

The Pawod Cave: An Exhilarating Adventure

Contributed by Bernil Gastardo
Thursday, 05 July 2007

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The dive objective was to penetrate "Paul's Peril". This tunnel goes further and deeper into Pawod Cave. Running 30 meters farther from the main chamber, its maximum depth reaches 18 meters/ 60ft. Only a handful of men have previously penetrated this tight restriction. I was to be the 5th one allowed the privilege.

The Pawod Cave was discovered by Dr. Alfonso Amores. Trained in cave diving techniques in the freshwater caves of Florida, he is the first diver ever to shine his light into the cave and lay a line around the main chamber. In his childhood years, he was one of the many kids that used the cave's main pool as a swimming hole to ward off the summer heat.
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"Let's eat so we can die with a full stomach," said my instructor Paul Neilsen. "Lovely..." I thought. We then started on our lunch of inasal manok (roasted chicken).

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One of the dangers associated with diving in this overhead environment is that the bottom is blanketed with thick, muddy silt. Anybody untrained in maintaining perfect buoyancy and proper line lying is assured of a disastrous outcome once he has reduced the clear visibility to zero with a careless sweep of his fin or hand. Without a guideline and unable to return to the exit point, the unlucky diver will frantically move around in circles until his gas is consumed. With lungs burning for air and clawing desperately at the cave ceiling in his final attempt to survive, the diver soon succumbs to the dark and cold embrace of the cave.

After which, the locals would say that the diver was victimized by the "Mantaga", a "freshwater octopus" that supposedly lives inside the cave.

We were not leaving anything to chance that day. Since the start of the course, we have been using twin 11 liter tanks with isolator manifolds. Each diver carried 3 lights. The main light is a High Intensity Discharge (HID) light. With a price tag of US \$800, it is well worth the investment since its beam slices through the dark corners of the cave, turning night into day.

Using the reel properly is one basic skill a cave diver learns. We had 3 reels each. There was a main reel plus two spools. In our pockets, we carried directional markers and an extra mask. On our harness, we had line cutters and scissors in case of line entanglements.

We never fail to draw a crowd anytime we start gearing up at the side of the road that runs beside the cave. That day was not an exception. "Are you looking for the Japanese gold, Sir?" is a pretty standard question. The word "Mantaga" is a favorite mantra of the local kids, and I would usually follow through with a word of caution for them not to follow us when we swim into the cave's entrance.

With twin tanks on our backs, going down the rocky slope peppered with sharp rocks that leads to the cave's pool is always an effort. Once the cool water is reached, we settle down into rechecking our equipments and going into our safety drills. Valve shutdowns and long-hose drills are done before each dive.

"Briefing!" says Paul. "Scott will enter first and do the primary tie-off and Bernil will come in second with the video camera. We do a jump from the main line and do a tie-off near the tunnel's entrance."

It was decided that Paul would lead me into Paul's Peril while I video the whole process. Scott would be the safety diver and he would wait for us at entrance of the tunnel.

Lights on, wings deflated, we descended into the pool's bottom. The water was murky from the silt stirred up by the numerous kids jumping around the water. A small school of guppies flitted around us. Scott finned into the cave entrance and I flicked on the video.

The entrance to the main chamber is like a gaping mouth. Around 2.5 meters wide, and 9 meters long, the edges taper off to a restrictive size. A long wooden branch lies right at the center (God knows how it got there), and that's where we did our primary tie-offs.

Inside the cave, the water was very clear. There seemed to be a constant flow in the area since the silt we stirred up from an earlier dive has dissipated already. Moving away from the cave's mouth, ambient light diminishes, total darkness descends, and we hold it at bay with our powerful HID lights. Average depth of this area is 6 meters.

Think of a woman's birth canal. There's the entrance and then there's the uterus. A big uterus---that would be the cave's main chamber.

The bottom of this chamber is covered with slabs of limestone rocks that looked liked they were once part of the ceiling. There is a big pile of these rocks right in the center of the chamber. We've navigated around this pile on previous dives, carefully laying lines for reference.

