



Carola Bieniek

Chinhoyi Caves Expedition 2012 - Quintin Heymans



Quintin Heymans

The dream to dive Chinhoyi Caves began almost 8 years ago when I was fortunate enough to be shown pictures taken by a group of divers of the Caves. Ever since then I just knew that I had to dive Chinhoyi caves in Zimbabwe one day.

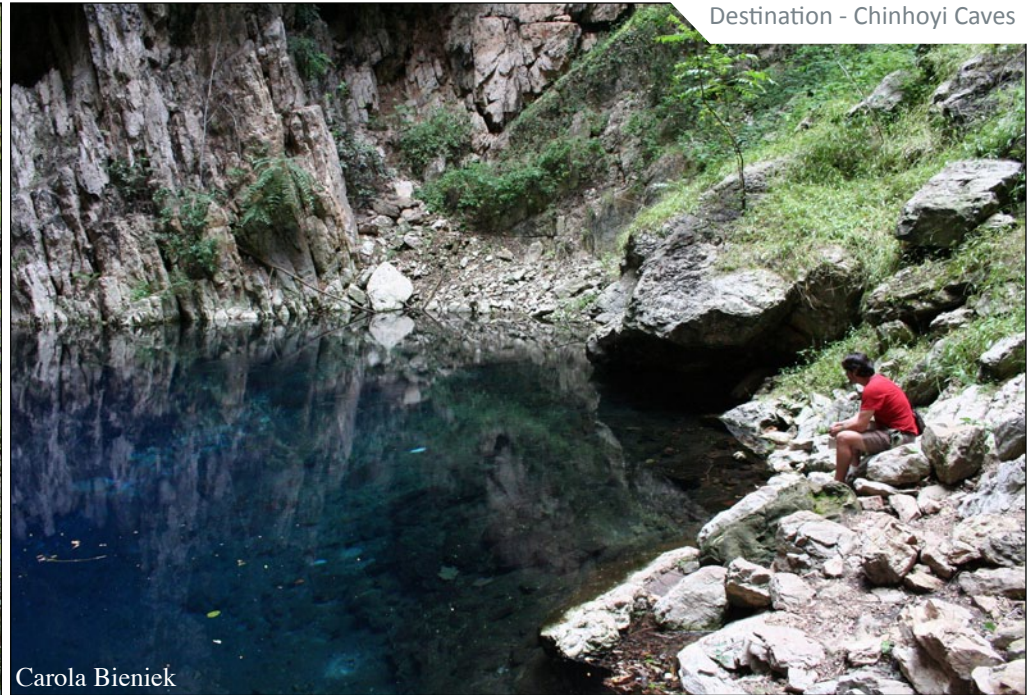
I am forever looking for new challenges and dive sites because of my passion for Technical Diving; for example the search for the elusive Sodwana Coelacanths at depths in excess of 100 meters. Back in November of 2011 the possibility of diving Chinhoyi arose as a group of us Technical Divers began to toss the idea around.

Technical diving considerations aside, Zimbabwe itself added a significant logistical and financial complication to the expedition, which needed careful consideration to successfully negotiate. To experience the full wonders of Chinhoyi we knew we had to go deep. And, to go deep we needed specific gasses, like helium, for our Trimix dives. Zimbabwe is in the grips of a recession and food, for example, is a scarce commodity, let alone supplies of helium. Having worked with the South African company Afrox, on previous expeditions we were able to secure delivery of all our gas requirements to the little town of Chinhoyi. With that important hurdle out of the way, we gave the expedition the go-ahead. We had to be self-sufficient for 10 days, meaning we had to supply our own food, accommodation, electricity, compressor and gasses, and transport logistics to get everything up there, and back.

