

1st Descent of the San Martin Cascade



The first indication that there was a big waterfall below the town of San Martin, Jalisco, México, was a chance helicopter flight I took in Feb. 2008. While flying up the Rio Santiago valley it was very obvious and I managed to get a few photos that would keep pulling me back over the next year. I finally got around to going to have a look on the ground on the 9th of May, 2009 when nobody was wanting to go do anything else. Armed with maps and satellite images, I found the road that that goes all the way down to the Rio Santiago, and hiked the stream uphill, into the bottom of the canyon finding the last waterfall of 35m. With the exit route figured out I headed back up giving a ride to some guys and their harvest of mangos. Those guys then took me to the top of the waterfall and even climbed out on the tree overhanging the first 140m drop to show it would be good for the first belay. Now that I had the logistics sorted out, it was time to recruit a team for the exploration.

On the 24th of May, 2009 I returned with Alberto Cortez, Victor Hugo Zaragoza and Mitch Ventura to have a look at the first part of the waterfall, with the plan to jumar back up the rope. We knew it was going to be big, so with my 110m rope hanging down we would now find out just how big. I was given the honours of going first and at about 100m landed on a good sized ledge which allowed me to get some photos of Alberto and Victor as they came down. From the ledge we could see down another 50m or so to the next ledge, which we guessed was about the one third of the way down. Then we jumared back up the 100m, which gave us lots of time to enjoy the views of the water blowing over us and thrashing through some of the bushy sections. Now we

The first view of the cascade from the helicopter

at least knew the first section was about 140m, to the main step in the whole waterfall. We still didn't know really how big the second section was as the bottom part was hidden in the bottom of the gorge and with the onset of the rainy season, we decided to wait till the next year to continue the exploration.

On the 3rd of April, 2010, our memories of how big the waterfall really was had faded enough that we were ready to try it again. We started down the first pitch at 10.30am after rigging from the same tree we had used on our recon trip last year. The idea this time was to pull down our ropes in manageable lengths of 50m or so, thus I paid out half of

Local person climbing out over 365m drop for a better look.





Alberto rappelling down the first 100m section.



Victor on the second section.

my 110m rope and headed down looking for a suitable ledge around the 40 to 50m mark. A nice ledge presented itself at 40m so I put in a couple of bolts there. Then a new problem presented itself in that the host basalt rock was quite full of vesicles (holes) and those vesicles continued inside the rocks. Sure enough I managed to drill right into one, thus when I started tightening the nut on the expansion bolts it just slowly pulled itself out as there was no rock walls holding it in place. So I had to place another bolt in a more solid looking portion and that seemed to work. While I was drilling the last bolt I heard a shout and it turned out that Alberto managed to pull a rock down on top of himself banging his shoulder while he was rappelling. Fortunately nothing was broken and he felt fine enough to continue. And I had some good pain killers for later if need be.

I led down the next pitch and found another small ledge next to a tree after about 42m. I only placed one bolt as we could use the tree with a sling for this rappel. From there another 23m landed us on a wide ledge where we could walk around and have lunch (where we had gotten to the year before).

A short down climb led to a thin ledge where I placed

2 more bolts that led down a gulley off to the side of the main water flow. About 15m down that gulley we rappelled right over a short cave that gave a view of the water falling on the other side of a pillar. 40m later landed us on a talus slope

Alberto rappeling off the tree anchor at R1c.





View of the upper section above R3.

which was the largest step on the whole wall. From here we were getting into territory we had not seen before, and I put a single bolt on the left wall to start a descending traverse to get out towards the lip of the next drop. As it was on a bit of an angle I ended up placing 2 more bolts to provide a straight drop down to a small ledge right on the edge of the big drop. As the ledge was so small I put three bolts there for the drop and another slightly back to give another person a place to connect while waiting to go. This pitch starts some 5m away from the water but after 40m or so, one is right in the flow of the waterfall and it continues just out of the main flow down to a ledge 75m below.

