

IT LOOKS INNOCENT FROM THE SURFACE -

a jagged scar cracking the barren plain of the Selma Plateau. Local kids scramble barefooted over the sharp limestone rocks, dashing between the scrub brush grasping for footholds on the rugged terrain. One little guy gets a little too close to the edge, prompting his dishdasha'ed dad to leap into action, yanking him back to safety. As solid as the ground feels, we're actually standing on the relatively thin roof of the second largest underground cavern in the world - Oman's *Majlis Al Jinn*, or "Meeting Place of the Spirits."

The crack in the earth we're perched beside is the smallest of the three entrances into the cavern... the narrow "Cheryl's Drop", forming a chimney approximately 5 meters wide and 15 meters deep. Peering into the gap, you can see the rocky walls falling away into the darkness below, and then nothing.

The sun has just begun to warm up the morning air of the plateau, about 4000 feet above the coastal down of Fans, and my back is slowly baking as I watch the rigging process begin. Frans and Justin, our guides from the Muscat Diving and Adventure Centre (MDAC), tie the rope through three anchor bolts drilled into the rock. The point of three separate anchor points is simple. If one gives, the other two *should* absorb the shock and keep the line secured to the lip of the chasm. A tough vinyl bag laid over the rock protects the rope from the jagged edge, and a sling secured to the opposite wall keeps the rope dangling in the center of the cravasse and away from the rock wall. Once the top end is anchored, Frans drops the 200 meter rope down the hole. We wait... and wait... and 5-6 seconds later hear the faint thud of it hitting the cave floor.

I nervously finger the gear that's wrapped tightly around my waist. When I first saw it, less than a week ago, it was a mysterious jumble of straps, ropes, carabiners and metal devices. I couldn't even figure out how to put the mess on... let alone entrust my life to it! A thick harness rides above my hips, connected to a strap for each leg, and cinched together with a thick metal D-ring carabiner in the front. To this D-ring is attached a blue metal device with a series of metal loops, and a handle. I'll thread the rope through this *descender* to control my glide into the depths of the cave. The next two items hooked to my D-ring are just as important, and will let me climb back up the rope. The *croll*, positioned on my chest, is a device which will lock onto a rope. Teeth in the croll permit it to slide up, but not down the rope. The ascender is similar, except it includes a large handle to hold onto, and is attached to two long nylon straps with footloops. The technique for the ascent is pretty simple... attach the croll and ascender to the rope. Stand up in the foot straps, which drags the croll (and your chest) up the rope 1-2 feet. Sit back on the croll and raise the ascender along with your legs. Stand up and repeat... hundreds of times! A caving helmet and gloves complete the gear. In addition, I'm wearing a camel-back filled with water, and carrying my camera, an extra lens, and my tripod. Four sessions on the MDAC climbing wall have gotten me used to the gear... though the 5 meter indoor wall doesn't compare to the 158 meter drop that awaits. Justin straps in and pops over the edge, and soon it's my turn to follow him. I double check the straps on my harness, thread the rope through my descender, and ease over the edge. Taking a deep breath, I sit back, dangling over the freefall, and gently squeeze the handle of the descender. As my left hand squeezes, my right slowly feeds the rope



Ascender



Croll



Descender



Harness

into the cave of the Spirits

By Kevin Rubesh



OUT AND ABOUT

through the device, helping to control the speed of my descent. The rock walls glide past my face - mere feet away. These holes in the earth are used by the local villagers as the community trash dump, and bits of cloth, packets of chips, plastic bags and other debris line the rock as I descend. The sun recedes in the ever shrinking gap above my head as I continue to slide down the line. And then, suddenly, the walls of the chimney vanish as I descend past the ceiling and into the cave proper. Visibility goes from 5 feet on either side of me to hundreds of feet. As my eyes adjust to the reduced light in the cave, I spot the cave floor. It doesn't seem too far away, until I notice a red ladybug crawling along the ground. It takes a couple seconds to figure out that the bug is, in fact, Justin's helmet, over 150 meters below me.

It's hard to convey just how massive this cave is, but let me try. The Statue of Liberty, from the base of the pedestal to the tip of the torch's flame is just less than 93 meters tall. If Lady Liberty were standing square on the cave floor below me, at this point, I'd be still about 55 meters *above* her torch. The 158 meter drop from the surface is a little bit less than half of the height of the Empire state building. The area of the floor below my feet is no less impressive. It's so huge that the world's largest indoor stadium – the New Orleans Superdome, with over 95,000 spectators, could fit comfortably within the cave walls.

looking nonchalantly out the window of an airplane to watch the ground far below. Your body is so unused to the idea of dangling freely hundreds of feet in the air that it doesn't kick in that there's real danger involved. The descent continues silently - the rope whispering through my descender. As it slides through, the friction of the rope moving past the metal loops gradually heats it up... it smells a little like an electrical short. It's a vaguely discomfiting feeling, knowing that the thin strands of fiber that stand between you and certain untimely end are getting hotter and hotter as you slide down the rope. Every minute or so I stop to take in the view, and take a picture or two, slowly rotating on the rope to get a panoramic view. The gap through which I entered is now a mere speck of light, far above my head. And then, nine minutes after I left the surface, I arrive in a new underground world.

