
INTO THE CHIQUIBUL

Cave explorer Bruce Minkin
tackles daunting adventure
10 years in the making

BY BRUCE MINKIN '69

*Editor's Note: Many physicians enjoy leisurely pastimes to decompress from the rigors of their medical practice – fishing, or gardening, or golf. North Carolina hand surgeon Dr. **Bruce Minkin '69** does something more intense: cave exploration. Recently, he traveled to the Chiquibul Cave System in western Belize, caves that only a handful of people have explored. The Nature Conservancy describes the meandering system as “the longest in Central America, and a treasure trove of geological and archaeological wonders.” Minkin's story follows below. His Belizean adventures have been featured in our magazine before; read “Parasites, Snakes, and Botflies. Oh My!” in MUS Today, April 2006, which is archived on our website under Publications.*

The Chiquibul. The name conjures up images from my favorite childhood book, *The Lost World* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It is a mystical place filled with fantastical creatures in a dense rainforest. The Chiquibul Forest Reserve contains one of the largest cave systems in the Western Hemisphere, and the Belize Chamber is the second largest underground gallery in the world. I had to go there. It took me 10 years to make it happen.

The Chiquibul National Park is over 400 square miles, making it one of the largest nature preserves north of the Amazon. It is located on the



Bruce Minkin descends 150 feet to Kabal Cave's Ledge of Offerings for a look at Maya artifacts.

border of Belize and Guatemala, and the cave system underneath the surface encompasses nearly 540,000 square feet. It would be like walking from Mud Island to Collierville underground.

Poaching and illegal activities

have significantly impacted this pristine rainforest. Friends for Conservation and Development (FCD) in Belize is fighting a valiant battle to limit poaching and timber cutting in the park. The situation is complicated by the recent discovery of gold in the reserve and the extensive, illegal mining that has ensued. It is through the FCD that we were able to organize our expedition.

My good friend Cameron Griffith has been involved in archaeology in Belize for 30 years. He was excited to join the expedition and especially interested in checking out an archaeological site near the entrance to the Chiquibul Cave System. Juan Carlos Ocaña, an expert caver and internationally recognized cave and nature photographer, jumped at the chance to accompany us.

Our objectives were to check out the cave's Ledge of Offerings and to photograph the extensive cave of Kabal in the eastern section of the system. Unfortunately, the other entrance at Cebada is currently restricted because of insurgent activity.

The Chiquibul is not easy to get to. Cameron, Juan Carlos, and I met in Belize City and drove four hours – a drive that included about 40 miles of dirt road – to the Las Cuevas Research Station. There we met our guides and prepared our equipment.

Our guides made up an interesting collection of highly skilled jungle experts.

Wendy (girl's name, tough guy) Garcia, the director of the Chiquibul

Karst Management Team, is an expert in cave rescue and vertical rope techniques.

Marcus Cucul is a K'iche' Maya who speaks English and Spanish in addition to his native tongue. With his vast knowledge of the jungle and its plants and animals, walking with him is like having a guide in a pharmacy or grocery store. I was amazed by the medicinal and edible plants.

Cano, our ranger guide, is a highly trained jungle warfare expert who has been on many interdiction missions in the jungle to help control illegal activities. I think his pack weighed as much as he did. He ran the perimeter all night, dressed in total head-to-toe camouflage, and never slept. Many times on the trail he would appear out of the bush like a ghost, startling us.

Ronnel, our cook, carried an extraordinary amount of gear for feeding us in the bush. He even made fresh tortillas on a slab of metal for each meal. Johnny helped carry our gear. He never complained and had a great attitude throughout the expedition.

There was no direct way to get to the cave entrance. We loaded all our gear and nine people into a pickup truck and drove for two hours to the nearest drop-off point. With no established trail, we hacked through the jungle with machetes for 10 kilometers. The route in was very complicated because of huge downed trees from last year's hurricane, which we had to go over and under hundreds of times. We finally got within an hour of the



After leaving the Chiquibul Cave System, Minkin and wildlife photographer Juan Carlos Ocana spent several days in the Caves Branch area in Central Belize for additional birdwatching, cave kayaking, exploration, and photography.

In the Blue Hole Reserve, Minkin explored this ceremonial room in Crystal Cave, a site of ancient Maya religious rituals.



base camp, and the skies opened up. Monsoon rains hit us hard. The guides arranged a tent tarp and covered our gear. Fortunately, we were able to fill all our water bottles from water off the tarp filtered in Cano's bush hat. The best cup of steaming coffee I've ever had was cooked up on a camp stove by Johnny.

We reached the base camp at dusk. I was laughing and goofing around when Cano used hand signals to tell me to freeze. He had heard rustling in the bush. Anyone in this area was a bad guy. After searching the jungle, he thought the situation was safe.

