

Sistema J2-Last Bash: the 2010 J2 Expedition
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My story begins in May 2006. That year's J2 expedition started with a mad rush into the unknown, in pursuit of a wide open lead at -1000m. However, at -1200 m, exploration came to a screeching halt when the team encountered El Siphon de los Piratas. For several weeks, teams mapped and explored side leads in hopes of finding a bypass to the sump. During one of these trips Tommy Shifflet, Jon Lillestolen, Bart Hogan, and I explored an infeaser near Camp 2a. It continued up two free climbs following strong airflow and stopping at the base of a 15-meter waterfall. The airflow was intriguing, but the passage certainly seemed to be headed upstream. In any case, we had no aid climbing gear with us that day and could not continue.

Several days later, back on the surface, Jon convinced me to go with him to check out a pit that he and several Polish cavers had discovered in 2005. After searching around for a couple of hours, and checking a bunch of other dead-end holes, we re-located the pit (previously dubbed 'La Cueva Hija Puta' by Pavo Skoworodko). The entrance was tight, thus inspiring the name, but man, was it sucking in some air. Both of us excited by the air, Jon went in through the entrance squeeze and set the first rebelay. From there the cave dropped through two more squeezes and opened into an echoing pit around -30 m that clearly took water in high flow. Out of rope, we retreated to the surface, stoked about having going cave. On the way back, for some reason we decided to try a new route. The route down the valley bottom had been pretty grim and we knew there was an established trail somewhere above us if only we could get there. After about 30 minutes of bushwacking up the treacherously steep hillside in the dark, we still had not found the trail. Going was slow, and we opted to traverse back into the valley bottom and retrace our path from before. In part inspired by this small adventure, and by the fact that the expedition was nearing its end, we settled on a new, more politically correct, name for the cave – Last Bash. Upon returning to camp, and adding the Last Bash survey to the database, we could see that the cave entrance was nearly directly over J2, and only about 500 meters offset from the blowing infeaser at Camp 2a. It seemed like a stretch at this point, but could these two passages possibly connect?

The next day, as a last-ditch effort to find a bypass of the J2 sump, in the final exploration trip for the year, Bill Stone, Jan Mathusius, Pauline Berendse, and I descended to the bottom of J2 to push bolt climbing leads. We spent two long days beyond Camp 3 knocking off climbing leads one by one, with Bill and me trading off the lead. None of these climbs yielded any significant passage, and we decided to retreat to Camp 2a and spend our final exploration day climbing up the infeaser passage. It seemed unlikely to lead to more depth, but at least it was going passage.

The waterfall that had stopped us before was broken into two steps, with a large alcove at about 5 meters. I free climbed the first pitch, which was easy, but very wet. Once at the top, I rigged a rope and the rest of the team followed. I then bolted up the remainder of the waterfall and squeezed into a tight passage above. The cave continued, and up around the corner I found a better place to rig a permanent line, which dropped back into the alcove below, out of the waterfall's spray.

Upstream, the passage enlarged to mostly walking-sized. We encountered two more free climbs and scooped about 200 meters of passage before finding another big waterfall. We went back for the climbing gear, and I began the climb while Bill and Pauline started surveying the passage below. The waterfall created a tremendous amount of spray, and the chamber below it was swirling with mist. Jan, who was belaying me, managed to crouch back in an alcove to escape the brunt of the wet and wind, but he certainly had a couple of cold, grim hours ahead. I bolted my way up the side wall and across an

overhanging traverse, until I could swing myself around into the slot from which the water was rushing. Then I chimned up the wet chute for about 5 meters until it opened into a chamber. I placed one bolt, and got half way through the next drill hole before running out of power. In that hole I placed a second, shallow bolt, which also happened to be my last. The chamber ended at yet another waterfall, with what appeared to be a narrow canyon passage emerging at the top. The cave continued, but we would not go there today. We completed a final survey shot, and I left a note on the station with the station number, our names, and the date. As I had a final look up the falls before descending, I wondered whether anyone would ever find that note from above – maybe years from now, if it could survive the high flows of the wet season.

