovely flowstone mass that nearly fills the passage.



Gerald and flowstone nearly blocking the way --Photo by Mary Gratsch



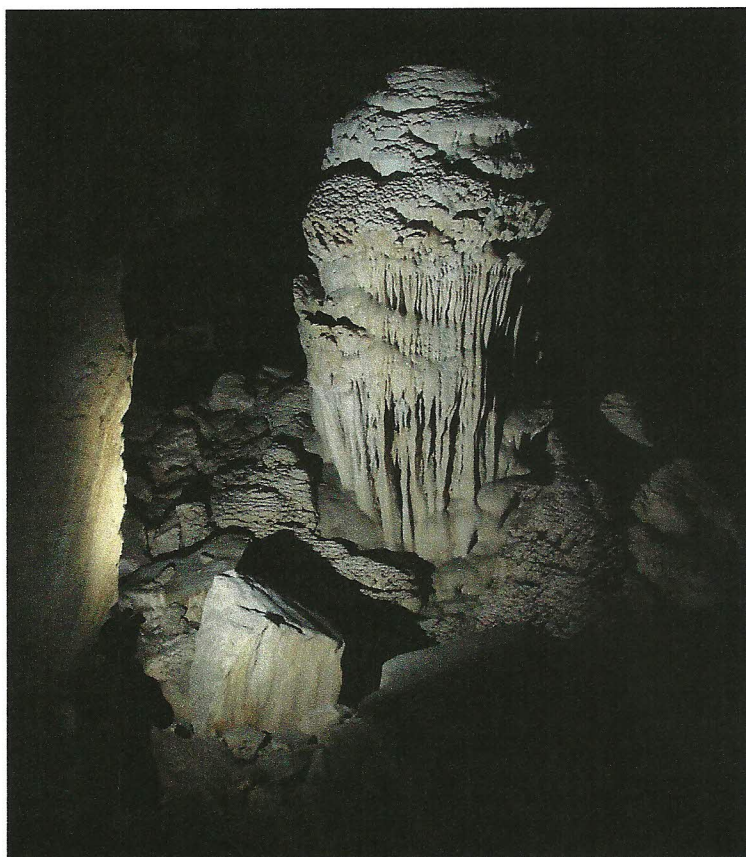
Pete and more flowstone beauties further upstream --Photo by Mary Gratsch



Gerald exiting the low stream crawl on the way out --Photo by Mary Gratsch

To continue on to the upstream majority of the cave, it is necessary to pass through a swift-flowing ear-dipper underneath this flowstone; in the previous image Gerald can be seen emerging on the way out. This sub-flowstone stream crawl is definitively not passable in the wet season, but in the dry season it is the key to seeing other beauties further upstream.

April 20: Today we visited what the Italians called Cueva de la Joya de Zacate, after the nearest tiny cluster of houses. But I prefer to dump this unwieldy name in favor of Cueva Susmay Abajo (Lower Susmay Cave), as this is believed to be the final resurgence for the stream that flows out of the mouth of Quebrada Susmay Cave. This is yet another cave that the Brits explored in the early '90s, and the Italians mapped in 2005. I had been here in 1995 with one of the Brits, but it was a new cave to the rest of our group. The entrance is a large stream passage, with swimming required, for a 100 m or so, then you reach the base of a huge high room that can be accessed only by a hairy climb up a breakdown cliff. But its worth the effort, as this is where the largest and most beautiful formations are found.



Large formations in Cueva Susmay Abajo --Photo by Mary Gratsch


The drama of this impressive chamber is enhanced by a skylight entrance, inaccessible from below.

Beyond the large stalagmites and other formations we reached a cliff, overlooking the upstream passage. But no descent is possible here without ropes. So we returned the way we came up, back down to the stream level, where we picked our way through giant breakdown blocks to pass under the formation room and gain the upstream side. The rest of the passage was big walking passage, a slog upstream to the terminal sump 998 m from the entrance. Though there was not a lot to see in the way of formations, the stream polished cave walls were quite beautiful, and it is such a joy to be in a pristine, unvandalized cave!



