

## *Lake Shasta patio boat trip Memorial Day 2011*



Over the Memorial Day long weekend, a group of us from the Diablo grotto set out on our annual Shasta Lake boat trip to the limestone around the McCloud river arm of the lake. We had 8 of us from the grotto - Chuck, Jef & Sue, Stephen, Gilly, me, John Moreno, and Dan Muino. And 2 from the Shasta area grotto got to join us as well - Rudi and Amber.

The trip had felt a bit disorganized a bit in the beginning - especially for me when my email was mistyped by 1 letter and the whole planning discussion was going on without me! I was stressing a bit at work and started stressing about the weekend as well. But things worked out in the end and I was going to be riding up with one of my buddies from the barbershop chorus - John Moreno. I met up at his place in Walnut creek just off 680, loaded up the car and we were soon on our way.

Passing the mothball fleet in Suisun bay (still home to the mighty USS Iowa battleship), the Sutter buttes in the central valley, past the farms and fields near Chico (seeing if we could spot any damage from the freak tornadoes from a couple days ago), we continued north on I-5. The holiday traffic was surprisingly light (maybe with higher gas prices and a still crappy economy more people are staying home) - I had anticipated a messy ride out of town.

Dinner was at the Black Bear diner near Williams - beefy burgers and steaks to gives us the energy for the next few days. The rain picked up as we headed north toward Redding - I'm glad we opted for the motel room instead of camping out by the parking lot! Plus we knew this would be our last warm bed and shower for a few days.

We woke up bright and early the next morning - Mt Shasta was gleaming white in the distance from our room - the rain had cleared and the might mountain looked beautiful. I was psyched about this long weekend - work had been quite stressful the last couple weeks with a product release that had been delayed several times. We had ranted for a couple hours about our work stresses (John was dealing with some things with his company as well) to get it out of our system - at least work was far away now. Egg McMuffins and coffee at McDonald's across the street got us going, and we were soon at the Holiday Harbor at the southern end of Shasta Lake.

Our patio boat was waiting for us - the group all met up at 8:30 right on time and we were soon loading the gear on our boat. I didn't think I had a lot of stuff, but there always seems to be more than we thought. The boat was quite full with us and our gear, pushing the bow into the water a bit as we motored out - we soon realized how much gear we had when water started pouring over the bow and started getting our bags wet! Luckily with a bit of shifting the weight around, we were fine. Poring over the map of Lake Shasta I reminisced about our trip from several years ago to Samwel and Potter Creek caves, as well as a houseboat trip with a church group a few years before that. Many good memories. The map indicated a bunch of mining ruins and trails in different directions that begged to be explored some time (John was an eager mine explorer - we started already thinking about our next trip!)

It was a bit of a trip up to Samwel - the small put-put motor on the back could only take us about 5 knots on the water. But it was a nice day and didn't mind the slow ride. We had camp set up fairly quick on a nice flat beach area just off the lake (most of the banks were quite steep so I was glad when we found a flat area). However some fairly rowdy neighbors had found the same spot! With air-horns blaring at passing boats and ATV's roaring up the logging roads, they made quite a ruckus. They already had their campfire going and alcohol flowing freely even though it was just past noon. Gotta love the kind of people getting away to the mountains!

It was a fairly short and pleasant hike up to the entrance of Samwel cave - the trail was marked with small plaques along the way talking about the Wintu indians that once lived in the area, the original name of the cave "Sar-Wol" meaning "sacred place", and how that name was mis-pronounced as "Samwel" (a little easier for us to pronounce than the original name - so maybe that's why it stuck?). Plaques also talked about some of the wildlife in the area including the short-faced bears and giant ground sloths whose bones were found in the cave. Samwel cave was much more than just an interesting playground underground - it had significant archaeological and paleontological value. Gearing up in the giant mossy entrance we anticipated what was to come - I felt we were in some rather exotic place - the entrance seemed quite out of place from the rest of the landscape. Although I had been to the same cave years ago, it felt like a whole new experience. However soon to my dismay a loud air-horn blared - seemed to be just 20 feet away, nearly deafening me for a moment! I couldn't wait to be inside the cave.# I guess our rowdy neighbors were following us.