Two laser beams of light stream from the large holes in the ceiling, now hundreds of feet above my head. The sand blazes with an otherworldly glow where the beams touch the ground. As the day progresses, these spotlights

circle the cave floor, tracing the movement of the sun. There's a ring of tiny flags close to the "landing zone" and a log book in which visitors have inscribed their names and thoughts. I unstrap myself from the rope, loosen my equipment and head off to explore.

On the East side of the cave, two mini mountains of debris have formed under the two large openings in the cave ceiling. Boulders the size of small cars litter the ground, having fallen from the roof many years ago. A fine layer of dust covers most surfaces, marking each step with a tiny cloud. The floor immediately under each opening is littered with the debris of life on



The cave floor traced against the surface view, with the Embassy as reference



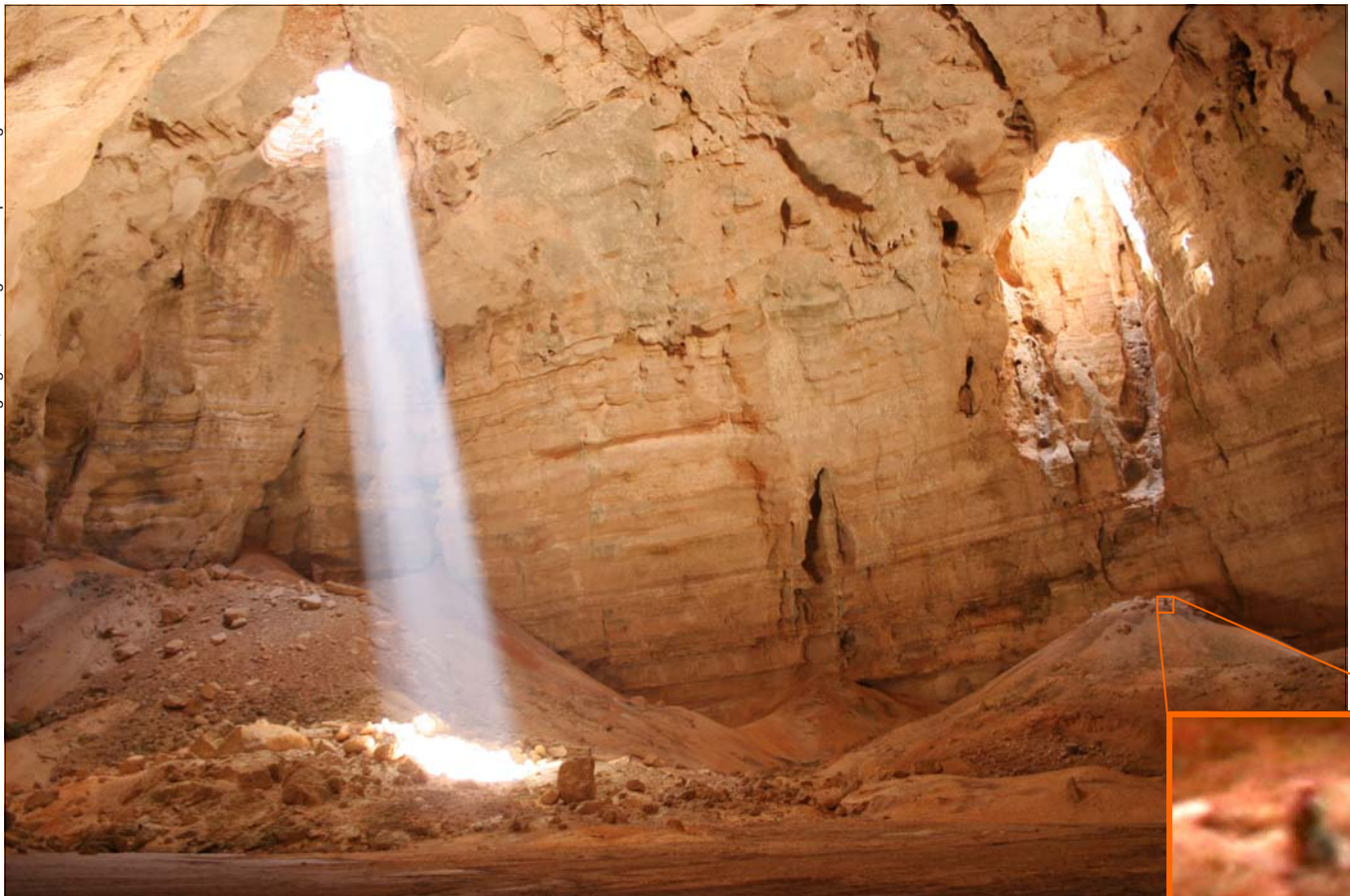
The immense scale of the cave makes the descent strangely unreal. It's kind of like