Ric on the edge of the cliff --Photo by Mary Gratsch

April 21: Avis' 80th birthday! Today Gerald stayed in town with the Birthday Girl while Pete and Mary and I drove back up into the limestone mountains near Susmay to check out a major sinkpoint on the map. A little under two hours got us as far as 4WD could take us, and we started hiking. Not far on the map, just up and over a ridge. But maps can be deceiving, and it's easy to underestimate how daunting even moderately steep terrain can be in the tropical heat—March and April are the driest months, a prerequisite for caving in Honduras, but also the hottest. After a half hour of hiking we knew



we weren't getting where we wanted to go, so we hired a local guide, who knew a trail that we would never have found on our own. The trail passed a spring which our guide said was the start of Quebrada Borjas. This came as a major surprise to us, as the map showed Qda. Borjas to go underground at the very sinkpoint we were trying to reach on the opposite side of the mountain ridge. Could it be the locals knew something we didn't?

We crossed the high ridge, descended to the hacienda in the valley below, only to discover that we'd have to wait until the owner returned before we could go look at the sinkpoint. So we settled in to wait, and have a bit of lunch.

Fortunately, Don Alejandro, the *hacendado* was not too long in coming in. And then we got the bad news. There is a new road into the hacienda which we could have taken, had we only known. And the Italians had already been here! Damn, just like in 2001, scooped again! Another bit of hard luck.

Alejandro sent his *mayordomo* with us to the big sink, which proved to be an open entrance with good air movement. The Italians had spent 2-3 hours in the cave, so it must go somewhere...probably to the spring our guide had shown us on the way over!

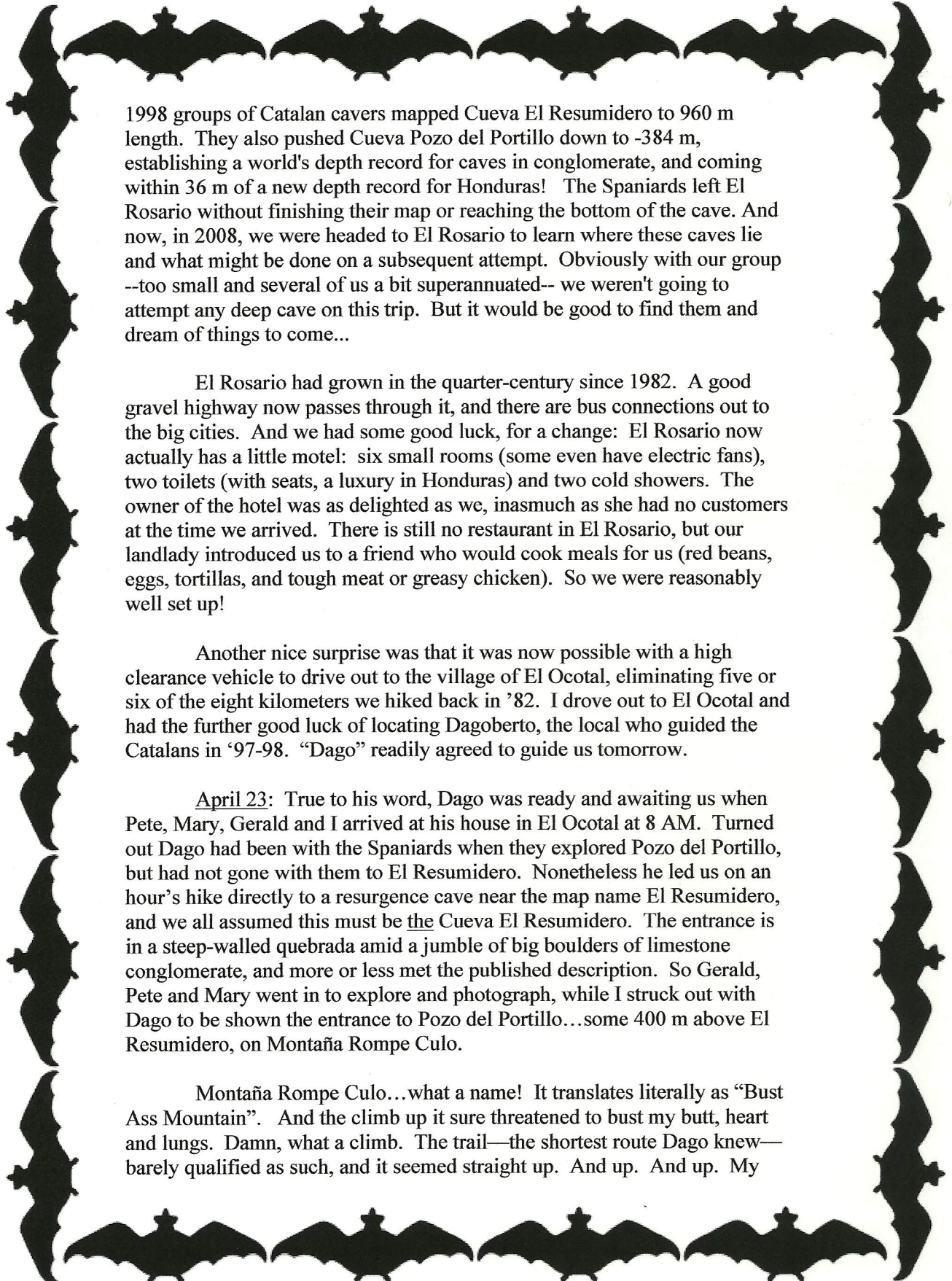
Not wanting to repeat what the Italians had already done, we next went with the *mayordomo* back up and over the ridge we had crossed on the way in, but veering off on a different trail to reach an entrance the Italians had not visited. This cave, in the middle of a burned off cornfield, descended very steeply to an unclimbable drop-off into a high passage. The locals had found bits and pieces of old pottery in the cave, and indeed some remained—coarse ware, nothing fine or ceremonial looking, but likely very ancient.