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In 2009, we returned for a major diving expedition. Amidst the chaos that is a major diving expedition, the team also managed to conduct a number of forays into Last Bash. Early in the expedition, Jon, Jim Castelaz, and I returned with 50 more meters of rope. We rigged down 3 pitches into a roomy chamber that led to the top of a deep, sloping fissure. Some rocks we dropped seemed to go on out of earshot. It would turn out that this fissure was even deeper and more vertical than it sounded. In a series of trips later in the expedition team members continued the push down this fissure. The ramp gradually grew steeper for about 100 meters before reaching a free-hanging drop of 150 meters. Several more steep drops, and the cave reached base level, at around -400 m, becoming much more horizontal. A final exploration and survey push led to about -500m, where the team ran out of rope. Now the gap with J2 had significantly closed. Given the amounts of air and water, it seemed likely that the two caves would connect, probably in the vicinity of Camp 2a, but there were many infeeders near there, so where exactly it would come in was anyone's guess.

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After 2009, the team was pretty worn out with J2, and we needed a break from hauling loads of diving gear. Furthermore, Bill Stone, who had led the previous J2 expeditions, would be spending several months in Antarctica with the Endurance project and didn't have time to plan another expedition for 2010. Given this, we knew that another big diving push for 2010 was out of the question. However, Jon Lillestolen, Marcin Gala, and I decided to put together a smaller expedition, with the main goal of trying to connect Last Bash into J2. Not only might this create an easier route to the bottom, but it also would bypass the Surprise Sump (-750 m), which had flooded several times in 2009, trapping cavers beyond. If we succeeded, we would head to Camp 3 to push an intriguing lead that Yuri Schwartz and Sergey Tkachenko, two Russian cavers, had discovered near the end of the 2009 expedition. While Bill and Jose Morales were diving in Sump 4, Yuri and Sergey were bolt climbing near Camp 3. They had reached an ascending passage with a large amount of airflow being sucked into it. This air was heading to a lower entrance somewhere, and just might bypass the sump and head downstream.

Jon and I arrived in San Francisco Chapulapa late in the afternoon on February 27, 2010, after driving straight through from the border. Shortly thereafter, Marcin, Kasia Biernacka, their daughter Zuzia, and Wicho Diaz arrived, having driven up from Oaxaca City that day. We settled in for the night at Rancho Faustino, the home of our good friends in Chapulapa, and the next day began negotiations with the Presidente and Bienes Comunales to obtain permission to go up the mountain to Last Bash. Negotiations with the Bienes Comunales dragged on as one day became two days became two weeks. Two unfortunate cavers, Mike Young and Brendan Nappier, came and went in the time that it took to gain permission. Luckily we at least did some caving during that time in Ken Cave near Santa Maria Tlalixtac, where we easily obtained permission. The true heroes of this expedition were Kasia

Biernacka, our best Spanish speaker who spent countless hours in the hot seat during negotiations, and Wicho Diaz, who made two trips up from Oaxaca City to help us get permission. Without the hard work of these two, we would not have had a 2010 J2 expedition.

With permission obtained, on March 14 we finally started up the mountain with our gear, establishing a new base camp down in the fields below Last Bash. It certainly had a different feel than our previous camp in the remote cloud forest. The new camp was exposed to the sun, frequented by cattle, pigs, and dogs, and every day dozens of locals would walk by on the way up to work in the fields. At least, after splicing a T-junction into a nearby hose, we had running water, which we had not had in the cloud forest. On March 15, Marcin Gala, Will Moffat, and Joke Vansweevelt set off on the first trip into Last Bash. Their main goal was to survey about 300 meters of passage that had been explored in 2009 but not surveyed. If they had time, they would continue exploration beyond. Around 9 am the next morning the crew staggered back from the cave. They had completed the survey, pushing the cave to about -570 m, but had no time to continue into unexplored passage. This was quite a 'warm up' trip to start off the expedition. Clearly, pushing Last Bash from the surface was going to require some long, difficult trips. Later that day Jon, Kasia, and I headed for the cave. We started rigging and surveying, and after only 100 meters of narrow passage we reached a tight crack that was taking all the air and water. I climbed down into the constriction and crawled along the stream for a few meters before encountering a short flowstone constriction that was too tight. We had brought 150 meters of rope, several drill batteries, and countless bolts and hangers, but we didn't have anything for enlarging passage. Stymied, we headed for the surface, emerging around 2 a.m. after 14 hours underground.

