

Diving Into the Interior of the Yucatan

staying at the Villas DeRosa and diving the cenotés

The fast currents and big reefs of Cozumel are the big lure for divers traveling to the Yucatan peninsula, but for bad weather days or a change of pace, the Yucatan mainland is less than an hour's ferry ride away. There you'll find a totally unique diving experience: cenote diving (pronounced say-No-tay). Cenotes are sinkholes, pools of water leading to underground rivers that have carved their way through limestone. Although the center of cenote diving is around Akumal, a small collection of resorts, restaurants, and dive shops about 60 mi. south of Cancun, cenote diving is being promoted everywhere, including the streets of Cancun and Playa del Carmen. They require no specialty training to take a dive and cruise the crystal-clear waters of the pool or swim back into the mouth of the cavern where the entrance is always in sight. If you haven't tried it, do; it's worth the effort.

If you find you like it, there are several ways to get past the warning signs at the end of the cavern zone. In our May issue, our correspondent reported on his cavern/intro cave training at Florida's Ginnie Springs. This month's correspondent goes a little further and a little deeper, opting for full cave training in some of the most extensive cave systems in the world.

Dear Fellow Diver,

By day ten of my Yucatan diving adventure, I was feeling like a veteran. My muscles had strengthened to where there was spring in my step as I lumbered along with 90 lbs. of gear hanging off my overweight torso. No, I wasn't headed for the beautiful, sunlit reefs offshore: I was making my way through the jungle to a waterhole.

Jumping into the Cenote Carwash with my guide, I did the mandatory gear check, then sank into the cenote and headed for the cave. The beginning of the cave system is a large, gaping cavern where my guide pointed out charcoal remnants of campfires and shards of pottery left by ancient peoples who used the cave as a dwelling in prehistoric times before it flooded. The eerie cavern entrance is crisscrossed with a tangle of trees that have fallen into the cenote over time. We tied off our guideline and entered the darkness.

Gliding through water so clear feels like floating in air. I concentrated on applying my newly-learned skills, making sure my legs delivered only the short, abbreviated kicks I'd been taught would minimize the "prop wash" from my fins and prevent silting of the passageway. As I ran my guideline back 350' toward the "Chamber of Horrors," my pinkie finger gently applied friction to the reel to keep the line from snarling. Then, picking up the permanent guideline, I tied off my primary reel and looked around, and that's when it hit me: it's incredibly beautiful in here. Swimming on past

Plantaris: Another Pain

After our May, 1999, article regarding a diver who had ruptured his Achilles tendon while making a giant stride off a rolling dive platform,

we heard from reader Richard Nelson, M.D. He wrote to tell us that Achilles tendon rupture is not the only injury that causes sudden pain to the back of the leg after push-off and leaves the ankle feeling powerless. He notes that Plantaris muscle rupture can cause virtually identical symptoms and that it's a much more common injury than Achilles tendon rupture.

Plantaris, unlike Achilles, does not "interrupt the motor mechanism": a diver who has experienced a Plantaris muscle rupture will still be able to move his foot downward when he squeezes his calf, whereas the diver who ruptured his Achilles tendon was described as "unable to rise on his left forefoot." Although both ruptures are quite painful, Nelson says Plantaris requires no treatment and "if a diver is hard core, he can continue." Achilles tendon rupture, however, requires surgical repair and weeks in a heavy cast.

Both injuries can be avoided by eliminating forward push-off entry, especially when heavily-laden with dive gear, and instead entering from a seated position.

"Luke's Hope," a minor cenote in the system, I contemplated its namesake, a foolish, under-prepared diver named Luke who was saved from impending death years ago when he ran across this tiny exit out of the underwater world.

Negotiating some minor restrictions, we snaked our way back to "Crystal Palace," where I moved past legions of brilliant white stalactites, soda straws, and dribbling flow stones. When we arrived at the "Room of Tears," the cave opened into a large chamber that resembles an ancient cathedral with sculpted columns. It didn't matter which way I turned; there was cathedral-like ornamentation in every direction. Although my MX-10 camera wouldn't do justice to this scene, I was there absorbing every view and burning them into my memory.

After penetrating 1700' into the cave, we turned around, our timing based on the air management "rule of thirds" (use 1/3 of your air in, 1/3 out, and surface with 1/3 left). I picked up our reels as we retraced our path through the magnificent structure. Arriving at the juncture between the cave and the cavern zones, I checked my instruments for the log book. I'd spent 1 hr. 50 min. in pure bliss. And I still had 1200 psi left in my doubles.

My home away from home for these 11 cave-diving days was Aquatech/Villas DeRosa in the quiet little community known as Aventuras/Akumal. With no restaurants, bars, or stores, Aventuras is less a town than a whistle stop off the main drag, Hwy. #307, running from Cancun nearly to Belize. The community hugs the beachfront in a lovely cove along the Caribbean coast, and Villas DeRosa is the centerpiece of the two- or three-block long enclave. Like so many small outposts along the Mayan Riviera, Aventuras/Akumal will soon experience some serious growth. Construction has started on a mega-development projected to include about 1,000 hotel rooms/condos. Today it's still an outpost, and the beach is abandoned more often than not.

