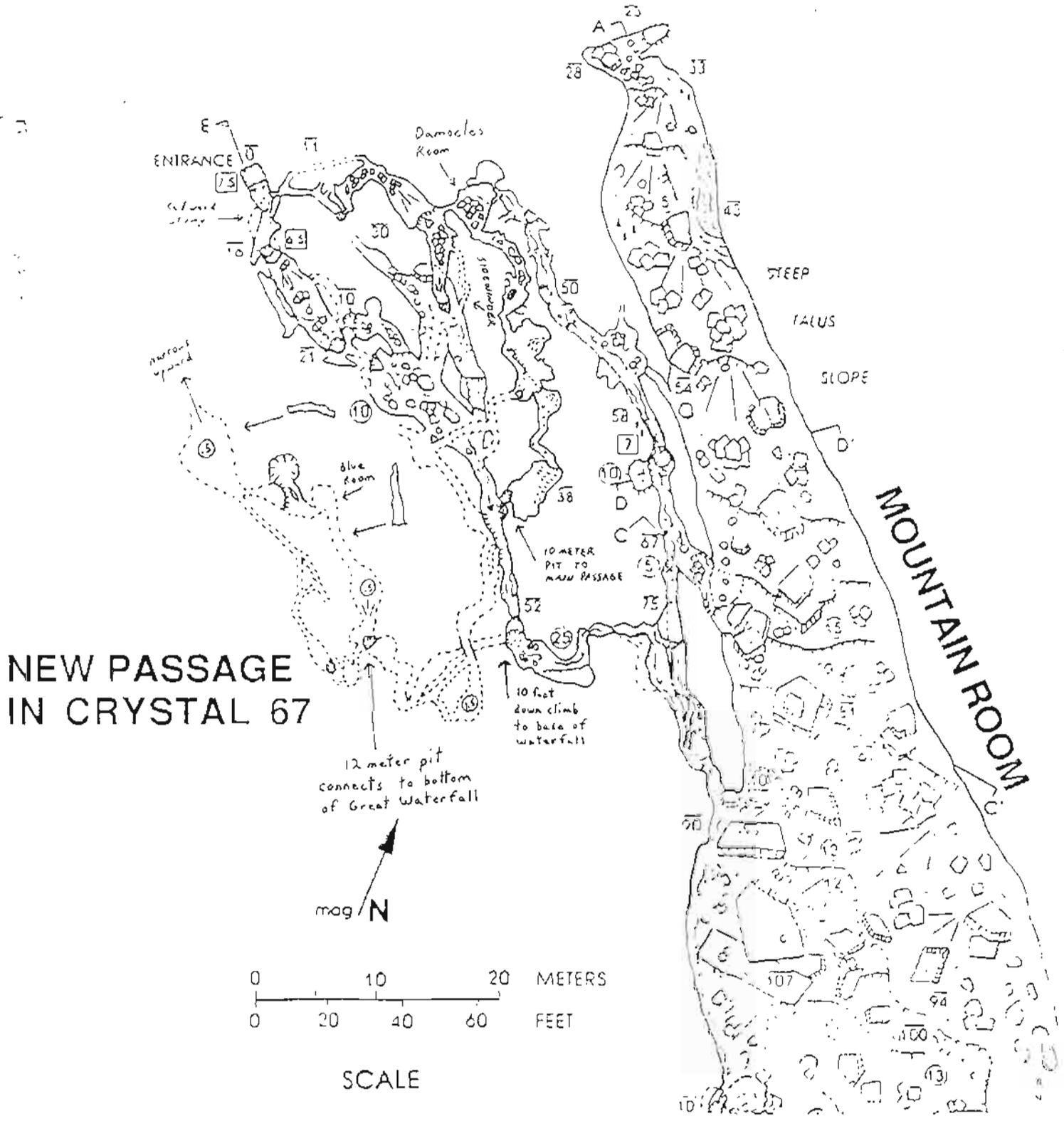


THE EXPLORER

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BEHIND THE REDWOOD DOOR

By John Woods

Climbers do it because it's there, caver's do it because it isn't.