Many tourists can see the big entrance, but few can go further - a locked metal gate at a restriction just past the entrance bars explorers any further. But we had the key (the sign said only "qualified spelunkers" were allowed - no rowdy riffraff). We locked the gate as we passed through, where just a little further was an interesting angled traverse, requiring sliding on your belly and grabbing a stalagmite while swinging your legs around about a 15-foot drop. The gate was in a very strategic place, being at a constriction and just before where the cave can be dangerous.

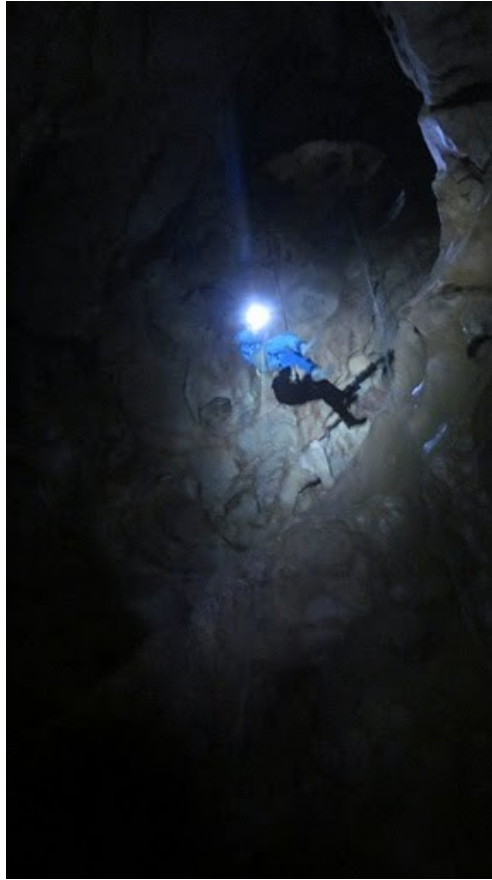
Just past the traverse were some brilliant rimstone pools - about a foot deep and about half full of sparkling clear water. An unusually wet winter has resulted in the cave coming back alive again with water dripping, pools filling up and formations growing once again. One of the rimstones was completely full and even overflowing as drips splashed and rippled through the sparkling pool. Unfortunately my hand found the water before my eyes, resulting in a soaking wet glove.



Jef and Chuck were rigging the 70-foot pit with 2 ropes side by side. Several columns were located in convenient places to tie the ropes around to lower into the pit. In the meantime, the rest of us had ample time to wander around, exploring the numerous columns and stalactites, taking pictures and just gazing at the intricacies of the formations.

We lined up and started descending the ropes - an easy 70-foot rappel into the void below. I think I was about the 4th one down, so as I descended I could see a triangle of the 3 lights of the others who had already descended. Their lights were enough to make me be able to appreciate the scale of the enormous chamber - probably 50-60 feet across. After reaching the bottom and yelling "OFF ROPE" I realized there was quite a bit more to explore - hiking up to a nice set of draperies on one side, laying on the "pancake" - a large stalagmite with a beautiful set of stalactites overhead (just make sure none decide to drop right at that time!), and testing our climbing abilities on some steep flowstone leading up to some pretty formations. We could have a field day wandering and exploring - could never do that on a commercial trip!

We had about an hour to play around and relax and explore and enjoy our lunch underground. I was glad to be underground, especially after a couple mis-adventures last summer (both times involving people getting separated from the group during the hike to the cave, causing me to not be able to do a couple caves even after we drove all the way there!). Chuck said the bottom of the pit was "boring" - the fun part is just doing the rappel, but for me, I thought there was quite a bit of fun at the bottom as well - ha ha!



