



QUINTANA ROO'S CENOTES

CAVES
HAND
CARVED
BY GOD

By STEVE GERRARD



Beginning in the early 1980's cave divers realized that a gold mine of cenotes (see no' tãyz), meaning natural well, existed in the Yucatan Peninsula. To date over 100 miles of underwater cave passage have been surveyed in the Yucatan. The total number of cenotes is unknown and cannot be determined since a low canopy of dense tropical jungle hides the entrances to these profoundly beautiful caves. With few roads or trails established in the jungle, accessibility is limited and often difficult.

One doesn't need a degree in geology, hydrology, or geomorphology in order to understand the formation of these natural wonders. Simply put, caves are formed by moving water. Rainwater drains from the jungle interior and meanders slowly to the Caribbean Sea. The Yucatan Peninsula, which has mostly flat topology, is an ancient sea atoll containing millions of years worth of ocean sediments which, over time, formed layers of geological history consisting of coral reefs, animal remains

and sand particles. The groundwater seeps into the flat landscape in its quest for the Caribbean. The flowing underground water slowly erodes passages through the layers of underground limestone and other sediments until caves are formed. The Yucatan is unlike any other place on the planet, in that it uniquely contains all ingredients required for the formation of a high concentration of caves within a small, flat area. It's the best Swiss cheese a cave diver could hope for. Depths within the Yucatan cenotes typically vary between 10 and 50 feet deep. These relatively shallow depths provide divers geared with doubles with long, leisurely dives.

What makes the cenotes so incredible is the crystal clear water and the interesting cave formations. They form a panorama of unforgettable beauty. An endless variety of formations includes the complete caver's spectrum of attractions such as stalactites, stalagmites, soda straws, bacon strips, rim pools, halagites, waterfalls, columns, etc. Fairly recently, ecologically speaking, these caves were given the opportunity to become dry enabling nature's chisel and mallet to reshape the calcium carbonate of the soft limestone into profoundly beautiful sculptures. The delicate creations bring forth feelings of awe and wonder.

Choosing the best cave dives from such an immense concentration of underwater caves is next to impossible, they are all excellent. Ask ten cave divers their favorite and the odds are you will get ten different answers. After years of diving the cenotes, here is this author's humble opinion of the ten best cenotes in the Yucatan.

Cenote Carwash and the Room of Tears

Though many caves, perhaps, are considered better, this particular system still makes it to the top ten. The Carwash is by far the most popular cenote due to its easy accessibility and clear water that offers a huge, cavern entrance. This site has become a popular dive for divers from all skill levels. Parker Turner and Mike Madden found the Room of Tears during the summer of 1995. The flurry of excitement caused by the discovery of this one little room set the stage for an explosion of interest and desire to see something new and exciting.

Accessibility of the Room of Tears has stimulated an emotional debate since it was first located. Should the offshoot guideline be easy for the touring cave diver to find or deceptively hidden as if it were the treasure of the Sierra Madre? This conflict stems from the desire to protect the pristine nature of this beautiful passage. The question is whether it is best to mark the passage so that everyone can easily find it, or leave its discovery to only those who possess sufficient explorer skills to find it on their own. The theory being that successful explorers will have proper conservation techniques thereby protecting this treasured resource.

Cenote Taj Mahal ▶



Regardless of your viewpoint, Cenote Carwash and the Room of Tears is still a classic. For those who saw it in the beginning compared to today, yes, there is some damage. All divers, regardless of their skill level, leave some damage when they dive. It cannot be avoided. What can be stressed, though, is the proper attitude of minimizing the impact of divers.

Beyond the Room of Tears awaits the Basement, Dreamland, and the Lotus rooms. All are beautiful, fragile and require special care. It is suggested that before one dives to this point, make an honest assessment of your personal ability and skills. If you are not able to assure yourself that you can protect this unique "glass house", then please continue to build your skills so you may return someday to view the beauty without impacting its appearance.

