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LAS GRUTAS DE CACAHUAMILPA PARQUE NACIONAL

SEARCHING FOR TROLLS?

Presented by Jim Moss.

Introduction

Whilst a good many of my friends around the globe are suffering cold, wet and even snowy wintry weather at the moment, here in Pachuca, Central Mexico, we are enjoying a typically dry, sunny and mainly warm winter climate. Monday 4th February was a national holiday in Mexico so taking advantage of the long weekend and the weather my family and I set off to visit the underground attraction of one of Mexico's national parks. Yes, you read that right - underground! We went 'troll hunting' in the Grutas de Cacahuamilpa National Park, one of the largest 'live' dripstone cave systems in the world located in Guerrero state, Central Mexico, about 25 miles to the north east of the immensely popular and picturesque tourist of Taxco and home to Mexico's best silversmiths.

The Cacahuamilpa Caves are part of an immense and spectacular system of caves in the area formed by subterranean rivers cutting through the predominantly limestone rock of the Southern Sierra Madre mountain range . They are ranked as one of the natural wonders of the world and well worth a visit.

Although located only 155 miles to the south west of Pachuca as the crow flies, our route was by way of the sprawling metropolis of Mexico City which at the moment has major highway construction projects both in and out of the city making the travel times through the city often tortuous. We left home at 8:00 am on Sunday morning, an hour when the vast majority of Mexicans are still in their beds, and we got through the city pretty quickly, but then we hit road works and were diverted sufficiently to lose our way for 30 minutes. After finally getting back on course drove steadily to our destination taking in the towns and scenery along the way and eventually arrived at the small village of Cacahuamilpa just past midday.

With the midday temperature in the low 90's and humidity in the air we found the entrance site to the caves thronged with sweating people and after finding out that entry to the main system was by guided groups of up to 80 visitors at a time ,every hour on the hour, it was obvious by the numbers queuing that we were in for a long wait. Since we were close to Taxco, a place I'd always wanted to visit, we decided to give the caves a miss until the following morning and set off to spend a very pleasant afternoon and evening in the town.

On Monday morning we were back at the caves at 9:00, an hour before the opening time, and after a good breakfast at one of the typical Mexican on-site restaurants we were at the head of the first group to enter the caves. There were about 30 of us in the group, an ideal number to get close to the guide and listen to his very good description of the caves, interlaced with a lot of humour and imagination as he pointed out the names of the various formations we saw throughout the system. Our tour lasted 2 1/4 hrs and we walked about 1 1/4 miles into the system through a series of gigantic caverns before turning around and making our way back.

The Cacahuamilpa cave system is particularly suited to group visits and has a very well made secure lit pathway laid through the caverns making it easy walking for all age groups. Part of the walk involves descending or climbing steps but again these are very well constructed with handrails for those who may require them. The lighting of the major rock formations is very well done and it was impressive to see that as we walked through the system the lights in front of us were switched on as those behind us were switched off creating a very dramatic effect.

The system is simply huge with some of the caverns reaching up to 120 ft. in width and as much as 240 ft in height . During our visit the temperature inside the cave was pleasant and it was possible to walk around wearing T-shirts and shorts without feeling unduly cold so long as you kept moving. Deeper into the system the humidity was high with water falling from the roofs of a number of the caverns.

Taking photos inside the caves proved a new challenge for me - try for example bouncing a small flash off of roofs so high! Also because of the need to use long shutter speeds to capture the low light situations some of my photos contain a few motion blur 'ghosts' walking through my scenes. Nevertheless , after a little post editing I did manage to get some reasonable shots.

After we completed our tour we walked about 400 yards down a very steep path to the river Amacuza which exits from another large underground system called the Grutas de Carlos Pacheco about 240 ft below the entrance to the Grutas de Cacahuamilpa. The river is formed by the confluence of two underground rivers, the Chontalcoatlan and the San Jeronimo which originally formed the upper cave system. Unlike the Cacahuamilpa system the Carlos Pacheco one has no artificial lighting but can be explored by raft for as far as 5 miles underground, a journey which takes up to 8 hrs. Norma and Kevin decided to take a brief 1 hour trip into the cave, largely because the guide told them they were going to get wet! As they paddled off into the gaping cavern I was left on the banks to guard our valuables, take a few photos and spend a pleasant hour chatting with the local guides about the park and the flora and fauna of the region.