We were running out of light and energy on Sat. afternoon after descending 6 pitches and about 230m of vertical. Getting fully soaked by pitch 6, I was keen to get it over with. So I put in three more bolts and dashed down another 15 or 20m to the last ledge I could see, getting soaked again crossing the main stream. I then got in one more bolt just before the battery died in

the drill (just for the record a lithium battery in a bosch will drill 17 three inch deep holes in basalt). So Alberto brought down the 2nd battery, and I got in a couple more bolts before Alberto confirmed what I was worried about... that we did not have enough rope to reach another ledge (and we had enough to pull down 80m). And that the bottom was at least 150m further below. Oops!

So plan B had us back up the pitch (thru the waterfall again!) and looking for another route in the dying light. We made an attempt which took us down a 50m slope about 50m off to the side of the waterfall, but left us at the top of another overhung drop, that seemed to be at least 50m high, and

probably more. Not wanting to be left hanging on the end of our rope in the dark we had to call it a day, and since my arms and hands were cramping up due to dehydration I was

Looking down at Alberto and Victor at the bottom of the R3 pitch.





Chris Lloyd, Alberto Cortes and Victor Zaragoza the morning after the bivy

in no shape to push it more. I had problems juggling back up the pitch and had to use my other hand to pry my fingers off my jumar as they had seized right up.

Then we had a little dilemma, as we had a driver waiting at the bottom with my truck. We could even see his camp fire from where we were hanging. So we had the discussion.... what to do? We didn't want a rescue call out as we were fine, just going to be a little late.... o.k. maybe a lot late. Fortunately I had just received my copy of Caving Accidents in North America, and had noted that two rescues were facilitated by people using cell phones in caves. Yes inside the caves! So we figured we should give it a try.

And sure enough.... we got a signal. Alberto called his wife, then I called mine. Everything fine, except that our driver down below had no signal, so had no idea we were fine. Oh well!

So we bivied up near the base of the last waterfall as that was the only place semi flat around. Alberto and Victor opted to suffer next to the waterfall on the bare rock and under the almost continual spray of the waterfall (Alberto was completely wet anyways),

while I spent 45 minutes digging out a flat platform on the 45 degree talus slope 20m further way and had a fine bivy site made to measure. I was also almost out of the wind which blew the water of the falls over every 20 or 30 minutes, just to remind you of where you were sleeping (or trying to). Fortunately I had brought a complete set of emergency bivy sacs from MEC and they worked a charm.

When we had daylight again I awoke to see a small mot mot sitting in the tree over my head. After a meager breakfast of 1/3 of a tin of tuna each and a few peanuts, we elected to try and follow the access route of the local people who had somehow climbed up to install a plastic pipe in the pool next to our ledge – instead of finishing the last rappels with little food or water. It took us one 30m rappel and a lot of exposed climbing to re-trace their route and get down to tierra firma. While we were thrashing through the dense brush we saw a large group of colorful parrots fly over making their standard ruckus. Then we still had to down climb the 2nd cascade of 3m and rig the 3rd cascade of 40m and stumble into the mango orchard where our driver was supposed to be waiting.

But the truck was not there! As we were slowly recovering from the walk (totally dehydrated), Victor spotted a young kid walking by and goes over to ask if he had seen a red truck about. The kid points up the road. Victor then volunteered to head up the road, and following a trail of

Alberto Cortes and Victor Zaragoza showing off their bivy sites the morning after the bivy under R3 spray.





Luis Medina rappelling R3b - 75m.

notes left by John Pint finds my truck and the keys left under a rock. Turns out that John had taken the offer of a ride up out of the Rio Santiago canyon with the local landowner at 10am, not knowing how things were for us. At least he left us a cooler of beer, so off we went at 3 in the afternoon of the next day, to find a point of cell contact to cancel any pending rescue call out.



<As a further comment on the cell phone signal.... We were in the middle of a 365m high wall, closed in somewhat on two other sides by the canyon and facing north into Zacatecas where