We set up our Hennessy jungle hammocks and prepared the campsite, spending the evening preparing our gear and checking our complicated camera strobes. We had to set priorities for the next few days. Since the Ledge of Offerings was one of our main goals, we elected to get there the following morning. During the night, Juan Carlos heard heavy breathing and a low rumbling growl outside of his hammock. The guides told us the next morning that a jaguar had come through the camp.

We thought it would only take a half day to check it out and do photography later, but plans don't always go as scheduled! We climbed down vertically 1,000 feet to the Kabal Cave entrance, which was located in a sinkhole the size of Central Park. The guides decided to go through the brush-choked sinkhole to get to the dropoff for the Ledge of Offerings. We chopped through the undergrowth with machetes for two hours. A vertical climb of 100 feet got us to the rim of the canyon, and our group rigged for the 150-foot descent into the cave. This all went smoothly. We then traversed the cave, skirting a 300-foot sinkhole. The climb up to the Ledge of Offerings was not too difficult with the aid of safety ropes, although the cave was full of logs and debris from massive flooding in the past. A 100-foot log wedged above us indicated the danger

of flash floods during the rainy season. We found significant artifacts on the Ledge, including metates (or grinding stones), pottery vessels, and obsidian blades. These blades were used during bloodletting ceremonies in the cave. Unfortunately, much of the material had been looted. Cameron documented the site, including GPS coordinates.

The ascent out of the cave was more complicated. Juan Carlos and Marcus exited without any problems. Cameron had difficulty ascending and became stuck on rope, unable to go up or down. Harness syndrome is a dangerous situation in which hanging on rope can lead to internal organ damage. After about 45 minutes, the guides were able to arrange a haul system. He was lowered to the cave floor to rest, and he finished the last of our water. The haul system worked well, and the guides were able to extract him, but the process took almost three hours. I ascended without difficulty but did not get on the rope until after 9 p.m.

With everyone safely out of the cave, we had to decide how to get back to the base camp at night. Hiking through the jungle in the dark is a hairy situation. The guides decided not to go through the sinkhole because the trail was so overgrown. With compasses and a GPS we were able to bushwhack through the jungle and return to base camp about 11 p.m. Fresh water and dinner were waiting for us.

After a good night's sleep, we prepared our gear for photographing Kabal Cave. The entrance to this cave is enormous. A 747 could easily fly through it! Juan Carlos spent hours composing photographs with our specialized strobes. Unfortunately, the expedition was only planned for three days, and we ran out of time to photograph the Sand Passage, a chamber one mile in length. It was time to exit Kabal for our return trip to the Research Station.

The trek out of the jungle took seven hours, but it was easier because we had already cut the trail. Juan Carlos nearly stepped on a fer-de-lance, a highly venomous snake whose bite can be fatal.

Once back at the research station, we spoke with the director about our expedition. We discussed ideas about ecotourism that would help protect and preserve the park. Juan Carlos' photos will be invaluable for promotion of the Chiquibul Reserve.

Cameron had another project planned for GPS mapping with students from the U.S., so he dropped off Juan Carlos and me at the Caves Branch area in Central Belize. We spent several days checking out caves in the Blue Hole Reserve, birdwatching, and cave kayaking. The highlight was checking out a shelter cave on the Indian River that had extensive rock carvings and ceremonial artifacts on the floor of the cave. This was an important Maya archaeological site that Cameron subsequently documented with a 3D scanner.

Overall, our expedition was a success. According to our guides, only some 50 people have seen the Chiquibul Cave System. By documenting the cave with photographs and registering the Ledge of Offerings, our expedition aided the promotion of the Chiquibul National Park.

I went into the Chiquibul, and now the Chiquibul is in me. Want to go? If you can thrive and not just survive in the jungle, if you have an intense desire to see one of the best pristine rainforests in the Western Hemisphere, and if you love cave exploration, the Chiquibul is your place. You can contact me at trlobytex@charter.net, and I can tell you how to make arrangements with the Friends for Conservation and Development in Chiquibul National Park. ■

In K'iche' Maya mythology, caves were the entrance to the underworld, which the Maya called Xibalba (Place of Fear). For **Bruce Minkin '69**, caves are a place of otherworldly beauty. Through a recent trip to the Chiquibul Cave System in western Belize, Minkin fulfilled a 10-year dream, visiting an area that local guides estimate fewer than 50 people have explored. The Chiquibul is a bit harder to reach than the caves Minkin explored as a teenager in Tennessee; the journey required an arduous trek through the jungle. But this meant a chance to visit one of the largest underground chambers in the world, and as Minkin said, "I had to go there." This pool, near the entrance of Kabal Cave, is where Minkin and his fellow explorers got their drinking water. See story on page 5.