An hour later Norma and Kevin were back, completely soaked with jeans and trainers full of river sand and with big smiles on their faces. One of the guides explained to me that the raft excursions into the cave system could only be made from around October to the beginning of May - the dry season. Once the rains started the river rose anywhere between 6 to 12 ft with a swift current making it too dangerous to enter the caves.

Around 4 pm we left Cacahuamilpa. The return trip home took almost 6 hours and the traffic in Mexico City was horrendous as folks headed back to the city after the long weekend break. Much to our surprise as we reached the high Toluca plateau before dropping down into Mexico City the temperature dropped rapidly and dark clouds gathered. By the time we hit the city centre a short but fierce electrical rainstorm hit us which created it's usual chaos on the roads. Arriving back home to Pachuca at 10 pm we'd left the rain behind, we were tired out but well pleased with our short but extremely worthwhile two day break.

Cacahuamilpa is definitely on my 'must visit again' tourist spots in Mexico and is one of those places that leaves a lasting impressive. Next time though, I'll be taking a bigger flash unit and a tripod!

And did we find any trolls? You're going to have to look through my presentation to find out!

Enjoy the photos!



First glimpse of the location of the entrance to the Cacahuamilpa caves looks fairly unimpressive. The entrance is behind the green mass of foliage hanging from the rocky face to the centre right of the image.



A pathway winds down from the park entrance towards the cave system's mouth skirting and crossing a small ravine which drops down to the river.



Passing the ravine this yellow amate tree has roots which cling to the rocks and penetrate into fissures to depths of as much as 250 ft in search of water containing nutrients absorbed from the rock minerals.



Another spectacular yellow amate clinging to the entrance to the caves.



Finally the entrance to the caves which resembles an immense shark's mouth with a pathway descending into a large black hole!



After the guide switches on the lights we saw a well defined pathway snaking into the blackness and walked down into the cavern to begin our tour. Note: the green of the rocks is algae which grows only where it can capture some daylight.



The first of approximately 20 caverns we walked through, the formations rising up from the floor were formed over millenniums of years from water seeping into the caverns through the walls and roofs.



Strange shapes seem to appear out of the massive drip stone formations. This one makes me think of a mountain of bleached skulls!



Each of the caverns we pass through is named after one of the predominant formations in it , unfortunately I was too busy working out how to take my photos to catch the names!



After the first few minutes in this system it was difficult not to be impressed by its size. These caverns were simply huge!



Another formation about 25 ft height – and still growing!



The passage from one cavern to the next was often by way of short flight of stairs around bends in the system preparing us for the next surprise around the corner.



This cavern was so wide that to the left as we entered there was a small man-made auditorium - not shown in this shot - in which orchestral concerts were occasionally held. I wondered if they played Peer Gynt's 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' as their showcase piece!



At the exit to the previous cavern two massive formations dominated the scene. The terraces of the one to the left were shaped in the form of cascading pools which fill during the rainy season as water streams down from the roof.



About half way into the system this more recent 'rock structure', a very clean and modern rest room!
With all the water dripping as we walked through the caverns it's easy to suddenly develop an urge to pee!



The halfway point of our journey about $\frac{5}{8}$ mile (1 km.) into the system and time to descend and then climb through the next cavern .

Prior to continuing down into the next cavern the walkway shown in the previous slide passed a rectangular pile of small rocks with a wooden cross stuck into them at one end . Our guide explained that this was the grave of an early cave explorer who got lost in the system and died of starvation.

During his exploration the man was accompanied by his loyal pet dog. Upon realizing he was hopelessly lost and having exhausted his means of illumination the man sent his dog out of the caves to go for help. The story has it that locals saw the dog exiting the cave and barking around them in a commotion and thought it was crazy and ignored it, never thinking that it belonged to a cave explorer.

Loyal companion as it was the dog returned into the cave and back to his master. Some time later a group of local cavers entered the system and came across the bodies of the explorer and the dog lying side by side. It was decided to bury them where they lay and there they remain.

It was somewhat comforting for me to be told that the explorer, the only person to have died in the system, was an Englishman! With so many Mexican's in our group I calculated that if an accident were to occur whilst we were underground the odds of another Englishman to die, rather than a Mexican, were pretty much in my favour!



Onwards we descended and then rose out of a long, rock strewn and relatively narrow cavern towards more path lighting in the distance....



...and after rounding another bend we descended into yet another tall, wide and fairly flat cavern.



Another bend in the path took us through a narrow opening dominated by some curious looking dark coloured formations.



