



El Sótano de las Golondrinas

by

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I start the descend following the rough cut mountain path while the dawn slowly begins to throw the first rays of light on the sky in the distance.

The valley and the mountain at the other side vaguely exclaim their presence in the poor light. Everything is quiet. Animals and humans are still wrapped in the nightly embrace. I move down between trees and lush vegetation, without any sign of being near what I'm searching. But suddenly the screaming starts from out there in the dark. Still too dark to see anything, but then I reach some wooden stairs, and carefully I step down, while the screaming becomes louder for every step. I reach the end and there, at a distance of 20 steps the ground suddenly opens revealing a giddy black abyss, from where thousands of swifts scream their way up towards the sky and a new day...

I've gone to the region Huasteca in the state of San Luis Potosí in the northeast corner of Mexico to experience one of the Mexican wonders not part of the well-known tourist route around 'Mayaland'. A natural wonder created in a distant past, and which today still is not very heard of.

"El Sótano de las Golondrinas", "The Cellar of Swallows", is a naturally created hole in the ground. The opening is found on a mountain slope at an altitude of about 800 meters (2600feet), and consists of an almost circular aperture with a diameter of some 60 meters (197 feet), and from there you found a breathtaking free fall of 376 meters (1233 feet) towards the bottom.

The hole is cone-shaped, meaning that when standing at the ledge watching down, it is with the knowledge that below you, you will only find an empty space.

The bottom, at the widest, reaches some 300 meters (984 feet). This is the actual cavity. The physical bottom point, reached via crevices in the rock, is found at some incredible 512 meters (1679 feet).

The bottom is covered by a thick layer of moss, and several minor animals like worms and scorpions have managed to create a life in this dark confined environment.

The hole was created millions of years ago by water eroding the softer layers of soil and rock. The water drained out towards subterranean rivers further below.

Here the White-collared Swift (*Streptoprocne zonaris*), one of the largest swifts in the world, with a wing span of almost half a meter, has adapted, and in thousands they have their nests on shelves or in crevices in the rock all the way down towards the bottom. Every morning, except when the weather is really bad, they leave their nest sites to ascend up and out of the hole to forage nearby or, by saying, all the way to the Mexican Gulf some 150 kilometers (94 miles) to the east.

And this I have come to see.

I place myself at the lowest observation point, and as the daylight increases, faintly I begin to see movements out in the hole. Fast whirls round and round along the wall in ascending spirals, until they reach the top, and throw themselves out above the lowest point of the opening, where I stand.



They pass low above my head screaming at full speed catapulting themselves out towards the valley and the open space.

It is a marvelous sight. They move too fast for me to think about taking photos as they pass by, so I decide just to enjoy the spectacular show as it is.

They take advantage of the hot thermals rising from the hole, and at the same time they use the circular movements to gain more speed as they ascend. The latter probably also as some sort of regulation of the traffic, since the narrow space in combination with many birds and high speed increase the risk of collision, which I actually experienced once.

Also, they seem to ascend in groups of hundreds, which could be another mean of regulation amongst the birds.

The swifts continue in a steady screaming flow as the other life around the hole starts to give notice of itself. A Collared Forest-Falcon (*Micrastur semitorquatus*) is calling from up the slope, while a Wedge-tailed Sabrewing (*Campylopterus curvipennis*) gurgles its morning song and the Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) lazily patrols with no hope whatsoever to catch a snack by the lightening swifts.

A peaceful morning. But suddenly the screaming of the swifts changes to a synchronous hysterical tone, and as one they all dive into the hole followed by the sound of their roaring wings. I look up and see a bird tearing down from above the tree tops, and in the fraction of a second as it passes low above my head, I get to realize that it was a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*). Hunting like some Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) it probably has learned to combine the high speed with surprise attack to catch the swifts as they leave the hole. But not this time.

Or perhaps the attack was rather intended on the other resident which also leaves the hole in morning: The Green Parakeet (*Aratinga holocloro*).

This little parrot occupy the upper parts of the cliff in the hole. And though much scarcer than the swifts, I calculated some 2 hundreds, and without sharp geometrical abilities, they still are a joy to watch with their flashing green colors in contrast to the dark surface of the cliff.

Only these two species have learned to adapt to the conditions in the hole, or perhaps they have competed out other potential species.

Thus when the flow of swifts finally dies out at about 10 am, and parakeets as well, the hole lies back quite and desolated without any sign of this 1. class experience that has just taken place.

”The Cellar of Swallows” is neither the only nor the deepest natural hole to encounter in Mexico or in the world for that matter. But it is the most famous and popular. Both because of the easy access and the extraordinary scenery and performance that nature presents here.

Of course the site has been known among the locals, the Huastecans, for centuries, while it was only known outside the area as late as in the 1970'ties.

Since then it has been well-visited by scientist and people with an urge towards extreme activities.

The free fall is the largest in the world, and of course acts like a magnet on people who needs to challenge that kind of things. Therefore until some years ago it was still allowed to both do rappelling and base jumping into the hole. But it turned out that it had negative affect on the birds,



and it was decided no longer to give permission to base jumping.