Suddenly there was cave where there was no cave. While waiting for the others, I had poked my head into a small hole behind a redwood stump that jutted into the passage. A short distance away the passage terminated in a breakdown chamber. In one corner several large rocks (100 + pounds) blocked the way but I could see a small void beyond. My first thought was "This is like Fibber MaGee's closet. If I move one, the whole damn pile will come down on me." I didn't want to become a grotto statistic but virgin cave fever seems to disconnect caver's brains as quickly as their manners. I tugged, they crashed... "S of a B... it goes!"

I examined the rocks. They had been there for a long, long time and the crevice beyond was undisturbed. This entire area was a huge mass of breakdown just waiting to make a caver sandwich out of me so I figured it was time to invite someone else to lunch. I yelled to Richard Chang, who was at the second climb, helping people up. We had been in the cave for 6 or 7 hours and were on the way out.

It was too much to hope that this could be virgin passage only 50 feet from the entrance of a cave that had been traveled for 60 years, but I couldn't be sure without looking, and I couldn't go on alone. Pessimistically, I figured it would go nowhere or I'd get mashed by a rock (or both). Richard got the rest of the party up the final climb to the iron ladder at the entrance and we told them we would be out in 15 minutes.

While Richard played shepherd, I moved a few more rocks and found another passage that required crawling underneath a 4 foot block of marble supported by a dubious looking keystone. When Richard returned he squeezed down the tiny crevice I had first opened. I had a try at climbing over the top of the 4 foot block which proved to be a bigger mistake than going under it, so I backed out to wait for Richard. He had wiggled down the crack and seemed to be going back underneath me. Within 10 minutes he was back reporting "It looks O.K. but there are loose rocks everywhere." Comparing notes, we both felt that this area didn't seem like it was going to go far but we should come back and survey it anyway... "just to get it on the map".

That was the summer of 1990. It was June 1991 before Richard Chang, John Chang and Jeff Kwiatkowski returned to find out if the area was really worth mapping.

Moving boulders and climbing through some of the most unstable cave I have ever experienced, they pushed downward through a series of breakdown rooms. One chamber was named the Damocles room because of the necessity of passing beneath a gigantic (10 x 8 x 8 feet) boulder comprising most of the ceiling. Like the legendary sword, it is apparently supported by a hair since we can't find anything else holding it up. After about 150 feet they found a tricky, 20 foot down climb into a large passage. This proved to be a connection through the ceiling to the main cave which bypassed the second and third down climbs on the main route. At least this might be a way to avoid the rather exposed climbs that were sometimes belayed for the less experienced climbers. It was well worth surveying this section of cave. Some traces of previous exploration were found and we figured that there must be several connections to known cave in this area. The passages we had traveled to this area were virgin so the others must have reached it from farther down the main cave.

I finally returned to this "redwood bypass" section a month later to do the survey which theoretically legitimizes all caving activities. On Saturday, John Chang and I spent a frigid few hours surveying, removing a ton of precariously balanced debris from the route, and poking our noses into some of the holes in the breakdown.

John had a look over the top of the 4 foot rock and forced a circuitous route that connected with the new survey near what we called "the window". It was too tight and dangerous to be of much interest.

Near the top of the chimney connection to the main cave, a few well chosen kicks and John managed to open up another way through the boulders. He wound down a tight slot, with rocks preceding him at violent intervals, and found himself back in the main cave below the exposed down climb he and Richard had found last trip. He christened the snaking passage "The Sidewinder". Although tight, the sidewinder avoids the exposure of the connection chimney. We found many signs of previous exploration in this area but they must have entered from another route.

Being of an older and saner mind, I tried to take advantage of the dreaded Asian disease "Gung Ho" that had infected John and suggested a look into a small lead (more loose breakdown) off the Damocles room. John was too smart to fall for that ploy! We were both cold by this time and decided to leave the cave. John returned to L.A. that night with Steve and Mary Koehler who had taken the traditional route to the bottom.

