

Written by Alison & Andrew Lovell, with assorted typos credited to Watson-the-Jealous-of-the-Computer-Lagomorph

Crack of dawn with Gatorades in hand, two Midwestern newbs set off into the desert, finding particularly surprising flora rising up from the iron-infused rocks along the route. According the Florence locals, those flora were better known as “penal facilities.” Ignoring that slight foreboding and carrying on towards Oracle to meet up with the rest of the cavers, we somehow resisted the urge to detour off course to break into the Biodome, since there was no time for bad Paulie Shore reenactments when there was caving to be had!

Meeting up with the rest of the CAG group, which included several ASU students eager for caving corruption, we had a quick pit stop (in which the Circle K employee bathroom may or may not have been broken into) and were officially on our way to our first official Arizona cave! The excitement in our caravan was palpable as we traversed up a winding mountain road, all the while attempting to follow Ray, who takes turns with the race car precision indicative only of those who have either already memorized every curve of their old-backroad-friend or those that have spent considerable time test driving cars as part of a pit crew for NASCAR, and if the latter is the case Ray, we need tickets! Regardless, our best bet was to follow the trail of flying dirt and dust on top of the concerning cliffs, and after many winds and turns down the dirt road we suddenly veered off onto another dirt road that was doing its best to impersonate a bunch of desert brush (which rewarded us by assaulting our vehicles with the tenacity of a rat terrier going for a chew toy). Fortunately we trusted that Ray was not leading us over a cliff as some form of Arizona grotto hazing ritual, so we pressed on in our uncaffeinated state, fortunately finding the parking lot...and that cliff we had been worried about going over. Naturally the converging grottos proceeded to lead us over that very cliff.

Once we made it to the entrance, a gaping black hole of doom greeted us. The extremely light breeze sounded eerily alike the whispered words of ‘and they were never seen again.’ Ignoring that second attempt of the universe to steer us away from becoming amongst the caving-addicts-for-life group we suited up into our borrowed vertical gear (thank you Ray!), promptly got tangled, took it off, tried it again, got re-tangled, and at this point the entire group of ASU students had already had plenty of time to descend down into the black hole of doom’s depths. This left Cameron to take pity upon us Midwestern ‘newbs.’ To his credit he admirably restrained the well warranted laughter we clearly had coming at us, and helped us get the gear on correctly.

Once we were checked, double checked, and triple checked (clearly Ray and Cameron knew what newbs they were dealing with) we then descended into a black abyss, the first obstacle being a short six foot high, small bouldering potion. While the rest of the grotto tackled this like it was ‘no big thing’ the ‘survival’ portion of my brain reminded me that I had recently two torn ankle ligaments and a soundtrack reminiscent of the death march began playing in my ears. Naturally this caused hesitation, but between Ray, Cameron, and some cheery gal previously referred to in Anel’s grotto write up as ‘the sacrifice to the gods’ (AKA Jessica) the laws of ankle physics were talked right out of my head and I got coached down it, all the while Ray cheerily continued informing all of us that it was ‘on the job training.’ Andy and Cameron of course hopped right down that first, seemingly insurmountable obstacle like the rest of the grotto had. In fact, Cameron did it with such ease that I’m still shocked he wasn’t whistling.



One-by-one the remaining grotto members dropped down into the black abyss with the easy abandon of the recently lobotomized, only for our turn to rapidly descend upon us like a supposedly extinct velociraptor (I'm convinced they're out there...). Due to a failed game of rocks, paper, scissors I went first (chivalrous of you Andy!), stepped off a ledge, and while feeling quite 'bad ass' and despite the simplicity of the maneuver managed to bump my head ever-so-slightly on a rock. It was right about then that I realized that I hadn't fastened my helmet *quite* tightly enough. I realized this because it shifted ever so slightly around, resulting in me turning my head, thereby resulting in my previously tight ponytail moving juuuust enough for it to get snared in the friction device of the rappelling equipment. Now, hanging ten feet down from the entrance to the black abyss, sixty feet up from the bottom of it, and trapped in the throes of a wardrobe malfunction I found myself contemplating the best way to relay my current predicament, and decided that shouting something akin to 'my hair is stuck' seemed suitably adequate for describing my clearly pathetic situation (and my clearly graceful rappelling skills).