Cenote Sac Actun ▶



Charles Bisch

Cenote Dos Ojos, Dos Palmas, High Voltage, Monolith Traverse

Commonly known as "The River Ride." This is the world's second longest explored underwater cave system—at least until it becomes connected with Nohoch Nah Chich, which is eminent. Cenote Dos Ojos means "two eyes" as two gigantic cenotes exist within 250 feet of each other. Dos Ojos was discovered and initially explored by Jim Coke and Johanna DeGroot in 1986. Like so many of the cenotes it was logistically difficult to get to. It is similar to Nohoch Nah Chich with shallow depths, elegant decorations and crystal clear spring water. Coke and DeGroot initially explored 6,000 feet of passage. Today it stands at 112,000 feet and is still going like a freight train.

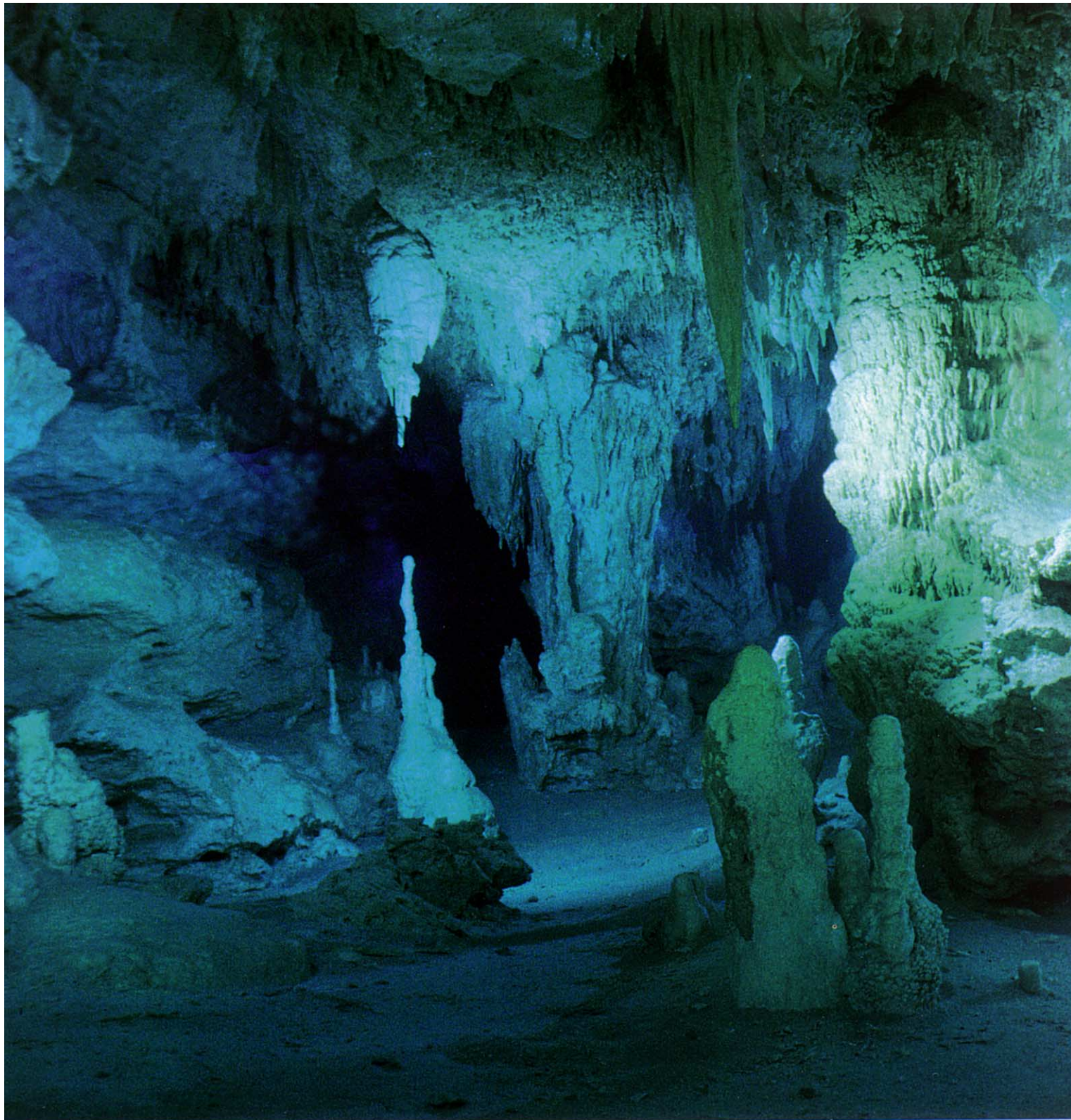
Cenote Sac Actun ▶



Paul Heinerth

The Traverse is approximately 5,500 feet long with four openings or potential bailout points along the way. Maximum depth is 36 feet with the average closer to 16 feet. The fresh water drainage is strong enough to encourage divers to go in the downstream direction. Entering from East Dos Ojos, the continuous guideline begins. It usually takes 45 to 50 minutes of swimming and casual drifting before arriving at Cenote Dos Palmas, named after the two palm trees growing in its basin. Continuing another 30 to 35 minutes, you reach Cenote High Voltage, locally known as "Tic Te Ha." The last section takes you through

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ote Sac Actun