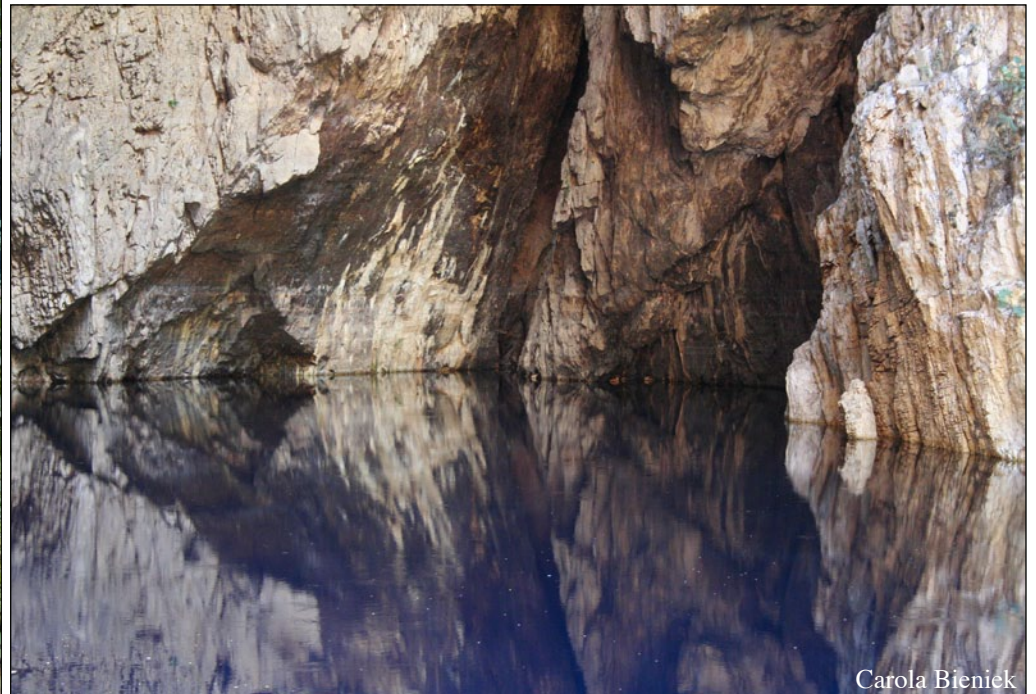
Getting permission to dive and explore the caves was no easy task. But eventually we got permission from the head of Zimbabwe's National Parks. Word of our exploits spread quickly especially given the magnitude of our expedition. Three different newspapers recorded and published the event and one news channel too. Even Robert Mugabe's private guards and police force came to interview us one day and the Minister of Tourism also travelled from Harare (about 130 kilometres from Chinhoyi) to meet with us.



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Destination - Chinhoyi Caves

We researched the Chinhoyi Cave system and came to the conclusion that there is no conclusive evidence to inform as to how deep Chinhoyi really is. Most of the information we obtained led us to believe that it is around 80m deep. Hence the expeditionary nature of this trip - we wanted to go and find out for ourselves.

After 5 months of hard work, 5 weekends of build-up dives, a lot of planning, a long road travelled, our first dive with expedition leader Johan Boshoff, made up for all the effort. Johan Boshoff was the only one in our group with prior experience of diving Chinhoyi.

Submersing beneath the water on that first dive it felt like we could see forever. The water was a pleasant 23 C. Taking a bearing from the light entering the cave as I descended I looked back to see the silhouettes of ten other divers against the azure backlight. It is a vision I will treasure for the rest of my life. It appeared as if each of the divers had eight to fifteen ghosts above them and their exhaled air bubbles were visible all the way to the surface. We could see the top of the rim of the caves from 50 meters down with small detail like the trees even being visible from that depth



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Our first dive was in the pool named the silent pool. And before the dive we were exactly that, silent. However, on breaking the surface after the dive the silence was shattered by an endless explosion of words from each of our mouths. "Wow", "awesome", "unbelievable", "azure", "endless visibility", "scary", "dark", the superlatives were never-ending.