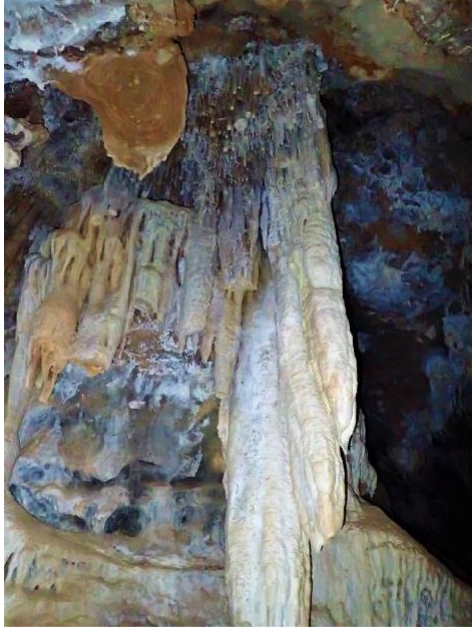
This was the point where Spiderman came in. Spidey-AKA-Jeff-of-the-Tucson-Grotto came crawling up the vertical wall of the pit with speed that would put Toby Maguire to shame, introducing himself as if finding damsels in distress hanging from ropes was just a normal part of his daily routine. While I clung to the rope and attempted (and failed) to not squeak in pain Jeff calmly explained that my only job now was to hang onto the rope and calmly began disentangling my hair. All fun aside on a serious note, had it not been for Ray, Jeff, and Cameron this could have been an extremely dangerous situation. Fortunately, as Ray reminded us later, this is why we go in groups, so as to help each other (~~AKA to help the skittish~~

~~newbs, though I suppose Andy wasn't skittish so it really was probably just me~~). Ray was able to lower another rope down that Jeff used to anchor me in, thereby eliminating the risk of me losing my grip and falling down further. This gave Jeff plenty of time to groom me into a new hairstyle, one for which I am so appreciative of that I fully intend to buy him an entire pizza (and one for Ray and Cameron too!) as thanks. Come to think of it Andy should probably buy him one too. Get on that Andy – sheesh.

Lessons were learned from this mishap, the biggest of which was that if you're a chick and you have long hair, ponytails are very poor caving selections when vertical drops are necessitated. One never knows when the ponytail could get twisted around and snared, which is exactly what happened to me. One of the ASU students had a great idea involving two Pippy-Longstocking braids tucked up under her helmet for the descent – now *that* would have been a great idea for me to have used! Read as: Girls (and guys trapped in the 80's), clips and braids are your *friends*.

