

# Undiscovered Country

Zacaton is only part of the story — the rest is about exploration by endurance and finding the last virgin places on earth.

JIM BOWDEN

*Editor's Note: Jim Bowden, who holds the world record for the deepest open-circuit, mixed gas dive (925 feet), is currently attempting to hit the 1000-foot mark at the bottom of Zacaton. As of press time, he and his team, Proyecto de Buceo Espeleologico Mexico y America Central, were in Belize attempting the new record.*

**T**he cave systems we explore are not found in travel books or on continental maps, sometimes not even on the detailed topographical maps we use. A great amount of time is spent

in research and study to find and precisely locate promising systems. Once identified, whether on a map, or by general description from a local inhabitant, the sought cave is pursued by ridge walking, four wheeling and often considerable back tracking. Time, time, time is consumed and for every system with promise, there have been dozens of disappointments and false leads. I have learned through the years, that although on occasion I have regretted the loss of time when we have a false lead, some of the quests and pursuits have allowed us to

venture through places of great beauty and wonder that we would have otherwise missed, that the wrong road traveled has taken us to a place of mystery and spectacle. The blessings of the accident known only to those who quest.

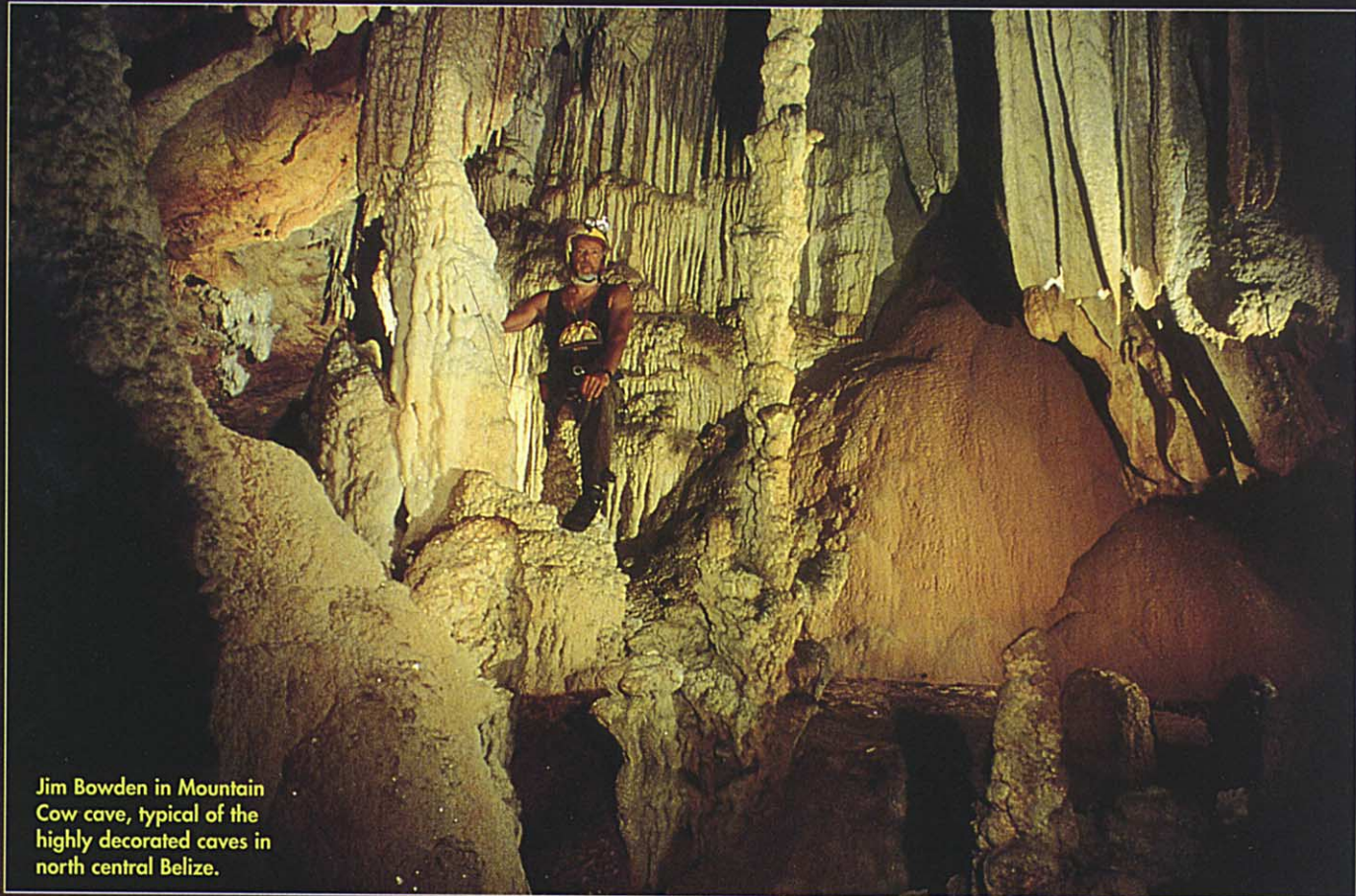
The remoteness of our project site leaves us free of the burdens of "civilization" and we establish our encampments far from all but the smallest of population centers. We are visited rarely, and if on-lookers arrive, they are the "gente," the rural Mexican, the refugee from Guatemala, the man and his family who are surviving