Under the sword

On Sunday, Richard, myself and a new caver, David Shopp, returned to the area to check out some of the remaining leads. With more than normal pessimism about the potential for more cave, we left the survey gear on the surface.

Richard decided to try the lead off the Damocles room and I followed with David. There were two possible leads, an obvious large "up" passage and a not so easy down climb through a narrow slot. A few squeezes, more rock moving and unbelievably, flowstone! Formations of any kind are rare in Crystal and this new cascade was a welcome sight on the usually barren walls. We were also out of the breakdown and into "real" passage. It descended steeply and we passed pure white bacon draperies 6 inches thick and 10 feet long. The passage funneled downward between increasingly flowstone covered walls. Tiny helictites and perfect white soda straws occasionally dotted the walls and ceiling and it was difficult to avoid damaging them.

With Richard leading, we twisted downward past a series of lovely rimstone dams and then peered into a roomy chamber entered via a slippery 8 foot down climb. Richard dropped into the room while David and I waited at the top in case he needed help climbing back.

I watched from above as he crept to the edge of a black hole in the floor that appeared to be a pit. I could see his light playing over a fluted wall at least 20 feet down and it seemed too wide to climb. "I can see a cobbled floor about 30 or 40 feet down" he shouted "and its big! I'll hang the camera over the edge and see if I can get a shot of the bottom. Maybe we can match it up with known cave" (this did not work!). One wall of this room is a superb flowstone cascade 12 feet tall.

Having just checked the survey, I was reasonably sure that we were somewhere over the main tunnel, probably above the 70 foot pit to the mountain room, and Richard agreed. We had no rope or anchors and we figured that we could come back, station a person at the top of the pit, and send cavers down the main passage to try for a visual connection (this eventually worked!). With only three people in the party, one of them inexperienced, it would have to wait for the next trip. The shifting rocks of the upper cave make solo caving unwise and we still had to de-rig the big pit from yesterday's trip. We also wanted to photograph the formations on the way out.

Retracing our steps, we slipped down the sidewinder passage and headed toward the top of the big pit. In the main passage about 50 or 60 feet upstream from the pit, we spotted a hole in the ceiling that looked like it matched what we had seen from above. We would see next trip.

West of Eden

On the weekend of August 17 we returned to survey the formation area and the second connection to known cave. It junctioned precisely where we expected (see map). While Richard, David Shopp and I surveyed, John Chang, David Chang, and Jeff Kwiatkowski pushed a slanting fissure passage to the west which ultimately crossed over the main route with several windows overlooking the passage above the big pit. This area is also very well decorated with white "bacon rind" draperies and helectites and requires some care to traverse without damage.

Several westerly leads were found and left for the next trip. The general trend of the cave suggests that more north/south passages may be found if we can go far enough to the west.

On September 7th we returned to Crystal to drop a pit discovered off the main passage just before the 70 foot drop. It was originally entered by passing over the top of the main tunnel from the east side and then making a slippery traverse. We later found that a simple up climb from the main tunnel went to the same passage. This is an area of tight crevices and showed signs of moderate travel.

About 75 feet to the west of the main passage the floor dropped out of the passage and we continued out over some dubious looking wedged breakdown for 20 or 30 feet. We came to a fine looking shaft of 35 to 40 feet that opened into large cave with the sound of water running below. Since we had never heard of the pit and didn't know where it went, we hoped it would bypass the main cave and lead to a new stream passage.

John Chang rappelled down and yelled "Big cave...goes down!" Richard followed him down and they headed off for a look. I sent Jeff Kwiatkowski down and then David Shopp. By the time I got down they had followed the tunnel down to a connection with main cave at the base of the 70 foot waterfall pit. It is a beautiful drop with the ultimate rig point and one of the easiest on/off ropes you could ask for. This route could be used to avoid the exposure of the traverse at the top of the 70 foot pit and the water that goes with it in wet years. The 10 foot down climb into the main cave does not require rope. It would also make a good second rope location to help get large groups out of the cave faster.