180 degree sweep of the cave floor

OUT AND ABOUT

The "Cathedral of Silence". Justin is highlighted, sitting on the top of the right debris cone.



the surface. Laying among the empty chips bags, the bits of old cloth, empty water bottles and candy wrappers are goat carcasses. The bones are wrapped in cloth – some of the villagers above believe that regular offerings to the spirits below will keep the Jinn appeased!

In contrast to the chaos of the eastern side of the cave, the floor to the west is flat – a smooth plain of mud over packed dirt marked with rivulets of water from the last rain. The mud clings to my boots as I walk across the plain to the far wall, following the footsteps of those who've come before me. I reach the wall, sit beneath an outcropping of rock and settle in to enjoy the view.

It's quiet down here. A deep, heavy quiet. The kind of quiet where your ears ring, confused by the lack of any sound. I watch as a human spider slowly descends the line – all noise of her progress engulfed by the expansiveness of the massive chamber. Sunlight courses through the natural windows above, lighting the walls of the cave with a warm glow, as the focal points of the beams trace across the floor. It's a Cathedral... a natural Cathedral of Silence. The walls of the cave and the openings above replace stained glass windows; the dirt beneath me substitutes for wooden pews; and the awe in the silence resonating around me competes with that the best man-made cathedral in the world.

Two hours of exploration and taking pictures pass by far too quickly, and soon it's time to start making our escape. The MDAC guys have rigged two of the three openings for ascents – Cheryl's Drop, through which we entered, and the large Khoshilat Maqandeli (AKA "First Drop"), which provides much of the light that illuminates the cave. I watch as the first two in our group start up the line. 200 meters of rope has a lot of stretch to it. So much, in fact, that the first 20 meters or so of work, you're bouncing up and down - just barely off the cave floor – as you pull out the slack in the line. Slowly, inexorably, you begin to make progress toward the roof, looking like you're doing "squats" on the rope. Reach up with your ascender, pulling your legs up with it. Stand up. Sit, relaxing on the croll. Reach up with the ascender... and so the pattern goes, a foot or so at a time.

Ascending from the middle of the cave where we descended, you have little in the way of frame of reference. The walls are so far away that you can't mark your progress! You slowly notice though, that the floor is indeed creeping farther and farther away... though for a long time, the ceiling doesn't appear to be getting any closer. I soon settle into a rhythm... 20 "squats", rest... 20 more... rest... 10 squats... a drink from my camelback... 10 more... stop for a picture. The rest stops become more frequent the higher I get... both to catch my breath and to admire the ever expanding view of the cave below. The