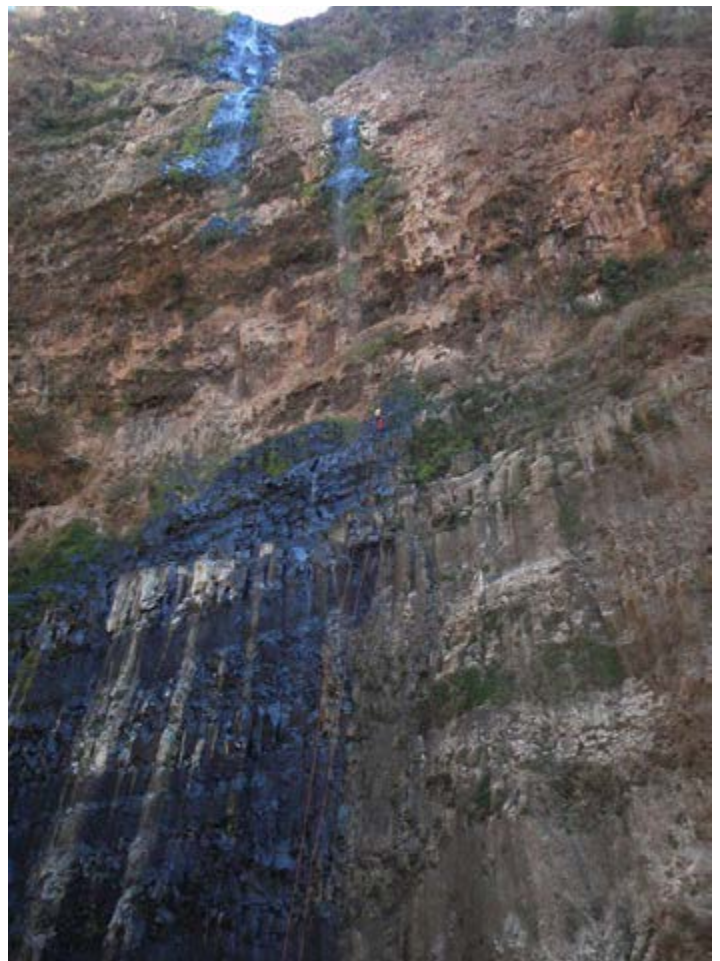
Daniel arriving at R4d re-belay still hanging in the air.

there are no people. There is no signal in the town at the top of the waterfall, nor at the bottom, nor even 2m to one side of where we were standing. How the cell signal got into that point is quite amazing, and even more so that we happened to be standing at that point when we needed to make a call. So don't forget to try your cell phone even if you think there is no signal around and always take water purifying drops.>

For some reason I could not convince Alberto and Victor to go back the next weekend, so I recruited Luis Medina and Daniel Matakane to finish the job. We returned on the 29th of May, and quickly rappelled down to our bivy ledge and had a new look around to figure out how to continue. It was 12 noon and the rock was so hot one could not sit down on it without getting burnt. I knew going straight down led to a very large overhang that even my 110m rope was unlikely to surpass. So we jogged left, climbing up a bit and setting two bolts on the lower part of our bivy ledge. These just allowed us to get over the edge and around a small corner, to reach a hanging belay that would give us a straight drop back down to the water where it appeared to fall into open space.

