

# Introduction









I suspect that we'll remember March of 2020 for a long time. It was the month that the world came to the gradual and then complete realization that COVID-19 was more than just another 24-hour news story.

As we grasped that we'd all be staying put for a while, my family and I found ourselves at our house at the Rosewood Mayakoba in Mexico. We'd come to Mayakoba to celebrate Spring Break together, although I'd planned to stay longer. I was taking a gap year after building and then selling what became a big technology

company that had consumed most of my twenties and thirties. It was a story with lots to be proud of, but it left me ready to recharge with something different.

Since I turned 12, I've been a diver, always fascinated by the water and in love with the feeling I get floating weightless in three-dimensional space. And for over a decade I've been cave diving, a passion that allows its practitioners to explore the inner part of our Earth, and the inner part of ourselves too.

If you've ever been passionate about a sport—taken it beyond reason and maybe pushed the envelope a bit—it's easy to see the sport itself as a metaphor for life. The point of life for me—and cave diving—is to go on adventures with people that I love. Of course, starting a family with my wife was the best adventure ever. Another is building companies with my co-workers. But at this life transition, I'd decided that my next adventure was going to be exploring caves with my friends. And, truthfully, I wasn't sure what would come after that.

I'd hoped to do a big cave exploration project somewhere in the world, but hadn't done any real organizing before our options suddenly narrowed when the pandemic started.

While I'd originally come to the Yucatán Peninsula for its caves, our family fell in love with the people and culture, so we bought a home in Mayakoba as a place to make memories with our kids. You can't be a cave diver buying a house in Mexico without at least thinking about how porous the ground below it may turn out to be. And, that porosity at Mayakoba is easy to recognize. The golf course has perhaps the most unique "sand trap" anywhere—a cave entrance (a *cenote*)—that forms the hazard on hole 7, which has been shown on TV all around the world during the PGA golf championship. And a little less obvious is Cenote Burrodromo, which can be accessed from a nature trail that had been a frequent destination on my morning runs. Plus, there is Guadalupe, the well-known cenote that forms the center of the spa at Rosewood.

So, we bought the house knowing there were at least three cenotes on the grounds, and probably more that hadn't yet been found. Of course, the caves were off-limits and people didn't know much about them, but when we signed on the house, I had an unearned confidence that somehow I might get a chance to explore the property.

By April of 2020, the world was firmly in the grasp of the pandemic. The roads were quiet, the jungle birds were loud, and as the Earth got a break, we started to see spider monkeys and colorful butterflies in places we had never before found them. Along with Ivo Chiarino and Kelvin Davidson, my long-time cave-diving friends, we passed many days diving the caves on the outskirts of Tulum to our south. But one day the government closed the roads, and we couldn't go out anymore.

Now confined, my family and I made new friends at Mayakoba. Borja Escalada, the Chief Executive Officer of RLH Properties—the company that owns Mayakoba—had temporarily moved in with his family, completing our group of pandemic hideouts. We started to form a community alongside the staff of Rosewood and a small number of guests and homeowners who remained at the resort.

Life's milestones passed amidst our group of compatriots. We celebrated birthdays together, got to know each other's families, and made the most of what felt a bit like the end of days. My wife Meara's grandfather passed; our youngest learned to ride a bike.

Daniel Scott, Managing Director at Rosewood, had become a friend some years before, but our time together now was different. As dusk approached on the golf course, my kids and I crawled into the cenote on hole 7 with Daniel and were captivated by its mysteries, wondering where the small bit of water 60 m (200 ft) into the back of the cavern might lead if we went for a dive.

As I got to know Daniel and Borja better and understood their commitment to the natural environment—and to showing guests the magnificence of this part of Mexico—something suddenly became clear. Our exploration project could be right here at Mayakoba.

Excitedly, I described the potential project to my friends, and before long, we had formed *Team Proyecto Mayakoba*, our group of explorers that would take on two principal objectives:

- 1 To raise awareness of the Yucatán Peninsula's natural environment and unique cave systems, promoting environmental conservation of this precious and fragile ecosystem.
- 2 To expand knowledge of the caves here at the property, and to create a greater appreciation of their unique value among visitors.

The outcome of the project would be a coffee-table book, a series of maps of the caves we found, and a short documentary film about the project.

I would fund the project with support from RLH and Rosewood, with any proceeds earned from book sales or donations going to the cause of further environmental conservation in the area. With collaboration between RLH and Rosewood's excellent staff, we soon had legal access to the property and were ready to get started.

We began this project as a group of divers and friends with a shared mission, but with much to figure out. Over the coming months, our work together would go from *storming* to *norming* to *performing* as we translated our ambition and ideas into a team that could take on this task.

Large passion projects like this don't get finished very often. While the appetite to start can be large, it is tough to sustain a project of this scope and length over the years required. Usually, grand plans are foiled by the realities of life. We run out of time and treasure, or the rarest of all commodities—the humility needed to do something that is so much bigger than ourselves.

Standing now at the project's finish line, it is clear that it was the project's culture—our dedication to true team-based diving, our resolve to have each other's backs and to support one another, our commitment to learning and growth—that has been the key driver of our project's success.

