Almost every tree, shrub, and plant has some sort of prickly that can puncture the skin or create some sort of dermal reaction that is more than unpleasant. To complete the survey, areas were cleared of vegetation using machetes and saws. We all received our fair share of blisters. One other drawback of working in this area is the infestation of ticks. It was not uncommon for each of us to pull dozens off every day. But even with the less appealing qualities of this place, it is still very beautiful and mysterious.

Our camp is around the 350-foot-deep thermal pool. Team members survey the edge of El Zacatón. The water here is at least 1,100 feet deep, but the bottom has not been located yet. Round floating grass islands move freely about on the water surface. Photo by Mark Helper. 

BOTTOM: Marcus Gary explains the geologic history of the karst aquifer to his advisor, Jack Sharp. Photo by Robin Havens.

In January 2002, a group of explorers and scientists, including Jim Bowden and Marcus Gary as well as University of Texas geology professors Jack Sharp and Mark Helper, began mapping the sinkholes and caves of the area using state-of-the-art technology. We first had to survey the perimeter of each of the sinkholes. This was not as easy as one might think. The Sierra de Tamaulipas is known for its harsh vegetation, appropriately termed “Tamaulipas Thorn Forest.”

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