

# THE CENTRAL JERSEY CAVER

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**On the Cover: Cueva de Candelaria, Ancient pottery now welded into the rock**

Photo By Victor Rivera (Edited From Submission by K Psarianos)

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## **Cueva de Candelaria**

### **A Visit to the Maya Underworld**

**By Victor Rivera**

Deep in the jungle of Guatemala lay one of the most extensive cave systems in Central America. The Cueva de Candelaria (Cave of the Candlestick) boasts over thirty kilometers of passageways, tunnels, and caverns, with seven major entrances and numerous "skylights", sinkholes high above the cavern floors. Abandoned by the ancient Maya and rediscovered in the 1970s, the cave lay undisturbed by humans for over one thousand years.

The ancient Maya of the Petén jungle had used the cave for rituals and possible burials as far back as 700 AD. Priests and nobles traveled there from as far as Cancuen, a Maya site on the banks of the Passion River. They burned incense made from tree sap, drank ritual concoctions of chocolate and maize, and even performed bloodletting ceremonies to appease their deities. Often, rulers of various Maya cities met in caves to negotiate alliances and to resolve disputes. Crystal formations in caves served as looking glasses, into which Maya priests gazed to see the future.

In fact, caves were revered by the ancient Maya, for they were portals into the depths of Mother Earth. Almost every major Maya site is located on or near a cave system. From Dos Pilas in Guatemala to Chichen Itza in Mexico's Yucatan, caves and cenotes played a significant role in the Maya psyche. It was the cave which served as the portal to Xibalba, the Maya underworld to where souls journeyed after death. I had seen Candelaria Cave marked on maps of Guatemala, but never stopped there, mostly out of fear of going into a cold, dark, and dangerous place.

To combat my fear of caves, I decided to join the Central New Jersey Grotto and learn more about caves. It was lucky for me that after my first meeting at CNJG a visit was planned for beginners (that's me and my friend Bob) for the following day. Bubbles, Mark, and Sherrye guided Bob and me through our first cave (located near Albany but I forgot the name).



The Cueva de Candelaria Jungle Lodge sits atop the Candelaria cave system.

Our three guides helped to take away my fear, and I decided that the next time I went hiking through the jungles of Central America I would visit one of the many caves there. My visit to Guatemala in August 2003 gave me just such a opportunity. The rainy season made an extensive visit to the cave impossible, as flash floods often materialize without warning. I did manage, however, a brief visit to the Maya underworld.

I arrived in Guatemala City on August 2, and immediately changed planes for the one-hour flight to Flores, a small town on the periphery of Guatemala's Petén jungle. There I met my local guide who drove me to the banks of the Passion River, where we had to trade our jeep for horses. Only horses can manage the rugged jungle terrain along the banks of the Passion River through the Petén. Our goal was the ancient site of Dos Pilas, a Maya city which flourished during the sixth and seventh centuries. On the way, however, we stopped at a small jungle lodge which is popular with hikers and backpackers crossing the jungle. Guatemala's civil war, which lasted some thirty years, ending in 1996, kept most foreigners away. Now, finally at peace, a whole country waits to be explored.

It is convenient that the Posada Candelaria, a jungle lodge, sits directly over the Candelaria cave system. It was a mere one hundred meters from my little bungalow to the cave's entrance. Rolando, the son of the posada's

owner, offered to guide me through the cave. He said he had just about grown up in the cave, as most of his childhood was spent exploring it. Rolando was twelve years old.

I must admit, my pride was not hurt when this little boy helped me to climb down the ten or so meters into the mouth of Xibalba. He had done it many times, and was patient with a novice. Even my guide from Flores effortlessly descended the jagged rocks. I remember thinking about how lucky I was that no one from the CNJG was able to see me struggling down what seemed an infinite distance.

Bubbles, Sherrye, and Mark had all warned me not to take a digital camera into a cave. Its not that I didn't believe them but rather that I was determined to have a record of my experience. By the way, they were right. I all but destroyed my camera. The photos included here, however, may not have ever been published. They are a small memento of my day in a cave.

The Cueva de Candelaria is immense, with at least two lakes, a flowing river, and a year-round bat convention. The site was a part-time home to the ancients, and the remnants of pottery, sculpture, and incense are testament to the importance which they attached to the cave. Rolando was quick to ask that I not touch anything, lest the work of future archaeologists be contaminated. In fact, the cave is both a natural and an archaeological wonder. Even today Q'eqchi' descendents of the Maya worship at the cave. Rolando showed me the cave's seven "windows", or entrances to the cave, which did not require repelling. At the end of the day, I was exhausted, and at the same time exhilarated to have gone to Xibalba and back.

The Candelaria cave system is becoming more popular with cavers, hikers, and those river rafters who enjoy riding river caves. While not exactly easy to get to, the cave system is accessible during the dry season (Jan- May) by car. In fact, I was told that from Flores, one can hook up with a local guide or tour group for an overnight visit to the Posada Candelara and the caves. The posada charged me the equivalent of 45 USD for the night. I am always willing to go back.



