

VAULTING AMBITION

Vietnam is in the frontline of caving today, with professional teams eagerly surveying new ground while guided tours put some of the incredible previous discoveries on the tourist map

Story and photography by Ryan Deboodt

DAYS FROM THE NEAREST VILLAGE, WE WERE SEARCHING for a cave that may or may not even exist. The porters, who we relied on for their innate knowledge of this environment, were worried about finding a water source for the night. We continued in the direction the cave was said to be, but after a long technical climb up a steep limestone peak, we found ourselves with no cave in sight and miles from a water source. All we could do was retreat to where the porters said there were a few banana trees from which we could get water.

It has been 25 years since Howard and Deb Limbert started leading caving expeditions to Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park in central Vietnam. The area was chosen for its vast tracts of karst: a limestone landscape easily sculpted by water and typically riddled with caves. And so it proved. Foremost among their discoveries is Hang Son Doong, a contender for the world's largest cave passage, but many of the others they have explored are almost as impressive, from massive river caves like Hang Khe Ry to speleological wonders like Hang Va.

Phong Nha-Ke Bang was made a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2003, and today attracts increasing numbers of tourists to various of its caves, some requiring a guide and equipment, while others are an easy hike in.

Meanwhile the Limberts are now trying to make connections

between the caves, exploring the blank places on the map, places where there should be massive caves. Each expedition requires a longer, more difficult journey into the jungle as the more accessible caves have already been explored.

I went to central Vietnam for four weeks during the months of March and April, the driest and coolest time of year, to join the 2016 expedition, based in Phong Nha village. The expedition was led by the Limberts and together with 13 other cavers from the U.K., U.S. and Australia, we were to head out into the jungle in groups of four together with local guides, porters, and cooks for a week at a time hoping to find and explore virgin passages.

For my first trip out, I joined Dave Ramsay, Darren Mackenzie and Alan Jackson in exploring an area of the national park called Ho Nui. It was a two-day trek in: the first day following a river valley to Hang En, a large cave created by the same river that runs through Hang Son Doong, then on the second day we climbed over a ridge into the next valley. It turned into a gruelling eight-hour climb and descent to camp, gaining at least 500m of elevation but only covering a distance of only 2.5km.

The terrain throughout the national park was intense. The limestone has been carved razor sharp, causing short technical climbs to become bloodbaths without gloves. Vegetation disguised



TRAIL? WHAT TRAIL?

The caving is only half the story: just reaching a cave can take days of arduous scrambling through the forest.



JUNGLE HAZARDS

Cuts have to be immediately treated to avoid infection. Below: Millipedes can also be a problem, exuding caustic or even toxic liquid.

holes dug out by swirling water, creating the ever-present danger of stepping into one of these traps and breaking an ankle, or even falling all the way through. Since there were few trails, at times it was like trying to cross a minefield.

After setting up camp, it was already getting late. Exhausted from the trek, we decided to wait until morning see what the nearby caves had to offer.

Waking up early next morning, we headed to the target cave, named Hang Bang by the local who found it. After descending a super-slippery, mud-and-rock slope we reached a large cavern but the layout of the cave was incredibly confusing and we found ourselves going around in circles.

Disappointed, we decided to try our luck with a small shaft nearby. Since it was vertical, we pulled on harnesses and Dave started rigging the cave. We continued down several pitches and at the bottom of the second, found monkey bones – the animals must have fallen in and were unable to get back out. We decided to name the cave Monkey Bone Shaft in their honour – Vuc Xuong Khi in Vietnamese. Eventually, we ran out of rope while the cave continued to descend into blackness. Frustrated at being unable to continue, we climbed back up.



Backtracking, two days later we were reunited with the full team. We reported our findings and listened to others tell of theirs. Though neither of our caves looked immediately promising, the little we had learned still helped fill in gaps.

Then it was time to work out who was going where next. The expeditions to Phong Nha-Ke Bang have always relied on locals for information about possible cave entrances. In recent times, the focus has been on caves with wind – or even better – clouds, blowing

IF THERE'S TIME

Team members descend into a 140-m shaft known only as Km 17. Without signs that a cave might connect with areas already mapped, such leads were not followed for long.

In recent times, the focus has been on caves with wind – or even better – clouds, blowing out of the entrance.

out of the entrance. These caves are prioritised for their higher probability of being passages leading somewhere useful, while others are labelled with 'if there's time'. Our shaft fell into this category being a four-day round trip and offering no obvious prospect of connecting anywhere.

This time, Alan and I were put with Deb Limbert and Martin Holroyd to check an area of the national park that, according to geological records, included a valley that once would have funnelled the same river that now flows through Hang Son Doong. Our hopes were high that we'd find something significant.

Working off a lead from a local who knew the area, we headed into the jungle near Kilometre 36 along Road 20. These kilometre markings ought to be very handy but have changed twice since the road has been built. When talking to locals, we had to remember that they often referred to the old markings that are a couple kilometres different to the markings on the road.

We were looking for a doline, or sinkhole, that supposedly was big enough to have clouds coming out of it. But after a long technical climb up, there was still no such cave and water had become a pressing problem.

