

# Cave Prospecting

Within the

# Republic of Panama

## 2011

An expedition of the  
Speleological Union of Ireland



Chiquiri Arriba

Photo Roger Day

## A word of thanks

All too often those who support original exploration are overlooked. The whole team therefore would like to offer their sincere thanks to the following

We would like to offer our gratitude to the people of Panama particularly the many smallholding farmers which we encountered so often who not only allowed us access across their land but also showed us great courtesy and assistance in searching for cave entrances.

To the Police Officers of Tonosi, Los Santos Province, who very kindly assisted us after disaster struck the trip when part of the rear suspension on the jeep suddenly left the vehicle. The remote area we were prospecting in gave us grave concerns about the actual vehicles recovery; however the Police advice and genuine concerns gave us enormous confidence. Ultimately we were returned to Panama City safe and sound.

Special thanks must be given to Angel Brennan who spent a great deal of time and effort enquiring about and pursuing reports of cave entrances across Central Panama and who organized many of the introductions to the owners of the rumored cave sites; even when he broke his arm he still continued to support the team's efforts, so thank you Angel, thank you very much.

To the Congresso of the Kuna peoples of Ustupo village, San Blas Province, specifically The Elders, their Witch Doctor, his assistant and the guides.

To the Speleological Union of Ireland who once again, even during these difficult economic times, kindly offered financial support to this trip and who publish these reports via their web site.

To Mr. Keith Christensen (USA), for access to his 2005 report and his personal communications with James S Cobbett, this report gave us valuable clues for further cave potential to the areas he had previously visited.

To Marilyn Cobbett, for her ever present good humour, patience and overwhelming hospitality.

On a personal basis, I offer my sincere thanks to each and every member of the team for their unceasing good humour throughout the difficult times, of which there were many. I particularly appreciate the photographers who spend a good deal of time and effort recording the events; without them the memories fades.

Last, but never least, to Pauline Cronin for her unwavering support for my pursuit of adventure.

Pat Cronin  
Doolin  
March 2011

# Introduction

This trip was different to the previous ones; hitherto we had been in the position of having some idea of where cave entrances were located. Due to James presence in Panama and the increasing knowledge that this resident “Gringo” was interested in caves we now became inundated with reports and rumours of holes in the ground. The reality was our team of four was faced with collating and assessing the information and choosing where to start so as prepare a route to visit as many areas as practicable.

Priority was given to revisiting the area around Cueva Del Cementario, the site where a possible pre-Colombian ossuary had been discovered during our trip of 2009. A copy of our report had been sent to Dr R Cooke for further advice and comment of the discovery. So a joint visit was proposed.

Further to what may be found on the southern shores of Lago Bayano we constructed a plan where we would check out the Chiriquí Arriba area and Terebario on the western coast of the Azeuro Peninsula. As well as these areas we could visit some of the sites recorded by K Christiansen by circumnavigating the Azuero Peninsular.

The distances and nature of the roads and tracks to be covered between each location was such that having our own transport was important and once again the Cobbett’s came to the fore and allowed the team to use an SUV. It was a superb piece of American engineering right up until we broke it. A pattern seems to be appearing here; during the last trip we used Marilyn Cobbett’s SUV and had to cut off the rear bumper; the 4x4 having sunk yet again into the fluid surface of a track while traversing the interior.

We finally decided to divide our time into four phases 1) Lago Bayano 2) Chiriquí Arriba 3) Tonosi and 4) eastern Kuna Yala

Overall, on this occasion, it was a particularly tougher trip and the effort expended by all participants significant. The rewards were a little disappointing; but that’s original exploration, caves are where you find them.

The four members of this team were James Cobbett, Dig Hastilow, Roger Day and Pat Cronin.

NB.

This report is the fifth of a series of studies of the caves of Panama by Christiansen 2005, McManus, Cobbett, Harper & Harper 2005, Cronin 2006 & 2009 and ideally should be read with the previous reports to give an idea of the scope of work carried out. The reports of 2006/9/11 are available from the Speleological Union of Ireland website, [www.caving.ie](http://www.caving.ie)

GPS CHART DATUM: Positions recorded are in NAD 27 “Canal Zone”



The Isthmus of Panama

## Logistics

### Medical

Fortunately during this trip nothing as serious as the previous Weils Disease occurred. Hydration via water and beer did the job. All wore good quality hats throughout the day and were much the better for them.

The heat was a constant problem and work during the middle of the day was avoided where possible, though not always practicable.

One member was off colour for a day or so but that passed without incident.

### Fluids

All the team opted for Doxycycline for Malarial protection and its antibiotic qualities.

Water treatment was carried out at all sources. To this were added salts to replenish those lost during exertion. Beer was enjoyably consumed as it was guaranteed to be safe; well that's what we told ourselves.

### Food

For the most part all the food encountered was acceptable, once or twice of doubtful origin but it was eaten all the same as there was no alternative.

### Accommodation

There are plenty of motels and hotels about. We used cheap motels where possible all of which were clean and basic.

### Transport

The use of James vehicle was an absolute necessity for comfort and not least to keep the costs down. The use of the helicopter was justified to see the terrain prior to our visit to that area. Canoes on Lago Bayano were arranged prior to our arrival to ensure they were actually there when we got there.

### Equipment

Normal caving kit was used, along with gloves at all times, experience showed that while thrashing through the undergrowth all sorts of thorny and sharp objects exist just waiting to delay the trip by puncturing. Not to mention dozing snakes on rock ledges.

### Cave Diving

As none was planned on this occasion only one full set was carried to allow a short investigative dive at a site.

### Lighting

The Petzl head torch was used throughout by all the team they provide 40 hours of good light with the option of a spotlight for those difficult to see places. The major plus of these lights are their use of AA batteries so common throughout the world's roadside stores.

### GPSR's

Garmin Etrex units were used as after several expeditions into the jungle environment it was found these give a superior signal reception beneath the canopy.

### Footwear

After having chosen our footwear quite carefully, during one trip four of the five pairs present that day fell apart with the severity of the terrain. Therefore a swift trip was made to the nearest town to get some more. One member used Wellington boots which were OK but did not have sufficient ankle support required to carry a pack all day, ankles were sore in the evening.

### River crossings

For the most part not a problem the temperature is warm and the rivers crossed were at a low flow level, we did not encounter a river more than shoulder height on James, which was only a problem if you were Pat.

## Trip diary

20<sup>th</sup> January

The team assembled at James house in Panama City from the Ireland, Britain and the Philippines, all arrived safe and sound and thirsty. A reduction in the KLM baggage allowance since 2009 meant the travelers from Ireland and the UK had to slim down on equipment, mostly the gear that provides a little comfort.

21<sup>st</sup> Jan

After a good night's sleep (the beer helped) preparations were commenced for our trip to Lago Bayano to meet up with Dr Cooke and his party to guide them to Cueva Del Cementario and the suggested pre-Colombian Ossuary.

