

Armstrong, "Cave Diving Accidents and Incidents 2017-2018," American Caving Accidents, NSS (National Speleological Society) News, December 2019, Volume 77, Number 12, https://caves.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/December_19_News.pdf, p. 35

16 June, 2018 Sistema Sac Actun (Cenote Manatí), Quintana Roo, Mexico fatality, drowning

On 16 June, a diver died near Tulum, Mexico, during a Discover Scuba program that began in open water but resulted in one diver entering an underwater cave and being unable to exit before running out of air. Discover Scuba is a course designed to give non-divers a scuba diving experience in a safe environment. Under ideal conditions (clear water, no appreciable current), the course is taught by one instructor to no more than four students; two more students may be added if the instructor has an assistant. Throughout the course, students must be under the immediate control of the instructor or assistant. If conditions are less than ideal, then the student-instructor ratio must be reduced or the course canceled. In this incident, a group of 10 young men contracted with a local instructor who provided an instructional team reported to consist of one instructor and two assistants.

The site chosen for this dive was Cenote Manatí, a large sinkhole formed by the collapse of a long section of cave that is the outflow of the extensive Sac Actun underwater cave system in the Yucatan Peninsula. The cenote ends near the sea, with the water flowing underground from the cenote into a bay. This creates a siphon cave, meaning that the water in the cenote flows into the cave toward the ocean. Diving a siphon is dangerous because the current can impede or prevent a return to the entrance. Experienced cave divers know to use caution whenever entering a siphon.

On this day, the current was particularly strong due to recent heavy rains. A whirlpool was reportedly visible on the surface of the cenote near the entrance to the cave. The rains also reduced visibility to a reported three feet. These conditions were not suitable for a Discover Scuba class.

Shortly after the dive began, some students surfaced because of the poor conditions and quit the dive. The remainder completed their underwater tour of the area. When the remaining group surfaced, two students were missing. After a search, one of the assistants found the two missing divers struggling in the current by the cave entrance. One of them was able to hold onto the assistant and be pulled to safety, but the other could not hold on and was pulled into the cave by the current. The assistant took the first diver to the surface, but there was no attempt to enter the cave to rescue the second.

A team of experienced cave divers was called, but given the delay in their arrival, there was no hope of a rescue. They were unable to locate the body due to the poor visibility. The next day, a 10-person team of divers found the diver's body wedged in a crack in the rock and brought him to the surface. An analysis of the victim's equipment indicated that it was complete and functioning properly. It would have been possible for the diver to follow the flow of the cave and exit into the bay, but that exit was not visible, and he likely would not have known that it was possible.

The instructional team left early in the process and was not immediately identified. There are reports that the lead instructor did not enter the water and that the group may have been led underwater by only the two assistants.

The local legal authorities were not immediately involved in the recovery, and no reports were made in local media. After an investigation, the contracting instructor was expelled by his credentialing agency.

Information for this report was provided by members of the team that recovered the body. They were not able to identify the victim.

1. James Coke, Jeff Clark, Kim Davidsson, Luis Leal, Alessandro Reato, Incident Report, undated.
2. John Adsit, Report for American Caving Accidents, 20 March 2019.