

dos nohoch no dos ojos.....you are my baby

by Michael Menduno and Dean Mullaney

According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Mike Madden is sitting pretty on the world's longest underwater cave: *Nohoch Na Chich* (Giant Birdhouse), surveyed at a staggering 26 miles, located two hours south of Cancún and a half hour hike in from the sole coastal highway separating the Yucatan jungle and the sea.

But the self-appointed accreditors at Guinness only know half the story.

the race to explore the world's longest underwater cave





Five clicks to the north of the entrance to *Nohoch*, Steve Gerrard and a hard-driving collective of x-plorers are pushing deep through *Dos Ojos* (Two Eyes), a giant 21-mile-long sister cave that is now believed to be the other half of the same system.

When the two caves connect—it's no longer "if"—the combined length will exceed 50 miles. Within two years, it is projected that the merged system might increase to beyond 100 miles and surpass all the world's known caves except the gargantuan *Mammoth* system in Kentucky.

There's a lot at stake for the two competing groups, much more than being listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Cave divers, long considered stepchildren in the larger community of dry cavers, anticipate the breakthrough giving them equal standing among the speleologically-inclined. Also at stake are the boasting rights for connecting the pair of huge caves, the reward of naming the combined system, and moreover, the ability to claim victory in a battle that has become personal.

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Nohoch and *Dos Ojos* are thought to be the longest of many caves in the state of Quintana Roo along the Caribbean coast of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. Near and around the ancient walled city of Tulum, the dense, mosquito-ridden jungle—most of it uninhabited—is literally built on karst passages that drain the Yucatan jungle into the sea. *Cenotes* such as *Car Wash* and *Temple of Doom* contain exquisite rooms with expressive names like "The Room of Tears" and "The Fortress of Solitude" that offer spectacular stalactites, stalagmites, and columns [See QROO by Eric Hutcheson].

One hundred and fifty million years ago, the entire limestone peninsula lay submerged. As sea levels fell and exposed the surface, rainwater flowed through fissures in the soft limestone, carving out the vast subterranean river system that now exists. During the last ice age, when sea levels were 100 meters below what they are today, rainwater again seeped through

the porous rock and slowly dripped from the roof of the caves, leaving small deposits of calcium carbonate that created beautiful decorations, similar to those in New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns.

The name game

The general flow of *Nohoch* and *Dos Ojos* is from the northwest to the southeast, but as each cave has connected to smaller ones, its realm has spread in all directions, like rays emanating from the sun. As additional lesser caves are absorbed, the two large systems get closer and closer.

The accepted practice in cave nomenclature dictates that whenever a large cave connects to a smaller one, it adds that length to its own, and thereby grows with each acquisition. Big cave eats small cave. Because there is no precedent for two large parallel systems uniting, a third—new—name could be chosen. The marathon efforts continue unabated, as each side wants to have the largest cave when the breakthrough occurs.

The name game is further complicated by the desires of the *ejido* that controls the surrounding land, who want it named after them. An *ejido* has no corollary in US law; it can be described as something similar to a group of families belonging to a homestead collective. Under Mexican law, individual members have title to specific parcels within the larger tract, while the *ejido* directly controls property that has been designated as common areas. All rules of management are handled democratically, in weekly or monthly votes.

Nohoch and *Dos Ojos* are located on land controlled by an *ejido* of 102 Mayan families known as the *Pat Jacinto*. The *Nohoch* system and all of its entrances are located on properties owned by the Rodriguez family and the Mas family. The *Dos Ojos* main entrance is located in a common area, and is leased to and controlled by Marcos Rotsinger. The other entrances of the *Dos Ojos* system are on parcels owned by other families in the *ejido*.

Steve Gerrard has agreed with the *ejido* that if he makes the breakthrough, the new cave will be called *Pat Jacinto*. Mike Madden said that he's not that concerned about what it will be called, although he smiled and said that it would be fine with him if it were called *Nohoch*.

The race to fame

The race has been neck and neck, as the system lengths have see-sawed back and forth. *Dos Ojos* edged past *Nohoch* in the middle of last year, only to be overtaken again when two smaller systems were swallowed up by *Nohoch*.