One by one we started frogging back up the rope, a slow and tedious process, but not too difficult (assuming the gear is adjusted right and your chest harness is tight enough - you have to cinch it until it's already too tight, then cinch it some more!). It was fun getting pictures of people on rope - their small bodies and lights on the thin ropes were dwarfed by the massive chamber all around us. Going back up the rope I had more time to admire the huge flowstone formations and stalactites all around (often the rappel is too quick and you are just looking down anyway). I wished I had my camera on rope, but didn't think it was worth the risk - oh well. We greeted Amber at the top (who declined to go down the pit - she's still pretty new to vertical caving). It was nice getting the vertical gear off - it felt freeing to not be tied in our harnesses any more!

Back on the "horizontal" part of the cave (which was still quite vertical indeed, but we no longer needed rope), we shimmied carefully back along the traverse near the entrance, passing packs and minding the 15-foot drop right below our feet. A small ledge takes you down to the bottom of the 15-foot pit, lined with sparkling rimstone pools off to one side, and a few chimneys that take you to even lower levels of the cave. Steven and Gilly and I found about a 15-foot chimney leading right to the lake room - I've always been fascinated by water in caves (especially since water is the life of limestone caves), and the sprawling lake stretched for about 50 feet, meandering along various passages. You just had to be careful not to step in the very clear water!

We looked for the rest of the group who had not found the narrow chimney we descended, and we could hear voices and see glimmers of lights across the water (blocking my headlamp I could clearly see where the light was coming from). But how did they get across the lake without muddying the

water? After searching for a bit and not seeing a way across, we went back up the chimney and soon found another passage leading down to the lake room - maybe that's where they were. But they were heading out a different way - we realized we were doing circles around each other! We let ourselves get lost for a bit - but sometimes that's the best part of cave exploring - and where you sense the true spirit of exploration. Otherwise it's just a "tour" if you just follow the map and always know where you are. I didn't want to study the map ahead of time (and just wanted to use it for reference after we were done).

Chuck sensed it was getting a bit late - we had been underground for about 5 hours, and started rounding us up to head out. Climbing back up the slope proved to be far easier than going down (when you can see where you are and can trust the holds more), and soon we were sliding back through the metal pipe leading to the entrance gate. A fun day of caving was finished as we changed out of our muddy clothes. As my eyes adjusted back to the light of day, they beheld a glorious sight of misty-shrouded mountains with clouds passing below us over the lake. It had rained a bit while we were inside the cave (but was dry for the hike out - whew!). I felt we were in an exotic tropical paradise like Borneo or back in Ecuador (we had been there for a 9-day missions trip with my church a couple months ago and almost every day we got to see the misty Andes mountains around us).

The trail was a bit wet and muddy but the hike was pleasant in the fresh air back to camp. We had moved our boat a couple hundred yards from our camp to the trailhead since we thought the trail near camp would be full of poison oak and a stream would be uncrossable. But there was more poison oak getting back to the boat than on the trail back to camp! I skipped the poison oak by the boat and instead hiked the couple hundred yards back to camp and soon heard voices from the boat saying "how'd you get there?" and "oh shoot, we didn't need to move the boat!). Oh well - it only took a couple minutes to move the boat anyway. Just hope they didn't get the poison oak...

Back at our tents we thought we had our clothes and food and camping gear safely packed away, but I realized I made a stupid mistake - when I laid the ground cloth under my tent, it was a bit too close to the edge - when the wind blew the rain fly in a couple inches, that allowed water to run down the side of the fly and onto an exposed corner of the tarp, causing water to start pooling on top of the tarp. It could then start soaking through the bottom of the tent and into my sleeping bag and clothes - bummer. I think it even dampened my cell phone battery a little, draining my phone charge in a couple hours (luckily it dried out when I got home so the phone was fine, but I was a bit worried). If I had skipped the ground cloth (or just made sure it was tucked underneath properly) - everything would have been fine. Oh well - lesson learned for next time. Luckily we had a fire going in pretty short order where we could finish drying out our gear for the next day. Jef (the pyromaniac) got the fire going with some generous splashes of white gas (and a little more to make sure the damp wood would burn) - when the flames caught, a visible pressure wave radiated outward from the fire ring causing some of us to jump back a bit!