Permissions to visit the Kuna Yala had been arranged. We have also had the good fortune to have Stuart Redwood, an expat Scottish geologist, agree to accompany us and assist us with understanding the local geology.

We've postponed the Lago Bayano trip until the 24<sup>th</sup>.

Disturbing news has been received; the trip that Dr Cooke was to accompany us on is deferred. He has departed for the USA to undergo urgent treatment. We are disappointed but our thoughts are with him and his family for a swift recovery.



Landscape South of El Valle

Photo Pat Cronin

22<sup>nd</sup> Jan

While James and Roger complete shopping for the final items required for the trip. Dig and Pat carry out an aerial survey of the phase two area, Chiriquí Arriba. Many small rivers and large streams were noted, along with the ever present vegetation cover. A very large waterfall was also noted on the northern flanks of the El Valle Mountain. As we returned to base, approaching the Pan-Americana highway, we flew over an area suggesting evidence of rainfall erosion that extended several miles to the west. One large stream seen beyond this point entered a small area of scrub in a system of cultivated fields but could not be seen to emerge.

In the evening, at Casa Cobbett, over several beers, we discussed the sad news of Dr Cooke and decided to continue with the trip and expand the area to search for more cave around Cueva Del Cementario.

## Phase 1 Lago Bayano

23<sup>rd</sup> Jan

Up very early for the long drive, canoe and walk to the south shore of Lago Bayano. Breakfasted at the small roadside bar we had used before, situated just west of the Kuna Yala border. As we had the permissions arranged previously we had no delay in getting into the canoes and heading off. Forty five minutes later we landed at Pueblo Nuevo. Here it was obvious that the lake water level was some three metres higher than 2009. Since 2009 a small landing charge has been introduced. We had been joined by a number of local cavers who wished to improve their caving experience. To accommodate them the party split up. Dig & Roger with Stuart and Moisas went into Cueva Pueblo Nuevo to check for any further leads and carry out a photographic study. On exiting Dig spotted a small entrance in the cliff opposite Pueblo Nuevo and pushed the tight passage in and upwards for some ten metres before it closed down. Meanwhile James, Pat and two others made their way upstream of the canyon to Sleepy Snake Sink to investigate and record its position. We were disappointed to find the entrance has become blocked by even more debris brought down by recent flooding. Fortunately James had already explored this site solo in 2005 for some twenty metres along a small passage to a point where prudence was deemed to be the better part of valour. It was his enthusiasm to return to this site that caused us to stumble across the adjacent Cueva Del Cementario and its Ossuary. Ascending above the sink the weather eroded limestone is severe on hands and equipment. The dense jungle doesn't help either. Just above the sink, on an alignment with the village, a large, almost conical collapsed depression was found. Its dimensions are forty metres across by some fifteen metres deep. A thorough search of the walls and base revealed a boggy floor, once cultivated. The walls had two minor rifts which had not developed. The two others in the team had become weary of the difficulties and asked to make their way back to the village and the others.



Formations Cueva Pueblo Nuevo

Photo Dig Hastilow

Meanwhile James and Pat continued to ascend the ridge and located a steep descending streambed this was followed until it opened into a field set within a semi-circular depression. The walls are an average of ten metres high. Three minor openings were located within this amphitheatre none of which were enterable. The walls exhibit a wonderful array of stal deposits. Following the right-hand wall we came to an area where we located the inaccessible upper entrance of Cementario directly above another display of stal.

Dig & Roger had showed the others around their cave and carried out some photography, Dig located, almost opposite Cueva Pueblo Nuevo, a short rift some twelve metres long, without further prospects of extending it.

James had also located a narrow stream entering the lake and pressed the canoe owner to take us there. Once through the narrows the area opened into a river with soaring limestone walls over thirty metres high. No definite cave openings could be seen. Another streamway which we followed up stream to a series of arches ultimately leads to a cave, previously visited by James, and was presently inaccessible due to the increased water level of the lake. By now the guides had had enough of the Gringos asking go here and go there so they pointed the canoes north and headed back before we could see another point of interest. Back across the lake, a beer in the bar and the long drive back to the City. A bit of a disappointment; but that's exploration for you. En-route back the leading jeep hits a huge and very deep pothole. Judging from the other cars present they weren't the first to do so. The impact had severely damaging the

rear wheel also causing a piece of metal to fall off from somewhere underneath. After changing the damaged wheel and tyre we all made it back to James place without further problems, continuously dodging the deep holes in the road.



Streamway, Cueva Pueblo Nuevo

Photo Dig Hastilow

Cueva Cementario	N009' 04.418	W078' 48.266
Cueva Cementario 2	N009' 04.440	W078' 48.253
Sleepy Snake Sink	N009' 04.415	W078' 48.349
Small Tight Rift	N009' 04.503	W078 48.310
Small Vertical Rift	N009' 04.493	W078' 48.300
Depression Centre	N009' 04.446	W078 48.352

## Phase 2 Chiriquí Arriba

24<sup>th</sup> Jan

In the bright morning light we checked over the jeep and found no other obvious damage. After breakfast we commenced preparing for the Chiriquí Arriba trip. Shopping etc took most of the day. Finally left to meet with Angel in Penonome; journey time about two hours. Angel Brennan whom we had met previously during our 2009 trip had family connections to the Aran Islands situated off the West coast of Ireland. His Great grandfather was forced to leave the islands in search of work, which ultimately brought him to Central America. His work for the Panamanian Government in the Ministry of Agriculture, takes him to the more remote areas of Panama assisting the farmers to improve their situation. In the restaurant Angel told us of another five cave entrances. One of these was situated far to the east some hundred kilometres or so from the Colombian border in the Kuna Yala. The fuzzy photograph of the caves general location showed a peak, among many others, apparently quite close to the coast line. The local village of Ustupo, where the local Kuna council resides, the Congreso, is constructed on a small island just offshore from the mouth of a river that appears to drain from the area of the mountain peak.

Stuart Redwood, the geologist, has given us an insight into the geology of Panama; it appears that a band of limestone, the one that occurs south of Lago Bayano, continues across Panama from Darien westward. The question is does this occurrence extend into the Chiriquí Arriba area and beyond, for that matter? It does suggest that the cave entrance reported near Ustupo may well be more than just a rock shelter.