Oddly enough, a short time ago, there was no competition: Madden and Gerrard dived together in a mutual effort to discover the caves. In fact, Gerrard was the fourth person to dive *Nohoch*, and had been an ongoing x-plorer. Two years ago, Gerrard and Madden were negotiating to become business partners, but the deal was never consummated and turned bitter instead.

The rivalry has caused problems in protocol for visitors who simply want to dive the *cenotes* and are concerned about being perceived as allied with one group or the other. Underground politics are alive and well in Mexico.

The separate teams have dichotomous approaches. 72 ▶

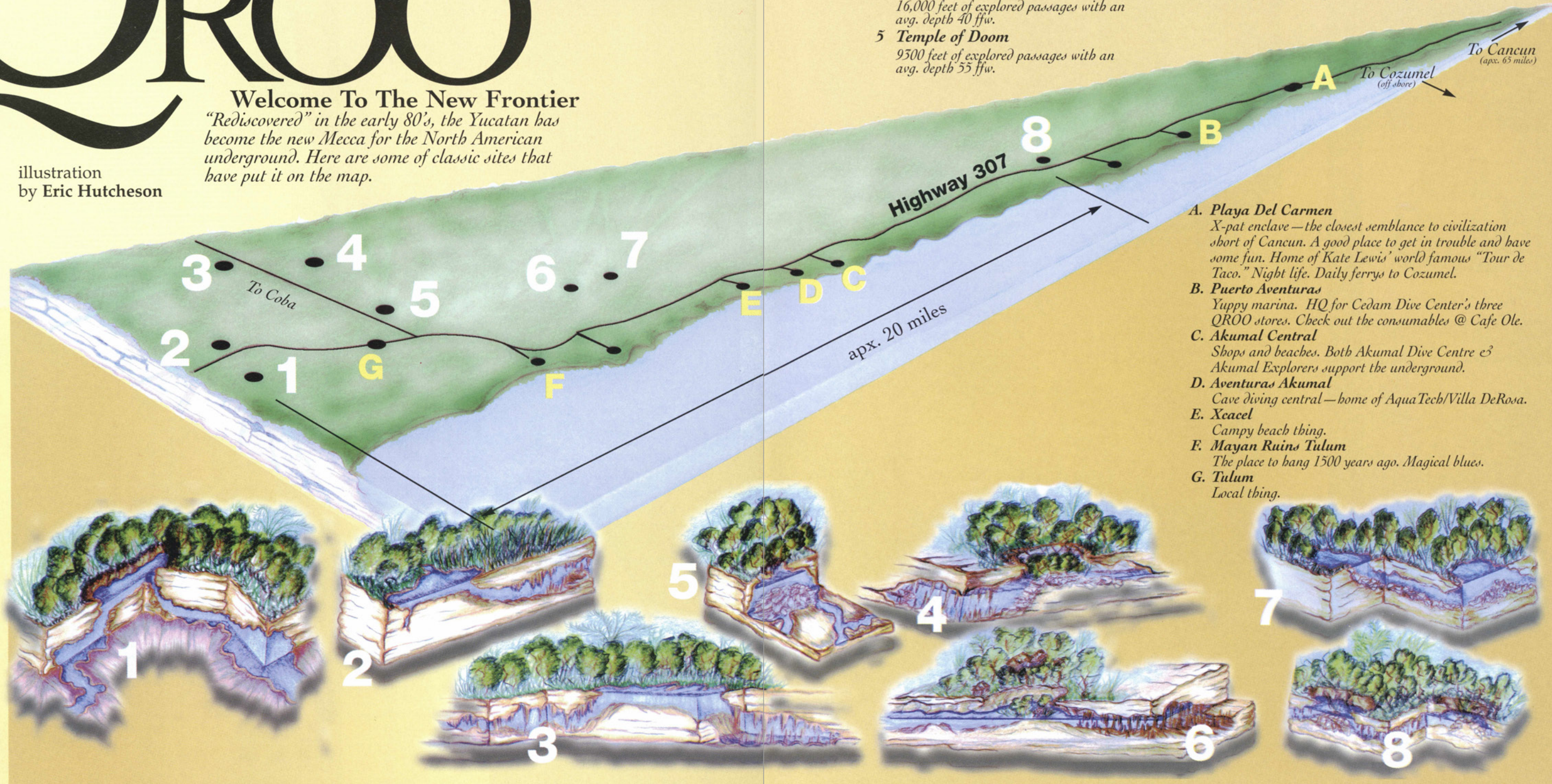


QROO



Welcome To The New Frontier
"Rediscovered" in the early 80's, the Yucatan has become the new Mecca for the North American underground. Here are some of classic sites that have put it on the map.

illustration
 by Eric Hutcheson



- 1 Maya Blue**
Maya Blue and Nabaron connect creating a large cave of over 60,000 feet of explored passages with an avg. depth 60 ffw.
- 2 Nabaron**
- 3 Actun Ha (Carwash)**
9400 feet of explored passages with an avg. depth 40 ffw.
- 4 Sacactun (Grand Cenote)**
16,000 feet of explored passages with an avg. depth 40 ffw.
- 5 Temple of Doom**
9500 feet of explored passages with an avg. depth 55 ffw.
- 6 Noboeh Nab Chich**
150,000 feet of explored passages with an avg. depth 50 ffw. Continuing exploration will connect Noboeh and Dos Ojos totaling over 50 miles of passage. Exploration lines in both systems have exceeded 250' ffw depths with penetration of over 9,000 feet.
- 7 Dos Ojos**
Over 108,000 feet of explored passages with an avg. depth 55 ffw.
- 8 Ponderosa**
35,00 feet of explored passages with an avg. depth 55 ffw.

- A. Playa Del Carmen**
X-pat enclave—the closest semblance to civilization short of Cancun. A good place to get in trouble and have some fun. Home of Kate Lewis' world famous "Tour de Taco." Night life. Daily ferrys to Cozumel.
- B. Puerto Aventuras**
