

Nohoch Nah Chich

DISDAIN A BEATEN PATH

KARL SHREEVES

Dive to the deepest point in the ocean and return. Do it twice. Do it once more, and only then — counting ascents — will your travels surpass the mapped passage distance of Nohoch Nah Chich (Mayan for “giant bird cage), the underwater equivalent of Mammoth Caves. With nearly 225,000 feet of mapped passage running beneath the forests of Mexico’s

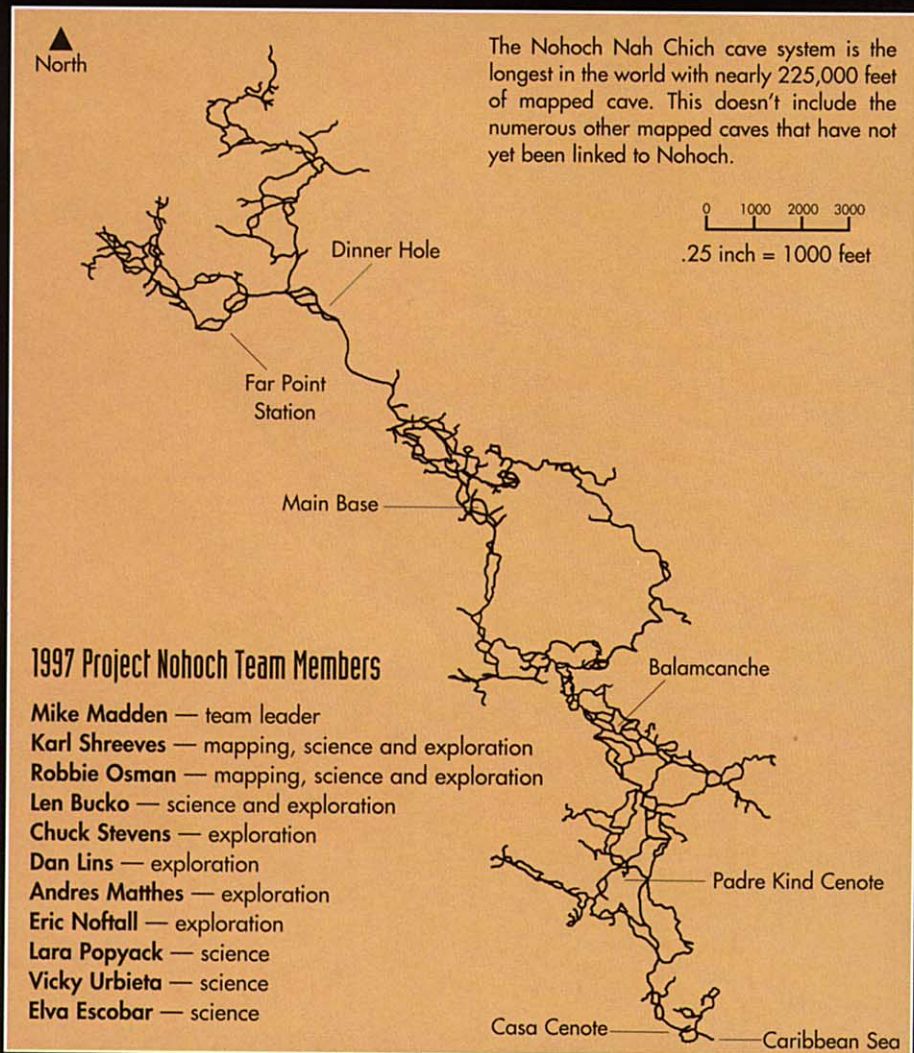
Yucatan peninsula, Nohoch Nah Chich exceeds the size of the next closest underwater cave by miles — and the end is nowhere in sight. Even now, a decade after cave diver Mike Madden slipped into a “promising cenote” that changed his life forever, it’s common for explorers to lay more than 1000 feet of line in virgin cave in a single dive. There are lines in unended pas-

sage just waiting for the time and resources for someone to come back and continue the exploration. And there are many places that have been visited only once, when the line went in.

Project Nohoch is Madden’s annual month-long effort that brings scientists and some of the world’s top cave divers together to explore, map and study the leviathan, though he explores and maps year ‘round as his schedule permits. Marking the cave’s tenth anniversary, Project Nohoch ‘97 (Oct. 15- Nov. 15) added 17,955 feet to Nohoch Nah Chich, for an annual average exploration of 22,440 feet of new cave since it was discovered — or about four and quarter miles per year — but that’s not the whole the story.

“Project Nohoch takes a regional, system approach to exploration,” explains Madden. “We explore cave systems that we believe connect to Nohoch, though until they do, they’re not officially part of it. During the 1997 project, team members put more than 52,000 feet of line in systems like these. So they’re not part of Nohoch Nah Chich’s total — yet.”

Altogether, in one month the Project Nohoch ‘97 Team surveyed three times Nohoch’s annual average growth, exploring more than 70,000 feet of new cave, or a daily exploration averaging more than 2300 feet. What makes this number even more remarkable are several facts. First, to simplify logistics, the ‘97 team was smaller than in recent years, so there were fewer divers (11), who besides exploring, made science dives and mapped. Second, for various reasons, it wasn’t





"Lone Diver." Every year, Mike Madden brings together some of the world's best cave divers to map new sections of the mammoth Nohoch Nah Chich cave system.

possible to dive every day. Third, the team spent several days on important exploration of The Pit — an uncharacteristically deep portion of the cave (you don't typically lay much line during cave dives at 300+ feet deep).