A rope would be required to continue, but we were ropeless. And there was no air movement, so we were not inspired to go for a rope and return here. Instead, we packed it in, hiked back to our Nissan, returned to Juticalpa and celebrated Avis' birthday at a local pizzeria, complete with a birthday cake ordered the day before. Avis was completely surprised by the cake, and we had a fun time. Later that night I found a happy birthday message to Avis from Anne Elmore on my e-mail! Pretty unusual birthday for Avis, all in all. What a shame her fractured leg was forcing her to sit out all the action...but she never complained.



Avis celebrates her 80th in Juticalpa! --Photo by Mary Gratsch

April 22: Today we headed out for the little town of El Rosario, Olancho, near where the deep conglomerate cave is located. I first passed through this dusty little town back in March of 1982 (see Caving in Honduras, Part 2 1/2, April 1983 Speleonews), accompanied by Elwin and Debbie Hannah and Frank Bogle. We had come to check out the prominent karst in a mountain ridge west of the town. We spent a truly miserable night in the one room made available to us (no hotels at all here then), serenaded by the indescribable caterwaulings of a nearby church meeting-- you'd have to be familiar with these Central American church sing-a-longs to understand how bad they can be! The next day we walked about 8 km to the mountain ridge, looking for a place called "El Resumidero", which is normally a good indicator of a cave. We didn't find it, but we did discover that the ridge was composed of a limestone conglomerate that in all my geologic wisdom I deemed unlikely to harbor a significant cave. Boy was I wrong! In 1997 and



1998 groups of Catalan cavers mapped Cueva El Resumidero to 960 m length. They also pushed Cueva Pozo del Portillo down to -384 m, establishing a world's depth record for caves in conglomerate, and coming within 36 m of a new depth record for Honduras! The Spaniards left El Rosario without finishing their map or reaching the bottom of the cave. And now, in 2008, we were headed to El Rosario to learn where these caves lie and what might be done on a subsequent attempt. Obviously with our group --too small and several of us a bit superannuated-- we weren't going to attempt any deep cave on this trip. But it would be good to find them and dream of things to come...

