

The Ultimate

By Evon Thompson

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Back in June some fellow Grotto members returned from their second trip to Mexico in 1998 and made mention of another trip between Christmas and New Year's. As these were the fellows who had very patiently taught me the "ropes" of rappelling and we had spent quite a lot of time together over the past couple of years, I couldn't stand the thought of them going without me again. I set myself a goal to make this trip and to descend into Cepillo only. After a conversation with Louis Adams, who asked me how could I go and not descend Golondrinas too, I began to consider the possibility. I decided to make that decision after our trip to Fantastic. I began to work out with weights and pound the treadmill in preparation. I was greatly surprised at the end of the trip to Fantastic and as you all know by now, made the decision to descend Golondrinas. Patrick and Victor were very concerned with my arm strength needed to be able to lift the rope to engage and disengage the bars of my rack on rappel. I was more concerned with my having enough stamina to ascend back up 1100 feet. At the vertical class at Patrick's house, Bill Cuddington instructed me in a technique not requiring much arm strength. I then climbed 900 feet until a blister on my foot caused me to stop. I was not very tired and was beginning to feel even better about my decision to descend Golondrinas.

Harold and Tracy Calvert, Gary Phelps, John Cammon, Bernard Powell, Wesley Pinyan, and Greg and I left out from our house on December 29, 1998 at 7:15 a.m. We met up with Patrick O'Diam, David Drake, Victor Bradford, and Micah Sims at Brownsville, Texas at 2:00 a.m., where we proceeded to purchase water and exchange dollars for pesos. Crossing the border went well and we were on the last leg of our journey. After breakfast in Victoria, Mexico we took the scenic route through the mountains. They were majestic and beautiful and many stops were made for cameras and video cameras. Finally, we reached Valles, Mexico at 2:00 p.m. and checked into our respective hotels. We walked around the streets that evening and had a really good Mexican meal and headed off to bed.

5:15 a.m. on 12/31/98 found Patrick, Micah, Wesley, Greg and I headed up to Golondrinas to start rigging up. The 10 minute walk across a pasture was a piece of cake and upon stepping up on the rocks that surround the pit, I was left almost breathless. We were the first one there and with the sun having just come up, the solitude and view were astounding. Wesley descended first, then Micah and Patrick. Greg was across the way videoing and I was left to help Patrick on rope, which did make me a little nervous. We were beginning to wonder where the rest of our group was at. Bill Davis and Bill Cuddington and some folks from Kentucky had arrived and were rigging a second rope. Finally, the rest of our troupe arrived and David and Victor held the rope for me to rig on. We had to check the turn of the twisted carabiner I had to use and did not notice that the rope was on the wrong side of my rack until I had just put my weight on the rope and double checked everything. David and Victor helped pull me back up. John descended next to give me a chance to rest. I was ready to go as soon as John was off rope. This time everything was fine and after many warnings from Victor to "watch your hair" I headed down. I, surprisingly, was not scared, but only a little anxious. I descended all the way on five bars and had a really great rappel. There was lots of squawking from the parrots who were flying in and out all day.

There were bird eggs, bird skeletons, and bird feces everywhere. It was an exciting moment to sign my name in this register. The vastness of the bottom of Golondrinas is unimaginable. It did not seem so far across until I tried to find Wesley. When he waved and I finally saw him, he was barely visible and I realized the enormity of the bottom of this pit.

It soon came time to ascend. I climbed tandem with Wesley and as soon as Wesley was off rope, John began to climb tandem under me. I had an absolutely terrific climb and had to give a big "War Eagle" yell a couple of hundred feet from the top. My first thought upon reaching the top was, "Is this all? I could climb more." What an adrenaline rush! My good buddies, Patrick and Micah, were there to coach me and to help me off rope. I sure must trust these two a lot! Greg, Tracy, Victor and Bernard were the sensible ones. They kept their feet on the ground, took plenty of pictures and video footage. They also had a lot of time to spend with the locals who hung around all day. The children ENJOYED the candy and water guns. The children also made me very nervous, sitting and looking right over the edge of the pit.

It was finally time to pull the rope up and head down the mountain. Needless to say, we were a very hungry bunch of folks. We were tired and dirty and it was too late to get a shower before eating if we wanted food before everything closed. We ate at the steakhouse at Hotel Valles and toasted in the New Year there. We had a lot to be celebrating. What an accomplishment for me, for the Cullman Grotto. I told Victor it was his fault that I was here and doing this. He got my phone number from my Dad and work and called me and told me about the Grotto. He then proceeded to convince me I needed to learn to rappel and was the first to put me and Greg on rope. We finally agreed that my Dad and Louis Adams also needed credit for what I did today.

