

Caves of La Palma

by Glenn Lawyer

It was one of those days that reminds one why life is worth living. Lorimer, a giant of a Spaniard, pilots the red zodiac up the coast. Georg watches for debris from the bow, holding the bow rope for support with a hand-rolled cigarette in mouth and the arms of his semi-dry flapping around his legs. The 4 other divers are vacation friends, people who share my habit of booking their Easter vacation on La Palma, the emerald gem of the Canary archipelago.

We are headed for the Cuevos de Agua, a group of caves which lie just north of Tazacorte. They formed when flowing lava left behind tubes and chambers in the cooling rock. Until very recently, this area was only accessible through local dive clubs. By making alliance with one of these clubs, Georg can now offer them to his clients.

The cave dives offer unique photographic opportunities. With a maximum depth of less than 15 meters, photographic skills remain unaffected by the “stupids of the deep.” Nor are the caves technically challenging. The only caving gear we brought was our torches. And as they are on the west coast of La Palma, the sun is shining and the sky is free of clouds, creating some beautiful patterns of light near the entrances. Sunbeams and silhouettes were my goal for the day.

A few minutes later we drop anchor in a little cove where high cliffs plunge into the sea. A roll into the blue and a short swim takes us through a large stone arch, the gate to the hidden realm. Here the sea has cut into the cliff base, leaving



(Above) While the entrance is narrow, the interior and exit of the cavern is huge. f4.5 at 1/180 and ISO 200



(Top right) Lorimer patiently waiting for a slower diver. The rest of the group has moved on.

f6.7 at 1/15 and ISO 200

(Right) Lorimer lights up the Devils Cave.

f4.0 at 1/60 and ISO 200

All images: Canon 7D in shutter speed priority mode w/ Tokina 10-17 at 13mm, Aquatica housing w/ 8" dome.



many hollows and overhangs. The sunbeams filter and dance in the channel, and the overhangs make beautiful triangular frames around the divers.

A small cave mouth appears on the right. Georg and I enter together, side by side. After 4 meters it narrows. George waves me ahead. Three kicks in and up take me into a giant cavern. I am in the womb of the earth. The other divers slowly enter. Torches begin to light the gloom. The cavern easily swallows all seven of us. We split into small groups, exploring the side chambers.

The focus lights on my Inons flit across a 60

cm long lobster, the biggest I have ever seen in the Canaries. It is out in the open, slowly scuttling across the rocky floor, stealthily moving away from my progress. It clearly doesn't enjoy the flash of the strobes, but neither does it dart for cover. I readjust my position and try a different angle.

The other large residents of the cave are a sad lot of common stingrays. The rays sometimes get tangled in the nets of the local fishermen. The response is swift and brutal-- the tail is cut off, and the ray tossed back into the water. Yet this



*Georg is all smiles after the dive.
f8.0 at 1/180 and ISO 100*

procedure retains some mercy, as the rays often survive. The ones dwelling here are fully grown, two meters in length. One rests now in one of the side chambers, eyeing me suspiciously. I could approach close enough for a photo, but its woeful look and sad condition makes me unwilling to disturb it in its refuge.

Back on board the boat, we pass around smiles, snacks and water. As the surface interval draws to a close, Lorimer fires up the engine. We motor south for 5 minutes, and anchor outside a narrow channel leading up to the Devil's cave. The channel is too narrow and wave-tossed for a boat, but at 5 meters depth it is calm enough to swim. Lorimer leads us up it to the cave entrance.

The cave is called the Devils cave. At low tide, the roof of the entrance is only 5 centimeters above the waterline. Waves push fresh air inside the cave, creating a deep guttural roar, "the Devil calling." The air inside is warm and humid. When a wave hits outside, a cloud of vapor rises from the surface.



The cave is inhabited by several large spiny lobsters. Their response to my focus lights was to slowly back away. f4.0 at 1/250 and ISO 200

The air chamber is narrow but long, extending 15 meters or more back into the mountain. A second chamber lies beyond. Deeper we did not go.

The next cave contains a freshwater spring. Rainwater percolates down through the mountain until it comes to rest on top of the saltwater in the cave. The division is marked by a distinctive blurring in the water; a very clear thermocline. Lorimer is big, two meters tall. In the water, he conveys the grace and power of an orca, while on land he has the joy and laughter associated in childhood with images of dolphins. His background is 15 years experience as a commercial diver, all in the Canary Islands. Maybe this is what made him such a refreshing guide-- not trying to take charge of or control the group, just there and if needed. And he did provide me with a much needed rescue. We were on the deck of the Bussard, on my last diving day. I was caught in a sink of depression. Lorimer came over, stuck one of the ear-buds from his mp3



The biologist inspecting some interesting life forms in one of the side chambers of the main cavern. We have now been in the cave over 10 minutes, and levels of silt are still remarkably low. f4.0 at 1/125 and ISO 200

player into my ear, and made me sing disco classics with him until I was smiling again. I had been saved from a severe "out-of-music" emergency.

Georg continues to build his business (<http://www.tauchpartner-lapalma.de/>). His partnership with Lorimer is new, as is a weekly cruise on the wooden charter boat Bussard. This allows dives in otherwise restricted areas of the marine reserve. In addition to expanding the range of dives offered, George continues to explore the marine biology of the island. Shortly before my arrival he had found a species of black coral not previously known to live in the Canaries. Identification is still underway.

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