El Rosario had grown in the quarter-century since 1982. A good gravel highway now passes through it, and there are bus connections out to the big cities. And we had some good luck, for a change: El Rosario now actually has a little motel: six small rooms (some even have electric fans), two toilets (with seats, a luxury in Honduras) and two cold showers. The owner of the hotel was as delighted as we, inasmuch as she had no customers at the time we arrived. There is still no restaurant in El Rosario, but our landlady introduced us to a friend who would cook meals for us (red beans, eggs, tortillas, and tough meat or greasy chicken). So we were reasonably well set up!

Another nice surprise was that it was now possible with a high clearance vehicle to drive out to the village of El Ocotal, eliminating five or six of the eight kilometers we hiked back in '82. I drove out to El Ocotal and had the further good luck of locating Dagoberto, the local who guided the Catalans in '97-98. "Dago" readily agreed to guide us tomorrow.

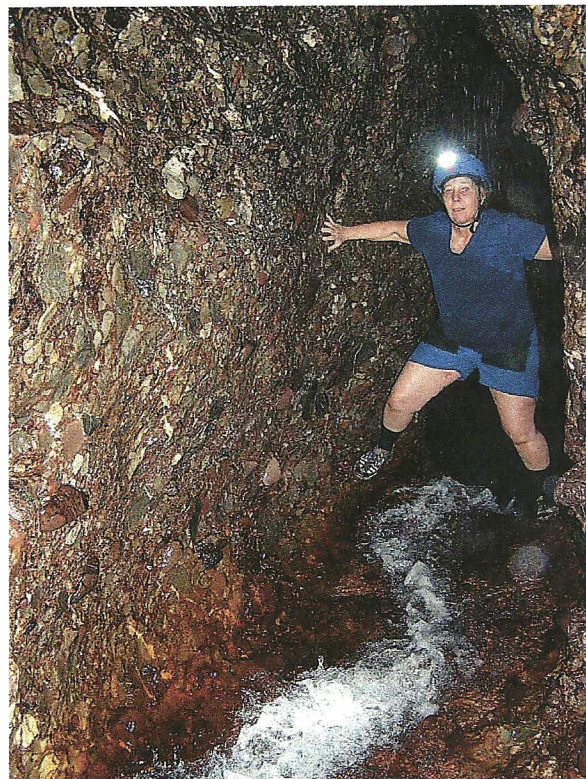
April 23: True to his word, Dago was ready and awaiting us when Pete, Mary, Gerald and I arrived at his house in El Ocotal at 8 AM. Turned out Dago had been with the Spaniards when they explored Pozo del Portillo, but had not gone with them to El Resumidero. Nonetheless he led us on an hour's hike directly to a resurgence cave near the map name El Resumidero, and we all assumed this must be the Cueva El Resumidero. The entrance is in a steep-walled quebrada amid a jumble of big boulders of limestone conglomerate, and more or less met the published description. So Gerald, Pete and Mary went in to explore and photograph, while I struck out with Dago to be shown the entrance to Pozo del Portillo...some 400 m above El Resumidero, on Montaña Rompe Culo.

Montaña Rompe Culo...what a name! It translates literally as "Bust Ass Mountain". And the climb up it sure threatened to bust my butt, heart and lungs. Damn, what a climb. The trail—the shortest route Dago knew—barely qualified as such, and it seemed straight up. And up. And up. My

heart felt like it was bursting. To Dago, of course, it was nothing. He hardly broke a sweat. He is an intelligent young man, very communicative, outgoing, and has quite a philosophical bent. We discussed many topics as I struggled up the steep flank of Montaña Rompe Culo towards the *portillo* or pass where Pozo del Portillo lies.

