



Cliff divers perform a special dive for Acapulco's orphaned children on Children's Day.



Iris Álvarez is currently the only girl to dive in La Quebrada.

La Quebrada Divers

Barbara Kastelein*

As anyone who has listened to the introduction broadcast four times every night from the venerable Hotel Mirador will know, the world-famous Acapulco cliff divers are “the proud representatives of the original native Acapulqueños who...lived in the area surrounding La Quebrada and as part of their living had to fish, swim and go under water to rescue their fishing hooks when trapped at the rocky bottom of the canal.”¹

The voice continues, “It was at the beginning of the 1930s when in a brotherly act the youngsters started competing among each other to see

who could risk to dive [sic] from the highest altitude at La Quebrada cliffs.”

Few know that the announcement, broadcast in Spanish, English, French and German, is based on a text written, as he recalls, a little over 11 years ago, by veteran cliff diver Ignacio Sánchez. This text also notes that the cliff is about 110 feet high and that the divers plunge from this height into 13-foot-deep water dotted with sharp rocks.

As a researcher, it occurred to me that there was no one else whom international readers want to hear more from on Acapulco's twentieth-century history than the world-famous, daring and intriguing “clavadistas de La Quebrada,” as they are called at home. However, I soon found that it was unusual to consult the cliff divers' opinions and that their

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Unless otherwise specified photos by Barbara Kastelein.

voices were largely absent from modern accounts of Acapulco's tourism lore.

I learned from Ignacio, known affectionately as Don Nacho (now aged 58), that he began diving in La Quebrada when he was only 12, in 1961, and this is not unusual —many divers start young. He told me the Cliff Divers' Association was first organized in 1942, then called "The Quebrada Divers' and Lifesavers' Club." Common injuries are fractured wrists, perforated ear drums, displaced retinas and spinal injury.

In the past, the divers have traveled around the world in exhibitions and competitions. Many who are now in their fifties and sixties have worked in Japan, diving from an artificial fiber glass tree.

Back at home in Acapulco the divers have a profit-share system, cover rent of the area in La Quebrada where the show takes place, pay taxes and electricity and provide night watch services.

In those days, just over two years ago, divers could earn somewhere between 3,000 and 8,000 pesos (a little under U.S.\$300 to U.S.\$800) every two weeks. As he was renting out his three fishing boats near Acapulco's Las Hamacas Hotel, one early March morning, veteran cliff diver Isafas Carvajal, known as "Chai", told me that it is much the same today.

The dangers and physical stress of a cliff diving career mean it does not last long, at best similar to that of a boxer or a soccer player. But in the

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Divers and children in the La Quebrada Channel.

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absence of comparable pay the divers have to have back-up income just to make ends meet. In Chai's case it was fishing, which he still does at night while helping with ticket sales and administration in La Quebrada on certain days of the week.

Many veteran divers, such as twice international champion Juan Obregón, drive a taxi. Articulate, well-informed and exceedingly witty, Juan (known as "Don Peque") will engage in all kinds of banter with his fares, including in-depth conversations about the past glamour of Acapulco. But he will not tell them he was one of La Quebrada's most important cliff divers.

I learned also about "Tarzán" (Johnny Weismuller), Frank Sinatra and other celebrities associated at some point in their lives with La Que-

brada and La Perla nightclub, the undisputed magnet of Acapulco located inside the Mirador Hotel which overlooks the diving show. But it was Antonio Velázquez, "El Profe" —all the cliff divers have a nickname— whom I spoke with next, who liked to remember the bad-old good-old-days and the stars, Marlon Brando, Brigitte Bardot, Bob Hope and James Caan.

"We were hated in Acapulco!" he remembers with gusto. "We were seen as trouble. It was envy, because we got all the foreign girls." His cliff diving career has taken Antonio all over the world: Holland, Portugal, Spain, Rome, the former Yugoslavia, Canada and the United States.

Lastly, back in 2004, I met the laconic Don Mónico, who looked at me for a second like a toad



Courtesy of Apolinar Chávez

Veteran cliff diver Don Apolinar Chávez with President Eisenhower.

at a fly not worth waking up to eat, before he closed his eyes to utter, “We are just part of Acapulco’s yesterday.”

Only a few months before, on July 17, the most famous cliff diver of all, Raúl “Chupetas” García had died, after suffering an embolism at the age of 76. With his demise came the end of an era, for the divers and for Acapulco, of which Raúl was one of the top promoters, along with former President Miguel Alemán, and the Swiss entrepreneur Teddy Stauffer.