Cenote Tapir's End, named after a dead wild pig skeleton that was found there. The dive concludes at the Cenote Monolith, named for a huge rock that leans against the ledge entrance to the water. Total traverse time is usually about 100 minutes with 1000 psi or more left in your doubles if your air consumption is anywhere near conservative. A dive well worth the effort.

Cenote Esquelto

The Skeleton—also known as the Temple of Doom. Cenote Esquelto was first discovered and explored by Mike Madden and Denny Atkinson during July of 1986 by following a “tip” from a local taxi cab driver. During the summer and fall of 1986, 6,000 feet of cave was surveyed including two large rooms. One room was named the “Coliseum” because

of its size and the second was named “The Fang” room because of an enormous 200 foot stalactite hanging squarely in the center of the room. Cave divers Paul DeLoach, Tara Tanaka and Dr. John Zumrick, residents of Florida, also contributed to its exploration at this time. DeLoach was so impressed with this cave that he said it was “the prettiest he had ever seen” and ranked it over the Sally



Charles Bisch

Ward Spring in Wakulla County, Florida. That's a tremendous compliment.

What makes Cenote Esquelto such a joy is the cobalt blue salt water and the snow white walls and floors that line the cave. The main gate is known as the Madonna Passage that reveals two pretty eight foot brown stalagmites. About 600 feet into the system divers encoun-

ter a "T" marked with orange arrow markers. If you head straight you enter the "Coliseum Room." Turn left and swim 250 feet, and you enter a football field size room containing "The Fang."