The next morning we discussed our options, all of us now having a little doubt about whether we would succeed in a connection. Given the difficulty of the trips, each team needed two recovery days before returning to the cave, so we all relaxed around camp for the day. The following day, Marcin, Will, and Joke returned to the cave, prepared to work on the constriction. After the hour-long hike to the cave, Will realized, to his dismay, that he had left his vertical gear in camp. While he ran back for it, Joke waited at the entrance, and Marcin decided to descend ahead of the others to start the work. Marcin arrived at the constriction and started a long two hours of hammering, half lying in the water with a shower trickling in from above. Finally, it was large enough to pass through, so he went for it. However, up ahead there was a horn that jutted out, creating a narrow spot in the air-filled portion of the passage. He had to completely submerge his body and ease under the horn in order to reach the other side. Soaking wet, and tired from the hammering, he was unhappy to find another constriction around the corner. His opinion was that this next constriction was too tight for too long. It couldn't be passed without serious explosives. About this time Will and Joke showed up. Marcin was hypothermic, so he headed for the surface. Will and Joke also passed the first constriction and spent some time hammering, removing the horn and reducing the water level in the squeeze by lowering the lip of the dam that was holding back the water. They took a quick look at the next constriction but then also headed for the surface because they were getting too cold.

Two days later, Jon and I returned, afraid of what grim lead might lie ahead, but prepared to push hard. The others had significantly improved the passage, and we only got wet up to our waists going through the first squeeze. Once beyond, Jon started working on lowering the water level more while I scoped out the terminal constriction. Without the fog of hypothermia to bias my judgement, I could see two possible routes. Up high, it looked almost passable, and was up out of the water. Down low I thought it was a little bigger, but also very wet. I would try high first. I removed all of the vertical gear from my harness and squeezed my way up into the opening above, but it quickly pinched out. From there, I thought I might be able to get back into the lower level, avoiding the wettest part. I worked my way into the widest spot, but soon my hips jammed. I wasn't going any further. I started to climb back out

when my harness snagged on a projection. After a couple of minutes of fruitless struggle I was beginning to wonder about my predicament. I slid back down to a spot where I could barely reach my harness carabiner and started working it open. Soon I had my harness unfastened, and was making better progress slithering out of the crack. About that time Jon showed up to say, "Man. Your harness is falling off."

"Yeah, I know."

After a breather, I decided that down in the water might be the only way on. I squeezed in, feet first, and gradually eased my way through. Awkward, but passable. Jon followed, hammer in hand, removing the most offensive projections. Next came another ascending squeeze followed by a sharp turn into a tight chimney back down. Finally things started to look better. We continued out into walking passage. For nearly 30 minutes we scooped forward through fairly easy passage, with a few short downclimbs but no rope drops. We ultimately named this passage "The Bazooka Attack" in memory of the shootout reportedly including 'grenades, artillery, and bazookas' that Jon and I had narrowly missed on our drive across the Mexican border. As we continued on, we were starting to wonder whether we had overshot the Camp 2a infeeder. There had only been about 200 meters of horizontal distance separating the ends of the surveys, and we had gone much further than that. Then the cave turned hard right, back on itself. Soon we were looking down a 10 meter drop that we could not free climb. I turned my headlamp up and scanned the room below. There it was, a rope rigged to the far right wall. This was the waterfall that I had looked up in 2006, wondering if someone would ever discover it from above. We had made the connection. Sistema J2 was established.