However, while in other countries “Chupetas” would have spurred gripping obituaries in the national press, in Mexico his memory was in danger of falling back into oral history and rumor. His widow Myrna Dalia Reyes Galeana was saddened that former President Fox did not even mention his death, even though Raúl had supported Fox and gone to Mexico City to attend his presidential inauguration. Myrna says Raúl was one of the most interviewed men in the history of Acapulco.

It has not been easy for the divers to find a united voice on what “Chupetas” meant to their tradition and community. Everyone agrees the orphan boy who arrived by boat from Zihuatanejo had charisma, but with it came a very strong per-

sonality, overbearing even. It was he who, as Diver Association president for a long period, took the show on the road to national fairs and international exhibitions, made adverts for Timex and Johnny Walker, and was on friendly footing with international showbiz figures the likes of Sinatra.



Courtesy of Rubén Aréchiga Robles

Actress Mia Farrow and Raúl “Chupetas” García.



Today's cliff divers before their annual dive in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

His complex status, in a world of rapid tourism development, served both to “open the world to us,” as Antonio says, but also to obscure the individual achievements of other cliff divers of greater technical or artistic talent. As the “great leader,” he provided a unified face of the Acapulco cliff diver; intrepid, picaresque, outspoken, contrary, willful and unpredictable.

This model, patriarchal and yet independent, helped maintain a brotherhood of cliff divers whose discipline, rules and systems of rewards and punishments have kept the phenomenon going through tremendous social and economic change in one of the continent's great tourism resorts. Inevitably, it also spurred rivalries and dissatisfaction, as well as probably led to an under-evaluation of many aspects of the cliff diver community, such as the divers' social participation, family dynamics, technical skill and individual courage.

What few could imagine at the end of 2004 was that this “forgotten” world was on the verge of renewal. The steps and surrounding areas of La Quebrada were remodeled in March 2006; the cliff divers hosted the long-overdue international high diving competition once again in La

Quebrada last November; Iris Álvarez, a 12-year-old cliff diver girl, was included in the 2007 *Guinness Book of Records*; numbers of active and trainee cliff divers began to increase, and rigorous training sessions became a daily feature.

These are among the achievements so far of Jorge Mónico Ramírez, the current president of the Cliff Diver Association. Ironically Jorge is the son of Mónico who expressed himself so pessimistically only two and a half years ago.

Jorge, who remembers taking his first dive onto the bed from the top of his closet when a boy, is only 35 years old, but studious and earnest. He used to organize diving championships at home with “luchadores” (little wrestler figures, popular toys among Mexican boys), and would attach matchsticks to their hands, to be their torches.

His serious manner suggests he sees this not so much as play, but as preparation for the responsibility he now bears. Jorge has an ambitious agenda for the divers that includes hopes of taking the spectacle to Africa (the only continent where they have not yet performed), that we complete the first-ever book on the divers' history, and a *son-et-lumière* (sound and light) enhancement of the show.

We talk about Raúl's last dive, an astonishing feat undertaken at the age of 70 and by some accounts performed to draw attention to Acapulco after the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Paulina at the end of 1997. "His friends told him not to dive, but he had already promoted the event in the press," Jorge remembers. "He wanted to do it. He wanted to die with his boots on."

The thunder claps as if signaling Raúl's agreement as we finish our supper in the traditional Hotel Boca Chica. "But it brought repercussions," Jorge says wistfully, "The last time we talked together his speech...well it wasn't fluent anymore. And that made me feel sad."

And now other divers are beginning to tell their stories: Don Apolinar, who met President Eisenhower for whom the whole of La Quebrada was closed off to the public; Don Daniel "El Plomo," who used to dive in a specially-made Spiderman suit for Acapulco's orphans on Children's Day; Temoc, who was unlucky in love and lives in his car in the little La Quebrada square; Rogelio, the "Soul

Brother" who met with little success as a cliff diver but is a highly talented sand sculptor; or "Chamoy," the only Mayan diver, who came to Acapulco from Yucatán as a boxer, found cliff diving to his liking, and now works part time as a tour guide.

"I like the fraternity of the divers," says Jorge simply. "On December 11 when we all dive, even those who are retired, in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe, we might think of another, 'You really piss me off. But I don't want anything to happen to you.' Up there on La Quebrada we are all warriors. We offer our lives there." ■■■

NOTES

¹ Dr. Barbara Kastelein has been documenting oral histories from La Quebrada, Acapulco, since November 2004. Her upcoming publication, *Héroes del Pacífico* (Heroes of the Pacific), is due for release in 2008.

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