Once at the cave system, the effort required to get to the dive site is immense. There are exactly 288 steps to get down to the Sleeping Pool (the main dive site) but remember, being technical divers we each had twin 15l cylinders, 2 x 80cu and 2 x 40cu cylinders with regulators attached to each cylinder, our dive bags, spares, toolboxes and camera bags and enough food and drink to see us through the day. As far as possible we tried to make only one trip down to the sleeping pool and one trip back out again each day. The expedition comprised four different teams according to their experience and target depth. A successful expedition is dependent on teamwork and our daily task list consisted of waking up, making coffee and breakfast, gas analyzing, working out dive plans according to mixes, assembling gear, loading the vehicles to take gear down to the cave entry point, preparing lunch, getting all the gear down to the pool, charging 2 way radios for the different teams, getting all the gear and divers out safely, making supper, heading to town for daily necessities, mixing gasses for the next day's dives, compressor maintenance and fuelling the generator.

We started with 40 metre dives then 60, 85, 100 and 105 meters. Each dive to a new depth added to our knowledge. When I dive caves I experience a phenomenon I call "the calling of the cave". It is as if some force lures you deeper and further into the caves. This is also the case with Chinhoyi. We reached our maximum dive time of 14 minutes at 104 metres, but yet we only scratched the bottom. There is still so much to explore.

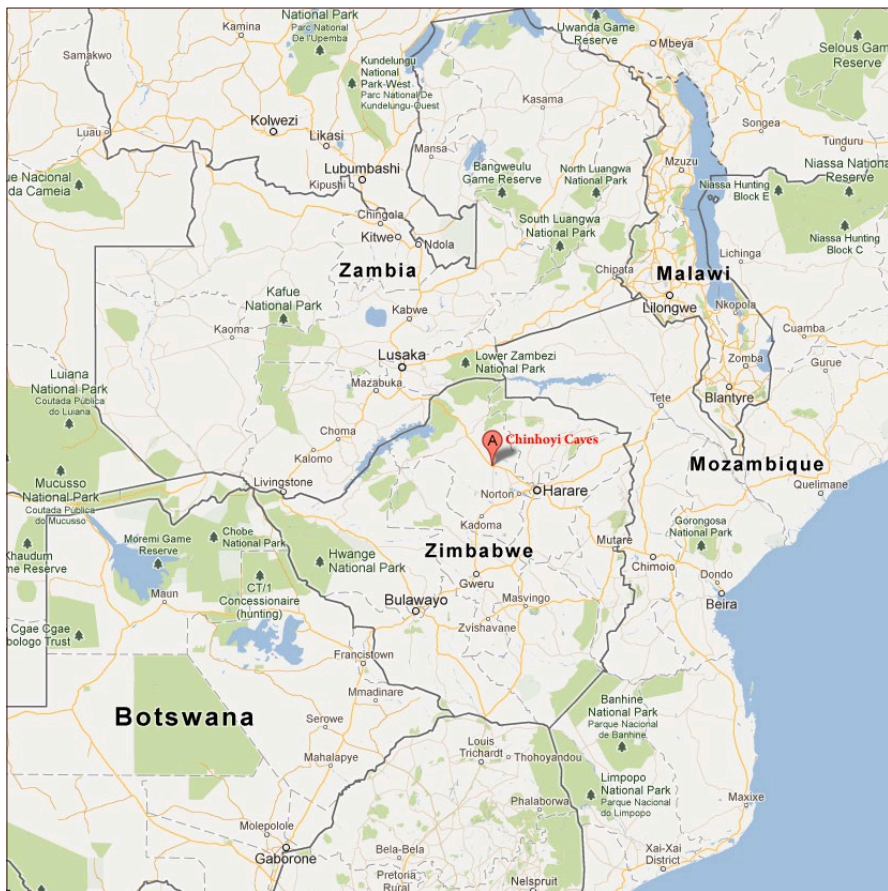
Nearing the bottom of the main pool for the first time felt really eerie. Adding to this feeling was the sensation that the bottom was beginning to glow. We looked at each other thinking we were on the wrong gas mixture. However, as we got closer to the bottom we saw that the floor was covered with broken glass, porcelain and coins. Then we saw what looked like a white ghost not too far away and immediately started our ascent without even signaling to each other – the conversation with the park ranger the previous night who told us of 4 Scuba divers who have never surfaced from their dives, added to the sensation.

