



CENOTE PUERTA MAYA, SISTEMA AH KAX HA

January 2023 Announcement



Arya Hintsala in Puerta Maya, © Natalie L Gibb, 2023

A BRIEF HISTORY

As far as we understand, Cenote Puerta Maya, once referred to as 27 Steps, was originally explored by Steve Gerrard and Andreas Matthes in the late 1990s or early 2000s. The cenote was named after the twenty-seven stone Mayan stairs that lead to the water. On the lines close to Cenote Puerta Maya, divers can see original, hand-cut and Aquatec arrows from this time.

Cenote Avicola (which translates roughly to “Chicken Ranch”) is a cenote slightly to the north that was originally explored by Bil Phillips and Pablo Diaz around the same time frame. They put a few hundred meters of line into the cave but did not continue the exploration.

In 2011, our team consisting of Natalie L Gibb, Vincent Rouquette-Cathala, and Anders Knudsen, was invited to dive Cenote Avicola by the caretaker. Vince saw a low bedding plane at the end of the line left by Pablo and Bil, emptied a reel, and the second era of exploration in the system began. We connected Avicola to a new cenote, which we named Ah Kax Ha (Chicken Water). We then proceeded to write chicken puns on every single exploration arrow. We named the new surveyed system Ah Kax Ha.

When we learned that Ah Kax Ha was close to Puerta Maya/27 Steps, we began pushing for a connection. It was not far but did require passing through a

relatively easy sidemount restriction, which would have prevented the original explorers from making a connection in backmount. During this time, we continued to add lines in all directions, starting from both Ah Kax Ha and Avicola.

Alessandro Reato was also invited to work in the area by other landowners and started working in a cenote called Selva Maya. He also added a few lines to Ah Kax Ha. Soon, Vince made the connection from Ah Kax Ha to Selva Azul, and the once small system grew to over 7 kilometers and 4 cenotes.

We started guiding select divers at the system, beginning from cenote Puerta Maya/27 Steps, but after a few years, the landowners stopped frequenting the ranch and we lost access. In 2021, we swung by the cenote after exploring and were delighted to find the original landowner’s son, Isauro, was cleaning up the ranch, opening the cenote to snorkelers and swimmers, and was interested in inviting divers.

We began a serious resurvey and line cleaning in December 2022, as the original survey files were corrupted and there were an excessive number of T’s remaining from when we lost access to the site. It’s nice to revisit the system and relearn the lines anyhow, as it’s been quite some time since we could access it!

OPEN TO DIVERS!

Our team is still actively resurveying and continuing the exploration of Ah Kax Ha. However, we have cleaned and resurveyed it enough that we are pleased to announce it is open to divers. During this time, the system is accessible to certified cave and cavern divers with a local guide, or to divers with known local experience and a reference from a local guide or instructor.

THE OPEN WATER

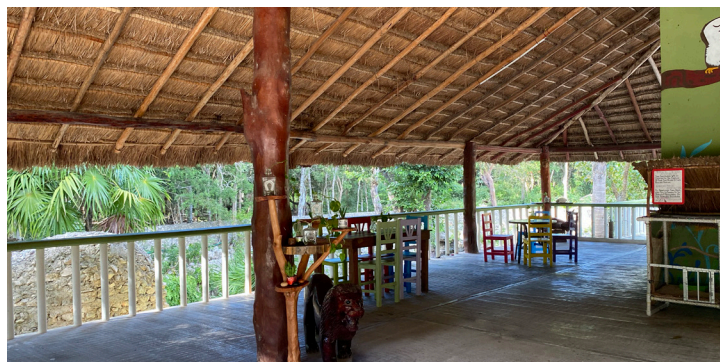
Cenote Puerto Maya has a large open water area, with a depth of approximately 1-2 meters. The open water is silty and is generally silted significantly by the end of the day by snorkelers and swimmers. However, it would be apt for kicking practice and basic drills if instructors wanted to practice with students in challenging shallow water. There is one spot where I managed to make an open water line circuit to practice zero visibility, but in general, there are very few tie-offs in the open water, and I wouldn't suggest the place for open water zero visibility practice or reel work.

THE CAVERN LINE

Cenote Puerto Maya now has a gold cavern line, however, it's only about 600 feet/200 meters. The profile of the cavern zone is such that it has extreme depth changes. Combined with the iffy visibility in the open water, I would not suggest this site for guided cavern tours/ divers who are not cavern certified.

On the cavern line, there are a few areas of formations, the line bounces from 2 meters to 15 meters, and at one point hits the halocline around 14 meters, where divers can see some nice hydrogen sulfide swirls.

I'm suggesting this cavern line as a training site. I feel that it is reasonable for buoyancy practice for cavern divers, high-impact skills and drills, and line-following work. I even made a really stupid corner to see if I can get cavern students to incorrectly cut the corner and break visual contact with the line a bit. :) The land-owner would like to see this opened as a training site, as it's not really a great cavern for cenote tours.



