

Pinnacle Point cave trip
October 30, 2004

After hearing about this cave at the Western Regional convention a few weeks ago, I was excited to come on this trip. It was famous for some beautiful marble banding, lots of sticky mud, and a nice lake at the bottom. All in the scenic Stanislaus river canyon. The trip had originally been planned for two weeks ago, but an unfortunate incident at the Burning Man festival a couple weeks ago resulted in an injury to one of our original members when his curiosity brought him too close to a red-hot glowing aircraft engine. Unfortunately even after postponing the trip, he was still unable to come - he'd have to join us on a future trip.

There were 3 of us on this trip - me, Eric Johnson, and David Kestell. We met at our usual Mother Lode caver meeting place - the Burger King in Angel's camp at 10 AM. After a 40 or so minute drive on scenic Camp 9 road along the New Melones reservoir and the curious columnar basalt in the lava tablelands, we arrived at the trailhead just past the bridge over the Stanislaus River.

The distance of the hike was short, advertised as 1/4 mile, but a brutal ascent up a 30 degree slope containing patches of slippery black oak leaves. Fortunately no poison oak - whew! About halfway up the steep hill, David and I noticed a mostly buried prospector mine shaft. We were tired from the hike and decided to poke our heads in a little. The little diversion proved worthwhile - the mine had a few hundred feet of walking passages with some colorful flowstone, rimstone pools and soda straws.

Back outside the mine, we hit the steep trail again, and soon afterward our destination came into view - a tall marble pinnacle jutting upward from the steep hillside. The name of the cave suddenly made sense. We finally reached the base of the pinnacle - that distance felt like he meant "1/4 vertical mile" - we were pooped! However, several cave openings were visible and that overcame our tiredness. We saw the main cave at the base of the pinnacle, but Eric encouraged David and I to explore and poke around a bit, and we each found some other small caves nearby. It was a beautiful area to explore - the expansive views of the Stanislaus river canyon were all around us.

The entrance to Pinnacle Point is about a 50 foot drop. We rigged the rope to a fairly secure anchor inside the cave entrance, and also we rigged a backup around a large sturdy rock at the entrance, just in case the anchor would fail. The entrance contained some beautiful flowstone and stalactites lit in the twilight. After passing a ledge, we continued on rope to the bottom and left our vertical gear behind.

Several passages connected at the entrance room and we started looking around. Instead of Eric saying which way to go, he encouraged us to explore around on our own - we got to pretend we were exploring a virgin cave to our heart's content. I thought I saw one opening 8-10 feet up on one wall but after puzzling for a while to figure out how to get up there, I gave up. I noticed on the left wall there was a hole about 4 feet up - a bit more accessible, though it would take a bit of wiggling to get through. On the other side of the hole were several passages in different directions. Eric and I stayed back a little while David nearly got stuck in one passage. Though he did find an interesting artifact - a fairly large old yellow tooth! We puzzled over what kind of animal it belonged to for a while, before heading along

another passage.

The other passage was a crawl that went around the corner - Eric and David went on a little, but I went to check out a steep slope on the right. It went past a low crawl and on the other side was a steep drop that I couldn't muster the courage to attempt. Then I saw some light on the other side - it was actually natural sunlight streaming through the entrance - I spotted the rope that we came down on. It occurred to me that this must be that passage I saw from the other side, but couldn't figure how to climb up to it!

Back down the steep slope, we went on a bit until the passage pinched into a low squeeze - a very tight squeeze! David and I barely got through - I'm sure it filtered out many people with a bit bigger chest size... It was quite pristine on the other side - we explored a maze of passages and noticed deposits on the dry mud floor that looked like they hadn't been disturbed for a long time. I explored around a bit more - hoping to find an alternative to the tight squeeze to get back out, but no luck. Back through the squeeze...

Back on the other side and after laying and resting and discussing some deep thoughts, we went back to the entrance room. I had remembered hearing a bit about a lot of sticky mud and a nice lake, but still hadn't gotten there. And then an obvious passage in the entrance room appeared - apparently Eric had been standing right in front of it while telling the rest of us to "explore around a bit" in the beginning, while he was secretly hiding it!

The passage wound down a ways and came to a large room - we were about 8 feet above the floor and a slippery 60 degree slope led to the bottom. Sliding down was easy - getting back was another matter, but we'd figure that out later. We called the room the "cathedral room" (is there a cave that doesn't have a "cathedral room"?) - it was probably 30-40 feet high and long, and maybe 10-20 feet wide. All the walls were beautiful banded marble, scalloped by the flow of rushing water - it was humbling to imagine how much water must have been there at one time.

After stopping to inspect some beetles and some small bones - maybe bat bones, we went on through a low archway. The mud started almost immediately, and a large room with a very dark floor opened in front of us. We soon realized the floor was actually water - we had found the lake that was promised! Several passages continued on the other side and it was obvious there was no way to avoid the water if you wanted to see any more of the cave! But the mud and water is why we brought our coveralls and polypros.

We waded through the lake - probably 2 feet of goopy mud and 2 feet of water, so it went up to our chests. The high water mark was probably 3-4 feet higher - we would definitely be swimming in that case. We got to play around in the goopy mud for a while - exploring another maze of passages, having mud fights (for a hit to count, it had to stick and stay there), and admiring the beautiful marble banding all around us. Several places had extensive iron boxwork - some paper-thin fins of iron stuck out at least a foot. Some of the deep scallops in the banded marble were also adorned with an interesting mottling pattern - the geometric markings possibly caused by iron leeching through the marble.

We played around in the maze for an hour or so - many passages looped back on themselves and we couldn't really get lost. However, one passage had a "nut-cruncher" rock

which would come up at exactly the wrong spot if you weren't careful! We heard voices on our way out - a group of cavers from San Luis Obispo had decided to join in on the fun and wallow around in the mud a bit - a great way to spend the afternoon. Hopefully they would find the "nut-cruncher" before it found them...

It was 5:30 - how time flies when you're having fun! We wanted to stay and play some more, but we didn't really want to navigate the steep hike out in the dark. Plus we had a rope to de-rig and an 8 foot 60-degree slippery slope to manage. With a bit of teamwork, we managed the slope and headed back to the entrance pit. The San Luis Obispo group had left their vertical gear and their rope. Being responsible cavers, we inspected their gear to make sure they'd be safe on their way out. It was a bit marginal, but looked OK.

We frogged up the rope and started packing up. It was a tiring day, but a lot of fun. The only thing I really wanted then was taking a nice hot shower and stuffing my face with pizza! We derigged our rope and inspected theirs - again being responsible cavers we just wanted to make sure they would be safe.

The hike went considerably faster - going down a 30 degree slope was much faster than going up! It was almost dark before the cars were visible - yay we were almost back. However just at that time, in my haste to get back to the car, I slipped on some leaves and cut my hand a bit on a rock - at least that didn't happen at the beginning of the trip! Plus the car was less than 50 yards away - thank goodness.

Pizza at Mikes in Angels Camp couldn't have tasted better - somehow pizza after a day of exercise always seems to hit the spot. I could see how Eric started his traditional "after-cave pizza extravaganza". It was probably around 9:00 when we were done - after our fun trip to Pinnacle Point, we were already talking about the next trip.

We were back home in the Bay area around 11:30, and after a nice long hot shower I finally hit the sack - what a day!