

Guatemala Caves

S627

By Steve Knutson

1. (Title Slide) During the 1980's cavers made several trips to explore the caves of Guatemala as part of the NSS "Lost World Explorations".
2. Guatemala is located in Central America bordered by Mexico on the north, Belize on the east, Honduras and El Salvador on the south, and the Pacific Ocean on the west. The country is about the size of Ohio.
3. The northern surface topography of Guatemala consists of a limestone plain, the central portion is covered by a limestone mountain range, and the southern portion is volcanic.
4. The Lost World Expeditions concentrated their efforts on the caves in the central mountains near Coban.
5. The caves are located near an escarpment which runs east west. The elevation of the western end of the escarpment approaches 12,500 feet above sea level. The caving area is located at about 5,000 feet above sea level, but the surface elevation quickly drops 1,000 feet within a mile or so.
6. The cavers flew into Guatemala City, then drove a short distance to Antigua, the old capital, to get ready for their trips into the mountains.
7. The ruins of several old churches provided evidence of past earthquakes.
8. The 1980's were a period of civil unrest and military repression in Guatemala.
9. During this period some of the bridges for the Pan American highway were destroyed by rebels.
10. Many regions formed local militia to combat the rebels. With so many people carrying weapons, Guatemala was a place where cavers had to be very careful.
11. During a trip in 1980, cavers stopped to explore a cave at 10,000 feet elevation in the mountains to the west of the primary caving area. The trip was aborted when they found a dead body inside the cave and were hassled by locals who wanted to know why they were there."
12. Starting in 1987, cavers began to explore the primary caving area to be covered by this program.
13. The Yallehouch Valley is located high up in the central mountains near Coban.

14. It is a closed depression several miles long and a mile wide with a major stream that sinks in the floor of the valley.
15. Along one side of the valley is a communal town built by the government in the late 1980's.
16. The caver accommodations in this area was an empty health station building which was never staffed by the government.
17. They rented a truck to get their gear up to the health station at the end of the road, then drove the truck back to town to avoid paying rental fees while they were caving. Once they brought a motorcycle intending to use it after they returned the truck, but the roads proved to be too rough.
18. The health station was an excellent base of operations.
19. It came equipped with a few tables, and the cavers brought chairs.
20. Everyone shared in the communal chores, such as washing dishes and ...
21. Cooking meals.
22. While some cavers slept in the house, ...
23. Others slept in tents, ...
24. Or hammocks in an adjacent structure. The weather was fairly cold, and it commonly rained once or twice each week. On the plus side there were no mosquitos and none of the nasty insects typically found in the lowlands of Central America.
25. The government installed a water system when they built the town and one of the spigots was just outside the health center.
26. Next door to the health center was a school, complete with playground.
27. All in all, it was a great place to repair gear, ...
28. And get ready for cave trips.
29. It was not unusual for a wild pig to wander through the yard.
30. They looked so mean that everyone let them sit wherever they wanted.
31. While the town was small, it was quite busy during market day.
32. The cavers shopped for souvenirs, ...
33. Food, and coffee.
34. Each year the cavers tried to hep toe local community in some way.

35. One year they donated notebooks and pens to the students of the local school ...
36. And provided a picture of the class.
37. There are several dry sumideros (stream beds) on the Yallehouch Valley floor that carry water in wet weather.
38. The Yallehouch stream is active year-around and sinks in a small hole which has yet to be explored.
39. While the entrance is small, it looks like a caver could enter it.
40. The Yallehouch stream used to flow further down the valley into the entrance of Yo Nas Neim Cave.
41. The entrance is located in a headwall at the lower end of the valley ...
42. Which is covered with heavy vegetation.
43. The entrance measures over one hundred feet high and forty feet wide.
44. Once inside, cavers are dwarfed by its immensity.
45. Leading from it, a large borehole passage goes into the mountain.
46. After looking at daylight one last time, ...
47. The cavers began their journey into Yo Nas Neim.
48. The cave started as a single large passage.
49. In places there was a small stream, but it soon disappeared.
50. Even in the lower sections of the cave, they never found any sign of the main stream from Yallehouch Valley.
51. Periodically water would enter from above, but then it would go down a drain without forming a stream.
52. Breakdown often littered the floor of the passage.
53. Eventually the cavers had to descend a short drop.
54. While the drop was wet, the water disappeared at the bottom.
55. This was only the first of a series of short drops, ...
56. And climbs as they continued into the cave.
57. Eventually the cave broke up into a complex pattern of passages.
58. There was considerable air flow in various places in the cave.