A wonderful potluck was enjoyed by all - turkey sausages, broccoli, pasta, steak and veggies, capped off with Rudi's beer keg and numerous bottles of Chuck's aged wine. We reminisced of past trips and good memories around the fire, as our wet clothes steamed in the heat. John almost caught part of his cave suit on fire - made sure it was definitely dry! Hearing Rudi's stories of life in his tree-house 180 feet up in a grove of old-growth redwood trees and hippie lifestyle seemed like a breath of fresh air from the rest of our busy lives and stresses while cooped up at our desks at work. It reminded me a bit of the movie Avatar, before the human invasion, when the Navi lived peaceably in the forest and communed with nature. Rudi worked as an arborist, and his girlfriend Amber made glass jewelry, so they could make her own schedule, not being bound to anything - they were free to enjoy nature as long as the cost wasn't too expensive!

I knew we had to be up fairly early the next morning - we had to motor a couple hours to Potter creek, find the cave, rig the difficult pit (the cave was famous for its notorious lip, which would make the ascent back up pretty tough), do the cave, hike back, and return the boat by 4:00. I was thinking if we got back late and had to keep the boat an extra day, I wouldn't complain (but it would be a bit more expensive and that would be tough for some people - some people almost dropped the trip completely since they were afraid of the cost). Jef made sure we were up - I was just stirring in my sleeping bag as it started to get light when suddenly a huge \*BOOM\* stirred us awake. My mind wasn't quite awake yet and I started to ponder what it was - I hoped it wasn't the crazy folks next to us doing something silly, and that it wasn't our boat engine blowing up or something! When I soon realized it had to be our pyromaniac friend, I started to laugh.

Our neighbors had left and didn't come back - I was surprised. But glad too - it had been a peaceful night sleep. And luckily all my gear dried out OK the night before - otherwise it could have been a miserable cold night in a wet down sleeping bag! Breakfast was pretty basic - just coffee and pastries and fruit - we had to get rolling since the schedule was a bit tight.

A heavy layer of mist spread across the calm waters of Lake Shasta in the morning - it had gotten quite chilly after the weather system from the previous afternoon passed through and the sky was clear. A low layer of clouds hung just a couple hundred feet over the water, exposing the tops of the hills above, bathed in warm sunlight. I felt we were definitely in another country. I had worried a bit about the rain initially, that it was going to spoil part of the trip and make things cold and damp, but it actually made for quite a neat experience. But the forecast improved just before we left and it wasn't supposed to rain again until the last afternoon as we would be going home.

We motored across the smooth, misty lake surface, across the lacy wisps of fog. Some small breezes blew on one side, wrapping the tendrils of mist into mini tornadoes a few inches across and several feet high. The water temperature was probably around 60 and the air about 40, but the water looked like a giant hot spring, like the Blue Lagoon in Iceland. Oh if only it was that warm!

It was a nice smooth ride over toward Potter creek - actually it was just across the lake from Holiday Harbor (where we would go later to return the boat). Luckily we had a decent GPS coordinate on where to park the boat to make sure we picked the right cove (otherwise it would be a long poison-oaky bushwhack through much brush). Chuck remembered there being a trail through some of the brush, but with the wet last couple years and the lake being much higher than usual (even some trees were submerged halfway up their trunks!), the landscape didn't look as familiar as in years past, being overgrown and the familiar beach submerged. I was a little worried about his part of the trip (last year, the group never even found Potter Creek cave - they bushwhacked for a while and eventually gave up after a poison-oak lined hike in 90 degree heat for a few hours!)