It took me an hour and a half to ascend the 400 m and reach the entrance to Pozo del Portillo and former campsite of the Spaniards, who spent a week here. The cave entrance is in a sinkhole clogged with giant boulders of conglomerate and swallows a small stream with flow even in the height of the dry season. I took some GPS readings, then we plunged back down to El Resumidero, an hour's trek, hard on my arthritic knees.

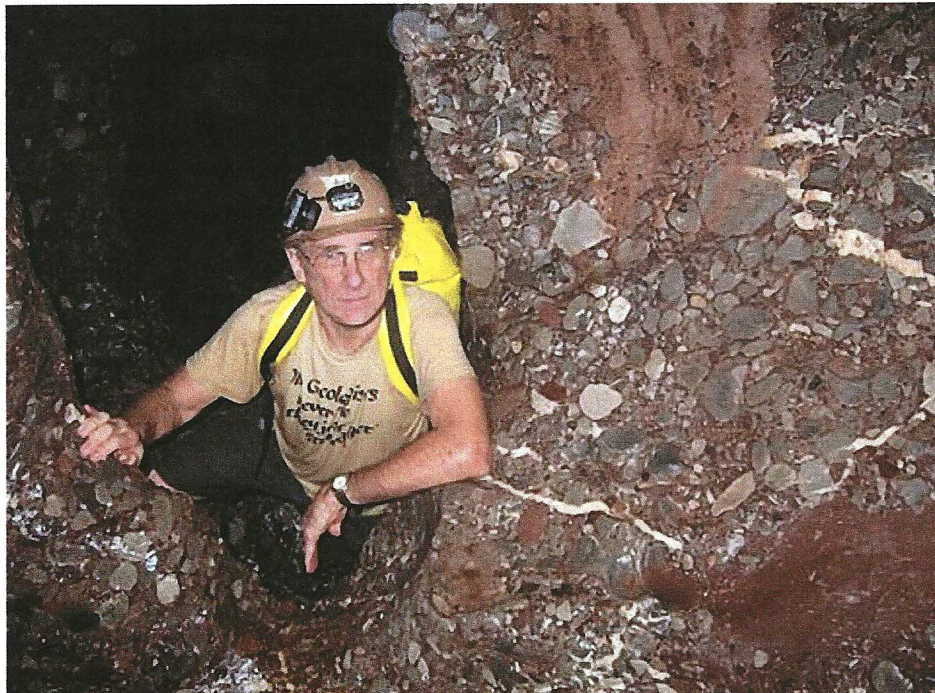
Back at El Resumidero I was surprised to find Gerald sitting outside the cave, with Pete and Mary still inside. I entered and quickly came upon them. They had not gone very far in before they came an interesting climb up and pass that required a long-legged stretch that was a bit much for Mary, so they had spent the last couple of hours photographing, which they were wrapping up.



Mary in the conglomerate cave --Photo by Pete Miller

Since I had just arrived and Pete still wanted to see more cave, the two of us returned to the pass that had turned Mary back...it was somewhat exposed, but doable, and we went on in. The walls of the cave here are polished smooth and absolutely spectacular...rounded grey limestone clasts in a brick red matrix of silt. While conglomerate is a clastic sedimentary rock and not normally a good cave host, in this conglomerate the limestone clasts make up the great majority of the rock, so chemically speaking it is a limestone and thus susceptible to cave development.

Pete and I pushed on through the cave, through pools, duck-unders and climb-overs, a little bit of swimming, past nice speleothems, to arrive at the terminal sump. Not as large a cave as I had thought it would be from the Spaniards' published description, which didn't really seem to fit the cave very well, but it is a cave well worth visiting: the conglomerate walls are fascinating and form truly beautiful polished mosaics in many places.