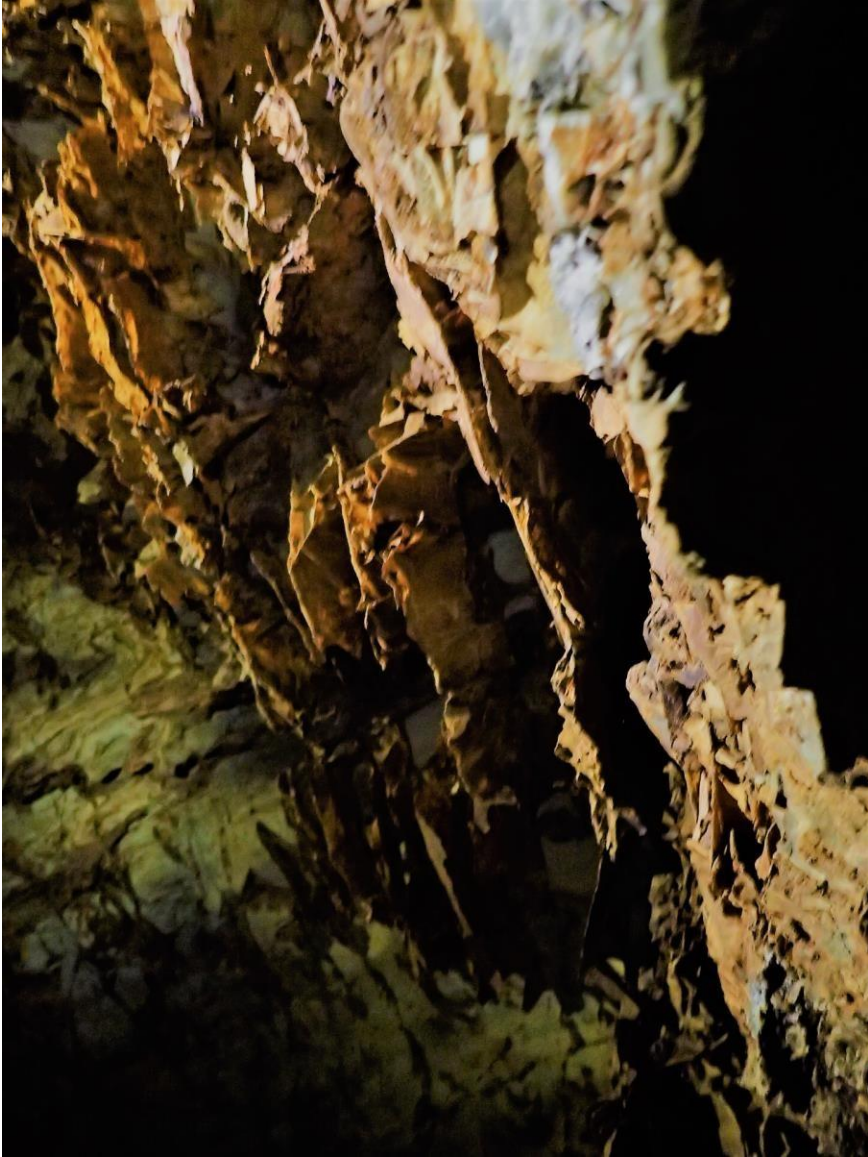
After surviving this misguided attempt of the friction device to scalp my new self, the descent down continued with a shockingly full head of hair - thank you Jeff! Being the Midwestern newb that I am, the descent seemed quite long, but the others on the trip later reassured me that oh no, it wasn't a long descent and there are much more fun and long ones to come – the horror! Now, my distance estimates are probably off, but after what seemed about fifteen feet of a straight drop an angled rock was hit, and it appeared to go down another fifty-ish feet to the cave's entrance. This portion of the descent gave me plenty of time to contemplate how awesome the grotto was, because I would have been completely and utterly screwed (and bald) had it not been for their expertise. Thanks guys! You're the real MVP's! Overall the total distance from the very top hole of doom to the bottom of the cave is 80 vertical feet at any rate.

Once all members – and their heads – were accounted for we were greeted with a surprisingly large chamber, with extremely large stalactites towards the 'back.' By 'back' I mean towards the back of the chamber, where it apparently ended. We quickly learned that most people, if not travelling with the awesome grotto members that we were with, tended to think that 'this' was the entire cave. Tricky, sneaky grotto members that the veterans are though, the cave was actually much larger, and several rocks of varying sizes could be seen littering the ground like perfect, shin-high tripping obstacles near the base of one wall to attest to that. You see, upon closer inspection through the Haboob that had apparently emerged spontaneously underground it became apparent that there was actually a hole that the rocks had been rolled away from, and sure enough there were boots that could be seen disappearing through that very same hole, even through the sea of animate dust. Us newbs had just encountered our very first 'Arizona Caving Gate' in a dismantled state, and that definitely made me realize just how much secrecy, even *within* the cave itself, was needed to protect the cave's formations.



Sucking it up and channeling my inner Alice I dove into the rabbit hole, lugging my makeshift medical *jump* bag behind me. Quickly realizing this wouldn't work out well for *anyone* (particularly Andy squirming his way through the small passage behind me) I decided that rolling it in front of me was going to work better. It did...and I also inhaled a large amount of dirt kicked up by that jump bag. Upon emerging into the actual cave itself it occurred to me, and Andy judging from the malevolent expression he threw at *his* jump bag, that we would need to be getting some caving specific bags and soon. Helllooooo REI!

From this point on there we began a fast paced game of 'follow the leader,' passing time cherished relics (or so we're told) like Pee Rock. Taking pictures of every piece of boxwork that I could in route, it never occurred to me to look *backwards* at where we had just come from. At least...not until we were a decent ways into the cave, at which point I started taking pictures of the way we had just come from. This initial lapse though I would come to regret later. \*Cue ominous music here\*





Eventually we found ourselves in the main room , at which point Ray decided he'd had enough of all of us and needed to take some well-earned 'him time.' At this point he sprawled out on a rock, looking as comfortable as those cats that have commandeered our patio furniture, looking totally ready for a cat nap all of his own while explaining to us some fun tidbits of caving. After this respite from the group's game of 'creating our own underground Haboobs whilst crawling' we took the obligatory proof-of-life group photo, then separated from Ray, leaving him behind. No one knows for sure what he got up to during this time, but we suspect there were probably a few underground, eyeless gremlins involved, of which only he speaks their language...