We scrambled a little ways up the hill, past an old rusty lawn chair and some beer cans (we thought we were on the right track by now), but were soon blocked by thick brush and some rocks. Plus the cave was supposedly in the exact opposite direction! We gave up after a few minutes, not wanting to repeat what happened last year. Also when seeing the hill behind the boat was pretty grassy and going about the right way (though the "trail" was supposed to be where we already were), we gave up looking for the trail, took the boat to the other side of the cove and started hiking up the steep grassy hill. Chuck thought he had the GPS of the cave entrance but it turned out to be a different landmark, so suddenly we realized we were not quite sure where we were going. hmmm - at least it wasn't too hot and the weather was nice. Plus the view of snow-capped Shasta Bally was beautiful right over Lake Shasta and the I-5 bridge (not to be confused with Mt Shasta itself which was socked in clouds and in the other direction).



The hike was steep, but only went for about 30 minutes when suddenly I heard a shout ahead "CAVE!" - yay, I couldn't believe it! We had found it so soon. But then came an "OH WAIT" - that wasn't it. What! But Jef remembered there was another cave about 150 feet directly below Potter Creek cave, and we must have found the other cave. When we saw a large bat guano slope in the back, we knew where we were. Yay - we just had to hike 150 feet up the hill to find Potter Creek! The last part was steep, but we were enthusiastic at this point.

The entrance to Potter creek is huge but tucked behind some bay trees (trees often grow near cave entrances where it's cooler and damper than the surrounding dry rocky hills). Most of the floor of the entrance was dry and dusty, except for a couple drips in the ceiling resulting in rings of ferns on the floor. They looked like small islands of vegetation in the bare dirt with small holes at their centers caused by the water drops. A couple parts of the floor had been dug out for archaeological reasons (bones had been found at Samwel cave and scientists believed there had to be interesting remains here too). Supposedly digging had been done off and on for around 125 years. We would see several dug-out pits in the bottom of the cave as well. I'm not sure if they found anything, but they sure tried hard.



Jef and Rudi were already inside rigging the rope (we knew the rigging would be difficult), so I decided to try to climb to a fun little chamber right by the ceiling of the entrance. I remember seeing it on my trip from several years ago (this was my second time to Potter Creek), but remembered it being a difficult climb and didn't try it. But this time I wanted to give it a shot. Climbing up ended up being not as difficult as I expected and I soon popped out on the alcove high in the entrance. Maybe my climbing confidence increased a little over the last few years? I heard John mention "how'd you get up there?!" - it was a fun little challenge. I carefully down-climbed my way down (knowing John was nearby in case I needed a spot), and got back down just in time when the rope was finished being rigged.

Rudi, being the arborist, came up with a clever way of rigging the rope with a re-belay to avoid the troublesome lip at the top of the drop. If the rope was allowed to drop straight into the pit, it would go right over a sharply overhanging lip through a tight squeeze (Steven had gotten stuck there on our last trip and didn't want to repeat it!). But this time, the rope passed over to the side, avoiding anything remotely tight and where the lip stuck out only about a foot (so you could push off with your feet easily to get past it).

The rappel was quite straightforward and we were all down in maybe 1/2 hour (Sue decided to stay at the entrance and read a book - just wanted to relax), but Amber gave the rope a try. At the bottom of the pit, I poked around at the archeological digs and wondered what they might have found, but it was hard to tell. On the other side of the room at the bottom of the pit was a fun muddy squeeze where you could shimmy down one way and slide back up a different way in a loop. Then a climb up a 20 foot steep muddy slope takes you to a small tunnel with a very nice room hidden in the back. Climbing the slope was tough enough, but at the top I saw the tunnel was about 2 feet in diameter and about at face level.



The rock and mud all around the tunnel was smooth, lacking any decent holds. But with 3 of us there, me, Dan and Gilly, we were able to help boost each other into the tunnel. Just being lifted about 6 inches was enough for me to get enough traction to pull myself through the tunnel and get to the room behind. The room was very unspoiled, laced with glittering flowstone and stalactites. In the far back of the secret room was a beautiful pool, rimmed with cave pearls, popcorn, and an overhanging rim that had formed on the water's surface. I felt like I had peeked into a bit of what the world would have looked like without humans to corrupt and pollute the pristine environment. I've been recently reading Alan Weisman's "The World Without Us" which had sparked my imagination to see what the world would have been like if humans had not spoiled nature. By now, people have covered almost every bit of the earth's surface, and it seems to be only in these small tucked-away niches that you could get a glimpse of unspoiled nature. And it was quite beautiful - I didn't have my camera handy (didn't want to beat it up too much), but using our teamwork, we got it passed through the small tunnel and got at least a couple blurry photos. Maybe if all our caves are permanently closed due to White-Nose syndrome, and nobody ever goes caving again, the caves will return to their pristine natural state (but who would be around to see it?)

