

Expedition Bacalar
By Linda Bowen

In a constant search for discovery, Advanced Diver Magazine's staff writer Jim Rozzi coordinated an exploration expedition that stretched from the south of the Riviera Maya to just north of the Belize border in search of several fabled cenotes. Joining the expedition was one of Mexico's foremost explorers, Matt Matthes, along with a group of merry cavers. The following is a description of their journey.

Just three hours south of Tulum lies Lake Bacalar, a giant natural fresh water lake which ranges more than 50 miles to the north and south and extends up to a half mile wide. Lake Bacalar is noted for its beautiful turquoise water that is created by its high mineral content.

Renting a small airplane from the local airport in Chetumal, a large city located about 50 miles south east of Lake Bacalar, the exploration team scouted the lake and surrounding jungle for any signs of hidden cenotes. The pilot of the small aircraft also gave the group hints of more giant cenotes he had spotted earlier, which were located approximately 70 miles southwest along the Mexican and Belize border. After finding more than 13 possibilities along the lake, the team decided to fly to these recommended areas to check out these giant cenotes.

The southwest terrain quickly changed from a sort of flat limestone plane to more mountainous rolling hills. It wasn't long before the group identified the giant river basin that flowed west to east, separating Mexico from Belize. On the basin's northern side lies a giant ridge that rises more than 300 feet from the river. Across this ridge, the exploration team spotted the first potential unexplored cenote, then another and another, until more than 15 cenotes had been cataloged with some appearing to be more than 800-feet-wide. With only one road into this area, the exploration of these mysterious cenotes would be extremely difficult and time consuming--

truly an expedition all its own.

Returning back to Lake Bacalar, Cenote Azul appeared to be one of the most promising cenotes. Cenote Azul Bacalar, a swimming hole and restaurant for the locals and tourists that visit this area, measures more than 600 feet in diameter and was prime territory for virgin exploration. Divers Matt Matthes, Marike Jasper, Scott Carnaham, Benja Sacristan and Linda Bowen explored this system for several days determining its maximum depth of 237 feet with no discovered cave passage.

Still, this cenote provided interesting scenery. The walls of the cenote dropped straight down 165 to 170 feet with an undercut at 20 feet. Flow stone formations hung from the ceiling and in some places undercut more than 30 feet. Made up of sand, silt and hundreds of decaying trees, the bottom sloped towards the cenote's center. Visibility was about 60 feet on the surface but cleared to more than 100 feet below a depth of 140 ffw. Due to its size, much more exploration and survey data will eventually be needed for this cenote.

Cenote 32 and 33 were located on the shore of Lake Bacalar and were influenced by the natural erosion and filtering of the lake's sand. Both were giant sand bowels with no walls, flowing water vents, or cave passage. Cenote 32 had a maximum depth of 117 ffw and cenote 33 bottomed out at a maximum depth of 160 ffw.

Cenote Myras Ojo was the second most promising. With just a small opening from the erosion effects of the lake, Myras Ojo had steep walls, which dropped to around 100 ffw. Again, the sand in this cenote sloped toward the center and a maximum depth of 170 ffw was discovered. Divers Matt Matthes, Dan Lins, Jim Rozzi and Curt Bowen explored this cenote's interior walls and sandy bottom. No cave passage was found, although they did discover some water flowing through rock fractures. Visibility in Myras Ojo never exceeded 40 feet.

The exploration also included two trips south along the Mexican and Belize border for dives to take a closer look at the giant cenotes spotted by the team from the air. The first reconnaissance (recon) trip included divers Jim Rozzi, Benja Sacristan and Linda Bowen. Obtaining a guide and several sherpas from the small village of Union, the team attempted to access one of the cenotes spotted from their earlier aerial view. Gaining access was very difficult due to the 250 feet high sloping banks and thick vegetation that surrounded the cenote. Because of this, only depth soundings with a survey line and reel were taken, and an estimated depth of 70 ffw was discovered.

The second recon trip included divers Matt Matthes, Curt Bowen and Scott Carnahan who returned to an unexplored cenote discovered by the first recon team the prior day. Cenote Azul Union (pictured below) was easily accessible by vehicle with a short 300-yard walk to the water's edge. A medium-sized stream of water flowed out of the cenote and into the nearby river. Cliff walls surrounded two-thirds of the cenote and small floating islands of grass moved around on the cenote's surface. According to the local guide, a rumored large crocodile inhabited the cenote. The guide kept an eye out for the creature while the team was underwater.

The cenote turned out to be only 54 feet deep with lots of fallen trees, debris and grasses. Several water vents along the walls and sand boils were also discovered. Visibility ran between five and 20 feet, which made spotting the crocodile a little difficult and somewhat frightening between all the fallen logs and thick grasses.

With the exploration time coming to an end, the team successfully discovered and explored more than 16 new sites, although only two ended up being interesting. With the proper dive facility available, Cenote Azul Bacalar--above all the other cenotes that had been investigated--was found to be a perfect location for future advanced and technical training.

Special Thanks to:
Roberto Hashimoto
and Matt Mickey