The caves presented their own challenges too. While the cenotes of the Yucatán Peninsula are renowned for their crystal clear water and immense, unending spaces, the caves in the north section of the peninsula where we conducted our project can be characterized by tighter spaces that end in ancient collapses that slow progress, and by incredibly soft limestone that rains down from our bubbles, turning the water into a turbid soup if we spend too much time in any one place. Over the course of the project, we have known what it is to navigate areas so small we dare not squeeze any farther, and we have spent many hours in very low visibility as the soft and crumbly limestone dissolves, where the navigation lines we run into the cave are the only path to life.

Despite this demanding environment, we have experienced the thrill of discovery—when a mere hole turns into the find of a lifetime. We have felt the exhilaration of laying navigational lines into a passage so large that we can't see the walls, the ceiling, or the floor, and we are simply dropping through blackness and space. We have witnessed the beauty of sunbeams streaming through a cavern entrance we hadn't known existed, and the satisfaction that comes from understanding something vast and complex. We have experienced profound calm, the Zen sense of flow that comes hours after we've gone into the cave and everything is going just as it should, and the mastery and focus that comes from being at one with our equipment and our teammates.

*Page 7:* Matt, the project leader and author of this book, hovers in Burrodromo.

*Bottom:* Matt on a lagoon in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere, a UNESCO World Heritage site south of Tulum.

As I sit here today, it is the summer of 2022, and with more than two years passed, we are ready to draw this chapter of the project to a close. In some ways, those first days on the project feel like a lifetime ago. The world has come back from the pandemic in fits and starts, and we have grown as people and as divers. We know so much more about what lies below our feet. Mayakoba is full of incredible caves, and in the almost 400 hours we have spent underwater here, we explored and documented six cave systems that stretch across the property, connected by more than 14.5 km (9 mi) of mangrove lagoons and canals, in which we found 25 cenote entrances. We surveyed and laid 3.7 km (2.3 mi) of navigational line under the ground, discovering some of the most interesting caves in this region of Mexico. We produced thousands of photos, created detailed maps, and took several terabytes of video footage.

We have gained the satisfaction of sharing our work with people who are truly interested. To see that these places we love can be loved by so many—that caves can provide a new reason to care about this fragile and special part of the world, provides us with great pride. Indeed, one of the most gratifying elements of the project has been the chance to show the employees of Mayakoba what the caves beneath the property look like—the opportunity to give the guardians of this place a visual appreciation of the magnificence they work to protect.

Tim Urban, the author of “Wait but Why,” wrote something that changed my thinking many years ago. Urban pointed out that by adulthood, many of us will have made choices that radically limit the time we can spend on the things we love most. As teenagers, we might have spent a thousand hours with our friends in just one summer. But by our forties, even with many remaining years of life, most people won’t spend one thousand hours with their friends ever again. Urban called this concept the *tail end*. Yet rather than accepting this with regret, his point is that we can choose the experiences we want to keep from receding into this tail end of life. We have to prioritize time for what matters to each of us, rather than “letting life happen.”



For a time during this project, I transformed from a tourist into a full-time cave diver living in Mexico. We explored because we could and because there were places that warranted exploration. This project provided the opportunity for long-range diving as one can only do when immersed in this environment, and the time for a passion project that many would find to be excessive. As two years passed and I founded my next company, I'm reminded of the tail end and have made sure this won't be the last time I'm able to dive at this level again, or to play again with my friends with this level of intensity.

Here on the finish line of the project, I find myself very grateful.

I'm grateful for my wife, Meara, who supported this dream of mine, and who makes me so proud of the strength she helps create in our family. When we weren't together, I missed her and the kids terribly, but she was there in spirit, helping the world turn so beautifully. I couldn't have done this without her.

For my family including Pete and Susan, my parents, and my friends. I'd never been away so long, but you helped me feel close.

And for the divers and crew that all came together on this project.

For Henry, the greatest friend one could ever ask for, and an incredibly talented and inventive human, full of a contrarian insight from which I have learned so much. Thanks for being you, thanks for being here, thanks for another great chapter together.

For Ivo, a man with incredible heart and great wisdom, and an amazingly gifted diver and teacher. I'm grateful for our conversations, and for all the time we've spent together, underwater, and topside. Knowing you has made my life better.

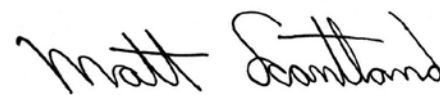
For SJ, a beautiful soul who brought creativity and humor to make each day of the project richer. The images you took and the book you designed brought this project to another level, but it was your friendship that I'll cherish most.

For Eric, who joined us in our second year and spent an incredible January filming our last days together diving. The heart you put into the film and the positivity you brought to the project were remarkable.

And for so many others I can't mention that helped along the way, some to create space for my time away and some to assist us here in Mexico. Your support was meaningful to this project, and highly valued by me.

Credit for this project must ultimately go to Rosewood and the RLH team at Mayakoba. Our work has only been possible with the enthusiastic support of Borja Escalada and his team at RLH, and Daniel Scott and the whole Rosewood family. These people and companies should be commended for the responsible path in which they have stewarded the property, and the courageous way they have chosen to share their treasures with the world. As the Yucatán Peninsula experiences more development, their work demonstrates how people and nature can thrive together.

We hope you enjoy this special place, whether you visit in person or in the pages of this book. And we hope that because of your visit, you'll be inspired to help protect a fragile and special part of our Earth that needs all of us to pitch in however we can.



**Matt Scantland**

August 28th, 2022