With each exhaled breath, our bubbles disturbed the limestone ceiling and white particles drifted down like snow.

Each fin movement is a conscious effort not to disturb the silt. Everything on the bottom is covered in silt, thick brown silt that lets loose at the slightest movement. Left undisturbed, one can observe small tractor-like prints made by petite crabs.

After 8 minutes of careful movement across the chamber, the guideline leads us to the corner where Paul's Peril starts. After tying off the jump line, Scott moved back and motioned us to move on. Paul swam past me and I followed.

Into Paul's Peril

Imagine going inside a box. Imagine the bottom of the box littered with rocks, mud, sand and silt. Imagine the ceiling of the box decorated with scraggy limestone. Imagine the box stretching far into a distance where your light does not fully reach.

Can you see all of this in your mind? Congratulations, you are in Paul's Peril.

I focused all my energy into maintaining perfect buoyancy. "Don't hit the ceiling, don't scrape the bottom," was the mantra that flowed though my mind. Certain stretches of the tunnel made it impossible for me to follow my mantra.

There was an area that left me chest deep in mud. My manifold was scraping the ceiling and each exhalation brought down so much particulate. Using my left hand, I slowly clawed my way forward. That action, together with my fining and breathing, created a total whiteout. Visibility turned to a finger length. All I could see was the white line on the mud floor that leads farther into the cave.

"What was Paul thinking when he laid this line," was all I could think of.

What sort of person would wedge himself into a hole with no assurance that the ceiling will not collapse, or that the tunnel will not taper off after a considerable distance giving him absolutely no chance of making a 180 degree turn?

Having freed myself from that space, I found myself in a slightly bigger area where I was able to rise a meter off the bottom. I checked my depth gauge, it read 12 meters.

I could see the faint glow of Paul's light in the distance. "Onwards then," I shrugged.

Squeezing into another tight area, my eye caught the familiar shape of a giant clam's shell.

"How many millions of years has this thing lain in here," I wondered. It was at that moment that I felt what explorers might feel when they chance upon a discovery few people have ever seen. I felt awed by it all.

I continued on and came out into a chamber. The water in here was the color of deep blue—clear and clean. I took off my regulator and tasted it. Fresh water. Depth gauge reading, 15 meters.

The line continued in between two boulders. I followed it and I entered the final chamber of the tunnel. The line ended there and it was tied up on a rock at the bottom. Depth was 18 meters.

The bottom of this last chamber is covered in boulders. The sides are limestone and the area is big enough for three divers to float beside each other. I approximate that the space is around 3 meters by 3.5 meters.

Paul signaled me the OK sign, I responded and then he headed back out. Alone, I paused for a moment to enjoy the area.

Heading Back

The trip heading back out was something. The muddy silt we disturbed had amassed into angry, thick clouds. I kept my eye trained on the line for reference.

Then I came upon an area where the bottom sharply angles up. I got stuck. I moved left—scraped my manifold. I moved right—ouch, bumped my head on the ceiling.

And right in the middle of this silt-out situation, my HID light went off!

Good thing that the video light was still on. But then the monkeys in my head started chattering, "You're stuck, you're going to die, you can't get out now!" Weird.

So I stopped, took a slow, deep breath, paused, exhaled very slowly and willed myself to relax. Then I slowly clawed my way out.

At the end of it, I saw two lights. It was Paul and Scott waiting for me at the cave's main chamber.

We gave one another the OK sign, shook hands, and then we swam out to daylight.

"Cool dive," I thought.

About the Author: Bernil H. Gastardo is a Master Scuba Diver Trainer and IDC Staff Instructor at Scotty's Dive Center, located in Shangri-la's Mactan Resort. He is also a specialty instructor for Deep Diving, Multi-Level Diving, Night Diving, Underwater Photography, Wreck Diving, Peak Performance Bouyancy, Project Aware, and Aware Coral Reef Conservation. To get to know Bernil more, visit Scotty's official website.