Yuppy marina. HQ for Cedam Dive Center's three QROO stores. Check out the consumables @ Cafe Ole.
- C. Akumal Central**
Shops and beaches. Both Akumal Dive Centre & Akumal Explorers support the underground.
- D. Aventuras Akumal**
Cave diving central—home of Aqua Tech/Villa DeRosa.
- E. Xcabel**
Campy beach thing.
- F. Mayan Ruins Tulum**
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- G. Tulum**
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69 To Madden, *Nohoch* is a high profile project. He runs his exploration like a business, and a very successful one, complete with a public relations arm. He has solicited sponsors that allow him to pay members of his team and work different parts of the cave simultaneously, as well as maintain permanent camps with generators at several cave entrances, and acquire all the necessary equipment. He organizes a two-month expedition each year—one month of preparation and one month of exploration.

His CEDAM Cave Diving Team, which is named after his three tourist-oriented dive shops offering *cenote* trips in the area, has an impressive roster of divers, including underground mapper Eric Hutcheson, Chuck Stevens, Dane Buczkowski, Eric Nofall, Mercedes Jones, Emmanuelle Sala, Kate Lewis, Virginia Urbieto, Dr. Elva Escobar, William Carlson, and Burt Jones.

Madden discovered *Nohoch* in 1987. It's a cosmic place, he says, and has consumed his dreams ever since. The entrance is the primary water source for

Don Pedro Rodriguez's family ranch, and with Don Pedro's help, Madden surveyed 2,600 feet in his first day. A week later, it grew to 5,400 feet with the help of fellow divers Denny Atkinson and José Tucac. By 1990, *Nohoch* had reached 43,600 feet. Today, it is nearly 140,000 feet in length.

Madden's organizational support has allowed him to capture most of the publicity surrounding the caves. It was Madden who contacted the Guinness people, and Madden who is interviewed and quoted on *MTV Sports*, in *National Geographic* and the *London Times*, and in a coming video produced by underground filmmaker Wes Skiles for PBS.