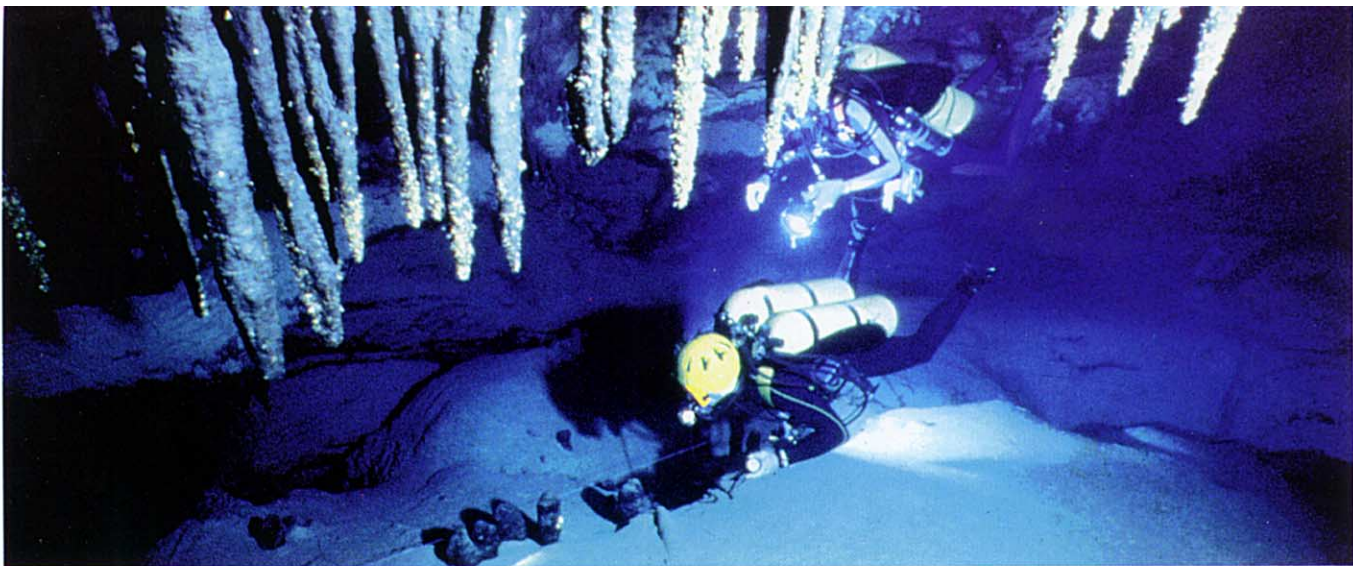
During the months of October and November, 1995, cave explorer and Instructor Gary Walten with the help of Sam Meacham and Gary's wife Kay,

added 3,500 feet of new surveyed passage. This cave system is a classic and deserves to be part of the 10 best cenotes in the Yucatan.

Cenote Naharon

The Myan Blue Traverse. Two cave systems were connected in 1989 by Jim Coke, Tom Young, and Paul Heinerth as

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Lalo Florelli

▲ Cenote Esquelto—Temple of Doom

the first official swim through. A year earlier, Mike Madden and Johanna DeGroot, in a separate, parallel route tied the guideline from Mayan Blue to the end of a string installed by Parker Turner in a siphon portion of Naharon that Parker said was the most gruesome dive from hell he had ever seen. That remark totally discouraged a traverse swim though for that passageway.

Make no mistake about it, this dive is not easy. It requires six reels, including four jumps, and there are no bail out points. The guidelines are set up to require cave divers to do set up dives to become familiar with the route and requires a stage bottle. Yes, it is a hell of a swim but it is also a lot of fun. It is about 5,000 feet in length with a typical bottom time of 75 to 90 minutes depending on route. There are two restrictions, a halocline and a wide variety of sights to entertain you along the way. This is a very satisfying dive that requires good planning and preparation. You'll enjoy it!

Cenote Mundo Escondido

Hidden World. This cave is located directly between the two largest cave systems in the Yucatan, the Nohoch Nah Chich and Dos Ojos. Mundo Escondido was first explored

by Buddy Quattlebaum and Gary Walten during March of 1994. This cave begins with a 20 ft. dry well shaft that leads to the water. The shaft is barely large enough for a diver to enter, and requires ropes to lower gear down. Transporting equipment to the dive site is a logistical challenge requiring the stoutest of 4X4 vehicles. Though it won't be anyone's favorite cave for convenience and ease, it definitely makes up for the hard work and hassle by dazzling the imagination of any cave

diver. This cave will make your mouth drop and forget who Marilyn Monroe was. In a word, it's awesome. Shallow and midsize passageways prevail. The upstream lead is an impressive review of power with art.