A plant grows in a precarious place.



The Rio Candelaria flows into one of the cave's entrances.



Victor with cave guide and new friend Rolando.

## **A Caving Story**

### **By Amanda Schroeder**

When I was a small child, my mom used to make everything an exciting adventure. From the telephone operator changing our telephone wires to getting stuck in elevators when the library closed, we would be having an adventure! Since then, I am always in search of adventure and often find it, even when I'm not expecting it....

And what an adventure it was! Dave and I left work early on Friday so that we could celebrate Valentine's Day that evening at the Green Briar. It was beautiful and wonderful in everyway. :)

Saturday morning, Dave, Ralph, Buzz, Matt, Tish and I went to McClung's Cave. (Mike started out with us, but ended up having to leave -- he had his own unfortunate adventure :( ) This was my third cave and I was a little nervous at how long it was going to be and about the canyon passage I had heard so much about. Starting out, I felt grrreat. The canyon passage made me nervous, but I felt good and strong and kind of like a badass, which is always a good feeling. We made good time to the gate and saw some really beautiful waterfalls and formations along the way. I started to have a little trouble on the way to the Liberty Bell because we had to go down over a big drop and I'm \*terrified\* of heights. And I couldn't quite get it through my head that I wasn't going to slip on the mud. Everyone was very very helpful, offering words of encouragement, body spots and patience. I had never been to an "out and back" cave, but it was a good experience because I learned a little bit about trying to remember the passages I'd come through on the way in and also to be able to gauge how close I was to the entrance. I was very tired by the end and the canyon passage was much tougher the second time around. All in all, I would say the experience was a good one. I feel like I got a little better or at least learned more about what I have to work on, and I was pleased to go with a group of people that I hadn't really known beforehand. Pizza and beer afterwards was excellent :).

As everyone knows, this was to be the only cave we went to because we were snowed in on Sunday. I still had a good time hanging out,

going bowling, in the hot tub and at dinner though. There was such a big group of people -- a little overwhelming, but it made things interesting and fun.

The next adventure was to be the drive home... It only took about double the time. The areas we passed through had obviously gotten hit much harder than we had. The drive through West Virginia and Virginia went fairly smoothly except for a little traffic that we eventually bypassed by driving illegally on the shoulder for 50 feet until the next exit. Rt. 11 offered a glimpse of people, small towns and cars engulfed completely by the 30 or so inches of snow they had gotten. Except for the fact that we couldn't find an open Wendy's, everything went fine until Carlisle, PA. We got off here in search of food but ended up getting stuck on right by the exit ramp for over 2 hours. Apparently, the truckers were upset that the truck stops were all closed and decided that they'd just park in the middle of the road, get out and look for food or go to sleep for the night. The police said it would take at least 4 hours to clear up. We realized that this called for dire measures and that we'd have to use our powers of logic (Dave's super power) and flirtation (mine) to get the truckers to move just enough so that we and some other small cars could make a U-turn and get back on the only entrance (south) that wasn't blocked by irate truckers. (I mean, I understand, but did they have to be vindictive about it?) Dave and I forged on, ended up running out of gas (thank God actually near the only open gas station in New Jersey) and finally made it home at about 1 am. Unfortunately no snow day on Tuesday...

I had a grrreat time. Bring on the next adventure! :)

## **Everything I need to know I learned from Kevin and Carolyn Psarianos (Life lessons for everyone... not just for cavers.)**

**By Sherrye Dobrin**

1. There is no need to panic when you've reached the end of your rope.
2. Should Lesson 1 apply to you, the Psarianos' are exempt from fault since you did not use enough rope in the first place.
3. If you don't like the path you've chosen, there is always time to do a quick changeover.
4. If the chest harness of life is sometimes constricting and uncomfortable, you are doing everything correctly.
5. Taking a risk is fine, as long as you attach a proper safety.
6. Everyone you meet on the way up, are the same people you meet on the way down.
7. Taking deep, slow breaths can help you through a difficult pinch.
8. There is always a way to traverse any obstacle, no matter how scary.
9. A stream that suddenly disappears can lead to an endless passage of wonder!
10. Save the back of your truck for cave gear. Leave the emotional baggage at home.

## **Cave Conservation Comes of Age By Ergor Rubreck (Submitted to the CJ Caver by Paul Steward)**

When I first started caving there was no such thing as cave conservation. Maybe that was because there were only 12 caves back then. I used to be able to name them all, from Mammoth Cave in Kentucky to Lurid Caverns in Virginia, Carlsburger Caverns in New Mexico to Sneaka Caverns in Ohio. I forget the rest, but they are household words in caver circles.

Those were the first caves in which conservation became a serious issue; many of the rest are closed, trashed, or resting on the fireplace mantles of early grotto chairpersons.