(Picture credit to Devin Roden)

Jeff, Devin and Cameron cheerily led us away from our human security blanket and through an increasingly confusing vortex that was rapidly becoming more and more reminiscent of the labyrinth, eventually stopping at the base of a short, blessedly easy looking rock scramble that led to what they promised to be the “Oh Wow Room.” I could only imagine that it was actually the Goblin King’s throne room, where he lurked in shadows, waiting to devour us newbs one-by-one as we crawled willing into his trap. One at a time we scrambled up anyway – films of our youths be damned – with only a few at a time entering. As Andy and I entered our newb-ness came out as exclamations of, “Oh wow!” echoed. Stalactites and stalgmities and crystals –oh my!

Once again the importance of why keeping the cave’s location a secret was impressed upon me. The room was absolutely gorgeous! Judging by the somewhat awed look on Andy’s face he was equally impressed. When asked what he thought of it at a latter date his response was a ‘super fly’ simple, “It was coooooool. Very pretty,” as if he too wasn’t left gaping in wonder. Descending down out of the Oh Wow Room we encountered Jeff-AKA-Spideyman, who cheerily pointed out another hole in a wall, about 5 feet off the ground, ‘selling’ it as a cave of wonders. Like the wide-eyed newb I was I took the bait and clambered on into the tight, yet cozy space, finding a small area that truly could only fit one person, and a small person at that, at a time. The stalactites, soda straws, and stalagmites in there, though on a far smaller scale than in the Oh Wow Room, were equally gorgeous. For pointing this out, Jeff may be getting a side of breadsticks with his pizza.







(The Oh Wow Room)



(Awesome Little Side Room Shown to Us By Spideyman)

Now that the charming little detour was over, we entered into what all I shall lovingly refer to as the 'Impersonating Rats in a Maze' portion of the afternoon. With Jeff and Dave in the lead, both cheerily telling us that they weren't fully sure where they were leading us but we were bound to wind up somewhere, us newbs quickly settled into a fast pattern of hurrying up (typically involving crawling and scrambling) and waiting while the professionals scouted out our potential routes. By this point the smarting ankle from Hades had decided for me that I wasn't moving until the

directional beacons known as Jeff and Dave had decided on a direction (don't Facebook while walking downstairs everyone – it doesn't end well for your joints!), which seemed a sound enough plan for the ASU crowd as they, by all appearances, appeared to have come to that similar decision on their own. One of them even took to impersonating Gollum...



(My Preciiiiouuuus!)

These periods of time were punctuated by awesome caving scenery, but as a newb a great deal of it began to blur together. Room after room, stalactite after stalagmite, boxwork...well there can never be enough box work, but identifying it from one room to the next for me personally was somewhat challenging. This was a feeling shared by some of the other newbs, while others exhibited a shocking ability to impersonate a human underground GPS system. They always seemed to know exactly where we were and where we were going! (Tell us your secrets!!!) These time periods of deep contemplation (trying to recognize one room from another and enjoying the ride) were punctuated by lots of lights in the distance and excited shouts of, "This way!" and then, "No this way!" from the professionals scouting ahead.

Eventually we reached a point where we had circled back around to the main room, where Ray was safe and sound just as we left him (no suspicious Gollum footprints anywhere...hrm....) and after another short respite from trying to stir up an underground dust tornado the veterans gleefully informed us that they were going one way, and us newbs were all going another way. This quickly led to a chorus amongst us newbs of, "Is this a good idea!?" while the veterans rapidly disappeared. Me, being the loudmouthed personality I am, took to shameless pleading for one veteran to come with us unsuspecting saps! Dave took pity – thank you Dave!

The newbs that served as human GPS units scrambled on ahead, including Cameron (a human GPS unit in his own right and while not a newb, was new to this particular cave). Following them and being continually shocked that they could distinguish one spot from another, I realized I had a *lot* of work to do upon improving caving navigation skills, and improving them rapidly. Eventually after a few more belly scrambles in a day full of belly scrambles, my makeshift jump bag was rolled ahead of me, and we found the rest of the group – huzzah! Thank you human GPS units!