After ascending the pit Richard and I climbed above the rig point into a high narrow walking passage that terminated at an 12 foot up climb to the left and a blind 8 foot pit on the right. One corner of the room had a magnificent blue boulder so it was dubbed the blue room. It was worth the climb just to see the blue rock. But the cave is very dry here and the rock extremely brittle, breaking off at a light touch and making excellent portable handholds.

Richard and John Chang continued up into a low roofed crack that angled both up toward the entrance and back down toward the top of the pit. The up lead was followed about 20 feet before becoming very tight. The route continued but they chose to explore the down passage. It finally connected through a circuit of very tight chimneys to the top of the 40 foot pit. We made a rough survey with general declinations and inclinations because none of us owns a proper compass. The easterly survey through the formation areas was done in a traditional Brunton and tape manner. The rough survey is denoted in dotted lines on the map.

Portions of this extensive upper level have evidence of previous entry but the formation areas appeared untraveled and the very highest sections on the west side appeared virgin. Obviously people had poked into the uppermost levels via main cave connections, but had entered only one small section of the decorated areas. The 40 foot pit area is very close

to main cave but I have never heard of this route to the bottom. I suspect that since this cave is very wet in the spring, some of the rocks have shifted to expose the voids that intrigued us on the eastern side. As to the western passages, does anyone out there know about them?

Most of the floors are massive breakdown blocks that divide narrow stream passages and many small leads remain through the rocks. The surprising amount of decoration has (until now) been preserved by the sheer danger of entering the passages from below. Since we had approached from above we could send the loose rocks down without endangering ourselves (no formations were damaged). I am again reminded that caves are the only wilderness areas on the planet that get larger every year because more caves (and passages) are discovered. Our real survey added over 350 feet to the cave with an conservatively estimated 700 feet left to map. Some of this passage is 10 feet wide and 60 feet tall and should have been mapped previously if it was known. This adds a substantial percentage of passage to a cave that was only 2,041 feet long.

I must emphasize the extreme instability of the areas described above. I have been in only one cave that had so much potential for rockfall and that was Neff Canyon cave in Utah. We have done a lot of "gardening" of this route but it needs more stabilizing to make it a really useful bypass.

We had two near misses with rockfall. At the first down climb one caver ended up straddled across the chimney with a 200 pound boulder sitting in his lap. Another 150 pound rock fell across the legs of a caver when he touched it. This does not count the many small rocks bouncing off helmets, into eyes etc. The aptly named teeter totter rock weighs just slightly less than an average size elephant.

I also add the conservation caution of traveling the newly found decorated areas. We have flagged some sections but much remains unflagged. It is expected that these sections will attract more cavers to Crystal 67. Please be careful.

EDITORIAL

Writing for "The Explorer" forced me to consider the issue of revealing in print the new formation areas of Crystal 67.

I could have left out the formation references and I doubt that many people would visit the areas but I do not subscribe to the notion that secrecy is the best or only way to protect a cave. Simply traveling through a cave will cause some damage but other cavers deserve the right to enjoy the "pretty stuff". I don't have the wisdom to decide who deserves to be told. The ultimate logic of secrecy is that the most ardent cave conservationists are the people that don't enter the cave at all and I suggest that they must practice this philosophy to maintain their credibility.

We pay a price (or rather the cave pays a price) for our visitations and my only hope is to educate drivers and keep the damage to a minimum. The indiscriminate travel over formations must be avoided, and deliberate damage to any cave is unforgivable. The "benefit of the doubt" philosophy is dangerous for the cave but the alternative is dictatorial and disrespectful of cavers in general.

My thoughts are more concerned with the issue of secrecy and that unanswerable, "who decides" issue. Out of respect to cavers, I owe it to them to tell the entire story. It is a personal decision based on hope and the belief that most cavers are not vandals. If not for the people who trusted and taught me, how would I have ever learned to love caves or see them in the first place?