"Considering the days we didn't dive and the days we devoted to mapping and research, it really works out to more than 3000 feet of new cave per exploration day," explains Madden. More than enough to hold the cave's place in the Guinness Book

of World Records. The numbers are impressive, but the "why" hangs there. Why fanatically pursue the unexplored reaches of a submerged labyrinth? Because it is there? To satiate the "Star Trek syndrome" and go where no one has gone before?

Those obsessed with cave diving seldom have satisfying answers; either you understand or you don't. But Abe Lincoln said, "Towering genius disdains a beaten path." In our drive to learn more about our world, about

our spirit and about ourselves, every day humanity sets out on a hundred unbeaten paths; perhaps Nohoch Nah Chich is but one of these. **DI**

The 1998 Project Nohoch is tentatively set for October 15 through November 15. It will include water quality sampling and further exploration of unconnected systems.

Karl Shreeves is vice president of technical development for PADI.

Mike's Promise and Mine

Slap! "Gotcha!" I laugh, a meaningless act of defiance against one of the approximately 23 trillion mosquitoes trying to bite my chin — the only part of my body not protected by neoprene or a mask. Eric Nofall and I kneel shoulder deep, gearing up in a small pool under a rock ledge. It is called "Mike's Promise," one of many small cenotes leading into the Nohoch Pek region of Nohoch Nah Chich; to get here we romped one klick into the jungle, our gear carried by horses and hired Mayan boys. At the top of a gentle ravine we geared up at a temporary day camp, then clamber over rocks, trees and army ants to reach the water.

"Almost ready?" Eric asks.

"A moment." I clip on the last of four 80-cubic-foot cylinders in sidemount configuration — two on each side, none on my back, the better to squeeze through tight places. We don't expect to exceed 45 feet of depth, but we'll be underwater long enough to require decompression.

Our objective is an area about 2500 feet up the main line with some promising openings off to the southwest — a direction on the cave map that's wide open for exploration. But there's more to this trip than mapping — I'm hoping to keep a promise.

Sign up for a cave diving class, and one of the first things the instructor will find out is whether you're a Star Trek fan. If you're not, forget it. Cave diving isn't for you. It's a law or something.

You'll find Trek references in many areas of cave diving, and Nohoch is no exception, with its Far Point Station and Deep Space Nine jungle camps at the system's extreme edges.

When actor Mark Lenard (who played Sarek, Spock's father for you non-Trekkies) passed away, I suggested to Mike Madden that given that every line in Nohoch has a permanent name, that we acknowledge Mark Lenard with one. I can't think of a more fitting tribute than a path leading into the unknown — where no one has gone before. Mike agreed, and Eric and I hope to establish an appropriate line on this dive.

Dive planned and checks made, we submerge. Mike's Promise drops quickly to a restriction at 35 feet, an inverted-V shaped slot that you sort of push and slither through on your side, trying not to bonk the cave too much as you go.

After the first diver, there's zero visibility, and naturally, I'm never the first diver.

After groping through, I slide out, wipe the mud off the left side of my body so I don't trail silt, and follow the line. Eric's waiting in clear water at the 100-foot penetration mark. On signal, we start scootering up the main line.

About 25 minutes later we arrive, clip the scooters to the main line, tie on the first reel and head into the unknown. The bottom is flat at 45 feet, but the ceiling gets lower and lower as we go, chasing black amid the rock — places where passage continues. Three hundred feet of line out and — damn, dead end. We turn and I reel back in. It's an understood rule that we don't leave line that goes nowhere.

We emerge near the main line and try again. And again we reel it out and reel it in. The cycle repeats yet again. I check my air. I've got one untouched cylinder left — when I hit 2000 in it, we leave. Time enough



"Blue Alien," typical of the highly-decorated caves in the Yucatan.

Inset: Trekking in to Mike's Promise.

for one more run to make the cave go. To keep a promise.

We head out again, and again the ceiling drops. It looks like the same dead-end geology we ran into on the last three tries. Wait! Eric points to the left — yes, it goes. We follow, peeling out line. Wall ahead, but there's a horizontal crack, about three feet high and four feet wide. As we head for it, my reel runs out. Quickly we tie in the next.

Eric looks into the crack, looks back and smiles. It's a break down room, with a passage leading up — we follow it, ascending 20 feet over the pile of broken ceiling, peaking and then down the other side. We emerge in big cave — cave that swallows our light. But my last tank has reached 2000 psi. Tantalizing, but prudently I turn the line out.

At the main line, Eric helps me with tie in data — the information that tells the computer mapping program where our new line lies in relation to the others. Before we scooter home, at the top of my survey slate I jot the name of Nohoch Nah Chich's newest path into the unknown.

Sarek's Line.

— Karl Shreeves

MONITOR



THE CAMBRIAN FOUNDATION'S 1998 EXPEDITION TO THE *MONITOR*, THEIR FOURTH, ALLOWED CIVILIAN DIVERS TO WORK OFF OF NAVY AND NOAA SHIPS AND DEMONSTRATE THIS 'NEW UNTETHERED DEEP SCUBA DIVING' TO THE BOYS FROM THE OLD SCHOOL.

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p. 20: Illustration by Allen Holt
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