THE CHIQUIBUL CAVE SYSTEM

Introduction

The Chiquibul Cave System was explored and mapped during three major expeditions in 1984, 1986, and 1988, organized by Dr. Tom Miller. The first two were partially funded by National Geographic, whereas the last one was financed by the participants. Additional visits of 8-10 days include a 1982 solo reconnaissance to the area by Dr. Miller, a 1985 trip sponsored by Partridge Films LTD. (London), and a 1987 visit by the Belize Department of Archaeology. British Forces Belize provided PUMA helicopter transport and support personnel for the '85 and '87 visits.

Description

The system consists of 4 major caves, three of which are in Belize and one in Guatemala. There are also several smaller caves, large sinkholes, and other karst features (e.g. the Puente Natural) which were created by the Chiquibul River and its tributaries. Some of the caves contain large 'fossil' passages which no longer carry the active flow of the river except during rainy season floods. Other passages in which the river still flows throughout the year are characterized by high mud banks and lakes up to two kilometers in length. The risk of flooding makes exploration inadvisable during the rainy season.

The four major caves have not been physically connected by humans due to obstacles such as sumps (water-filled passages requiring scuba gear). However, it is obvious from the mapped locations that these caves are all part of the same "system" linked by the Chiquibul River. For example, only 200 meters separates the downstream end of Actun Tunkul from the upstream end of Cebada Cave. Total length of the system is approx. 53 km., including the smaller caves.

Following is a very brief description of the four major caves, moving from upstream to downstream.
ACTUN KABAL  (Cave of ??)

length: approx. 5 km., primarily large fossil passage but with some lower sections of active river passage
entrances: 2 major (upstream & downstream), at least 5 minor ones
archaeology: numerous walls/terraces/platforms in both major entrances; numerous complete vessels found up to 0.5 km. inside; one high chamber which probably served as a 'ceremonial dump' contains hundreds of broken vessels and other artifacts
exploration/mapping: 1984, 1986
other visits: 1985, 1987

ACTUN TUNKUL  (Cave of the Stone Drum)

length: approx. 12 km., primarily active river passage terminating in a downstream sump
entrances: one major (upstream), one minor (small skylight, vertical)
archaeology: no evidence, probably due to frequent flooding
Belize Chamber: large room approx. 6 km. inside the cave: 450 m. long, 50-200 m. wide, 65 m. high; largest room inside a cave found to date in Western Hemisphere, and fifth largest in the world
exploration/mapping: 1984, 1986
other visits: 1985, 1987

CEBADA CAVE  (named from abandoned Cebada Camp nearby)

length: approx. 18 km., primarily active river passage
entrances: two (one in approx. middle, one downstream)
archaeology: no evidence, probably due to frequent flooding
exploration/mapping: 1986, 1988

ACTUN ZACTUN  (Cave of White Stone)

& XIBALBA  (name of the Maya Underworld)

(located in Guatemala)

length: approx. 9 km.
entrances: (upstream, middle, downstream) Zactun is the upstream portion of the cave, Xibalba is the downstream portion
archaeology: several large walls/platforms in the entrances; several
small interior chambers which had once been sealed by walls but have since
been looted; one burial

exploration/mapping: 1986, 1988