Meanwhile, *Dos Ojos* has quietly grown by linkages and bounds.

First discovered in 1986 by pioneering Yucatan diver and mapmaker Jim Coke, and Johanna DeGroot, *Dos Ojos* lies several kilometers west of the Xel-Ha ruins off Highway 307. Access to the *cenote* is easier than at *Nohoch*: a four-wheel-drive road approaching the site was built in the early eighties by a mining company. The line on *Dos Ojos* was

picked up in 1992 by Marcos Rotsinger and X-Floridian Buddy Quattelbaum, who formed Divers of The Hidden World, and contracted with the *ejido* to maintain the road and manage diver traffic in exchange for access to the system.

Dos Ojos was surveyed at 46,000 feet in March 1993, and has swollen to over 112,000 feet of passage at the hands of Gerrard, Coke, Quattelbaum, Rotsinger, Lori Beth Conlin, underground mapper Dan Lins, Gary and Kate Pozda Walten, sometime *Nohoch* x-plorer Chuck Stevens, and a long list of contributing divers. In the past two years, *Dos Ojos* has incorporated many smaller systems, including *Tikim Chi*, *No Name Cenote*, *Mot Mot*, *Dos Palmas*, and *Tic Te Ha* (High Voltage).

Gerrard and company are a loosely-knit group of unpaid divers who spend weekends and evening exploring *Dos Ojos*. Most of the current crew are divemasters and instructors centered around aquaTech/Villa DeRosa, an Aventuras Akumal dive center devoted to cave diving that boasts an impressive 36 sets of doubles.

The group has no outside funding, no permanent campsites, and no effective public relations savvy. They rely on their jobs

YUCATAN XPLORERS



Chuck Stevens
nohoch project x-plorer



Eric Hutcheson
nohoch project cartographer



Tony DeRosa
villa derosa owner

Kate Pozda Walten
x-plorer and instructor



Gary Walten
x-plorer and instructor



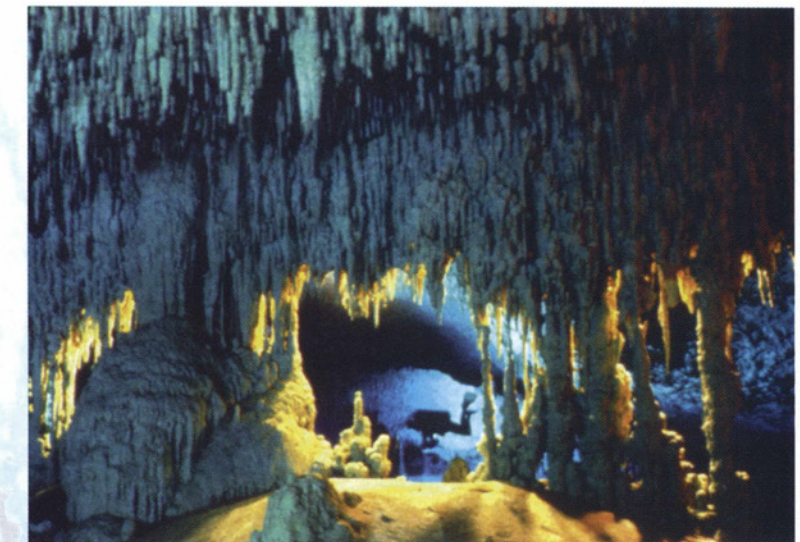
Dan Lins
x-plorer and mapmaker



Buddy Quattelbaum - x-plorer

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Hole in Time. Photo taken in Nohoch Nah Chich Cave System. ©1991 Madden and Winker

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DIVERS HAVE DIED HERE...