The next challenge posed to us by the cave veterans was to try to find, on the map, the spot we were currently at. Finding a spot to actually *read* the map though was just as challenging in itself. Eventually a suitable rock was found, and the human GPS units figured out where we were after several helpful directions from Ray and Jeff, who had taken to saying we could totally trust him on directions. Hrm... Still, the map seemed intricately detailed, but heck if I could match where we were on it to the place we were standing.

Eventually this life lesson was learned and we reached the end of the cave. The Arizona gate was redone by Jessica and Dave, who I'm pretty sure are mighty mice in disguise (seriously...you should have seen how easily they moved those giant rocks)! The second major lesson of the trip (after securing one's hair and helmet better) had been learned though: You need to remember the way *out* rather than relying on other's with you *for* the way out. Next time...we shall remember.

Stalactites, stalagmites, and boxwork-palooza left behind (oh my!) and it was time to learn how to climb *out* of a cave using vertical. We resumed the match of us vs. the vertical harnesses, failed several times, Andy's being twisted around in some unusual fashion that took 3 people to figure out (Cameron to the rescue!) and amidst the shouts of, "Rock!" as random bits of that very item fell down the 80 foot entrance *to* the cave, it eventually became our turn to contend with what we now lovingly refer to as *the foot loop of hell*. Now, the name aside, the vertical set-up for getting oneself up and *out* of a cave safely is actually quite ingenious. Our methods of *using* that gear effectively though were anything but. After about 3 tries to ascend and only rising about a foot, I began to see why Jeff and the dynamic duo had chosen to boulder their way up – it seemed easier! But I was doggedly determined to learn a new skill, and Spideyman Jeff made an appearance to shadow me the entire way up, with Ray calling helpful instructions up the whole time. I'm absolutely convinced they are superhuman X men in disguise.

After setting a record for length of time it takes to actually *get* out of a cave using vertical (and by record I mean the *longest* time record) I had decided both that the cardiologist needed to become my new best friend (sorry Andy) and that I needed to be at the gym...every day...for hours on end. Shockingly Andy and I both somehow have kept up on that *since*. As for the rest of the grotto's time in using vertical to get up and out? By this point I'd seen enough of their skills to not be shocked when they poked their heads up looking relaxed and content, despite the speed they had gotten up and out *with*.

With the light of day trickling down and the cavern behind us, Spideyman Jeff continued to boulder his way up (without ropes) forming an assembly line of sorts with Jessica and Dave. They were all bringing the bags *up* out of the cave for us (you're real MVP's guys)! Eventually with some good coaching from Jessica both Andy and I made it up and out of that final obstacle. On an aside, I am convinced that Jessica is a part of the superhuman party we were with, given that this was her (if memory recalls) 3<sup>rd</sup> proper cave of caving, yet she was already as adept as Spideyman at crawling around on walls, even with no previously attested to rock climbing experience! I may have fallen over in shock quite literally once I had escaped the gaping black hole of *awesome* doom at that fun fact.

Overall us new cavers learned quite a few valuable lessons. The first involves the importance of securing hair, and the fact that even if you think your hair is secure, it probably isn't. The second involved the extreme importance of paying attention to you way back *out* while you are still crawling your way *into* a cave, because the cackling

veterans may just make you lead the way back out (not to mention all the safety reasons). The third is to *trust your caving partners*, they are awesome and they know what they are doing, even when shouting fun things like, “I have no idea where we are!” That wound up being half the fun! The fourth is to go to the gym...*all the time*. The fifth was that Southwestern caves are *warm* caves, not at all like the caves back East. This probably has something to do with the rain fall accumulations in the region, since the cave is considered to be, along with with Peppersauce, Colossal, and Aqua Caliente, to be a dry cave by speologists, even though it does seasonally collect wet (more like moist) spots. This is different in almost every respect from the caves that we’d been in back East, given that those caves had frequently involved crawling through water, frequent run-in’s with beautiful underground pools of water, and lots of beautiful dripping feature along the walls. Additionally the caves back East, such as Mammoth Cave which we were in a fair bit of the ‘wild portion’ of, had easy access entrances, and once inside only involved very basic bouldering with no vertical skills needed (at least the parts we were in). Every bouldering obstacle at the cave put the ones we had encountered in Mammoth Cave to shame!

The trip was an awesome, educational experience all around. Thanks guys!

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