The Aquatech/Villas DeRosa complex includes several neatly arranged buildings constructed in the typical Mexican stucco/cement style, all bright white and sporting

The Caribbean coastline between Playa del Carmen and Tulum offers the greatest concentration of highly decorated cave systems in the world. It's estimated that close to a million feet of survey line has been laid since 1985. About 50 cave systems have been explored to date, and the two longest caves are competing for the title of world's longest: Nahoch Nah Chich, with 215,000' of surveyed passages, and Dos Ojos, with 200,000'. Exploration of new cenotés is ongoing, and major expeditions are organized regularly to push new line into the two biggest ones. No one thinks they've reached the end.

Cozumel Ferry Robbed

It was a traveler's worst nightmare: on May 31, a half-dozen hooded pirates waving grenades and firing assault rifles into the air attacked the ferry making its evening trip to Playa del Carmen from Cozumel. According to police, the privateers were targeting a money shipment from Cozumel's businesses that was en route to mainland banks.

The incident did get passengers' attention. Vacationer Tracy Miller, a 33-year-old Los Angeles postal clerk, reported hearing gunshots before the boat stopped and said "we didn't know what the gunshots were; we didn't know if they were shooting other passengers." The ferry's engineer was badly beaten, and two security guards who were transporting the cash were thrown overboard before the robbers sped off in a speedboat. One guard drowned, but his companion was rescued the following morning. Local reports said that the surviving guard, who, unlike his deceased partner, was given a life jacket before being thrown overboard, has been detained by police. While the police have detained suspects in the robbery, at last report they had not recovered the missing funds.

The episode appears to be an isolated incident, but shows once again that when you travel, you should be prepared for anything.

offers reef dives, fishing trips, and a full spectrum of tourist activities, their focus is on cave diving (they claim to service 85% of the area's visiting cave divers). All ten of the principals on staff are certified cave-diving instructors or divemasters who regularly explore. The four I dived with were friendly, professional, safety-conscious, and ecstatic about cave exploring.

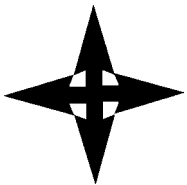
I came to Aquatech a novice, a purebred open-water diver with nary a shred of cavern-diving experience. They paired me with a British cavern diver, and, as the days progressed, we fell into a routine of gearing up around 8:30, grabbing two sets of doubles, and taking off for an intensive four-dive day. Lectures were presented during surface intervals, on the road to the dive sites, and occasionally at night back at the resort. Our first and third dives, conducted with full doubles, were our deepest and longest penetrations, dives two and four shorter ones using our remaining air for skills drills. I logged 704 minutes of bottom time during 15 dives in five days of training.

Although most cenotes run with crystal-clear water that gives you the giddy feeling of floating in nothingness, in some places the cave system runs close to the surface and picks up brown, tannin-soaked jungle waters. These dark, low viz waters can stain entire cave systems a dirty brown and obscure spectacular formations. Marine life is conspicuously absent from most cave dives; however, there's usually a thriving marine ecosystem in the open bowl of the cenote. At Cenote Nahoran, large box turtles cruised in and out of the aquatic grass. As we bobbed on the surface at Carwash, my earlobes were regularly assaulted by schools of Yucatan tetras and an occasional Jack Dempsey. At Cenote Vaca Ha, Steve called his dog in from the swamp because a week earlier his wife had seen a small crocodile there. During deeper penetration cave dives, I ran across several blind Yucatan cave fish and a couple of remipedes, small white centipede-like creatures.

Why train extensively for dives that you can only do at a few places in the world? There are reasons beyond the spectacular formations you'll see. Having seen a lot of reefs, cenote diving takes on new challenge and mystery. It's an excellent way to develop self-sufficiency as a diver. And, although I didn't venture into any unexplored territory, I certainly got a feel for what the explorers are into. There are few destinations left where you can actually be the first one to enjoy the view.

If you're vacationing in Cancun or diving Cozumel, a day adventure in a cenote is still a treat. Not only is it totally unlike reef diving, it's also a way to get wet in bad weather, a quiet retreat from hectic Cancun, and an other-worldly experience to add to your mental log book.

— X. P.



Diver's Compass: If you're coming from Cozumel, catch the ferry downtown to Playa del Carmen, where several dive operations on Fifth Street or along the beach offer cenote dives. Most are within an hour's drive of Playa...In Cancun, cenote dive options which include transportation to the Playa/Akumal area are marketed by most dive operators or hotels...To contact Aquatech/Villas DeRosa: phone 52-987-59020, website www.cenotes.com.

Rooms \$45-\$200 (varies w/size and season). Packages for cave-certified divers including airport transfers, full meal plan, 7 nights accommodation, and six days guided diving start at \$850/person for groups; full cave-training packages w/room and board run \$1400 (6 students) to \$2075 (private); many technical courses and private cave tours offered...Mostly aluminum 80s, some steel 85s, 95s, and 104s, Nitrox available...10% tax on almost everything...Water temps 76-79 year-round, viz as high as 300'; air temps 80-85 mid-November...C-cards and log books checked...Cokes were free, local rum \$2.50/liter in Tulum...