25<sup>th</sup> Jan

At breakfast Angel arrived to tell us of the requirement for a “blood chit” to allow us access to explore the region which is part of a preserved area managed by the adjacent Eco-centre motel and lodge. We arrive and after a short delay a guide took us downhill into the narrow valley, here we walked into the river and continued wading downstream to the cave. These caves turned out to be large hollows in the bedrock at a point where the valley walls narrow. However much to our surprise we found ourselves looking at a superb array of Petroglyphs spread across the walls of these hollows. The carvings meanings are not obvious, though one suggests the river, a wavy line similar to a sine wave, another, an elongated skull. One other carving is similar to the Celtic spiral; this one was two joined spirals. One circle has been cut deep enough to expose a lighter colour of rock beneath. Others are no more than deep scratches. Some appear unfinished. Disaster, the rock encountered here is not limestone! After the photo session the team made its way back upstream to the waterfall. Although close this is definitely not the one seen from the aerial survey earlier in the week. An investigation of the area did not find any evidence of cave. The waterfall is rather nice at around forty metres high. It would appear that Petroglyphs have generated some interest of late; although accurate dating appears to be a problem. A wide variety of shapes and stylized images have been found throughout Central America.

On returning from the waterfall we meet up with another guide who knew of the reported cave. Alas it was too later in the day to travel to it so we arranged to meet again in several days time, as we have already arranged to search for another site called Robbers Cave.



Petroglyphs, Chiquiri Arriba

Photo Dig Hastilow

26<sup>th</sup> Jan

Up at 05:30 to meet the guide, Ivan; the distance to the cave is considerable so an early start to avoid the heat of the day is important.

We had arranged for a pack horse to carry some of the kit. The approach seemed best up the spine of an obvious ridge thence up the higher ground. First a shallow crossing of a wide river; then through cultivated land and onto the foothills, which is covered in a dense scrub and thorn bushes. After two hours...and at least one about turn to retrace our route.....we began to realise that the guide may not be as experienced as he had us believe. We became aware of him regularly using his mobile phone to ask for directions! Time was passing and the heat was increasing. Some of the team were beginning to feel its effects. We began to descend the hill and realised that we were only some five hundred metres from the jeep, this was confirmed by Digs GPS. Noon was approaching. The team decided to make for the vehicle and re-assess the situation. Crossing some cultivated farmland the owner welcomed us and pointed our guide and us in the right direction so off we went again. Heat now very intense: low water supplies. James succumbed and agreed to wait for the teams return eking out what water he had remaining, an hour on and Pat

turned back, again no water. Dig, Roger and the guide pressed on with a cave entrance becoming visible on a distant hillside. A further hours trek brought them to the two cave entrances set within a rocky outcrop among trees and dense undergrowth. The first entrance was a crawl which led into a small chamber some four by three metres. The second entrance was wide and low followed by a ten metre passage opening into a chamber some five metres in diameter, from here another scramble led uphill into a further cavity some three metres in diameter. Both caves appear solutional and unfortunately not in limestone. Two other cave entrances were visible much higher up on the hillside but the steepness of the approach would require climbing techniques involving rope etc. Both give the impression of being sites of mining activity.



Approach to Robbers Cave

Photo Dig Hastilow

Meanwhile Pat walked back down hill to locate James to make their way back to the jeep and drive to the local village to locate something for the lads to drink on their return. They are sure to be thirsty. James and Pat find a shop and buy lemonade and beer after drinking their fill they hurried back to the boys. Later, back at the hostel, all were thankful for a cold shower and a much needed visit to the bar. This trip today cost the team four pairs of boots, one pair of which belonged to the Ivan the guide.

Robbers Cave 1	N008' 30.772	W080' 27.539
Robbers Cave 2	N008' 30.765	W080' 27.534

27<sup>th</sup> Jan

06:00 we are all fairly disappointed so far with the results of our efforts; hardly anything to show at all. Arguably we have checked the reports and we can report no limestone and no cave as yet! The rumoured cave entrance for this morning's trip is being expressed as a definite cave; for sure this time! The cave is near the village of Pueblo Orai. We are informed that the locals know it as Cueva las Huacas! The name implies there are possible archaeological remains present within; that would indeed be a bonus for the trip. Again we are headed for the high hill line. An hour's walk brought us up to a narrow pass between two conical shaped hills. This area is similar to Cockpit Country, Jamaica. If only! The exposed rock outcrop is up on the right, up a very steep slope covered with scrub and scree. A further climb and scramble and we encounter an entrance. The young guides appear both fearful and fascinated. They find it incomprehensible as to why the Gringos should want to enter the caves. The general subdued talk is of the presence of Gold! However a little later we offer them our helmet and lamps; they tentatively enter and soon thoroughly enjoy themselves scuttling about the passages, looking for the gold no doubt. Meanwhile James speaks to the guides and presses for further information, while Pat & Dig survey the cave and explore further as Roger takes photos.



Tree roots in Cueva las Huacas II

Photo Dig Hastilow

The cave has a phreatic appearance, though the rock does not appear to be limestone, again. The series of tubes join into one and descend to enter a lower chamber that has an exit at its lowest point out onto the cliff face, like a plug hole. The area shows evidence of significant water flow through the passages and out the lower exit. This water is, perhaps, the runoff from the high bare rock faces above the site. Dig and Pat complete the survey. While scrambling

about Roger finds a wasp nest, and they don't like their visitor. James continues to interrogate the guides and has learnt of another cave with a much larger entrance just around the cliff face; could this be Huacas II? Is this one unknown to Angel? The guides are correct, just around the corner the cliff face continues and immediately on the right is a small hole down which Pat is unanimously volunteered to go in, it is a small tube some four metres long and blocked with rock debris. Further on still is the one the guides spoke of, an entrance some nine metres diameter; Cueva las Huacas II. A slope descends to a level floor with a small phreatic tube continuing which takes water, too small to enter. Around a large pillar the slope opens up to ascend to another elongated entrance. Climbing up through this we are back out on the cliff, a further scramble around the edge of the cliff leads to a pothole. This shaft drops some ten metres to a ledge but the shaft can be seen to continue. Dig's turn; using a ladder the ledge is reached; another ladder is added and Dig continues down to the base of the shaft at -14m. The stench from the bat poo is overwhelming and makes our eyes water. Pat joins Dig to explore the horizontal passage; within a few metres it became too tight. They surveyed the cave.



Pozo Pueblo Orai

Photo Roger Day

Once the rift was detached the guides then set off to climb even further up the cliff face. They are becoming more relaxed toward us; we really are looking for holes in the ground. While Dig and Pat were below James and Roger had pressed the guides even further and their answer was there are indeed more entrances nearby, but we have to climb much higher up the cliff face to reach them. An ascent of some forty metres through scrub and loose stone brought the team to a large buttress. Continuing to climb to the left of the abutment the team was shown a tiny hole obstructed by a very large boulder, which the team

could not move. This was very frustrating, as a large diameter descending tube could be seen. James climbed down and around the buttress to find a possible lower entrance, success! He found a very tight rift opening partly obstructed with substantial sized roots. Pat was pushed through the squeeze and managed to thread his way through the mass of tough tree roots blocking the way. A small chamber opened out and around the corner the tube was followed steeply upward to the blocked upper entrance previously noted. A well developed passage of twenty three metres long with a vertical range between entrances of fifteen metres. Another small rift was noted with no prospects. A slow walk back to the village followed by a cold beer.