Slithering out of the tunnel on my belly feet-first was much easier than going in, and soon we were heading back up the rope to ascend out of the pit. Someone had dropped a bunch of cyalume sticks around the bottom of the pit (would have been cool to go down, seeing the shining green light-sticks at the bottom). But they had irresponsibly left them behind as garbage. I had to do my duty to pick them up... A bat fluttered overhead - I wanted to do my part to keep the cave clean.

It was Amber's turn before mine to go back up the rope, and she attempted the ascent old-school style with prussic knots (skipping the modern jumar and croll ascenders). Unfortunately about 10 feet up, she realized the rope was a bit too dirty for her upper prussic knot to pass easily. The ascent ended up being quite a chore, until she stopped and one of us handed her a jumar ascender. She replaced the prussic with the jumar and ascended much more efficiently. The lip also ended up being a bit tougher than she expected (with her sub-optimally adjusted harness). Luckily enough people were already on top that they could set up a 3-1 Z-haul and heave her upward a couple feet to get her over the lip!

Rudi had his ascender made of parts of an old Russian nuclear submarine (which apparently could ascend the rope without needing the gripper "teeth" - it would only let the rope pass one direction). My ascender was just a conventional croll - nothing too exciting, but got the job done. One guy had a Mitchell ascending system with 2 foot loops. We all ascended using whatever method we were comfortable with. I should go to the next vertical practice to experiment with some of the other systems. Besides a little bit of rope snag right near the top, the ascent over the lip was quite easy - thanks Rudi for your expert bit of rigging!

Just as we were packing up and de-rigging the drop, Rudi found another pit just to the left of the main pit. After getting Jef's attention about the pit, Jef slithered a way down through a tight crack to where he could look down into the black void beyond. The pit appeared to drop about 20 feet before angling to the left, out of sight. But it was already getting late and we'd have to save the pit for the next trip - oh well. But it's always fun knowing we have something to go back to!

Back in the entrance room somehow I got a bit emotional when putting away the gear - somehow seeing all the beauty hidden underground left a bit of an impression on my mind and heart as well. The time underground had been a wonderful escape from the stress at work and was immersive to the mind to the point where everything was able to reset and clear anew. I was saddened to face the reality of leaving the beautiful environment and knowing I would have to go back to the mundane world.



We had the GPS of the entrance now, and with the knowledge of the better way to rig the drop, we knew that future trips should be much easier. It was a fairly quick hike back down the hill toward the boat, and the excellent route-finding and rigging saved enough time for us to not only be not rushed, but to even have time for a swim - cleaning the grime from 2 days of caving off our bodies as well as the bits of poison oak (and Chuck appreciated the swim after slipping on the sandy trail falling right into a leafy bush of the noxious plants!)

The ride back to the marina was relaxing - nice just to put your feet up and enjoy the warm sun (much warmer than the previous day!) The ice cream back at the gift shop at the marina was much appreciated too - made for a wonderful reward after 2 days underground! And for a little icing on the cake, as we were enjoying some of Rudi extra pasta and meat sauce back in the parking lot, Chuck came back to us saying we got a discount on our boat - so instead of it being \$60 / person, it was going to be just \$33! Glad nobody bailed on the trip because of the money. Maybe we should have kept the boat for 3 days (and not have had the time pressure to get back from Potter creek), since we could have had the boat for the extra day for still the original \$60. Oh well - another lesson learned for the next year. And then maybe we'd have time to try the newly discovered pit in Potter Creek.