modestly with resources reaped from the land. We are not encumbered by the sounds of traffic, city crowds, or even the distraction of light.

In Belize, our jungle home was in a setting of such beauty that all efforts to describe it sound overly sappy, and cloying. Sixty miles from the nearest town, we were visited in the night by tapirs and jaguars. The dreaded fer-de-lance lived in our grass, and the jungle encroached upon and reclaimed every trail older than 24 hours. The sounds were other-worldly, a chorus of frogs produced the most frightening cacophony we



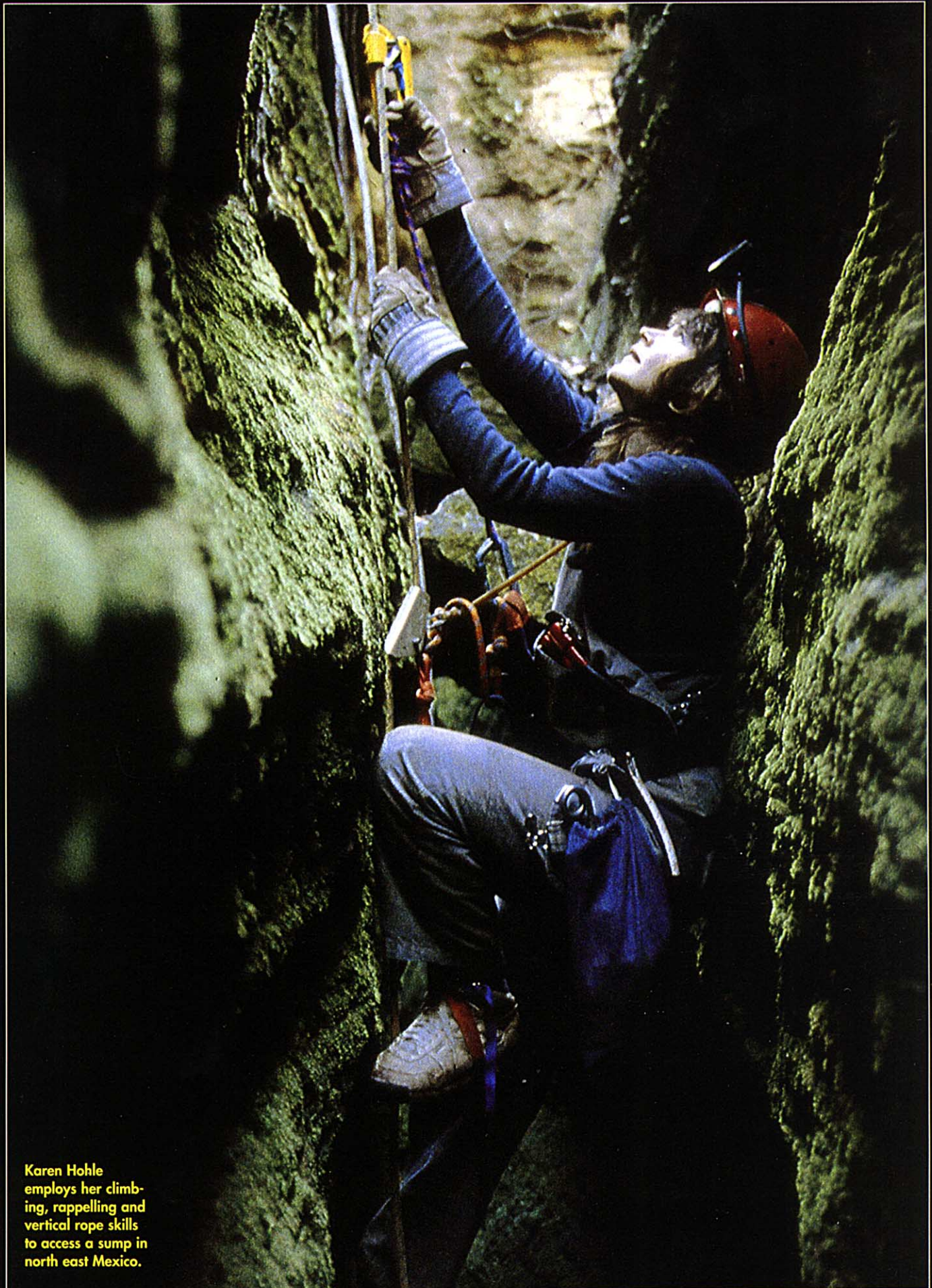
photos: Jim Bowden and Ann Kristovich



Jim Bowden in Mountain Cow cave, typical of the highly decorated caves in north central Belize.



Air filled passage of St. Herman's cave, Belize



Karen Hohle employs her climbing, rappelling and vertical rope skills to access a sump in north east Mexico.

photo: Jim Bowden



Left: A 13-foot waterfall and strong currents in the Rio Mentiras necessitate the use of vertical climbing aids. Below: Karen Hohle (top) and Ann Kristovich preparing for a sump dive in Rochelle's Cave.

have ever heard, terrifying and riveting, especially when one is ignorant of the source. We could walk for a day and see no traces of man, visit caves and oasis-like settings that convinced us that we were the only people on earth. We coped with too much water and torrential seasonal flooding that either trapped us in our site or prevented us from accessing it, or with prolonged drought which bakes everything and gives a whole new challenge to hydration.

These elusive locales then become the focus of our work, at times for merely a few hours, and at others, for several years, such as our experience at Zacaton and her sister cenotes. The special demands provoked by the conditions of each cave have at times necessitated that we acquire additional training, tools and expertise. The goal, no matter if the system is long, tedious, or incomprehensibly deep, remains the same — the end must be obtained. In Belize, this "end" was the joining of several previously unconnected caves into a continuous underground labyrinth. In certain caves, the end is the terminal most passage, beyond which no further passage, water or air filled, is discerned. In the case of Zacaton, our end is the bottom of this majestically deep cenote. The exploration is not finished after the bottom is reached — it is just begun, but the depths dramatically limit the amount of meaningful exploration possible.