Cueva las Huacas 1	N008' 36.908	W080' 28.608
Cueva las Huacas 2	N008' 36.924	W080' 28.598
Cueva las Huacas 3	N008' 36.942	W080' 28.581
Cueva Tight Sod	N008' 36.933	W080' 28.575
Cueva JCC	N008' 36.937	W080' 28.575
Pozo Gotham	N008' 36.943	W080' 28.572

28<sup>th</sup> Jan

06:00 breakfast and off early to meet the guide to search the mountain above the Eco Lodge. Our contact, the guide, says there is a large cave opening situated in the cliff face directly above the forty metre waterfall and that his dog had gone into the cave, chasing rabbits, never to be seen again!!! After the usual thrashing through jungle and scrub we dropped down to the narrow gulley and crossed the river that feeds the fall.



Approach above waterfall

Photo Dig Hastilow

An eighty degree, muddy climb back up the opposite bank brought us back into dense foliage. Owing to the steepness of the ground above the rumoured entrance, about 80 degrees, Pat set up a series of safety lines to allow a safe descent down to the shelf of debris directly above the waterfall. The team's position did not allow for any visual of the area beneath so we opted to abseil down to an obvious buttress and try to work along from there. Dig went first and managed to get to a point where he was almost above the fall and began to work his way along through the accumulated jungle detritus, due to the conditions the SRT was re-positioned several times to facilitate the horizontal progress. After a great deal of time and effort Dig emerged from below the edge and confirmed that no cave existed anywhere in the vicinity. A closer investigation of the rock exposed along riverbed and banks around the lip of the waterfall, showed it to have a granular appearance and wasn't recognizable as limestone.



Cuevas las Virgins

Photo Dig Hastilow

29<sup>th</sup> Jan

06:00 met up with Angel who had managed to break his arm since we last saw him but undeterred the hardy Panamanian still chose to accompany us for the day's exploration with his arm in a fresh plaster cast. Another walk is required today, this time to ascend the line of hills that surround the approach to Cueva las Virgins. One of the young guides has been replaced by Jose, a member of the Policia de la Frontera.

These are a tough military police unit who patrol the jungle region of Darien near the border of Columbia, dealing with drug smugglers and insurgents. With local suspicion as to our motives for exploring this inhospitable area, the team speculates as to whether our new "guide" has more to do with officialdom; ensuring that we are truly in search of caves and not treasure hunters liable to steal away the county's heritage. This entrance is reported to be apparent from the approach below so it'll be interesting to see exactly where it is. Once again the steep climb with gear took its toll. All are suffering from the increasing heat. The ascent took the team up through a pass and into a valley behind the hills. From a narrow footpath the guides lead us up through dense scrub to the base of a fine conical rock pinnacle.

He indicates that we have to climb the near vertical slope as the cave is somewhere up there, not quite where we had been lead to believe. Thrashing across the ridge, through the undergrowth we are aware of a vertical drop on our right. The guide scampers up the bare rock surface and uses the foliage as hand holds. Once up he throws down our rope, which we use as a handline, and we ascend to the top of this cone of rock, which is definitely not limestone. Communicating with a friend in the valley, far below, he positions him self directly above the cave mouth and indicates to us the exact spot to descend. Pat set up the rope system and Dig abseils down to observe the entrance, at some fifty metres below the top and some hundred plus metres above the valley floor. Alas, this ancient site seen each day by the villagers for hundreds of years, suspected to be the repository of their antecedents treasures, reputed to have been hidden from the invading Spanish some four hundred years ago, is no more than a dark hollow in the cliff face which casts an impressive shadow. Bitterly disappointed the team makes its weary descent from mountain peak; making their way back to the lodgings for a well earned meal and beer. This was our remaining, reported cave entrance for this area, so the team decided to leave and make their way back to Panama City and the comfort of James place to address the details and plan for the next phase.

Cueva Las Virgins

N008' 36.522

W080' 29.060

## Phase 3 Azuero Peninsula

30<sup>th</sup> Jan

The team split up to prepare for the next area, the Azuero Peninsula. Some spent the day repairing what bits of kit were broken or damaged during the last few days, the others made a trip to the shops to replenish equipment and obtain further supplies for the next trip. A review was made of the recorded sites utilizing Keith Christiansen's report of his 2005 trip. Some of the sites, we had been recently informed of, coincide with the general area visited by Keith, though the descriptions differ somewhat, still, that's no guarantee of new sites, so we'll have to check each one in turn. Time consuming but there's no other way. Equipment is checked again prior to our early departure.

31<sup>st</sup> Jan

Today is set aside to travel to Azuero Peninsula. Fortunately by careful planning and packing both the equipment and personnel squeeze into the vehicle. We made good time following the Pan-America highway. Turning south onto the peninsula the roads gradually deteriorate into tracks. We arrived at the cowboy town of Tonosi just after nightfall and check into a motel, basic and cheap. We eventually found some food and drink in a small local bar, a little difficult to find and fairly limited for choice.

## February

1<sup>st</sup>

07:00 up to look for breakfast and gasoline, no gasoline and almost no breakfast. The plan today was to revisit a deep rift canyon noted by James during a previous visit. It is located on the margin between jungle and cultivated fields, close to an abandoned cement works. We scoured the countryside, no luck. By 10:30 the heat and packs were becoming unbearable so we began to head back toward the vehicle checking the adjacent area enroute. James found a small outcrop that lead shortly to the end of the rift. The team split up here and began a systematic search. A small gull cave was found within the gorge and almost immediately we discovered another entrance in the bottom. This led to the head of a four metre pitch which was blocked at the bottom by boulders adjacent to this was a second small entrance. The cave was surveyed while rest of the team searched in vain for further cave entrances. While there are a great many small entrances all are blocked. What was present was a substantial amount of decorations along the walls. Returning to the vehicle we bumped into Mr. Salome checking his land on horseback, this gentleman who had shown James around previously.



Southern, lower end of rift, Tonosi

Photo Roger Day

Over a mid afternoon beer he told us of a very deep cave entrance near where we had been, so in the appalling heat we carried the equipment back into the hills, only to find the deep cave was in fact the other end of the rift we had just explored, damn.

Back in downtown Tonosi the place was getting ready for the Fiesta del Torros so tonight we have a wider choice of foodstuffs on offer. James is not feeling too good tonight, and goes to bed early, perhaps from today's strenuous efforts and the severe heat, it's certainly not the effect of beer, he's had none, so he must be ill!