Our cars were parked about a mile away in the overnight parking at Holiday Harbor (at least they provided a car shuttle - would have been a long walk!) Soon we had our gear packed back in our cars and were caravanning to Ellery Creek where we planned on camping. In years past, we've always been able to find a nice spot in that campground, which is located near another cave called Horseshoe cave (you can go in one way, horse-shoe your way around and come out a different way). But a bit to our dismay, Ellery Creek and in fact all the campgrounds nearby were either closed (were flooded because the lake was so high after all the rains), or full (since all the people were concentrated in the remaining campgrounds) - bummer.

When we pulled aside to decide what to do, a yellow Wrangler pulled up, and the driver Steve was friends of Rudi and Amber from the Shasta Area grotto! They happened to be passing through and they recognized Rudi's old Mercedes - how about that! We chatted for about 1/2 hour, got some locations of some more cave entrances (including some "secret" ones) and got some tips on where to camp. I think we already had plenty of ideas for next year's trip!

Crossing the McCloud river bridge at the end of the McCloud arm of Shasta lake, we came upon a wonderful group camp spot that was open - yay! A couple cars were there but were probably just overflow cars from people fishing or something - nobody came to bother us - nice! Our tents were soon up (to make sure we "claimed" the spot), and Jef soon had the fire going. This time, to keep us from being blown back by the shock wave of the igniting white gas, Jef laid out a streamer of gas about 10 feet long, so when he lit the end of the streamer and the fire went "woof!" we could watch from a safe distance!

Rudi and Dan went down to the lake to go fishing (catch & release) since they had already eaten plenty earlier and the rest of us enjoyed the nice campfire and telling of tall tales. Much beer and wine were to be had (Rudi's keg was still mostly full - I was surprised!). We watched the stars and several satellites streak overhead in the clear mountain sky before hitting the sack.

The next morning, we were awakened by the birds chirping and rustling in the nearby tents (no bomb blast was necessary this time since we didn't have a schedule - nice!), so we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of coffee, fruit, eggs and sausages and toasted bagels before packing up and heading a couple miles down the road to Horseshoe cave.

The hike to the cave is only a couple steps more than the hike to Rippled cave (totally the opposite as to finding Potter Creek with the steep hill!) - following a well-worn path through the thorny blackberry bushes takes you right to the entrance. Other than having to dodge a couple poorly placed poison oak plants, it is an easy 3 minute walk to the cave. The entrance is about a 3-foot diameter round tube descending at about a 30 degree angle for maybe 100 feet or so - a fun slide down. We were greeted by a cute black and red striped millipede about 6 inches long at the end of a slithering muddy belly crawl (he curled up into a nice circle when I passed by!)



The cave isn't real big, but it is a bit sporty in places full of fun climbs, slides, squeezes and mud at the bottom. My primary light started flickering at a very inconvenient spot - probably because the battery pack was jostling around a bit (it stopped flickering when I got out of the squeeze), but I was fearing the worst. My backup worked fine, but I realized how much it would suck to be caught in the dark right in the middle of the awkward squeeze! The reward for the squeeze though was a wall of sparkling purple flowstone and some small but pretty pools.

A steep slope led to the bottom of the cave where Ellery creek flows underground, coming from a spring, flowing for about 30 feet, ending in a siphon sump. A 30-ft hand-line proved useful for the group as we made our way down - otherwise it could be a long slide, going right into the cold water. I wonder if anybody had ever dived the sump. Even in low water at the end of the summer, the passage is still sumped - maybe it goes through another cave system whose entrance is still buried in poison oak and thorny blackberries and just nobody has found yet?

Nearby the water is a junction room with 4 options - the way we came down, a fun little climb up and down about a 20 ft slide (which reaches part of the creek further downstream by the sump), a muddy chute where you can slide head-first back down, and the Y-room - a 20 ft chimney with 2 chambers at the top, connected by a small hole. Gilly was first in the head-first slide room - she climbed up about 8 feet up a very steep muddy chute, swiveled around in a small room at the top, then came barreling head-first down the mud back toward us. We had to catch her in case she would keep sliding right into the water! It was entertaining to see how dirty we would end up getting! Especially for Gilly whose cave suit was torn the previous day, so she had thrown it away and was now caving in just regular clothes! We took turns on the slide and shooting videos of each other (and I think some may have found their way onto YouTube...)

