

# Out and About

Journeys Completed or Contemplated

## A rope, a cliff, and that big step backward

*You cannot be brave if you are not first afraid.*

Here are the things I was afraid of:

The height.

The heat.

Holding everyone else up.

Getting all the way down, and not being strong enough to make the trip back up.

The way I'd feel the next day if I made my body do things it was not up for.

So I didn't go. I stayed behind with the guy with the new knee. We watched our travel companions strap on their harnesses, clip in to the ropes, and drop over the side of the sinkhole. Most of them would rappel to the bottom, then climb back up the ropes to the halfway mark. Then, they'd hike out.

I hiked to the halfway mark along the ledge. Me, and a guide, and the guy with the new knee. It wasn't hard. There was a little bushwhacking, a little swatting at mosquitoes, and it was humid. We reached the halfway point and waited. We looked up at pictographs and down at the bright green birds circling below.

*Sima de las Cotorras* — “Parakeet Sinkhole” — is in the Mexican state of Chiapas. It's about 500 feet across and 500 feet deep and takes its name from the hundreds of parakeets that make their homes here. The pictographs on the sinkhole walls are attributed to the Zoque people, indigenous to the region.

When I told friends I was off to Chiapas, they asked me if it was dangerous, this traveling to Mexico.

“I'm not planning to buy drugs or run immigrants,” I said. “So what should I be afraid of?”

My trip would be three days of guided outdoor activities and three days in San Cristobal de las Casas, an attractive colonial settlement in the Chiapas highlands. My biggest worries were that I would eat all the hand-made tamales, thus annoying my travel companions, or that I'd say something really stupid in my bad Spanish.

I had not considered that I had signed up to drop over a 500-foot ledge.

I enjoyed watching my travel companions descend the vertical face of the sinkhole. They swung in the air above me, dropping a few feet every time they fed the rope up through a system of brakes designed to keep them safe. They spun out away from the wall; a few of them shot photos. A handful of them unclipped at the halfway point. The remaining climbers continued on to the floor of the sinkhole, disappearing below a canopy of trees. Those of us with our feet

on the ground hiked out along the ledge and drank coffee in the visitor's center perched on the rim.

The following day we hiked down to a waterfall, ate more tamales, and sat in the visitor's center chattering late into the night. I had this crazy idea. If I was not holding up the trip, if I got up really early, maybe I could have another go and drop over the edge this time? My biggest fear was no longer of the heat or the height, or even of holding everyone up. It was that I would miss out. And that fear was exactly the motivation I needed.

I asked the guides and I asked my travel companions — would you mind? Could I? I didn't want to leave without knowing what it felt like to hang from a rope in the sky surrounded by screaming parakeets and the red walls of the sinkhole.

“Let's do it,” said Mauricio, the first guide.

“I'll take you; no problem,” said Alex, the second guide.

At 5:30 a.m., Alex checked my harness, my brake, and I backed over a 500-foot ledge. I swung freely in the harness, my feet touching nothing, and watched the bright green birds circle below. I spun away from the wall and waved at my waiting companions on the opposite rim. I did not feel brave, but I did feel light.

What changed my mind? It wasn't that all of a sudden I'd become fearless. And certainly I had not become super fit overnight; if anything, I was in worse shape, my body was battered and sore from a difficult hike the day before. And it was still hot. I was dripping with sweat as soon as the sun hit me.

You cannot be brave if you are not first afraid. Of course, I was afraid to step out into the open air. No sensible person should be completely cavalier about such an activity. But a sense of adventure can diminish fear. Fear can be transformed into plain old common sense. And being surrounded by people you trust helps — I knew Alex; my guide would not let anything happen to me. Trust is fear's biggest enemy. A little fear, under the right conditions, can become courage. And that can send you right over the edge in the best possible way.

We went halfway down the rock wall, about 200 feet. Suspended in the air, it was still hot, it was still a long way down, and I could feel where I would be bruised from the harness. But I was no longer afraid. ♦

# Over the Edge

by Pam Mandel

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