Gul Rift	N007' 27.842	W080' 32.342
Gorge Rift	N007' 27.820	W080 32.356

2<sup>nd</sup> Feb

After a grim breakfast we set off to Guera near Guaniquito, some twenty kilometres north west of Tonosi, to commence checking out some of our sites against those that Keith Christiansen had recorded. We stopped often and enquired of residents for cave entrances. By the greatest of good fortune we found Louis, the man whom Keith had used to guide him. After a little delay in allowing him to prepare he guided us up into the hills behind his small holding. Enroute, as the grassland gave way to forestry we began to encounter outcrops of limestone, at long last. At the top of the long climb the ground became much flatter and a fine example of karst pavement began to show through the sparse

covering of grass. The first site we found was a curious lump of rock jutting out from the plain, some eight metre high with a rock shelter at its base. Further on we found Cueva Chiricu del Paco, described by Christiansen as a three metre climbable hole with no leads, we actually found an eight metre deep entrance. Pat descended and found a small narrow hole in the lowest corner of the pot, squeezing through this he dropped into a water worn passage and followed it over boulder for twenty metres. Dig arrived and the cave was surveyed. A number of small entrances were entered the most promising of which was the vertical rift "V1" descended by Dig but becoming too tight below three metres.



Cueva Chiricu del Paco

Photo Roger Day

Moving on across the karst pavement the tree cover diminished, to the point where the onset of heatstroke became a severe risk. So it was a welcome surprise that during the search of the many rift openings that Roger found a pothole down which we could escape the crippling heat. The pot Roger found was a ten metre shaft that opened into a six metre high rift passage. Several passages lead off so the team split up once again and explored the system. Pat and Dig commenced surveying. The cave was well decorated and like the other caves had a large number of bats.



Photo Dig Hastilow

Roger Day descending into Pozo Guaniquito

Once we had emerged from the cave and packed up the kit we continued to systematically search the pavement, made difficult enough with the thorny foliage. No snakes were seen, though we suffered a great many bites and stings from the various flora and fauna.

On the way back to his house Louis spoke of a big river canyon, not too far away, which had many cave openings, and, much more exciting, a point where a big stream comes out of the ground! We arrange to pick him up the early next morning.

3<sup>rd</sup> Feb

Louis was up and waiting for us so it was a quick start to the day; we soon arrived at the river and prepared the packs. From the vehicle we crossed the waist deep river and climbed up the limestone wall of the gorge onto a wide limestone bench. Within thirty metres a five metre diameter cave entrance was noted that required an exposed climb of some ten metres to reach, after a lot of effort Dig managed to enter the cave “Willys” and found it to be ten metres in length.



Photo Roger Day

### “Willys”

This became the norm for the many openings that occurred along the walls of the river gorge. A further fifty metres upstream from our first cave, Louis proudly shows us the famous resurgence; it is a low wide bedding, quite impossible to enter. At the point where the gorge narrows it is possible to climb above through the densely covered outcrop and descend a defile to the river bed beyond. Upstream from this point an opening was spotted high in the cliff. To reach it a lay back and sling were required to scale the overhang out of the river and climb up to the disappointingly short cave passage.

Pat and James continued wading upriver for a further kilometre until the vertical sides of the gorge petered out into a much wider slow moving river. No limestone was seen to be present above this point. The day has provided us with several caves all of which are uninspiring.

The swiftness of the current caused some problems for the returning pair. The trip back to the vehicle was uneventful. As we had some daylight remaining we opted to take a look at the next area that we intend to visit tomorrow. Keith Christenson had found two caves of at least 200 plus metres, developed of severe changes of direction of surface streams. Again we spoke to a friendly farmer who was kind enough to point us in the right direction.



Descending into the Limestone Gorge

Photo Dig Hastilow

Having located the general area of the streams recorded by Keith, we turned and headed back to Tonosi. Traveling along discussing the plan for the next day the vehicle hit yet another pothole in the road, a regular occurrence here. The severity of the loud bang was made real as the vehicle slewed to a halt on the verge. An inspection found that the rear suspension had failed; a strut had parted company with the body, a fault that we could not repair at the roadside, likewise this level of damage could not be repaired in Tonosi.

James and Pat caught a lift into town and spoke to the Police to notify the danger of the vehicle on the unlit road. They were excellent in their concern for our welfare and arranged for a recovery vehicle to assist us into town. But it would be the next day. Meanwhile fizzy drink was obtained for the lads and a swift return trip back to the vehicle in a taxi to collect all the equipment. Roger and Dig had removed the wheel and inspected the damage more closely to see if a repair could be made, alas no, it needed hospitalizing in the vehicles manufacturers agents garage; there is nothing we can do.

That night we reviewed our options in one of the many small bars in Tonosi. There are more bars open tonight than any other night we've been here, perhaps word is out that the Gringos drink. After several, correction, after a lot

of beers we came to the conclusion we have no option but to return to Panama City and hope for a swift repair. Sadly this precluded our exploration of two of the most promising leads in the area, Cueva Quebrada la Mocha and Cueva Quebrada Pintada

Willys	N007' 30.001	W080' 33.695
Dead Wood Cave	N007' 30.065	W080' 33.750
Climb Hole	N007' 30.125	W080' 33.859
Climb Hole 2	N007' 30.125	W080' 33 859
Beach	N007' 30.173	W080' 33.885



Busted suspension  
With supporting bar removed

Photo Roger Day

4<sup>th</sup> Feb

The recovery truck arrives and tows James vehicle away, a quick look at the underneath shows us that the suspension is snapped off; could this be as a result of the big hole it drove into near the Kuna Border? Either way we are stuck here in Tonosi. Hopefully we can arrange transport via the recovery lads. Excellent news, we are to be driven back so that's a load of our mind, particularly with the amount of kit we have to carry. So we waved good bye to James broken truck and got into a taxi, provided by the insurance company, for the five hundred kilometre journey back to the City. We enjoyed a steady trip back to the James place, a very nice shower and some very cold beers.

5<sup>th</sup> Feb

Today we have to find out how sick James truck really is. Following several phone calls to various people we have very little information available to us as to the state of the vehicle, and more to the point how soon it'll be until it's fixed. No other option for the moment than to prepare our kit for the next area and hope the jeep is fixed soon. This is the second of James vehicles we've been lent and have broken.

## Phase 4 Kuna Yala

6<sup>th</sup> Feb

Frustration is setting in, after a visit to the garage there is much head shaking and shrugging of shoulders. When the parts will actually arrive is anyone's guess, which is no good to us at all. After much talking and planning the team has come up with an idea of how to visit the promising cave site reported near Ustupo, Kuna Yala and the one at Ailigandi. We could use James boat. It would however mean a journey of three long days there. But the idea appeals to us, there would be very little walking and carrying packs.

7<sup>th</sup> Feb

PC commenced assembling the data for the report, little else done due to no information forthcoming as yet on the state of repair of James jeep. We have decided to go with the idea of using James boat to get to Ustupo. At least this way we will have all our kit for exploring caves. It does mean we will have to prepare the boat, which will take about a day or so. The option of a flight severely curtails the amount of kit we can take, so that's a problem as we don't really have an idea of what we are liable to encounter. James, Dig and Roger head off to commence the long list of work to prepare the boat.