Cenote Nohoch Nah Chich

The Giant Birdhouse. Nohoch Nah Chich is the world's longest explored/ surveyed underwater cave. As of November of 1995, this giant cave system has yielded over 160,000 feet of surveyed passageway. It was first dived in November of 1988 after being located based on a tip from a Myan employee. Mike Madden has organized an annual exploration project to Nohoch Nah Chich that has included over 35 persons and a well financed and marketed organization with a dedicated drive to keep pushing the line.

After early dives in Nohoch Madden reported shallow, crystal clear water and stunning decorations that overwhelmed his imagination. With further exploration, what eventually became the most impressive feature is the immense size. Never deeper than 25 feet, the giant hallways obviously formed the

Steve Gerrard



◀ Cenote Myan Blue

basis for the name. Floor to ceiling distance is twenty feet or more in most areas. The cenote basin provides a pool of water that stretches far into the cavern zone and is ideal for snorkelers. Today, it serves as one of the most popular snorkel/adventure trips along the Yucatan coast with groups from several hotels and resorts and an abundant supply of tourists from Cozumel.

Diving Nohoch upstream will knock your eyes out. However, because Nohoch requires a 50 minute hike and equipment portered in by horse, it is logistically difficult and expensive. About one thousand feet upstream divers pass through "Heaven's Gate" to a passage called "Disneyland". To say Disneyland is huge would be an understatement. Every turn provides formations of unique character and delight. Because it is so shallow, there is enough air and time to include several loops on established lines all equally as impressive. All dives in Nohoch must be accompanied by a guide from Madden's dive shop, Cedam Dive Center, per agreements with the landowner. If you have the time, add this dive to your list of sights to see.

Cenote Systema Ponderosa

Early in June of 1990 Bill and Joyce Matthews, of Palmul, mentioned to Tony and Nancy DeRosa that there was a beautiful cenote in Playa Del Carmen. Always energized to find something new the DeRosa's decided to have a look. They found a fifteen foot drop to a body of water that looked emerald green due to the surrounding lush foliage and clear water. Jumping in with single tanks they saw daylight in the distance underneath the ledge heading east. Swimming through 300 feet of passage they emerged into another cenote that was a typical circular collapse packed tight with palm trees and mangroves. The traverse had such a large diameter, that they knew immediately this was part of an outstanding cave system.

They invited me to help explore the cave during the second week of July in 1990. Enroute to the cave I was blindfolded as a joke meant to empha-

size the precious nature of this jewel. I wasn't disappointed. We spent four days exploring and surveyed 7,500 feet of passage. It was the third day that gave us the real reward though. Early on we found a tunnel heading east. Not large, not small, just kind of average. It kept teasing us with annoying haloclines and percolation. The reel kept spinning and the passageway kept going. Finally we hit pay-dirt. We entered a gigantic room where our lights were absorbed by the dark void of water. It was over 100 feet wide and 300 feet long. We named it the "Pool Hall" as if it were a billiard table with pockets at each corner. At the other end, the room bent to the left. Looking up, we noticed that the surface had an air pocket where our exhaust bubbles broke apart. We ascended and carefully decided to try breathing the air. The air seemed fine but what we saw when we shined our lights around in the air was mind boggling. We were stunned by the incredible decorations. We felt as though we were in an elegant china shop. We named it "The Chapel" since it was so beautiful a wedding could have been conducted there. The name has held true for the hundreds of cave divers who have witnessed this gallery. Today, over 34,000 feet of surveyed passage have been explored in Systema Ponderosa, with connections to at least nineteen cenotes. A cave diver can be happy for many days here.

Cenote Systema Sac Actun

The White Cave. Easily the favorite of most cave diving visitors, Systema Sac Actun is easy to locate and get to. This shallow cave system is Picasso's playhouse. There's no place within that will disappoint the eager cave diver. It was discovered by Steve DeCarlo and Jim Coke during November of 1988 while flying Steve's private airplane purposefully looking for new cenotes along the Coba Road near Tulum. It's a coincidence that two of the most beautiful cave systems in the Yucatan, Systema Sac Actun and Nohoch Nah Chich, were discovered during the same flight.

