

## The Search for Caubian Cave

Contributed by The Old Wolf  
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Now that's my kind of text message! Finally, we have the coordinates. We've talked about this location, and thought that if we have any reasonable lead, then we'll give it a shot. I suppose things must have moved pretty quick, as the next message I received held more cheery news – we have a boat, crew, and a guide!

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Despite the hazards of driving in Cebu, I was still in a very good disposition upon arriving at the rendezvous place in Punta Engaño. As I maneuvered the gravel path, into a reclaimed parking area, I could not help but shake my head and smile at the irony of my thoughts – another boring (translate – standard) day in the tropics – blazing sun, gentle breeze, flat seas, the odors of coastal life (drying sea weed on the white sands, the scent of humidity and salt water air) – pure and absolute bliss!

Some of the usual suspects were already there, checking their gear out, stretching out on the lounging chairs, catching up on what the others have been doing. After the usual pleasantries to our guide and the boat crew, all of whom I just met, we just needed to sort out our weights, and we were all good to go.

We loaded up everything on Tempest, a good sized bangka for what we wanted to do and for the number of people. Maybe 10 meters in length, perhaps even slightly less, Tempest is owned by Rudy Balbuena, another keen diver whom I have yet to meet. Certainly not the fastest bangka I have been on, but she has more than enough speed.

Getting gear into these outrigger boats is usually tricky, no matter what the situation. Today, we were boarding from a reclaimed area which doubles as a pier. This time, we had the benefit of a gangplank (can be a disadvantage sometimes!). "Plank" is the operative word here, and in most cases, you are lucky if you get 12 inches of width on the wobbly timber you are precariously balancing on. I personally prefer just going into the water, walking to the boat, and boarding from the diving ladders. Nevertheless, gangplank day it was. Thankfully, nobody did a big splash at the wharf. "Kumusta Marcelo?", I greeted the skipper. "OK lang sir!". Then Marcelo gave the order to castaway. A quick reversing operation involving the engine and props aft, and a crew member with a long bamboo pole at the bow, and then we were away.

Marcelo pointed the vessel towards our destination. I was monitoring our heading and route from a portable GPS unit, having previously saved the coordinates as a waypoint. At the wharf, upon boarding Tempest, I just needed to mark the location, and then let the GPS map a route to Caubian. You can set the unit to have a "highway" view of your route, where you will see your destination marked by a flag on the horizon. A straight line plots the course from the starting point

towards the flag. Marcelo was guiding Tempest on that line, and I haven't even shown him the GPS yet!

"Kahibaw ta asa gyud ni ang cave?", somebody yelled out, to compete and win over the sound of the boat's diesel engine. "Naa marka daku nga bato didto sa ilawm", another shouted back. I thought, "OK, so we float on the spot marked by the GPS coordinates, find the big rock, and we'll be fine, but do we know what direction that big rock is from the spot marked by the GPS? How do we know it's this big rock, and not that big rock, and what is big anyway?". OMG! Things were starting to look a bit shoddy. Only our guide Dodong, has been down to that cave. In fact, I remember that it was the first time for anybody in the team to dive that area. I considered that as soon as we've anchored, we'll need to review the whole situation and decide on the best approach.

We had a couple of new dive cameras in our team and Doc Toby seemed quite content about the new state of affairs. Usually the only guy who had a dive camera, he was mostly behind one. On more than one occasion has he expressed that he would like to have a souvenir, a photo of himself, in action, underwater. Well, at least we can accomplish one thing today! This one was almost guaranteed. Now, I wasn't too sure about finding the cave though.

Marcelo eased the throttle of the engine, and the boat slowed down to a crawl. People started to gear up, upon hearing from the crew that we must be on the spot now. I also saw that we were a good 2 nautical miles short of the GPS coordinates. Time for some very modest management intervention and considerable people skills, I judged, very aware that egos and pride are at stake here. A quick conference with Marcelo and Dodong, and it was decided that we will motor up a little further upstream of our GPS target and drop anchor there. We considered that the only concrete thing we had were the coordinates and that it has been a while since anybody has been back to this place. Dodong already had his bearings sorted. Upon reaching the area where we slowed down first, he and Marcelo both had the same assessment as to the direction of the wall, and that will be the direction we will swim to, as the big rock marker will be there. Our new plan: we motor all the way to the GPS location, read the direction of the tide and go upstream, anchor and enter the water from there, head for the ledge, drift with the current, and hope to see the big rock. I was very pleased. Everybody considered everyone else's view, resulting in a new and very logical strategy.

Equipment sorted and dive buddies confirmed, one by one we entered the water. From new divers to seasoned campaigners, we were all there primarily to find the cave, and of course enjoy the dive. There was never any plan to enter the cave. Our goal was only to find it and confirm its location. I saw my dive buddy give me the OK signal, as he reached bottom, after him initially having trouble equalizing. We headed for the edge of the drop. I can see the rest of the team ahead of us. After only a few minutes, from how the divers ahead of us were swimming, I speculated that we were not trying to find the cave anymore. Then, I could see this gaping black hole on the side of the wall. Cave, markers, location, everything was as they said it would be. Everything confirmed. If my logbook is accurate, you should stand at the floor of the mouth of the cave at 35 meters depth. The dive was quite pleasant, characterized by a gentle tidal current, acceptable visibility at the bottom but very good in the shallower depths. Gently descending towards the cave mouth floor, I caught Doc hovering just inches above the bottom, ever vigilant for those little creepy crawlies he so loves to shoot with his camera. After planting my fins firmly on the base, I accepted that it was mission accomplished then, and it was now time to relax and enjoy the area and my time. With a gentle push, I was out of the cave's entrance. I signaled Raul and Phoebe, and Nene to pose for a group photo, and I managed an unfocused one. Ah well, it was dark down there, and I was using unfamiliar gear, and of course, I have a million other valid excuses.

At such depths, it wasn't long before we had to start our ascent. Deco time is always fun, and you can never guess what guys will be up to. Some will be scrutinizing the ocean bottom, and others capturing anything and everything on their cameras. And what does the legendary underwater photographer Doc Toby do? But of course, underwater ballet!

Here's a link to Map Quest, with the location of Caubian. And you can use this page to get a map of your lat and long coordinates.