8<sup>th</sup> Feb

The boat is at the marina in Colon, on the Atlantic side of the canal, so a drive of about a couple of hours got us all there and another few hours saw all the kit stowed and us leaving the port. We moored off Portobello for the night; a fortified town founded by the Spanish and the last resting place, offshore, of Sir Francis Drake. The team went ashore for a meal and a beer then to bed for the early start. This port has been in existence since 1597 when the Spanish developed the area as a port and became the depository for some of the accumulated wealth nicked from the natives before it was sent to Spain.

9<sup>th</sup> Feb

Up early and ready for the off, Pat had to dive down to release the anchor as the heavy weather last night caused it to bite into the seabed quite deep. We are soon free and passing the two 16<sup>th</sup> century forts that guard each bank of the entrance into Portobello. Our next destination is Chichime Cays. They are a series of small sandy isles that afford a safe shelter to anchor for the night. However several wrecks visible on the reefs remind us of the treacherous reputation of these waters. A welcome respite, the sailing is surprisingly tiring and hard work, having to make good these long distances each day. Shagged out, all the team enjoy a light meal, a beer and bed.

10<sup>th</sup> Feb

Much the same routine as the yesterday; pressing on eastward toward Ustupo. Tonight we aim to anchor in the East Hollandes Cays; once again it'll be good to stand upright for a while.



Sacred Mountain from Ustupo

Photo Dig Hastilow

11<sup>th</sup> Feb

We arrive and anchor at Nagara and take advantage of the last available fresh water. We needed more than we had thought and suspect a leak in the tanks, which will be a serious problem if it turns out to be true. We buy the cheapest and most abundant food available from the villagers and enjoy a fresh lobster.....each!

12<sup>th</sup> Feb

Weighed anchor by 08:00. En route to Ustupo we witness the Kuna fishing. The Kuna's reputation as master seamen was demonstrated when we come across a small flotilla of them many miles offshore. With the dugout canoes riding the rough swell the boys dive to collect lobster from the seabed. Our depth sounder measured the seabed at 60ft!



Kuna Fishermen

Photo Dig Hastilow

We arrived, finally, at Ustupo and threaded our way through the reef by following a local boat and anchored off the village. We took the dingy ashore to try to locate the Witch Doctor who Angel has advised us was to be our contact in the village community. The village is quite large and the numerous huts are built with vertical bamboo poles and roofed with coconut fronds. We were taken through a maze of narrow walkways to the Witch Doctor's "surgery".

The Kuna have the highest rate of albinism in the world and while we wait for the Witch Doctor's arrival we observe the strange sight of dark skinned Kuna mother's breast feeding their snow white light ginger haired new born babies! The albino children are known as "Ninos de la Luna", Moon Children, and are revered in the tribe. They are believed to have special powers including the ability to see in the dark of an eclipse. The Witch Doctor had been delayed so we were taken to meet the village Presedenté and elders in the "Congresso", the village meeting house.

The Elders were aware we were coming but the date and reason for our visit had not been communicated. They are worried not least because the direction to the cave the guides must take goes straight through the cemetery. The most important point is that the cave is located on the flanks of the holy mountain that is scared to the Kuna and there are fears our presence may provoke the spirits and produce a repeat of the recent devastating storms and flooding. We therefore have to wait for the Congresso to discuss our request and arrive at a decision.



Photo James Cobbett

Albino boy, Ustupo

We are a little concerned and downhearted at the apparent surprise our arrival has caused the locals, after the assurance we had received before we left Panama City that we were to be expected. We return to the boat to have lunch and discuss the matter. That afternoon most of the team turn tourist and visit the town.

13<sup>th</sup> Feb

A bad omen of a day and date! James heads to the village to visit the Witch Doctor again. The Congresso have met but had still not decided to give us the permission, more time is needed to consider the matter, they are unsure of our true intentions. We will have to come back, around noon. Having Marilyn with us is so useful; several pieces of information are translated concerning the cave and the reason of our interest. Three of their observations are of particular interest to us, namely. 1) There are an abundance of turtle shells scattered about the large entrance. 2) Though there is a river nearby it is not quite clear if it comes from the mouth of the cave. Finally the cave is inhabited by devils who steal people away. Pat is of the opinion that the descriptive term “devils” used, almost whispered, by the Kuna, has been corrupted over time and may refer to hostile actions of those who used the cave as a refuge.



Photo Dig Hastilow

Ustupo

Finally at 13:15 James & Marilyn got the OK for us the Witch Doctor and his armed assistant, acting as our guides, to cross the cemetery and to climb the mountain. On their return to the boat we began to prepare the kit only to find the Witch Doctor and his assistant canoeing past us shouting for us to hurry as the permission was only granted for today!

A mad scramble into the small boat, throwing in the packs, we speed off after them only to go aground on the sand bar that protects the mouth of the river, heaving the boat through the mire for seventy metres we launch again and recommenced the pursuit it's 14:15!

During the trip up river we discuss the events. We are uneasy as the middle of the day is incredibly hot and night fall is around 17:00. We beach the dingy next to the canoe and shoulder our kit packs. The Witch Doctor swiftly proceeds barefoot pointing out various medicinal plants and roots while his surly assistant clutches an ancient rifle held together with jubilee clips and scowls at us.

I'm not sure we can get there before dark, but we can always camp out as it's not too cold at night and there is water about, as regards food, well we'll have to wait if necessary. En-route there is much evidence of the recent storms that hit Panama with torrential rain storms; whole areas of the hillsides are washed away. The track we are following has collapsed down into the river canyon causing us to fight our way up the steep hillside through the undergrowth to go above and around the mess.



Landing point

Photo Dig Hastilow



Witch Doctors Assistant

Photo Roger Day

16:00 the guides stop and in a quiet way state to James that they cannot go any farther. The Witch Doctors assistant informs use that we, **WE!** Should have left much earlier, night is coming on and the devils that live in the cave will be abroad to steal us away without leaving any trace. James tries to laugh their fear off but the assistant is becoming increasingly fearful, at this point the Witch Doctor moved away into the undergrowth and appears embarrassed letting his assistant take the lead in objecting to go further. James quietly maintains, without being too awkward, that there is nothing to fear, that we have come a long way to see the cave, at this point the assistant becomes even more excited, turns away and disappears into the undergrowth leaving us alone with the Witch Doctor. He too becomes excited, very excited, yet there is a genuine fear in his eyes, he all but begs us to leave the area quickly, even though we are still some way from the cave entrance. The problem appears to be we have to leave the track at this point and begin to move through the thinning jungle cover for about another half mile to the upper slopes of the mountain and the cave entrance. James is doing a great job at being nice and calm, yet pressing the importance that we only have the one chance to do this visit as we have to leave early the next day to start the long journey home; impasse. The Witch Doctor then becomes very quiet and quickly walks past us down the track back toward the village and sits down on the ground, quite a statement. Without him we can't locate the entrance. We need to return at a later date and cajole him into starting much, much earlier. We must make sure however that we leave here with a good reputation so as to be able to return. We have a slow steady trip back to the river; it's now very dark, with no moon. The Witch Doctor has become much more at ease the further we get from the mountain and as we approach the canoes he tells us of a cave entrance within the area of the cemetery, two at least. In the profound dark we split up to look about and end up stumbling about, but find the holes, they are beddings and show some evidence of water flow, perhaps in high water conditions they act as resurgences, meanwhile they are just low beddings with little prospects, and in better light a greater idea of the whole area would assist understanding their



Approach to the Scared Mountain

Photo Dig Hastilow

relationship with the adjacent river. We are now aware of the Witch Doctors assistant who is lurking here in the shadow of the trees, he quickly jumps into their canoe, he urges the Witch Doctor to get in the canoe in short barks of speech and they are swiftly gone into the darkness, we quickly lose sight of them.