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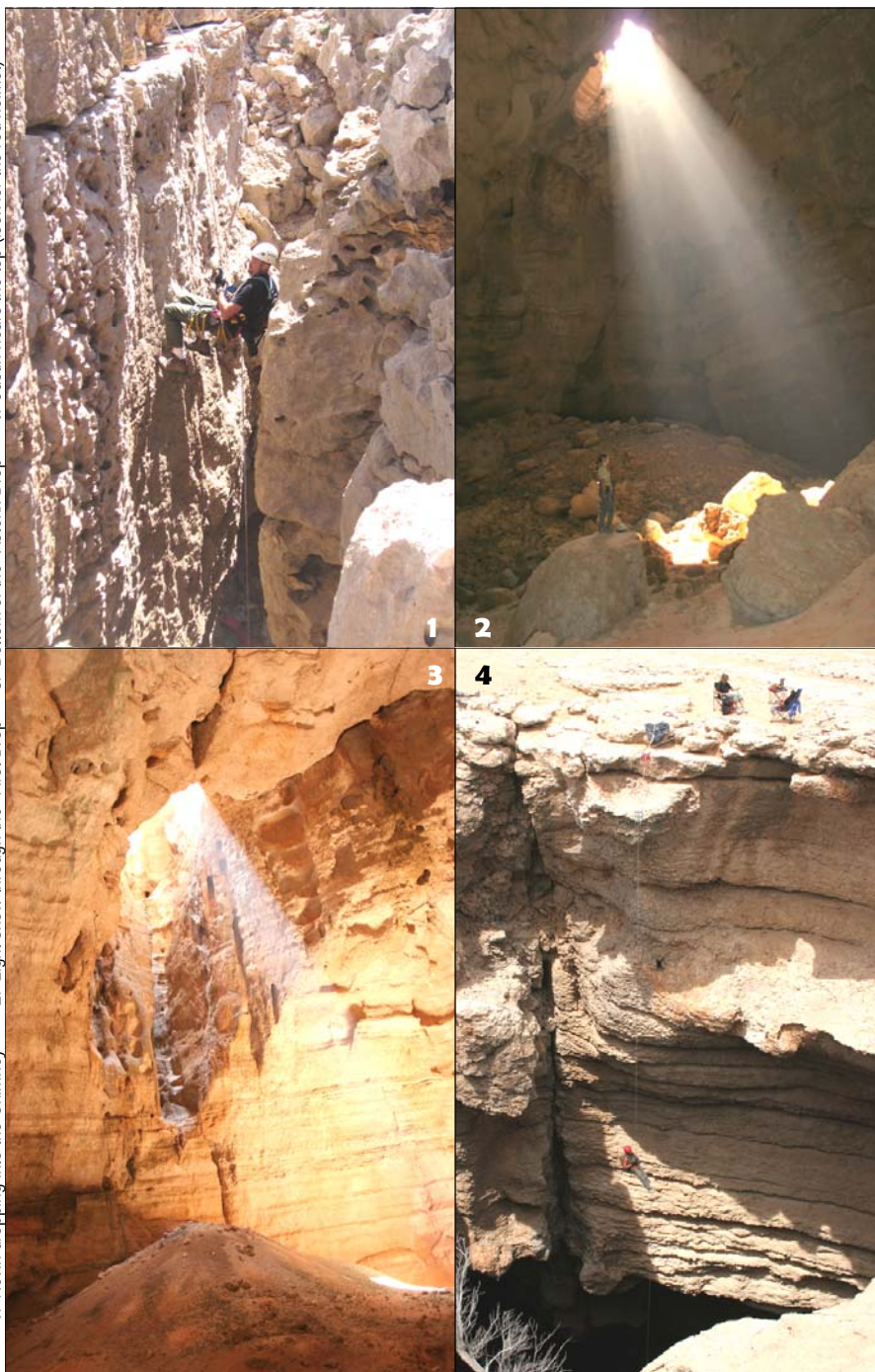
equipment works as advertised, and the ascent goes much as we had practiced on MDAC's rock wall. Training on the 5-meter rock wall though, was a little like preparing for a marathon by running laps around your desk. The scale just doesn't compare! Finally, 470 squats and about 30 minutes after I started, I emerge in the brilliant sunlight of the surface. I clamber over the rocky lip, totter a bit unsteadily away from the edge, and unclip myself from the rope. The village goats peer at me quizzically – wondering where in the world I had

just come from.

An hour later, we had recovered the rest of our party from the depths below, packed up our rope, shared a final cup of tea with the villagers, and started heading back down the mountain.

The hustle and bustle of "real life" back in civilization awaited, just a couple of hours away by road, but a world apart from the subterranean wonders of the "Cathedral of Silence."

1. Kevin dropping into the Chimney
2. Light show through the "First Drop"
3. Bottom of the "Asterix Drop"
4. Juslin nears the top (look for the red helmet)



By the Numbers

Getting There: Distance (one way): 110 miles. Trip time: 3 1/2 hours.

Facts and Figures: The base of the cave is 340 meters (1115 feet) by 228 meters (738 feet). Floor area is 58,000 square meters (14 acres). Ceiling height is 120 meters (389 feet). Longest descent is through *Cheryl's Drop* at 158 meters.

GPS Coordinates: 22°52'52.79"N, 59° 6'18.46"E

If you want to make this trip: Make sure you have a good 4WD. The road to the Selma Plateau is the worst road I've ever traveled in Oman. Good off-road driving skills and a dependable 4WD are requirements!

Go with a reliable company—*Muscat Diving and Adventure Center* is extremely professional, and is one of the only companies leading tours into the Majlis al Jinn. MDAC requires that you complete 12 hours of training before going on the trip—12 hours well spent!

<http://www.holiday-in-oman.com/>
Email: info@holiday-in-oman.com
Phone: 24-485-663

MDAC will organize the trip, conduct training and provide the equipment. You bring your own food and camping gear for the night before the descent.

Make sure you're in decent physical shape. You don't have to be Superman, but you do need to be able to do strenuous exercise for 30-45 minutes to make the ascent out of the cave. Afraid of heights? This trip will make you confront those fears... think twice before taking the plunge!

More pics and web references:

- <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199005/meeting.place.of.the.spirits.htm>
- <http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0304/feature2/index.html>
- <http://picasaweb.google.com/kevin.rubesh/MajlisAlJinn>