59. But the air flow disappeared in the maze.
60. Farther into the cave they intersected a deep pit along a fault.
61. After placing bolts and tying off the rope, they started down.
62. They carried additional rope in case more drops were found farther into the cave.
63. The descent into the pit was along a wall.
64. It consisted of a series of four drops interrupted by short shelves along the way.
65. The pit depth measured 360 feet when they reached the bottom.
66. At the bottom was a Great Hall going off into the distance. Standing at the far end they could see fellow cavers at the top of the drop.
67. Heading off the Great Hall were large canyons.
68. Occasionally they were blocked by breakdown which required them to squeeze through large blocks of rock ...
69. Only to find more tall canyon beyond.
70. At places fill occupied the floor of the passage making it considerably smaller.
71. Every once in a while, the way was interrupted by short drops.
72. As they continued to explore the cave, they found several formation areas.
73. Soda straws were particularly common ...
74. And some of them were quite large.
75. At one place they found a soda straw which had fallen and impaled itself in the silt floor.
76. During their surveys they mapped almost six miles of passage, making Yo Nas Neim the longest known cave in Guatemala.
77. When they started back out, ...
78. Yo Nas Neim had been surveyed to a depth of 964 feet.
79. It was the deepest known cave in Guatemala until 1990 when a nearby pit further up on the mountain was found to be deeper.
80. Finally, they reached the entrance carrying all their gear.
81. The next morning the Yallehouch Valley was covered by mist.

82. Some of the cavers had come from Belize before arriving in Yallehouch Valley. They spent time digging beef worms out of their skin (photo of ½ inch beef worm). Lucky for the other cavers, beef worms do not live in the cold climate of the valley.
83. The cavers washed their gear in the main stream of the Yallehouch. At the end of the dry season the water flow was measured at 7 cubic feet per second. However, after a heavy rain they saw the flow at a rate increase to as much as 100 cubic feet per second.
84. The cavers headed up the sides of the valley towards one of the higher entrances of Yo Nas Neim.
85. To get there they had to struggle through heavy jungle undergrowth.
86. It took considerable time and effort just to go a short distance.
87. The struggle seems endless.
88. Finally, they reached the entrance.
89. Just inside the entrance they found a piece of an old jar.
90. Pieces of ancient jars. None of the relics were outstanding.
91. Nearby was a partial human skeleton.
92. The platforms were located at the edge of a drop into a lower level of the cave.
93. Perhaps this may have been a Mayan ceremonial site.
94. In one area the platforms were large enough for groups of people.
95. But off on one side was a little circular platform just big enough for one person, perhaps the priest who conducted the ceremony.
96. The cavers spent a lot of time checking along the sides of the Yallehouch Valley.
97. They hired the local residents as porters to help carry the rope to make it easier for them and to help the local economy.
98. Some of these pits were clogged with vegetation.
99. The lead caver had to chop his way down with a machete.
100. He had to be careful not to cut the rope on the way down.
101. It was a lot of work to have to descend through a jungle.
102. But once the first man down cleared the way, ...
103. It was much easier for those that followed.

104. The pit proved to be 400 feet deep but went nowhere at the bottom.
105. Another one of the pits they found was Rain Drop. It got its name when they had to climb out of it through heavy rain.
106. The entrance pit was 250 feet deep.
107. It led to cave passage at the bottom that eventually descended in a series of drops to a depth of 800 feet.
108. The Yallehouch Valley is an entirely enclosed depression.
109. The road out of the valley ascends onto the surrounding uplands.
110. The cavers left the road to follow an ancient trail.
111. These deeply entrenched trails have been used for centuries. They were well established routes long before the Spaniards arrived.
112. In the uplands above the valley is a pit called Pozo de Cepalao.
113. It was found by Steve Knutson in 1987.
114. The cavers rigged the rope at the top of the pit.
115. There were few good anchors, so they tied the rope to everything they could find.
116. Finally, they started down the pit.
117. The entrance pit was 230 feet deep.
118. It was clean and dry.
119. Not far from the base of the entrance pit was another short drop.
120. After walking along a canyon for some distance they encountered another major drop.
121. First, they set bolts at the top of the drop.
122. Then they descended. The pit proved to be 470 feet deep.
123. At the bottom of the 470-foot drop, the passage continued but was filled with several deep pools.
124. Continuing down the passage they encountered a small stream which would later flood after a heavy rain outside.
125. The cavers descended another short drop ...
126. And then a 230-foot pit.
127. While the cavers were still in the cave, it started to rain outside.

128. The water quickly flooded several passages in the cave. The cavers had to wait several hours before the water flow abated enough that they could make their way out.
129. As of 1990 Pozo de Cepalao has been pushed to a depth of 1,400 feet making it the deepest cave in Central America.
130. (photos by Garza & Knutson)
131. (Script by Paul Stevens)
132. (Narration, composition, title slides)
133. (New Credit Slide)

This show was developed by Paul Stevens based upon slides and associated explanatory tape provided by Steve Knutson. It was completed and entered into the NSS A/V Library in January 1992.