It's a little unnerving to be told when you are underground that this cave system is often subjected to earthquakes which in the past have caused the collapse of some of the monumental pillars formed over the ages. The collapsed segment in the center of this shot clearly shows the growth rings created by limestone deposits.



Yet another strange looking formation standing about 15 ft tall.



Another bend in the path past some tall narrow formations and we were about to enter the final cavern of our tour.



Mother Nature certainly knows how to keep the best part for the end. The massive formation to the center left is dwarfed by a whirlpool carved ceiling almost 240 ft high! Simply spectacular!!!



This cavern warrants another photo! After gazing in awe at this sight for several minutes it was time to snake around the tall formation and begin our return journey.



Part of the path back took a slightly different route out of these last two caverns which was the laid on top of the original route the explorers who discovered this system used. This massive flow formation completely dwarfs the path to the lower right of the scene.



After all we had seen during the past 90 mins you would have thought there were no more surprises...



...Wrong! I've no idea what mineral produced the stream of 'diamonds' in this flow structure but it looked very pretty and added a nice finishing touch to our tour.



30 mins later and we were back in the light of day at the entrance to the cave with Kevin looking well pleased after our tour... but we hadn't finished yet!

As I mentioned earlier , our next visit was to the Amacuza river , about 80 yards vertically and to the south below the entrance to the Cacahuamilpa system . Its been determined that the two underground rivers which joined to form the Amacuza river originally carved out the Cacahuamilpa system but subsequently an earthquake shook the area and dislodged part of the system diverting the flow of the rivers which carved out the lowermost Carlos Pacheco system . Between these two major systems a third dry cave system also exists which can be seen whilst walking down a steep and slightly precarious winding path to the river .

Despite the high early afternoon temperatures in the mid 90's F and a very humid climate we decided to sweat out the walk down to the river.



Half-way down the path we passed the entrance to the dry cave system . These caves are only usually visited by experienced cavers or specific organised caving tours.



At the bottom of the path the river Amacuza flows out of the Carlos Pacheco system . This entrance looks small until you compare its size to the two climbers rappelling the rock face!



100 yds. from the entrance, on a sandy river bank, a group of local guides were offering rafting trips either down the river or into the caves. The difference being that by taking the river trip you stayed dry, whilst in the cave trip you got wet! No prizes or guessing which trip Norma and Kevin took!



As my wife and son disappeared into the darkness wearing hard hats, head lamps and life jackets I walked downstream a little to take this shot of the river looking northwards back towards the cave entrance.



Turning around the Amacuza river begins its meandering path south. With the winter being very dry in this area the river was at its lowest level. Once the rainy season starts around mid May it rapidly rises by 6 to 8 ft and becomes a very popular venue for extreme sports rafters and kayakers.



Just over an hour later the two intrepid explorers were heading back to the shore , safe and sound, happy and thoroughly soaked! Fortunately on such trips we always carry a change of clothes and footwear in the car!

By the time we had climbed back up what seemed to be a much steeper path than it felt walking down it was time to head for home and look for somewhere on the way to eat.

Our return trip took almost 6 hours but despite the long drive and the traffic delays on the way we wouldn't have missed visiting Las Grutas de Cacahuamilpa Nacional Parque. The images of those caverns will stay in our minds for a long, long time.

For anyone interested in reading more about these cave systems and in particular how they were formed follow these internet URL's:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grutas_de_Cacahuamilpa_National_Park

<http://trans-americas.com/blog/2011/01/cacahuamilpa-caves/>

<http://mexihkayotl.blogspot.mx/2010/03/cacahuamilpa-caves.html>

This last link is to a scientific paper asking the question 'Could earthquakes cause the broken stalactites inside the cave system' and provides some interesting information about the formation of the caves systems in the area. An interesting read....

http://labnathaz.geol.uoa.gr/uploads/Literature/INQUA_IGCP/13-Garduno_Mexico_revised.pdf

So, with this last piece of information this presentation has almost come to an end. Only one question remains unanswered about this fantastic cave system.

'Did we find any trolls?

Well of course trolls don't really exist , do they?

But...

if you have a vivid imagination and you 're walking through a dimly lit immense cavern where the only thing you can hear is the slow dripping of water and your heartbeat pounding in your chest, you might just lift up your eyes to one of those immense rock formations and see something looking down on you which will make you want to pick up your heels and run for the entrance as fast as your legs can carry you.

To other people it might just seem like a strange rock formation, but to you and me, and them that knows , we aren't fooled are we?



What do you think this is ?