photos: Jim Bowden and Ann Kristovich






Staging area in Sotano de las Calenturas, adjacent to the first sump, Lake Louise.

possess. One is uniquely alone in each confrontation, the crushing weight of 1000 feet of water, the pitch and difficulty of hand holds may be similar, but no one's given other is ever the same, and one's personal resources are never exactly the same.

For years, all of my leisure time was given to exploring. Actually, I was exploring only in the sense of finding myself. As I spent more and more time in the wilderness, I came to realize that whatever I did or accomplished depended on others and on the length of time I was in the field. It seemed that all too soon, I had to return to work, family and responsibilities before the desired goal was accomplished, sometimes even before the objective was located. I had no time to deal with the vicissitudes of nature and weather. In short, I found that one could not be on the cutting edge of exploration and have a job, responsibilities of family, or commitments to anything else but exploration.

With each slide show and presentation I give, I try and show in some way the wholeness of our effort. I know that I am there because of my "record dive," but what makes me an explorer is the fatigue to the point of collapse, the broken, torn and bruised muscles and bones, the frightening diseases found only in my tropical area of work — including one that almost killed me, and took over a year to recover from — and the very personal successes and experiences that mean as much to me as being a record holder. The friendships formed, the loves, the eccentricities, the unique characters that have been a part of my life, all contribute to the wholeness of my being.

In closing this philosophical explanation of our effort, I am reminded of a quote from Kafka:

"Life's splendor lies forever in wait, veiled but not hostile, reluctant or deaf. If you summon it by the right word, by the right name, it will come." 



Ceiling height is more than 200 feet in this lake filled, cathedral-like room of Nacimiento Mentiras.