

## Cave Diving in Mexico – October 2012

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I am driving sedately along the highway from the dive shop to the dive site. Without any warning my backseat passengers are screaming at me to pull over. I brake sharply and swing onto the hard shoulder, but before the car has even finished moving my passengers have bailed out like SAS commandoes. By the time I have parked properly my 3 companions are huddled together, staring malevolently at the back seat where a large black scorpion sits, tail raised. Clearly it has climbed out of our stacked dive gear and as we try to trap it with sticks and remove it from the car I make a mental note to shake my dry-suit thoroughly before diving. This isn't my first exciting Mexican experience, nor will it be my last, it is just one of many since I initially visited in 2001. And strangely, despite the nerve-jangling reputation of cave diving and the murderous activities of the Mexican drug cartels, every single one of my most concerning experiences in this beautiful country has been wildlife related.

Mel and I first visited Mexico as backpackers in 2001. With a week to spare in our 3 month visit and in need of new visas for Mexico, we did a side trip to Belize and took the opportunity to dive the Great Blue Hole at Lighthouse Reef. Viewed from the air this is one of the worlds' most incredible and iconic dive sites and our early morning dive into the depths is an experience I still clearly remember. However, it was the boat ride back to port which has had the most profound influence on my diving career. Up until this point Mel and I were both happily in agreement with the majority of divers (and non-divers) who view cave diving as an incomprehensible mystery, but by chance we got chatting to another diver who had recently visited the cenotes in Mexico and he convinced us to give them a try. We did a single dive, just in the cavern zone of a popular cenote, but it changed everything. We immediately signed up for a two day cavern diving class and it was magical. Since then I have returned to Mexico 4 more times, spending over 10 weeks in the area, doing a mixture of cave courses and most enjoyably several hundred cave dives. Now as a passionate cave diver and cave instructor it is an area impossible to ignore.



The Great Blue Hole - Belize

Unfortunately (well fortunately really), there are lots of great dive spots around the world well worth visiting, especially if you also love wrecks and reefs as I do, so as 2011 came to a close and I looked ahead to my diving ambitions for 2012, it was clear that financially Mexico was not on the agenda. However, a chance meeting in May 2012 changed things. Marc Sluszny, whom the Sunday Times describes as, 'a Belgium extreme athlete and adventurer', was visiting New Zealand and contacted me about doing some diving. As I do with all prospective clients I asked for his diving background and experience - his reply came back with a couple of items which stood out: HMHS Britannic 2008 and deepest dive to date 168m. I wasn't quite sure what I could do to top that and simply arranged for us to do a couple of days out at the Poor Knights, where I took him scootering for the first time and showed him a couple of the sea caves. During the trip we got chatting about Mexico, as he was thinking about doing a trip there, so I recommended Zero Gravity, the dive shop I always use. As far as I was concerned that was the end of the conversation, but everything changed a few days later when Marc asked if I

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would consider flying over to Mexico to be his private guide for a week – all expenses paid. Oh if only I could meet lots more people like this!

Four months later and I was on a plane flying to Mexico. I had a week of diving planned with Marc and another week planned with two former students Ali and Cam, who are currently living in Mexico City where Cam has a 2 year work secondment. Despite having nearly 30 hours of travelling ahead I was still very excited.

The area I was heading to is in South East Mexico, the Yucatan peninsula, specifically the Caribbean coast between Cancun and Belize. Known to tourists as the Riviera Maya, it is famous for mile upon mile of spectacular white sand beaches, turquoise water and luxury all-inclusive resorts. However it is also famous with



cave divers from around the world, as home to the world's longest underwater cave system, plus dozens of other systems, including several others in the top 10 in terms of length. In fact it's hard to keep track of the lengths of the different cave systems as many kilometres of new passage are discovered each year and smaller systems become linked to larger systems. In terms of underwater cave exploration this is probably the most active area in the world at present, offering amazing opportunities for those divers bold enough to take the plunge. And even if extreme exploration is not your thing, simply touring along the well traversed main-line in the most well-known systems is still hugely rewarding.