We had left all of the survey and rigging gear back before the series of squeezes, which we later named 'The Moment of Doubt.' Our plan was to try to survey the passage and then return to the surface. However, the only set of instruments was totally fogged. Since we had rigging gear, we decided that Jon would work his way back to the connection point, rigging all of the short drops for travel with a camp duffel. In the meantime, I would work on the Moment of Doubt with the sledge. Two and a half hours later, Jon returned, and we headed out of the cave.

The first goal of the expedition was accomplished, but time was running out fast, and we still wanted to push leads out of Camp 3. Marcin, Will, and Joke headed in for a 5-day camp. Their plan was to spend some time surveying the connection route on the way down, and then to head for a day of exploration out of Camp 3. Travel was slow with the camp packs on the way in, and they didn't have time to survey. Jon, Omar Hernandez, and I followed the next day. We planned on spending 2 nights at Camp 2a working on improving the Moment of Doubt, familiarizing Omar with the cave, and installing a data logger in the Jungle Series above Camp 2a. The Camp 3 team had a tough but successful exploration day and found a route through the tight, loose, breezy breakdown maze that had stopped Yuri and Sergey in 2009. They stopped at the bottom of a 7 meter climb that needed bolts. After a fast trip back to Camp 2a, they spent the second half of the day surveying in the connection route, and then connected the surveys through the Moment of Doubt on the day they exited the cave – a strong effort in a miserable task. Somehow this team always seemed to end up with the hardest exploration efforts and long surveys of scooped passage.

The next trip into the cave was a 6-day camp with Kasia, Omar, Wicho, Mirek Kopertowski, and Olivia Rysnik. They would spend two days exploring in the bottom. On the first day, they pushed leads in the lower passage near the sump. They also discovered that the water level in the sump had risen about 10 meters during the wet season, leaving dive gear floating in the water and one dive tank stranded near the ceiling. The next day Kasia, Omar, and Wicho started out of the cave, while Mirek and Olivia

went to bolt up the climb that had stopped the previous team. They reached the top, crawled through more breakdown, and emerged into a sizeable chamber, with passage going both directions. Downstream quickly pinched with flowstone, but there was an ascending stream passage that ultimately had the air.

As the others exited the cave, Jon, Bill, Marcin, Kelly Mathis, and I descended for a final trip to the bottom. We first went to map Mirek and Olivia's discovery and look for a way on. The ascending passage quickly deteriorated into a large breakdown maze. We spent a few hours pushing around in it, without finding a continuation. Though the air flow was enticing, the passage otherwise was pretty nasty. We had lost the air in the breakdown, and were becoming doubtful that we could find a way through. After mapping several routes through the breakdown we called it a day, not sure whether we would even return. Given the grim nature of Yuri and Sergey's lead, we named it 'From Russia with Love.'

The next day Bill and I stayed near Camp 3, collecting data and installing a data logger. Marcin and Kelly went to bolt climb up to the best remaining lead in the bottom part of the cave, and Jon returned once more to 'From Russia with Love' to see if he could find a way through the breakdown. Marcin completed the climb, but the lead went nowhere. Whether it was good luck or bad might be debatable, but Jon found a way through the breakdown and emerged at the bottom of a 30 meter dome, which he called 'Perestroika Well.' The passage continued, but now nearly 200 meters above the main stream level of J2, it seemed to be heading quickly toward the surface. We learned after the expedition that a nearby cave, Palomora, which ends in a too tight squeeze, has a strong outward draft. The two caves are only separated by about 350 meters vertically and less than a kilometer horizontally. Will there some day be another connection to J2 through 'From Russia with Love?' I don't know. The team that explored Charco were the last folks to push Palomora. They report that it is horrible, tight, and nasty... Maybe not.