Depths of 45 feet or less and swimming pool clear water add to the appeal of

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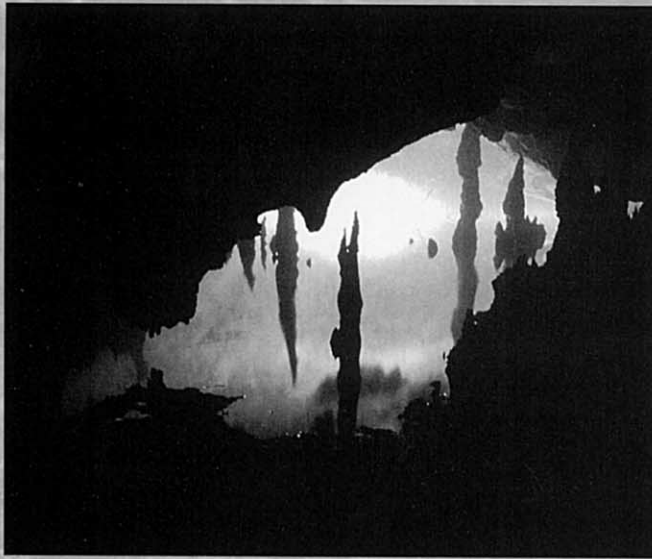
▲ Cenote Mundo Escondido—Outside View



Steve Gerrard

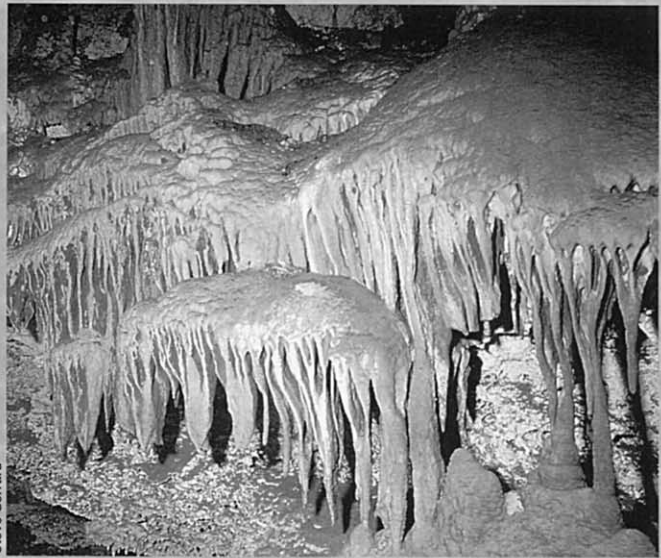
▲ Cenote Mundo Escondido—Inside View

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▲ Cenote Systema Sac Actun

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▲ Cenote Naharon

this cenote. It is a cave photographer's dream. Thousands of columns, hanging stalactites, tiny soda straws, chandeliers, rim pools, and frosty overflows abound.

Jim Coke and Tom Young, residents of the Houston area, teamed up to produce an outstanding map of Systema Sac Actun. There is currently