New Year's Day found us up at 7:00 a.m. and ten of us headed to Cipillo. Bill Davis and Bill Cuddington had been there on Tuesday, so they didn't go with us. Due to back and knee problems, Greg and Tracy decided to stay behind in Valles to sightsee and shop all day. By the time we reached Tamapas, the van went from quiet to tough sounding to sounding like a logging truck. Bags of clothes were set out for the locals and within seconds there was a large crowd and the clothes gone. It was close to lunch time as we headed up the trail. It was a hot and sweaty group that arrived at the pit. With two ropes down, progress went pretty smooth. A local who had carried the rope up was also vertically proficient and Patrick allowed Cesar the use of his equipment. He owned a frog system and had never used a ropewalker system. Patrick explained the system and down he went. He had a good climb and loved the ropewalker. There was actually lots more to see in Cipillo than in Golondrinas. There were some very nice formations and a beautiful pool. I could have wandered around down there a lot longer. I was greatly disappointed however as Vic was supposed to descend and I had wanted to climb with him. I begged to no avail. Only 50 feet off the bottom, I looked up and then back down, and all I could think was "It sure is a long way to the top". All of my energy from Golondrinas must have disappeared in my sleep. I still had a really good climb. At approximately 150 feet from the top, Vic tried to sweet talk me, as I had threatened him from the bottom when he did not descend. I had promised a young friend of mine I would bring her a rock from the bottom of Golondrinas. It came from Cipillo and not Golondrinas and I did tell her the truth.

Upon arriving at the top, I wanted to check on David as he had taken a fall on the bottom and put a small cut on his leg. Harold and some others had gone on to the van to check out the muffler, (and brakes) which left the rest of us to pull the rope up. Remember, I have little arm strength, but am getting good at holding the rope bag open.

Upon arriving back at the van, we found a little boy seemed very taken with Wesley. Some drunk locals tried to start a little trouble but we ignored them and headed down the mountain where many surprises were waiting for us. The muffler kept changing sounds. Then we heard a very loud, fast popping sound in the general area of the front of the van. Oh Boy! was the CB getting a lot of use! It was a bent fan blade which was plastic so could not be bent back in place. Otherwise everything was ok and we would just have to endure the noise. It was only minutes before a LOUD clanking sound came from the rear of the van. CB time again! It was immediately apparent that we had a flat this time. Patrick turned around and came back. All we had was a doughnut tire. We had only come a couple of miles and had too many miles left to go. All I could think was that if a brand new tire could not make it, then a doughnut sure could not make it. Vic, Micah, Gary, John and I decided to start walking and if the van could make it we would get in when they caught up with us. It was dark and they all thought it was so funny to talk about snakes, of which I am terrified. I made threats and I know how scared they were. Ha! Ha! Then I told them that we were really in Mexico to practice for the Eco Challenge. The van finally caught up with us and it was decided that the smallest people in the group would ride in the van and the rest with Patrick. It had taken us an hour and a half to drive up, but it took us three hours to drive down. Again, we were dirty and hungry.

We headed to Hotel Piña to pick up Greg and Tracy, who we thought were going to wait and eat with us. Guess again. It was midnight and they had already eaten. So we were off on another quest . . . to find food after midnight. Nothing was open! We met up with another caver who took us to a corner hot dog stand and was nice enough to order for us since Patrick did not join us and none of us spoke Spanish. Those were the best hot dogs I have ever eaten. We were not shy in how many we ordered either.

Saturday morning found us getting a used tire and last minute shopping and picture taking and finally heading out around 11:00 a.m. The used tire lasted 49 miles and blew out. When this happened, we were headed downhill around a sharp curve with a mountainside on one side and practically nothing on the other. We stopped sideways across both lanes facing off the mountain and Harold had to get on the old CB again. The pucker factor in the Caver #2 vehicle went off the scale. There was even a news anchor on the scene.

After finally finding another, almost new tire, we were finally on the road again. Bet you wouldn't believe there was more picture taking and video cameras. We did some last minute souvenir shopping at Garcia's in Matamoras, Mexico which is at the border and headed across to exchange money and head for more food. It seems we were always starving.

At 9:00 p.m. I was calling my parents from the Pizza Hut in Brownsville, Texas to let them know I was still alive and in one piece and that the bandits did not get me and Greg. I know how relieved Patrick must have been to order a meal only for himself and not for all of us.

We arrived back at our house at 5:10 p.m. on Sunday a tired but happy bunch.

I had accomplished the goal I had set for myself and was very proud of myself and of my fellow Grotto members. I am very sad that Greg's back made it impossible for him to participate, but am proud of the love and support he gives me. My pride was even more enhanced when Patrick told me that I had gone from beginner, to intermediate, to advanced all in one weekend. Thanks for that compliment! It means a lot coming from a fellow Grotto member.

I have much to be thankful for. To Vic for making that phone call and putting me on rope. To Vic, Patrick, Micah and Harold for taking me with them and watching out for me, especially when Greg is unable to be with me. To Harold and Tracy for driving their van. To Louis Adams, who really planted the idea of descending Golondrinas in my head. To Bill Cuddington, for his instruction. To Patrick, for organizing this trip for us all.

Most of all, I thank God for giving me the ability to see such a wonderful and beautiful part of His creation that is viewed by so few. If a person could not see God's majesty in this, he is blind.

I could go on and on and never be able to describe the beauty I have experienced in this trip. Beautiful, majestic, awesome, breathtaking, wonderful, gorgeous, massive. . . Need I say more?