Retreating, our guides found the banana trees they were looking for. Cutting them down, they were able to collect a small amount of water from each stump overnight and for the next two days they

were our water source while we searched for the cave, to no avail.

Back at the road, we learned of another lead on a cave supposed to have a significant draft coming from it, not far from where we exited the jungle. 'Not far' turned out to be more than 5km of hot, dusty trudging on Road 20. This foray proved just as disappointing and hours later we were stood back in the same spot, only more tired and bloodied than before.

Walking to the nearest ranger station, we managed to get a lift in the back of a pickup loaded with the head of a dead cow. Once the back of the truck was packed with gear, someone had to sit on the cow's head to get everyone to fit. Unfortunately for Martin, he drew the short straw.

We got out of the truck at the Kilometre 30 valley, setting up camp just a few minutes from the road since it was late in the day and there was a handy stagnant pool of water we could tap for drinking and cooking.

Next morning we made a three-hour trek down the valley and set up our next camp site near to a cave called Hoa Huong that had been explored two years before but with one side passage being missed. There was also a cave that Ky, a local to Phong Nha with extensive knowledge of the national park, knew of about 30 minutes walk away.

Ky told us we should check out Hoa Huong first while he

EDDIES IN TIME

By Michael Bösiger

Soaking wet, I climb upwards into the sun. The sudden heat is almost overwhelming. The intense brightness is blinding. The air is thick with the scent of vegetation. It seems as if the dial on all my senses has been turned up to max.

For the past three days, our group of eight, led by a guide and accompanied by two porters and a cook, have been exploring caves, swimming or climbing wondrous formations in full equipment.

I have vividly felt my insignificance beside the forces of nature that shaped these mighty hollows – hollows that have existed for several million years, while our species has been on earth for only a fraction of that.

A few months ago, my partner Caroline and I read in a magazine about the world's largest cave system, just recently discovered. We learned that in 1992, the National Geographic Society started an expedition to map uncharted rainforest areas. In the process, an incredibly large, interconnected cave system was discovered.

Fascinated, we booked a guided trip with Oxcalis. Our initial scheduled dates were a washout, postponed due to flooding in the region, but luckily, several months later, we have a second chance and have been able to explore several awe-inspiring caverns.



SON DOONG

The world's largest cave passage, this marvel of nature is more than 6km long, 200m high and 150m broad – and there are still uncharted areas.

TU LAN

A whole system of neighbouring caves which require lots of swimming as well as abseiling and climbing to explore thoroughly.

PARADISE CAVE

The first kilometre is open to the public and easy to access but the most spectacular portions lie deeper, where the ceiling hangs more than 100m above you. Around 10km from the entrance, at the end of the path, parts of the ceiling have collapsed. As beams light the cave from above, it feels like the beginning of time – and I am in on it!

GETTING THE MEASURE OF IT
Expedition member Alan Jackson takes note of survey measurements read off by Dave Ramsay in Vuc Xuong Khi.



CATHEDRAL IN THE KARST
Alan Jackson climbs a short pitch in Hang Hoa Huong after a long day surveying more than 2km of new passage.

confirmed that he knew where his cave was. As past experience had shown us how unreliable locals' tips can be, we agreed, even though any new cave automatically sounds much more enticing than one already mostly mapped.

We headed in and found the passage to be a good size with some excellent speleothems – a term used for all sorts of mineral deposits, most often stalactites and stalagmites but including other more unusual forms. The passage was covered in a layer of slick mud and car-sized boulders making the going slow but we began measuring and sketching, ascertaining angles, directions and distances for 50m segments, that being the distance our survey equipment could read. Once we had mapped and explored nearly a kilometre of virgin cave we called it a day, not having carried overnight gear in with us. Filing out, we were weary but content at having finally added a piece or two to the puzzle.

We spent two more days there exploring, racking up two kilometres of new passage in all. While it wasn't the monster cave we were all hoping for, it was one of the more significant discoveries of the entire expedition. Also, geological dating put it at five million years old, making it one of the oldest caves in the national park.

While to the uninitiated, caving can seem awfully hard work that often ends in disappointment, for me the knockbacks just make the eventual rewards sweeter still. Being among the first people to see a previously unknown feature, or walk even a few metres of unexplored cave is enough to keep me coming back for more. And Phong-Nha surely offers many kilometres of those sorts of discoveries yet. **AA**



THE WORK OF MILLENNIA
A large flowstone named The Egg in Hang Hoa Huong.

PRACTICALITIES

When to go

In the rainy season, from September to December, the caves are off-limits as the rivers can rise tens of metres in just a matter of hours. January to April is the best time to go, due to cooler temperatures.

How to get there

Dong Hoi is the gateway city for Phong Nha, as well as the national park. There are daily flights from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City international airports, as well as an overnight train from Hanoi. From Dong Hoi, daily buses and taxis run to Phong Nha.

Contacts

To easiest way to get into the caves in Phong Nha-Ke Bang is with Oxalis Adventure Tours. More info can be found on their website, www.oxalis.com.vn. For some cave systems, such as Tu Lan, they are the only operator given permission by the Vietnamese government to conduct expeditions.

Further info

Oxalis provides all the caving gear and permits that are needed on their trips. For any other caving in the national park, permission must be granted by the park and by Quang Binh province.