Ric caving in conglomerate --Photo by Pete Miller

We emerged from the cave to find Gerald had left with Dago, and in his place was a man with a rifle, pointing it at us! Potential hard luck, for sure! Turned out to be the landowner, who wanted to know what the heck we were doing on his property. He seemed rather angry, but warmed up to us after some talk and Mary took his picture, promising to send him a copy. No bad luck this time, but it certainly could have been. I do wish I could have gotten a picture of Pete with his hands over his head!



Owner of the conglomerate cave --Photo by Mary Gratsch

April 24-25-26: Though we were not scheduled to fly out until the 27th, realizing that our caving activities were concluded for this trip, we elected to spend a few days just touring. So we headed back towards Tegucigalpa, which proved to be an unpleasant drive. The sky, always hazy in the dry season due to the *campesino* habit of burning off fields, this day was really smoky and the countryside a hellish landscape of fires. And then when we hit the main highway we began a series of encounters with cops. We were stopped no less than three times at roadblocks, and at the third one we got screwed. Turns out Pete, riding on the rear seat, did not have his seat belt on, for which they cited me as driver and confiscated my driver's license. This led to a long exchange, in which we argued that passengers in the back seat were not required to wear seat belts, the cop pulled out a printed copy of regulations showing that it was indeed required. I pled

ignorance and asked for some consideration for us as foreign visitors. Next I asked to speak to his superior officer, thinking that might make him back off. But the *capitán* supported the young officer. I whined a bit more, and then the *capitán* casually informed me that they were in need of a new computer, and if I cared to “collaborate” with them I could have my license back. So a \$10 “contribution” to the “computer fund” was made and we went on down the road. More hard luck, but at least it was cheap.

We spent the next two nights in a nice little hotel in the historic mining town of Valle de Angeles, now a tourism center just 30 km outside Tegus. The town is small, attractive with colonial style buildings and cobbled streets, and much cooler, quieter and nicer than the big city of Tegucigalpa. Good restaurants, too! But we hadn’t shaken off our hard luck streak...not being used to driving an automatic, I mistakenly left the vehicle on a slope with the gear selector in “drive” rather than “park”, and it rolled away (with Avis inside on the back seat, unable to do anything to stop the vehicle). Result: it hit a rock wall, leaving a big dent in the fiber-glass front bumper-fender area. Pete, who is a mechanic, managed to pop most of it out, and camouflage the remaining damage with dirt...but it still showed.

We drove out of Valle de Angeles a few kilometers to another old former mining town, San Juancito, and visited La Tigra National Park. Here



Tree ferns in La Tigra cloud forest --Photo by Ric Finch



Mary and Pete at one of the old mine adits --Photo by Ric Finch

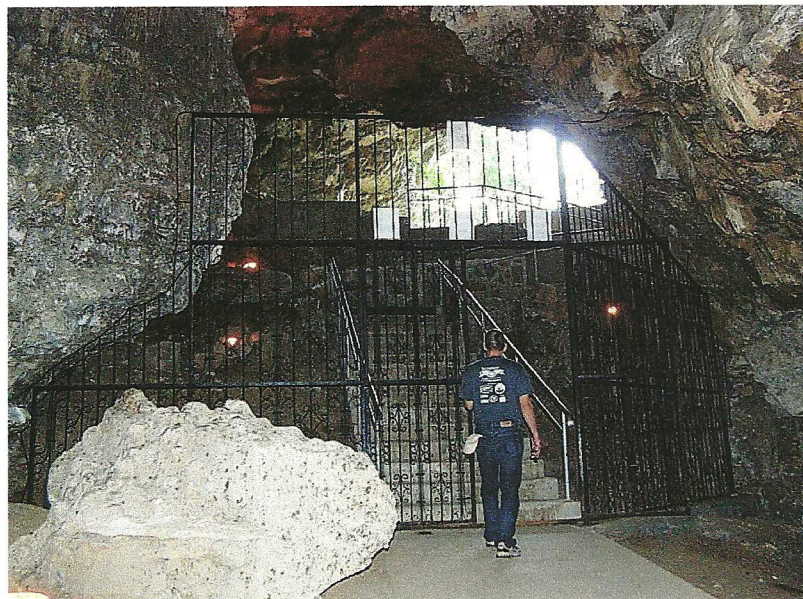


Gerald and Mary in one of the mine tunnels --Photo by Ric Finch

old mining roads have become hiking trails that lead up into the cloud forest passing by numerous adits that invite cavers to explore. Originally opened by Spaniards in colonial times, the famous and extensive El Rosario Mine, a quartz vein producer of gold and silver, was operated from 1878 to 1954 by the New York and Honduras Rosario Mining Co.

