

Rolf Adams 1965–1992

On Sunday afternoon, April 19, 1992, Australian cave explorer Rolf Adams died in Hole in the Wall spring near Marianna, Florida, in a cave-diving accident. Adams was one of the world's leading deep-cave explorers. He had come to the United States at the end of February to join an international team that was training for the 1993 San Agustín Expedition to Huautla, Oaxaca, Mexico. The team had successfully completed two months of cave-diving training at hyperbaric research facilities and at Jackson Blue Spring, using computer-controlled rebreathers, and was in the process of packing up when Adams and team-mate Jim Smith decided to tour one of the many nearby springs prior to Adams's departure for Australia that afternoon, using standard open-circuit cave-diving apparatus. They were returning to the entrance from a 365-meter penetration into the cave when Adams developed difficulty breathing at a depth of 30 meters. Despite a heroic effort by Smith to assist, Adams passed out and drowned within 60 meters of the entrance. Medical studies later indicated that he had suffered an arterial gas embolism.

Adams was best known to cave-exploration teams around the world for his pioneering work in the deep caves of Oaxaca, Mexico, although his capabilities were also well known in European circles, in his native Australia, and in New Zealand. Rolf gained fame in 1987 in the Chilchotla highlands of Oaxaca as a protégé of Australia's premier vertical caver, Alan Warild. He was quickly recognized as an outstanding team player and began working with the American team exploring Cueva Cheve. He became a prime force in establishing it as the deepest cavern in the Western Hemisphere. In the spring of 1989, Rolf was the catalyst behind many breakthroughs in the Cheve system. On a three-day blitz from Camp II, he and Jim Smith pioneered the intricate path leading out of the Hall of the Restless Giants that was the crucial route that opened up the vast discoveries to follow. A week later, he led Bob Benedict and me back through this section to where we ultimately discovered the Black Borehole and what was then the deepest point in Cheve, at -1125 meters. Rolf was also the driving force behind a 40-hour marathon push that successfully linked the 887-meter-deep



Photo by Bill Stone

Osto de Puente Natural to Cueva Cheve, a feat that added significantly to the overall depth and length of the system. I am quite certain that everyone involved in that trip, both from the Puente and Cheve sides, has clear memories of Rolf's cheerful character even when the going was grim. On a return expedition, in the spring of 1990, Rolf was a member of the team that first established Camp III at -1050 meters and explored and surveyed Cheve to a depth of -1364, establishing it as the world's sixth-deepest cave. He was also one of only three people to have made a day-trip to Camp III in Cheve, a thirty-hour, twenty-kilometer round trip to 1050 meters below the Cheve entrance.

A Yosemite-class 5.11 rock climber, kayaker, and long-distance runner, Rolf was to have participated in the annual 24-hour "Rogaining" overland running event held in New South Wales, Australia, following his return from the training mission in Florida.

Rolf earned his masters degree in applied mathematics at the University of California at Berkeley in 1989 and was to begin work on his PhD in Belgium following the return of the San Agustín Expedition. He was a brilliant computer scientist and had recently completed a one-year sabbatical developing computer-vision protocols at the CSIRO Applied Mathematics Branch of Australia's National Research Laboratories in Sydney.

During March and April of this year,

Rolf was in top form. He acquired the highest level of cave-diving certification and then went on to learn about experimental rebreathers. He amazed everyone with his ability to grasp complex new tasks and then put them into practice. After discovering during a dive a problem with one of the electronic display systems on the rebreather, he calmly sat down one afternoon in a hammock at base camp with a printout of the sixteen thousand lines of code that ran on the on-board computer. That evening he took aside the engineer who had written the code and politely pointed out the problem. By the time the training exercises were over, Rolf had the ability to confidently carry out a four-hour rebreather cave-dive, swimming a total distance of nearly four kilometers under water in the process. And he could do that every day, or, as he often did, simply serve as the safety diver for another member of the team, using traditional Scuba. He was equally at ease under water with whatever apparatus was needed. That Rolf should be taken from us while on a tourist dive following this complex work seems terribly unfair. But such cruel irony is common in our world. It is much like the crack Himalayan climbing team that is returning from its most dangerous expedition without a scratch, only to lose one of its best members while bouldering on the hike back to civilization.

Theodore Roosevelt, one of America's most charismatic presidents, once said, "Far better to dare mighty things than to take rank with those who live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat." Rolf embodies that credo, and in his brief time on our planet he lived a richer life than all but a very few will ever know. And he left our world, and all he touched, a great deal richer in spirit. Although he was only twenty-six years old, he was one of the finest individuals I have ever known.

If there were to be an epitaph for Rolf, it should read: "He was a quick study, a jack of all trades, and good at every one of them. He was the ultimate modern explorer, bright, athletic, a team player you could count on when the chips were down. He was never at a loss for a smile or a good joke, and he always carried more than his fair share." We, your fellow explorers, salute you. Godspeed, Rolf Adams. —Bill Stone