The problem is cave diving is scary – or at least it is when you think about it in the abstract. Cave diving confronts several instinctive human fears and anxieties. Some people fear drowning, some fear the dark and others fear small enclosed spaces, but to tackle all three at once? And of course plenty of people also wonder what the fuss is about. What is there to see except wet rock? If I was to answer glibly I might ask what is so special about two sets of modern cavemen chasing an egg shaped ball around a rectangular shaped piece of grass, but given the All Blacks legendary status here in NZ maybe I won't. Instead imagine water so clear that diving in it feels more like flying. Imagine flying over ancient fire pits undisturbed since actual cavemen roamed the earth 11,000 years ago. Imagine beautiful stalactites, stalagmites and other fabulously contorted and complex cave decorations which the majority of the global population will never get to see.

Of course returning to the starting point of this article there are also a few things I'm not so bothered about seeing like scorpions, or more disturbingly the time a snake fell out of the thatched palapa roof during one of our dive briefings. (I really don't like snakes.) Spiders (at this time of the year tarantulas are on the move) I don't mind and the resident crocodile in Cenote Carwash is really pretty cute, although if it continues to grow at the same rate as it has for the last 5 years 'cute' will definitely turn into 'concerning'.



To describe all the dives I did during this trip would become a little tedious, except perhaps to the few avid cave divers amongst this newsletters readership. We visited many different cenotes and spent nearly 25 hours underwater, so instead I will give a few highlights. In Dos Pisos we swam into the cave for 112 minutes before finally turning the dive, also taking a side trip into a very shallow area of cave full of tree roots and catfish. In Grand Cenote we swam all the way to the La Boca restriction, past some of the most beautifully decorated areas I have seen. In Jailhouse we headed down to the 9<sup>th</sup> level, another highly decorated area and also explored the Swiss Siphon, enjoying the amazing blue tints once below the halocline. In Taj Mahal we saw the Bone Room, which has an 11,000 year old fire pit full of bones and in Chac Mool we saw the 'largest stalactite' which although technically a flow stone is spectacular none the less. Even a relatively simple dive such as Marc's first at Xtabay is impressive, with huge open rooms and a very clear Halocline. And if you think I may be exaggerating then Marc's first comments on exiting might explain. Previously he has dived in caves in Florida and the Dordogne area of France so I was keen to hear his first impressions. They were simple: "Why would you go anywhere else to cave dive?"



Photo by Danny Riordan

Unfortunately Mexico is a country with a bad reputation. A recent UN report listing the world's most dangerous cities based on murder rates, listed 5 Mexican cities in the top 10. Clearly this is the result of the drug trade, but Mexico is a large country and the majority of the violence is in the north, in cities close to the American border. The Yucatan peninsula by contrast is very peaceful, a situation heavily enforced by the authorities as the tourist trade in the area contributes over 12% of Mexico's total GDP. However, since my first visit in 2001 it is clear that tourism isn't entirely beneficial to the area. Large scale development threatens several of these unique and fabulous cave systems, so the best advice I can give you is to go asap. By visiting you will not only get some amazing dive experiences to treasure, but the more cave divers who visit the more the local population will value these fragile and irreplaceable caves as a source of income. It's a win-win situation.

But be a good cave diver! Cave diving is dangerous if done improperly and damaging to the environment if done inconsiderately. Make sure you have the right skills, the right equipment and the right training to firstly leave the caves (several months ago 3 divers didn't leave!) and secondly to leave the caves as you found them i.e. undamaged. To give an example, good buoyancy – it helps to protect you from silt outs and the cave from damage. To quote my instructor: "Divers have no right to be learning to control their buoyancy inside these caves – learn before you go in!"

As a paid guide it was a pleasure to re-visit Mexico and show Marc around. As an instructor it was a pleasure to do challenging dives with former students and see how far they have progressed. As a cave diver it is just a pleasure to be in the Yucatan again. And finally it was a pleasure to yet again slam on the cars brakes during this trip as Marc yelled at me to stop. This time thankfully it was for something outside the vehicle, a huge tarantula crossing the jungle track in front of us. This time my passenger merely wanted to get a good photograph.