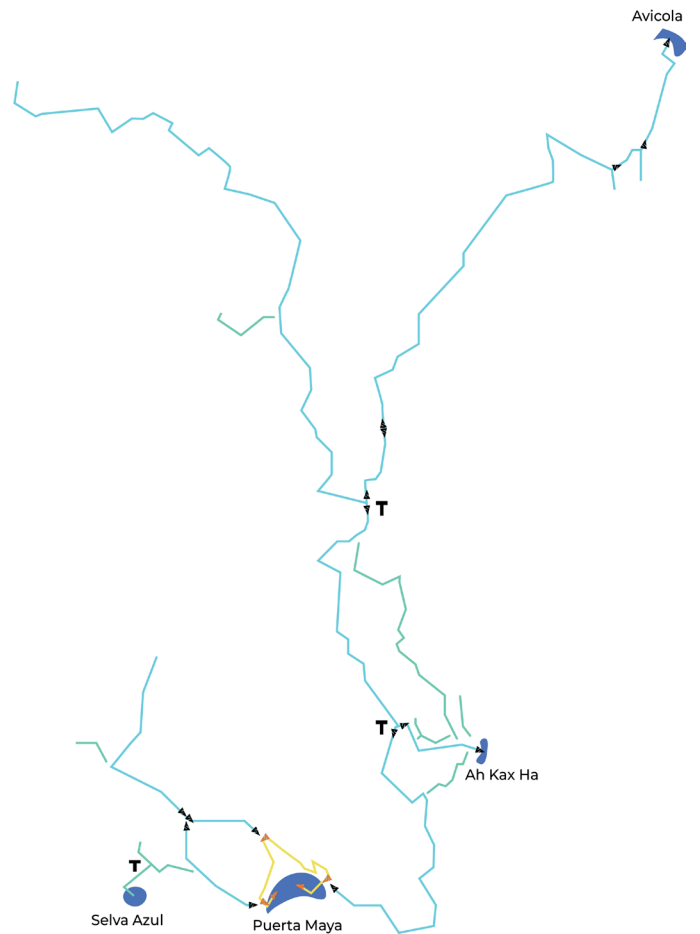
Clockwise from the top right: Arya Hintsala stands at the edge of Cenote Puerto Maya, the facade overlooking the stairs, overhanging vegetation at the cenote, and a nice shady palapa with tables and a view of the cenote that divers may use. @ Natalie L Gibb 2023

THE CAVE LINES

Three main cave lines, two to the west and one to the east are accessible as jumps from the cavern line. The first 200-300 meters of each line is reasonable for Intro to Cave training, and for Intro to Cave certified divers. As there will not be guided cavern tours at this site, I would suggest Intro to Cave Divers simply run their line under the cavern line to reach a direct connection to the cave line, as we all used to do in Grand Cenote. There's not a good way to make it possible to route around the cavern line due to the scarcity of tie-offs, and I actually think it's a good example of how to work around non-ideal line work situations for students.

Both of the west lines max out at about 24 meters, with average depths of around 18-20 meters. They are not particularly long, but could be used for high-impact skills, and even lost line drills. I would, however, be careful with this, as it is a relatively un-dived cave at this point, and not that stable on open circuit.

The eastern line is appropriate for Intro to Cave divers up to about 200/300 meters where there is a restriction. After this, there are two T-intersections. This line starts at around 14-15 meters, but quickly reaches much more shallow depths. I would suggest the first 100 meters or so of this line as a high-impact training cave as well. It's very much like Ponderosa or Chikin Ha until the line gets shallow.



A partial resurvey missing most of the jump lines. The cavern line is yellow, the mainlines are blue, and the jumps are green. We have a lot of work left!



Arya Hintsala on the middle jump from the Puerta Maya cavern line. © Natalie L Gibb 2023



Arya Hintsala on the middle jump from the Puerta Maya cavern line. © Natalie L Gibb 2023

THIS SURVEY IS INCOMPLETE WE ARE ACTIVELY EXPLORING IN THE SYSTEM

Under the Jungle's resurvey of Sistema Ah Kax Ha is incomplete, and we are using every possible day off to continue the project. As such, the attached map shows only the cavern line, mainlines, and a few jumps. I will continue to update the map with a number of jump lines as they are surveyed.

We ask that visitors respect the fact that we are actively exploring the system, and are currently working on a resurvey and still plan to push our old lines. We will update the community with new information about the system as it grows, and we hope to add quite a bit, now that we all have rebreathers!

ACCESS

Puerta Maya is just behind Akumal, about a 10-15 minute drive door-to-door from Under the Jungle. Specific directions will be given to divers when they pick up the key. We currently only have one key available. If this access experiment works and the landowner approves, we will get more keys. However, for now, it is necessary to let us know one day in advance/ the night before you dive, in order to reserve the key for the day. WhatsApp Nat @ 984 806 1962

Access to Cenote Puerta Maya is possible every day for a cost of \$300 pesos per diver. As normal, guides do not pay. The key and the sign-in book are at Under the Jungle, which opens at around 8:30 am. For the moment, it is necessary to come to Under the Jungle for the key, and to sign the liability release form for the landowner, as he is uncomfortable checking certification cards.

Payment is direct to the landowner at the dive site. His name is Isauro and he usually arrives between 10 and 11 am. You can dive and just pay him after your first dive.

I'll keep you all posted as the project continues,

Natalie L Gibb
on behalf of the
Under the Jungle Team