It is very dark without any moon, visibility is almost zero, we are having difficulty avoiding the trees that overhang the river. Two of us have to lean over the bow of the small dingy to light the route and fend off the foliage. The LED lights on our helmets do not have a strong enough beam so we regularly have to take action to avoid obstacles such as sand banks as the narrow river twists and turns on its route to the sea. After what seems like an age we arrive at the sand bar and see the anchor light of James boat, one last effort to heave the dingy over the seventy metre wide sandbar, a short paddle and we are on deck with a nice cold beer, now that is what I call an interesting, eventful day.

14<sup>th</sup> Feb

05:00 we are woken by a severe squall with torrential rain, the wind buffeting the boat, this means a delay in our departure.. That's all we need. Have we upset the God's? How will this weather affect our relationship with the Kuna? We really have to leave early; it's a long way back to the City. The weather eases, we have a quick breakfast and leave, it's an eight hour sail to our next overnight anchorage. We arrive at the Coco Banderos Cays at 17:00, a 9.5 hour journey, we all are fairly exhausted.

15<sup>th</sup> Feb

07:00 overcast but very hot, set sail again to Eastern Narvargandup Cays, anchored at the small islet of Canbomba – Rio Azuear for the night.

16<sup>th</sup> Feb

After two hard days of sailing we all need a rest so decided to rest today and speed on to Lemon Cays tomorrow. Exhausted the team stretch out and do little for the day, this was a good idea all the team feels the benefit for the break.

17<sup>th</sup> Feb

Heading for Lemon Cays today, but we are low on supplies so called into the settlement on the mainland of Rio Azuear, managed to get ice, bread & veg. Wind is up so perhaps we'll have a swift passage? Today's sail achieved an average of 7 – 8.5 knots so arrived at Lemon Cays at 16:00!

18<sup>th</sup> Feb

Today our destination is Isla Grande, 43 Nautical miles away, our final stop before we return to Colon, the town at the entrance to the Canal. Sail started well with good wind but soon dropped to 6 knots. Noticed "orange" object on starboard bow, hailed it on Channel 16 but no reply, item appeared to be sinking. We altered course as did a yacht some ½ Nm astern of us. On our approach to within 150m the item sank, a figure diving off it toward the awaiting craft, a RIB, with what appeared to be fishing personnel aboard who sped away eastwards. Later that day we saw another of these things they appear to be conical fish storage nets with some sort of controllable buoyancy. At Isla Grande we found a good bar so we made the most of some beer and a reasonable meal. The weather is changing; a cloud bank is forming in the distance.

19<sup>th</sup> Feb

We left early to get to Colon ASAP; wind conditions very difficult so later used motor to speed progress. At the marina we packed up quickly and drove to Panama City. Even though we got in late we were all in need of some real food so went out for a meal, a real meal. Said our goodbyes to Roger who's flight is very early tomorrow morning, James is kind enough to rise and drive him to the airport.

20<sup>th</sup> Feb

This morning we have a fine sleep in, the best in a while followed by a long shower, ahhhhh bliss. Today no early starts or heavy packs to carry; today we just sort and pack our kit for our flights tomorrow, and drink James beer supply by the cool of the pool. Tonight we'll go out and have an expedition meal.

21<sup>st</sup> Feb

James and Marilyn kindly took us to the airport, patiently enduring the traffic chaos. We are already speaking of the elusive cave at Ustupo. James is going to see what other, if any information he can glean. Goodbyes to each other once again; the team part company for their homes.

## **Postscript Ustupo**

A recent opportunity to return to Ustupo was taken by James and Roger in early 2012. On their arrival they immediately paid their respects to the members of the Congresso and the Witch doctor. After a pleasant welcome and a lengthy discussion James and Roger were politely told that it would not be possible to cross the sacred mountain let alone enter the cave.

The end result of the meeting was that the head of the Ustupo Congresso, from whom we had previously received permission in 2011, has expressly forbidden any visits whatsoever to the cave. It would appear that the cave is now reported to be full of immense wealth, gems, gold etc and therefore none will be allowed to enter it. Following further in depth discussions with many of the Kuna, the vague nature of the location etc suggests that it may not actually exist.

## **Ailigandi**

During the same 2012 trip to Ustupo James and Roger managed a very brief visit was made to Ailigandi to investigate the occurrence of a cave entrance close to the village. Time was limited due to the effects of a severe storm developing just off the San Blas coast, which was producing waves in excess of six metres high with accompanying storm force winds. Enquiries had indicated that a Smithsonian field base and representative were nearby and he knew of caves. Discussions with the Head man of the local Kuna Congresso were very positive; he openly welcomed the interest, insofar as he would like assistance to develop the caves as a tourist attraction and so bring some revenue to the villagers. After making arrangements to go up river to locate the caves the Smithsonian representative, Christopher, was unable to remember precisely where the main cave entrance was to be found. So the team would have to wait for the return of the local man who acts as the guide. After waiting for a day the guide had still not returned to the village so a return there is planned. During their wait they were informed of three other similar entrances all within a half hour walk from the river. Unfortunately the guide did not return. With the increasing deterioration of the weather conditions the team decided to make a run for a more sheltered anchorage to ride out the storm. Ailigandi has a short runway to service the immediate area so a return via an aircraft is planned.

## Conclusions

On the whole the trip was successful with the number of cave entrances located (see list), even though none were of significant length.

The number of entrances reported to us was considerable and here lay a problem, where to prioritize. The areas visited during this trip allow us to dismiss, to a degree, other reports in the obvious non limestone areas. Information we had not previous been in possession of.

The disaster with the transport was reduced to a minimal effect with once again James and Marilyn's kindness in being able to use their boat to get to the east of Panama to access Ustupo. Time did not allow us to investigate the report of a cave at Ailigandi, where the recently studied geological chart suggests limestone in the vicinity.