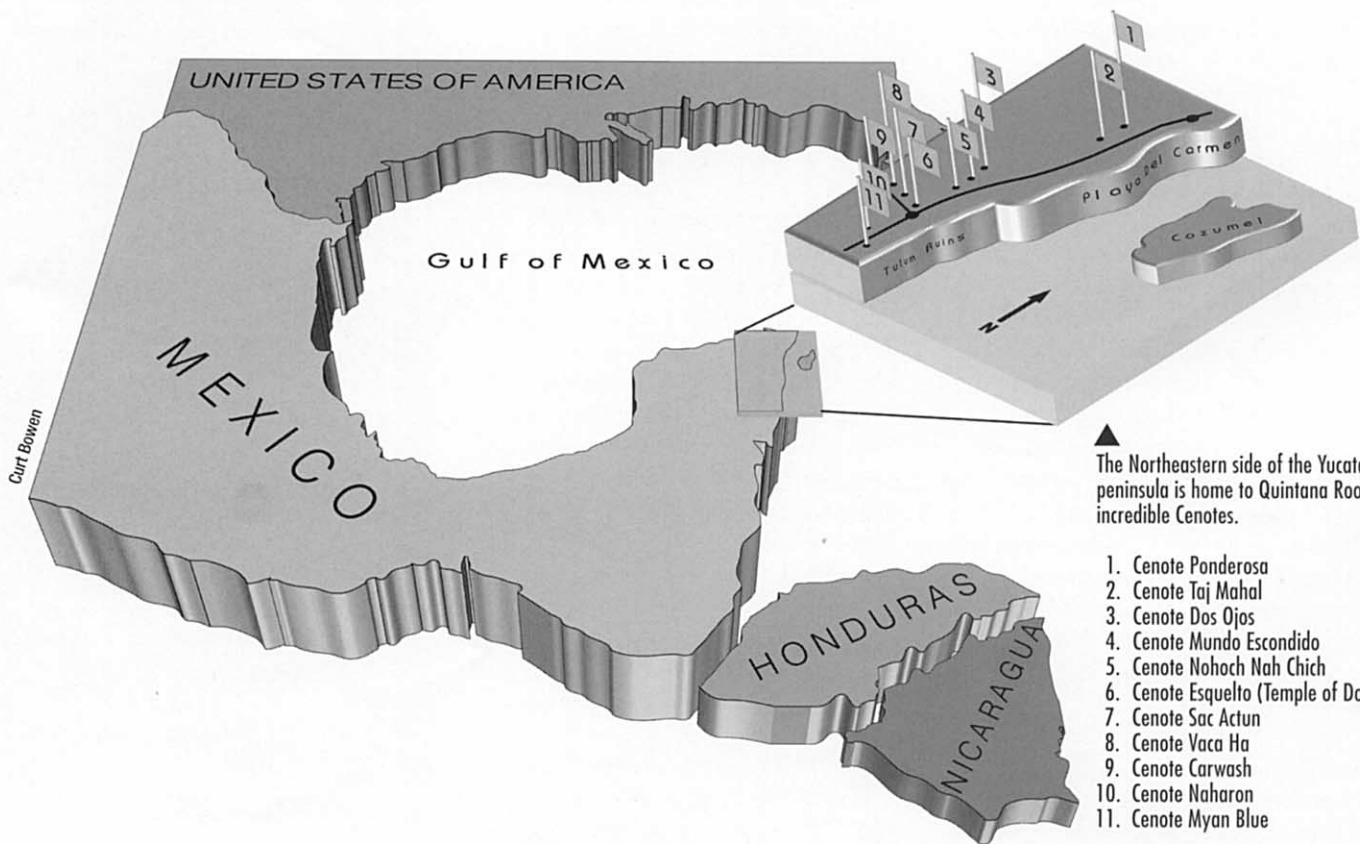
17,000 feet of surveyed passage with nine openings to the surface.

The most popular section is known as the "Cuzan Nah." The best place to enter is Cenote Hotul, located in the middle of the system. Though more difficult to enter, due to a long hike, it provides better access to all sections of

the system. This cave will make you dance with joy—it's that good.

Cenote Taj Mahal

The Palace of Ornaments. Paul Heinerth, of Hudson, Florida, said it best, "The size of The Jumna River compares to the rooms of the great cave system Diepolder in Hernando County Florida." However,



▲ The Northeastern side of the Yucatan peninsula is home to Quintana Roo's incredible Cenotes.