RULES FOR DIVING

1. CERTIFIED CAVE DIVERS ONLY IN CAVES
2. NO LIGHTS IN WATER EXCEPT BY CERTIFIED CAVE DIVER
3. DO NOT ENTER CAVE *without* REEL WITH GUIDELINE to OPEN WATER
4. AT LEAST THREE LIGHTS PER CAVE DIVER IN CAVE
5. DO NOT ENTER CAVE WITH LESS THAN 2000 PSI IN TANKS
6. BEGIN EXIT WITH AT LEAST 2/3 AIR REMAINING
7. NO DIVING WHILE UNDER INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL or DRUGS

SHAME

As scuba diving increases in popularity in the beautiful and intriguing cenotes located along the Caribbean coast of the Yucatan, the fear of many professional instructors and dive store operators finally arrived like a Tyson uppercut to the jaw on August 17, 1995.

Three open-water divers died while in the *Temple of Doom* cenote. The divers were part of an eight-person cave trip organized through a Cozumel dive store owned by a husband and wife. The dive store hired an independent UW instructor who was familiar with several of the popular dive sites near the village of Tulum, but was *not cave certified, and therefore not qualified to take divers into the cenotes.*

The group made their first dive at the nearby *Grande Cenote* without incident. When they dived from the cavern area of the *Temple of Doom* into a popular cave tunnel known as the *Madonna* passage, the entire team passed two obvious warning signs without stopping: one shaped like a traffic stop sign, and the other depicting the Grim Reaper and reading "Prevent Your Death."

The eighth person of the dive

team—the husband/dive store owner—became uneasy, and returned to the surface. The instructor continued further into the cave system with the six remaining divers following. Many minutes passed before he looked behind him. Half the team was missing. They were trying to find their way out, low on air and scared. Confusion reigned. Every diver was desperately trying to swim out of the cave. The instructor managed to reach the surface to retrieve the eighth diver's tank. Going back into the passage, he found two dead divers: an American woman and a Dutch man. A third diver—the wife/owner—was found unconscious but still alive, and was pulled to the surface. They performed CPR and managed to transport her to the Red Cross station in Tulum, where she died.

As a result of this unfortunate incident, dive store operators, owners, and representatives up and down the coast met in Playa del Carmen, and began the process to form an Association that will govern the safety policies of diving the popular cenotes.

—Steve Gerrard

dem bones

Humans have been exploring these caves for over 100 centuries.

Tony Martin, Glen Klag and Steve Gerrard discovered a complete 10,000 year-old human skeleton stretched out on a rock approximately 500 f/152 m back in Temple Cenote. The find has been reported to the appropriate Mexican cultural resource agency. Only seven people have made this dive. [It was pretty darn cool. M2]

photo by Glen Klag



catering to tourist trade to support their exploration into *Dos Ojos*.

...

In fact, the tourist trade is important to both teams' dive store operations. *Cenote* trips have become a hot business in the Yucatan. Half a dozen operators now run trips, and tourist divers are ferried in from Cozumel. The tourists are also a detriment because recreational divers can damage caves, or get killed [see related story].

What makes the Yucatan *cenotes* attractive to recreational divers also make them perfect for explorers. The caves are just beneath the surface, with average depths running 40-60 f/12-18 m and temperatures between 76-79° F/23-26° C.

A four-to-five hour exploration push, eight-to-nine thousand feet back, requires very little decompression and a very manageable supply of gas—an over-pumped set of 104s and a pair of scooters will take divers a long, long way. Both the *Nohoch* and *Dos Ojos* teams use scooters—sometimes pairs, which are staged along the way, allowing explorers to zip through the

seemingly endless systems. Some rooms are large enough to house an airplane, while in other spots, lone divers must wear side-mounts to squeeze through the gnarly passages.

The end is in sight

Mike Madden is currently in the middle of his 1995 *Nohoch* x-ploration. When reached at the CEDAM Dive Center, he said that they are very close to breaking through to the adjacent *Cenote Manatee*, which will not only increase *Nohoch's* length, but more importantly, make the long-anticipated connection to the Caribbean.

Meanwhile, Steve Gerrard's team has added 15,000 feet to *Dos Ojos* so far this summer, and he says that there are hundreds of good leads to yet explore.

Even with all of the competition, there's one thing both sides agree upon: *Nohoch* and *Dos Ojos* will probably be connected this year.

As one of the team's leader said of his counterpart: "I can almost smell his line, we're that close."

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