It was later explained to us that when a Sangoma dies, the first person at the scene takes all of his or her belongings and wraps it up in a cloak and throws it into the sleeping pool. This was what we saw resembling a ghost, the floating white cloak.

Diving Chinhoyi is no easy task made more difficult by the effort required on every single dive. During our expedition we explored a lot of the cave system and gathered much information all of which we gave to the local authorities for future use. Unfortunately no words adequately describe the beauty of this place. I hope the images give you a taste of its beauty.



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History (Courtesy of Parks and Wildlife Management authority)

It was believed that the Caves were being used as a stronghold by an outlaw called Nyamakwere who murdered many victims by throwing them into the “Silent Pool”, now referred to as the “Sleeping Pool”. The notorious Nyamakwere was eventually defeated and killed by a herdsman called Chinhoyi who became a Mashona Chief, hence the name Chinhoyi Town. Chinhoyi and his followers used the Caves as a refuge from raiding tribes such as the Matebele. Until a few years ago the remains of Chief Chinhoyi’s grain bins could be seen in some of the underground passages.

The Traditional name for the Cave is “Chirrodziva” which means “Pool of the Fallen”. The name was derived from an incident, which took place in the 1830’s when the Angoni Tribe, who were moving northwards, surprised people living near the Caves, and flung them down into the pool.

The Caves consists of a system of tunnels and caverns. This System is a dying one, in that they are slowly collapsing. The Wonder Hole, which is the main feature of the Caves, is in fact a “Swallow Hole” or a large cavern with a collapsed roof.

The walls or sides of the Wonder Hole” drop vertically down for 50 meters to the Sleeping Pool. The Sleeping Pool has a known depth of 120 meters. The Pool is unbelievably blue and crystal clear which reflects great depth and the non-flowing water.

Several underwater passages have been found leading from the Sleeping Pool, but all those that have been explored lead back to the main Pool again. Near the end of the Dark Cave is a small annex to the sleeping pool known as the cave of the bats.

Destination - Chinhoyi Caves

This Cave has three outlets – one, known as the Blind Cave leads to a small cavern and is accessible only to a SCUBA DIVER, a second one connects with the Sleeping Pool 58 meters below the surface and the third has not yet been explored.

The Caves are composed mainly of the sunlit “Sleeping Pool” and the artificial lit Dark Cave. The Sleeping Pool is accessible in two ways.

Excavations in and near the Caves have revealed that people have stayed in and near the Caves from earlier times. Pottery and human remains were unearthed from the area which were Radiocarbon dated as far back as A.D 650 . The pottery from the area excavation is called the Chinhoyi Tradition of the early Iron Age and is found from Chinhoyi to Kariba.

The dominant rock in which the Caves are formed is Limestone, Millions of years ago the action of underground water weakened the cohesive forces that held the rock particles together forming underground caverns and tunnels. Some of these caverns eventually collapsed to form sink holes, the largest and most spectacular of which forms what is known today as the “ Wonder Hole” and “ Sleeping Pool “, rated as the country’s most dramatic natural tourist attraction. The clarity of the water in the “Sleeping Pool” is such that the fish and rock formations can be seen many meters beneath the surface and the shoreline.

“ The Caves” don’t have much in the sense of fish life but it’s the visual of the underwater rock formations, stalactites and stalagmites, caves and crannies that bring divers back each time and having a breathtaking experience. On a technical point, the conditions in “the Caves” offer the most ideal deep dives and offer exciting opportunities.

Team Members

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Sponsors

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