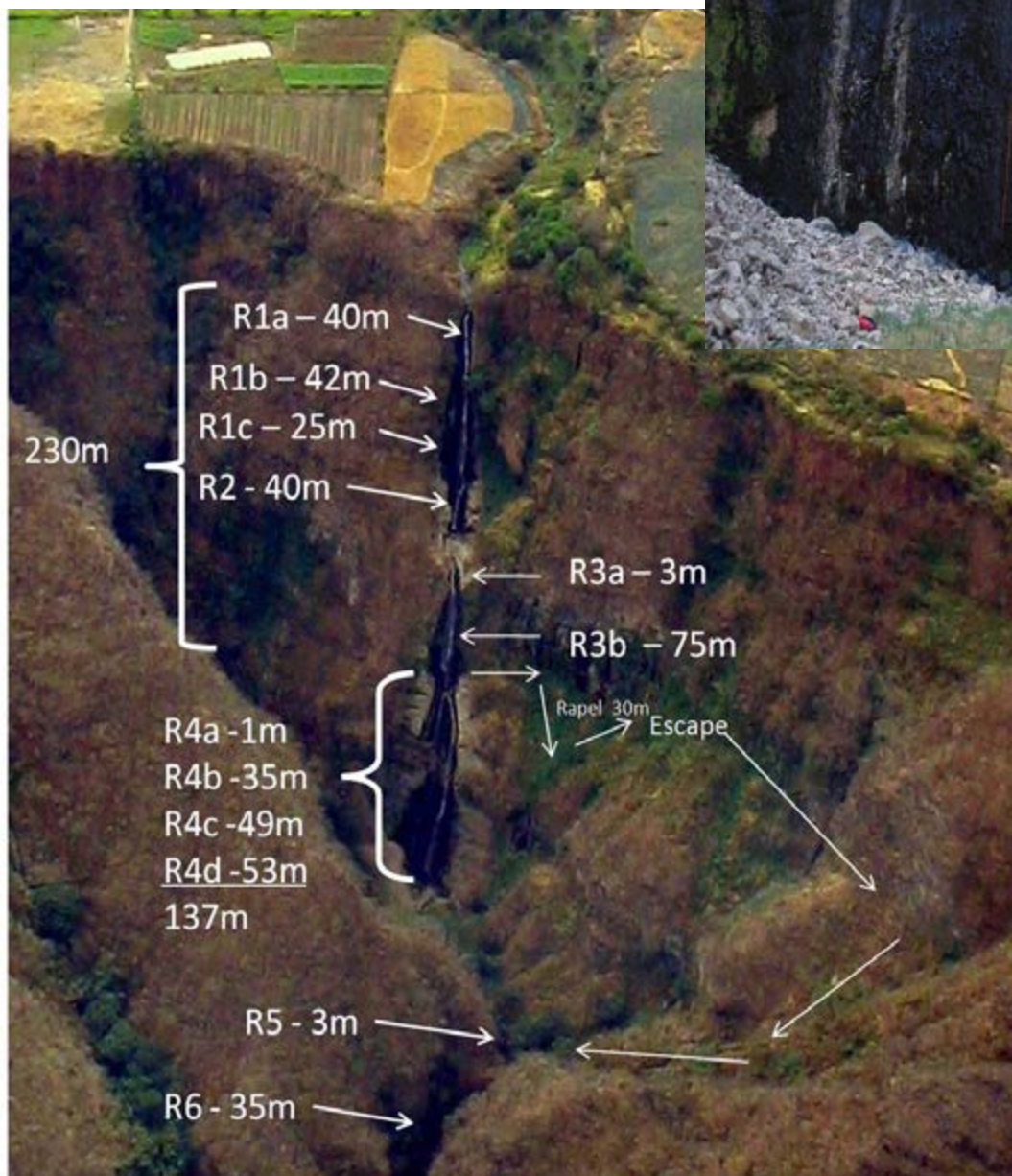
Matakane went ahead with the drill and set a station right near the lip of the next drop, and had more problems with

Looking up at Daniel on the R4d re-belay ledge (20cm wide).



hidden vesicles. Luis was elected to lead the next drop and rappelled down out of our sight under the waterfall. It was some time before we heard the all clear call of Luis's whistle and I followed next to find out why. Luis had managed to spot a thin (20cm wide) ledge on the over-hanging wall and using one finger in a crack had pulled himself in and held himself there while drilling the first bolt – he also got lucky in that the wind was blowing the spray of the water the other way when he needed to drill. He pulled me into the ledge, as I did Daniel when he arrived, only to have the wind blow the spray all over us. We were extra careful and paranoid pulling down the rope on this drop, as any screw up would leave us stuck under the waterfall on a 20cm wide ledge still way off the ground.

There was considerable debate as to how long the next drop was. Looking straight down we were pretty sure there was still another 100m to go, as we had no idea how big the rocks at the bottom really were. But when we then paid out



Daniel on last part of main cascade. Note ropes not touching the ground.

half of my 110m rope it just about touched the ground, so we went down on that and found with our weight on the rope, we had indeed finished the big wall. Seeing pieces of freshly broken rocks on the ground we quickly pulled the rope down and moved out of the fall zone, and on through the last part of the canyon. We made it back to the truck by 5pm and were very satisfied at having completed what is probably the most technically difficult canyon in Mexico.

The final tally came in with 11 separate rappels the



Alberto on the last cascade - R6.



Looking up R2 past the cave

longest of which is 75m. Essentially it is two waterfalls of 140m and 215m right on top of each other, which if there was no dam on the stream above would create a single giant waterfall in a big rain storm.

Alberto Cortes, Victor Zaragoza and Chris Lloyd after the first descent (imcomplete), with top of main cascade visible in the background.