1. Cenote Ponderosa
2. Cenote Taj Mahal
3. Cenote Dos Ojos
4. Cenote Mundo Escondido
5. Cenote Nohoch Nah Chich
6. Cenote Esquelto (Temple of Doom)
7. Cenote Sac Actun
8. Cenote Vaca Ha
9. Cenote Carwash
10. Cenote Naharon
11. Cenote Myan Blue

Steve Gerrard



▲ Cenote Taj Mahal—Unusual Cave Formation

Steve Gerrard



▲ Cenote Taj Mahal—Fossilized Sea Urchin

instead of 240 ft. depths, this colossal passageway is only 40 ft. deep. Talk about clear thinking and enjoyment.

Cenote Taj Mahal was first explored by Nancy DeRosa and her brother Wayne Nefzger after receiving permission from the Don Feliciano, the landowner. Bill and Joyce Matthews of Palmu were instrumental in helping to secure permission for the dive. Accessibility was nearly impossible at first, being located deep in the jungle two kilometers from any semblance of road or trail. As luck prevails a new resort was constructed in 1993 that leased the land for use of natural material. They bulldozed a road that ended only 200 yards short of this cenote. The landowner pushed the trail directly to the cenote.

Nancy's husband, Tony DeRosa, joined the team and the exploration continued. The excitement was contagious. On the fourth day, Nefzger was unavailable so I was offered an invite to go explore. It was the sixth exploration day. Never in my cave diving career, had I seen such immense passageway. It left me speechless. We pushed it a total 2,400 feet from the Cenote Taj Mahal to a new cenote we named Cenote Shan Jahan.

This river passage will impress every cave diver who visits here. Loaded with fossilized shells, sea urchins and coral, this mammoth conduit clearly displays

the geological past. Huge boulders the size of houses and massive slabs of limestone abound. The Jumna River is an excellent example of a great dive.

Cenote Vaca Ha

The Cow Well. This dive usually blows the mind of the cave diver who dives this site for the first time. Cenote Vaca Ha was first shown to Tony DeRosa and I by Don Camillo, the land owner, in May of 1992. It was appropriately named since it looked like a tiny water filled hole that the cows drank from. We were skeptical that diving into a dark little hole was such a smart thing to do. We were desperate though, since we had already promised a unique dive to an exploration group due to arrive in a few weeks. Desperate people do desperate things. I descended into the hole with a reel and guideline thinking that this was really nuts. I was disappointed to find only a small room but I kept poking around. I found a tight restriction and squeezed through about 40 feet of cave and presto—a huge, pristine passage lay before me. Stretching my reel to it's 350 feet, I knew it would be a winner.

In August of 1992, Cliff Keck and Allen Jonushaitis were given the honor of the first dive. They laid 1,800 feet of line and discovered one of the most beautiful caves in the area. The first 600 feet is fresh water richly decorated with columns. Then it dramatically changes

into a fault-line passage and blazes on as if it were a subway tunnel. It's not a long cave system. There's only a total of 4,000 feet of surveyed passage. According to survey data, it sits only 200 feet away from a passage known as "The Drain" in the Cenote Carwash system. Several attempts to connect the two caves have been made without success. Cenote Vaca Ha's unique entrance and beautiful hallways provide enough charm and energy to satisfy any cave diver's appetite for a rewarding dive.

The Best Cave Diving in the World

These ten caves represent a portion of a concentrated, abundant supply of cenotes and cave systems located within close proximity in the Tulum and Akumal area of the Yucatan. With accessibility and logistics slowly becoming easier and more convenient, this new frontier has evolved into a popular dive destination for cave divers around the world. For adventure, breath taking sights and awesome diving, this paradise is second to none. 🤿

Steve Gerrard has been actively cave diving since 1975. He guides and teaches cavern and cave diving along with technical nitrox for Aquatech/Villas DeRosa located at Aventuras Akumal, Mexico. Steve can be reached in Mexico at: 011-52-987-42171.