I've always been one who prefers climbs to squeezes, so I opted for the Y-room instead of the head-first slide. The entrance is in the ceiling - a 2-ft diameter hole just above our heads. With a boost from Steven, I could get high enough to grip the walls of the chimney and start shimmying up. I went up first, picking one side of the Y, then Gilly went up to the other side of the Y and we got to see each others faces and shake hands through the small hole - this was definitely a jungle-gym for adults! I felt like being back in elementary school at recess and playing all over again!

Sliding back down the chimney was fun (after making sure someone was there to catch me on the way down!). I wish I had my camera, but I realized it would be hard to get pictures - it was the experience that counted! I thought this cave was a great exercise in teamwork - we helped each other with boosts, body-belays, and spots on the down-climbs. When we had enough fun we started back up the slope with the hand-line. We were soon on our way back to the main chamber of the cave and making our way back through the muddy belly crawl (and our millipede friend was still there). Then up the 30-degree tubes (some people went one way, some the other), and we were out.

Rudi had found out from his friend that there was another cave just about 100 feet from Horseshoe cave and we thrashed our way through the brush looking for it. We actually found it pretty easily (since it's along the same creek) - Rudi and Amber slithered down about 30 feet to a large room and came back up. I was eager to give it a try, but it was already about 1:00 and we had a long drive back home (plus we wanted to get back not too late and get cleaned up and ready for work and the real world the next day). Oh well - another thing to check out on our next trip.

We got a few parting photos - saying bye to Rudi and Amber (who were headed back up north to Weed) and we were ready to start heading back. But 2 small adventures were about to start. First, John realized he didn't have his keys - he reached in his pocket for his keys and his hand just went right through his pocket - whoops! But a quick search found the keys just nearby - whew, they had just dropped right there in the parking lot! But it was reminiscent of my adventure in Lassen about a month earlier when my keys dropped through my pocket into the snow and were lost. But amazingly an angel must have found them and turned them into the visitor center where I could retrieve them - amazing! At least John wasn't driving so he would have been OK, but it still really sucks to lose your keys (and not just 1 key, but the whole ring with 8 or 9 separate keys!)



Then we were all in our cars and ready to hit the road when I noticed Chuck wasn't following - he was still parked on the turnout and not moving. When he tried to start his car, the ignition just went click-click. Bummer - car wouldn't start. But luckily someone had a jumper cable and I was able to pull my car next to Chucks and we jumped his car - started right away - whew! He must have left one of the lights on inside - I think maybe a strap was caught in one of the doors, causing it to not close completely, and making the dome light stay on the whole time we were in the cave, draining the battery. Two crises averted - whew!

Back on I-5 we headed south, returned the Samwel key, visited the Shasta lake visitor center in Redding (had some interesting information on the Wintu Indians around Samwel), and went by the famous Sundial bridge over the Sacramento river (we just drove by this time since most of us had been there before). It was about 3:00 when we decided to stop at the Black Bear Diner (second time for John and me!), but this time I decided to gorge on the blueberry pancakes (pancakes is one of those "breakfast" foods that can be enjoyed at any time of the day. A week later we'd be having blueberry waffles at a friend's place for dinner!)

We were home by about 7:00 - the sun came back out as we drove south. Rain and wind blew through the area that night (glad we weren't camping another night!) as winter would keep its hold in the Shasta area a bit longer. My washer definitely got a bit of a workout dealing with the muddy laundry (actually for one pair of jeans it made sense just to throw them away!), causing it to overflow a bit, dumping water on my floor - bummer. Another lesson learned! We all made it home that night, just a bit tired and dirty, but no injuries or further car problems - whew! It was a great trip and I look forward to the next one!