The loss of opportunity to conclude the visit to the cave above the sacred mountain at Ustupo means a return trip which James may be able to arrange earlier in 2012. However it remains as an important site that warrants further investigation for both speleological and archaeological purposes. (See postscript)

The Azuero Peninsula does require a return visit to investigate the surface streams that appear to allow the development of significantly size caves, for Panama that is.

More than a little disappointed the team remains determined to pursue cave exploration in the Republic of Panama and where possible pass on such knowledge to those Panamanians who wish to participate.

### CAVES OF AZUERO PENINSULA. PANAMA 2011

				<u>Latitude</u>	<u>Longitude</u>	Elevation	Depth	Length
Gul Rift	17N	550863	825022	N07 27.842	W080 32.342	*169	11	23
Gorge Rift	17N	550838	824981	N07 27.820	W080 32.356	*167	4	24
V1	17N	540010	827387	N07 29.128	W080 33.892	*163	0	5
Pozo Guaniquito	17N	547894	827352	N07 29.109	W080 33.955	*182	12	74
Willy's cave	17N	548372	828996	N07 30.001	W080 33.695	*76 (water level) 0		8
Dead tree hole	17N	548271	829114	N07 30.065	W080 33.750	*89	0	13
Climb Hole	17N	548068	829225	N07 30.125	W080 33.859	*78 (water level) 0		8
Climb 2	17N	548067	829190	N07 30.106	W080 33.860	*78 (water level) 0		8

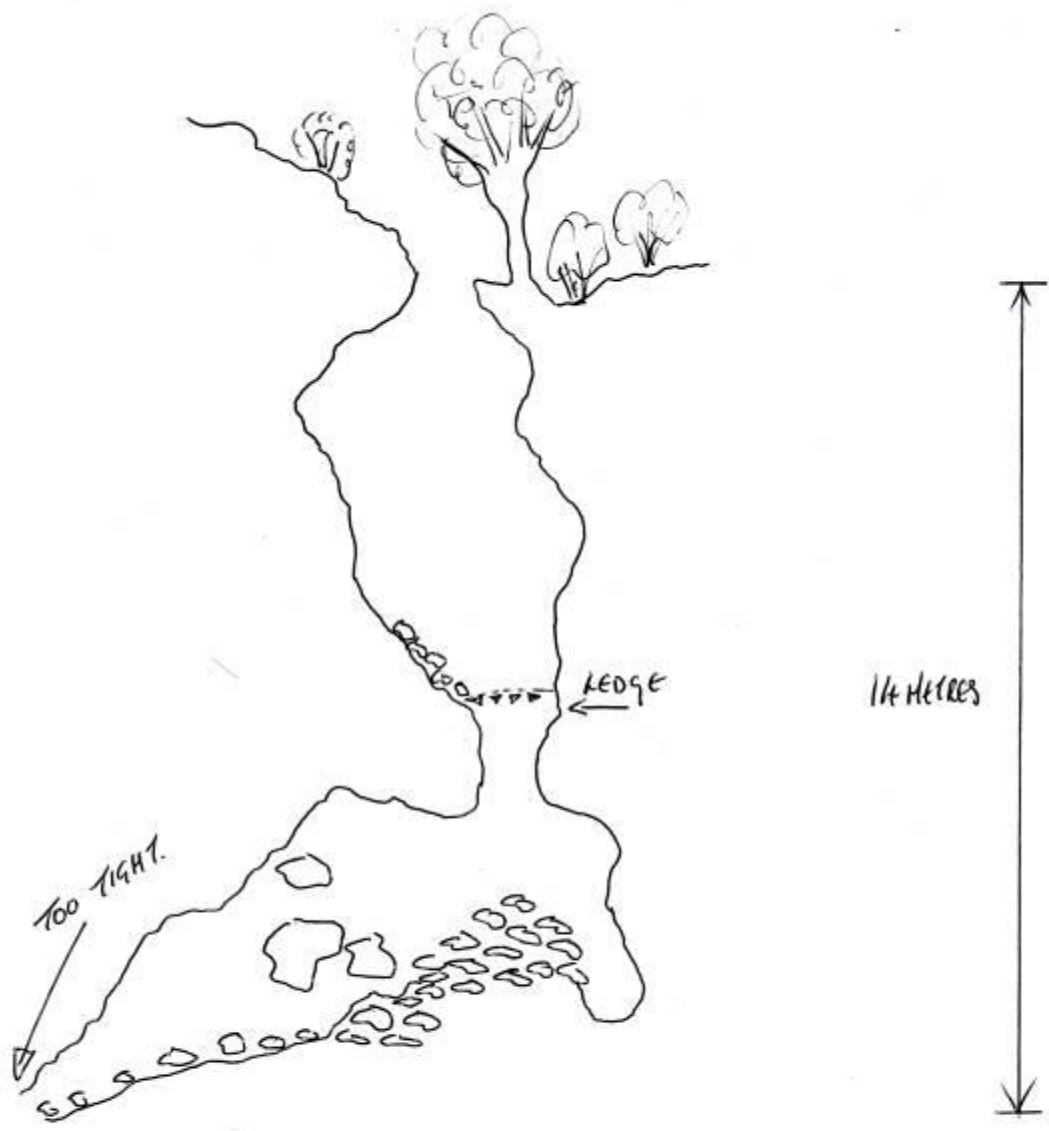
### CAVES OF CHIGUIRI ARRIBA. PANAMA 2011

Petroglyphs	17P	589695	959408	N08 40.745	W080 11.082	*298	0	0
Waterfall "Cave"	17P	590038	959079	N08 40.566	W080 10.895	*303	0	0
Robber's 1	17P	559544	940980	N08 30.772	W080 27.539	*	0	12
Robber's 2	17P	559554	940966	N08 30.765	W080 27.534	*	0	17
Cueva las Huacas 1	17P	557567	952282	N08 36.908	W080 28.608	*157	9	43
Cueva las Huacas 2	17P	557591	952313	N08 36.924	W080 28.596	*159	7	25
Cueva las Huacas 3	17P	557618	952345	N080 36.942	W080 28.581	*321	2	6
Cueva el tight O	17P	557628	952328	N08 36.933	W080 28.575	*366	15	0
Cueva el tight O lower	17P	557628	952336	N08 36.937	W080 28.575	*370	0	23
Pozo Pueblo Orai	17P	557634	952347	N08 36.943	W080 28.572	*366	14	8
Virgin "Cave"	17P	556739	951570	N08 36.522	W080 29.060	*211	0	0

### CAVES OF LAKE BAYANO. PANAMA 2011

Cueva Cementario 1	17P	741334	1003659	N09 04.418	W078 48.266	Found 2009		
Cueva Cementario 2	17P	741358	1003700	N09 04.440	W078 48.253	Found 2009		
Cueva Nuevo			No GPS fix obtainable				0	12m
* Unreliable GPS altitude							Total	297





Pozo Pueblo Oraí  
Sección along Jbli° HAg.