Today it is still possible to do rappelling, but with the restriction that it can only take place between 10 am and 4 pm to minimize the disturbance of the birds.

An unofficial number I got from one of the guides says that some 500 persons enter the hole every year. Immediately it sounds like many, and I'm sure it would have a positive effect on the birds if this 'tourist rappelling' was stopped as well.

The Huastecans, reportedly, came to the area from the nearby low lying areas escaping the Spanish. The legend says that the place was sacred to them, and, as the Mayans, they sacrificed the most beautiful virgins to receive the favors of the gods. The virgins were dressed in gold, jade and jewels and afterward thrown into the hole. They thought the souls of the virgins would be transformed to swifts, and if the first animal to ascend from the hole would be a swift, it was a sign that the gods were content with the sacrifice. If, on the other hand, the first animal to show up would be a snake, the gods had rejected the contribution, and times would be rough. One must presume that they lived well and in good comfort...

But at the same time they must have being very pragmatic too, because despite that the swifts represented the virginal souls, they still profited from catching these for food. And since the swift always leave the hole above the lowest point of the opening it must have been fairly easy to catch them with the racket-like instruments they used.

Today the area is protected on a national level, with a status of special natural value. But it is the local Huasteca-community, Unión Guadalupe, which owns and administers it. They claim a 20 pesos (1½ usd) entry fee, which goes to watchmen and maintenance of the installations they have build. These being stairs, open roof-covered huts and toilets. It is possible to camp their but you have to bring everything you need. Private housing though, was mentioned as an option, but you probably should expect rather primitive conditions since the community is poor. The most obvious solution is to use nearby Aquismón as a base and then do the 13 kilometers (8 miles) up the mountain in the morning.

It is ecotourism. And ecotourism in fact is the trademark of the region. It is often mentioned as the Mexican paradise because of the incredible nature. It is situated on the Atlantic side of the eastern Sierra Madre mountains at lower altitudes 500-1200 above sea level (1640-3936 feet). With a tropical climate the vegetation is green, dense and overwhelming. Stretching up the hill sides coffee and banana plantations intermix with untouched forests, and spread out across the hilly virginal landscape you find several waterfalls and rivers. The largest with a fall of some 100 meters (328 feet). The porous underground gives room to other holes like 'The Cellar of Swallows', and various caves, some of them with subterranean crystal clear lakes where possible to swim. And with a bird life related to the ones you find further south in Veracruz and Chiapas like Parrots, Tucans, Chachalacas, Saltators, Woodcreepers and Tanager to mention a few exotic groups, the nature loving explorer has every opportunity for an unforgettable experience.

The clock reaches 4 pm, and I'm back at 'The Cellar'. Actually it was not my intention to stay to



watch the swifts coming in in the afternoon as well, but since I decided to stay up there to see what else the bird life had to offer, it became natural to do it anyway.

I'm sitting relaxing after a hot and strenuous day walking around the uneven terrain and dense wilderness, only dreaming about an ice cold Coca Cola, when the first swifts start to return. They approach from the open space above the valley to where they also left in the morning. They are big so I spot them at a distance. They come with good speed in direction of the hole, but as they reach it, they stop and start circling some 30-40 meters (98-131 feet) above the entrance. A while. Then some of the swifts decide, and accompanied by a full volume screaming they plunge directly into the hole at full speed! I'm stunned! During the day I was told that the swifts didn't enter the same way they leave, but I never imagined anything as crazy as this.

More swifts make the decision and throw themselves fearlessly into what looks like certain death. The sound and the roaring from their wings as they plunge through the hot air is without comparison. They are impossible to follow with the eye. I only see some vertical movements disappearing into the deep (about 130 km/h (81 mph) has been recorded). It is amazing.

With this behavior I can't help thinking that the time restriction for the rappelling not only can be to protect the birds. To be trapped half way down dangling at the end of a 200 meter (656 feet) rope while being carpet bombed by swift missiles, is not to wish for.

I was happy and content with the morning's experience, but with this phantom final, I don't hesitate to announce "The Cellar of Swallows" as one of the greatest birding experiences I have ever had – perhaps the greatest.

The swifts continue to come in and the parakeets have just started, when I have to leave the site at 630 pm to keep my appointment with my transport.

It is up some 600 meters (1968 feet) by a steep path. I'm groaning, but not complaining. It is all worth it!

And then there was this about the name: The name has no resemblance with the reality. There have never lived swallows in the hole. The lack of accordance is caused by the fact that the language of the Huastecans, huasteco or tenek, doesn't contain a word for swifts. Therefore, when the name was to be translated to Spanish back then, they erroneously decided to translate it with swallows which probably were used to exemplify the meaning of the word.

Site visited on September 16 2009



View towards the valley and the lower observation point



Watchmen are present when the swifts enter and leave the hole, to avoid that people get too close to the edge.



The swifts ascend in a spiral always counterclockwise



The swifts are big, almost falcon-like



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Caught along the rear wall



Jesper Bay Jacobsen © www.naturewatch.dk

The Green Parakeets ascending from the abyss