We thought nothing of dumping spent carbide on trails. The white paths marked where visitors could walk when they were not treading on the cave pearls and lilly pads. The carbide fumigated the caves to rid them of pestilent white bugs of various kinds, which we thought to be a serious public health risk. One could get histoplasmosis from cave crickets if they bit you. Few of us got bitten, to be sure, but we were cautious in the old days.

We heard about particularly vicious bugs from Tennessee caves: Ray Bees, I think they were called, because they thrived on Raydon. When they weren't annoying the bats they attacked TAG pit descenders on their cable ladders. This is why cavers today use single ropes for a speedier descent. Bats in those days did tangle up in people's hair. That's why cavers adopted hard hats while naïve cave visitors took to wearing headscarves.

It used to be that graffiti was a sign of serious conservationists. When I smoked E.R. on the Pillar of the Constipation, people knew that Ergor Rubreck took a serious personal interest in preserving that cave. If you smoked your three-digit NSS number by your initials, cave aficionados could look you up and swap lies about exploits in the cave, and how wimpy the four-digit "spelunkers" were compared to us tough cavers. All that changed for the better: The stencil and aerosol spray paint made more colorful graffiti possible. The best was yet to come when cavers took to sniffing the paint instead of spraying it. "Whassup dude?" originated in a New Jersey cave in 1958.

The National Spelunking Society gave lip service to cave conservation in the 1960s. They advocated education for the first decade, secrecy for the second decade, and confusion for the third decade. This was the era of scrubbing cave speleothems with hydrochloric acid. The practice quickly fell into disrepute when cavers found the graffiti was not all that dissolved. Some of the immense chambers in Mammoth Cave are today devoid of speleothems because of zealous restoration

parties. The acid dissolved the bristles on their brushes, effectively putting them out of business.

When the American Cave Preservation Association was started in Kentucky, they inaugurated a high tech approach to cave conservation...Bingo. With the proceeds of Bingo games they purchased Teflon paint that preserved the natural look of cave features, but prevented graffiti from sticking. A few leading cave biologists talked them out of using Teflon because it interfered with their population census studies of cave organisms. Scientists used tiny colored dots in a unique pattern to code individual critters, but the dots fell off. This gave rise to the expression, "If you've seen one cave beetle, you've seen them all." In recent years the ACPA has turned to sinkhole cleanups. The salvage value of metal objects pried from sinkhole walls and floors has almost paid for their new headquarters faced with cave onyx.

Kave Kleen-O-Ramas have supplanted individual caver efforts at preservation and conservation. In 2002 some 493 cavers from all over New England converged on Pompano Caverns in New Jersey. In eight hours they dismantled the cave rock by rock, carried it to the dry cleaners, had it sanitized and pressed, and returned it for assembly. They voted to spend the Green Stamps for a keg of beer to celebrate the spanking-clean cave at a campfire at the mouth of the cave that night. They bent the wire hangers into marshmallow forks. Smoke from the fire stained the walls, so the following weekend they repeated the process to "get it right."

To show how far we have come from the bad old days, we have a new motto: "Keep cave locations secret on your GPS; your cave trip schedule on your PDA; Leave nothing but DNA."

## **Mike Lite Review**

### **By Kevin Psarianos**

These days pretty well every new caving light is outfitted with a bank of tiny white LEDs. So I was pleasantly surprised to hear that Mike Frommer was working on a new carbide cap

lamp. I recently had the chance to try it out, and here's what I found.

Most cavers inclined to use carbide cap lamps get their lights from the diminishing stock of older brass miners' lamps. There have been a few recent entries into the market, including a stylish import, based on the brass miners' lights. The Mike Lite is quite a bit different in a lot of ways, with the most obvious being that the body is plastic. And "No, this is not your father's plastic carbide lamp". Compared to the infamous plastic Justrite, this lamp is compact and robust (and I haven't melted it yet, though I tried).

There are a lot of new and interesting features in this lamp. Among them are an adjustable lamp bracket and stainless steel tip. Actually, all components seem to be either plastic or stainless steel, adding to the durability of the lamp.

Dimensionally it's more comparable to the better brass lamps. It's about the same weight (actually a little lighter), and rides a little closer than my Autolite. It is a little taller, but the adjustable lamp bracket allows you to set the lamp as low as possible.

I've run it a few times so far, both in and out of caves. The lamp runs fairly stable, at a level matching the best that you could hope for from a well-tuned brass lamp. Running hot (a little more than a 1-inch flame), I would get 3-4 hours from a typical charge. It also took whacks quite well (I tend to abuse my gear).

So I'll easily say that I liked the Mike Lite. The price is a little steep at about \$100, but this is fine compared to the crapshoot you face with \$40 lamps in the used market. I also liked its weight and performance as compared to the other new lamps. You collectors out there will find this to be a nice addition for your mantle (I do hope that you don't place it alongside your plastic Justrite, which would be a disservice.)