April 27: Time to fly home. Oops...the hard luck continued. Smoke from the burning fields and forests had caused Toncontín (the Tegus airport) to be shut down. All flights had been canceled. And inasmuch as weather conditions fall in the category of "act of God" (why do airlines and insurance companies attribute only bad things to God?), Continental would not pay for the additional hotel we now had to book. On top of that, I had gotten in a big hassle with National Car Rental over the dent in the Nissan...the camouflage job didn't work! My credit card insurance eventually covered the costs, but it took months of negotiation to settle.

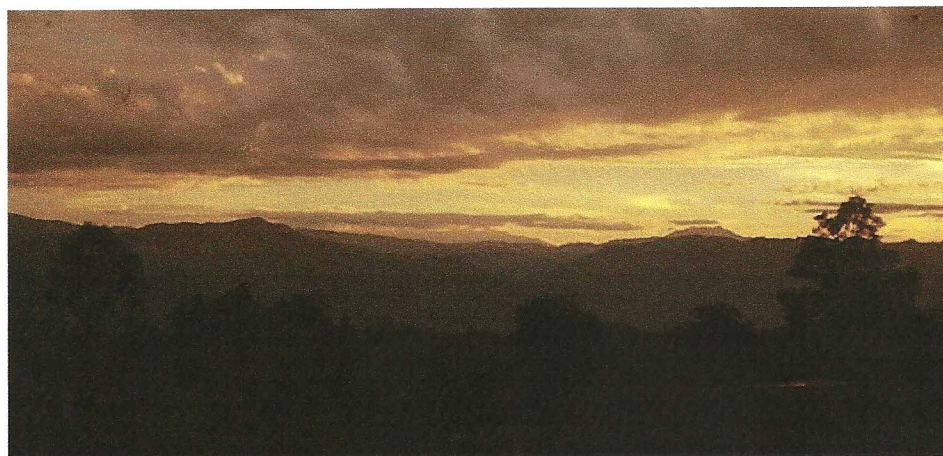
April 28: Toncontín was still closed to commercial flights and no one knew when it might open up. We decided to rent another car, this time from Hertz, and drive across country to the north coast, as the international airport at San Pedro Sula was not affected by the pall of smoke over the rest of the country. We were joined in this enterprise by another stranded passenger, a young guy traveling around Honduras as a professional coffee taster and buyer. En route we stopped to visit the Taulabé Cave, a tour cave with a location Cumberland Caverns would envy: right beside the country's main highway.



Looking out the entrance gate to Taulabé Cave --Photo by Ric Finch

I had never liked San Pedro Sula, and nowadays it has an evil reputation for robbery and mayhem, so we overnighted in the smaller town of El Progreso, a short drive from the international airport. Here I had another run-in with a cop, but it only cost \$5 to settle. When would the hard luck end?

April 29: Finally we got a flight and out of smoky Honduras. Not quite the trip I had anticipated. We only mapped a little over a kilometer of Cueva Siete Quebradas, perhaps a third of the cave. But in spite of Avis' painful mishap, we all had a good and interesting time. And we set the scene for a return trip, not only to finish mapping Siete Quebradas, but to tackle the Pozo del Portillo in hopes of setting a new depth record for Honduras and for caves in conglomerate. To be continued...



Sunset in the sierras of Honduras --Photo by Ric Finch



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Memberships (*expires 12/31 of current year*):

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Nashville Grotto
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