

# JOURNAL

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## Caving in The Abode of The Clouds

By Lieutenant Colonel Toby Hamnett

*So... do we go down there? Tudor, the Romanian geologist from Transylvania, looked up from the entrance, pushed his long hair back under his hat and asked the team. It was late in the day. We had explored possible cave entrances, of all sizes, across the plain in the Indian sun during the day. This was the last.*



PHOTOS

ABOVE

Toby Hamnett back at Base Camp

RIGHT

A Survey team using specially made equipment to survey Krem Sait Shyrba

BELOW RIGHT

Caving in the Abode of the Clouds Team 2015. Photos – A Harp

### Unexplored Cave

When we arrived at the small hole, with air draughting out of it, it was blocked by monsoon debris of mud and large boulders. With Barry leading the assault with a crowbar, the boulders had been rolled back up the slope or pushed, booming, into the void below. After an hour of concerted effort, the hole was open, man-sized and now safer to descend. In the dark, the brightest of lights had shown that there was a passage leading into the hillside 12 metres below. With an hour and a half of daylight left and 'Marissa' – the expedition's 4x4 flatbed truck of unknown vintage - waiting an hour away in the jungle we realised it would be tight. However, this was an unexplored cave.

The ropes were tied to a tree to allow Tudor to abseil into the cave. As he lowered himself down his expression changed as he looked back at me. "Errm", he said calmly with a hint of concern, "Have you seen what you are standing on? I wouldn't move about too much if I were you". Realising that what had looked like solid ground was six inches of rocks jammed over a drop, I stood still. Tudor continued to descend and, on reaching the floor, the rope went slack. Dan leant over the hole and looked in "Does it go?" he called...

*...the most beautiful cave passage I had seen in years...*

### The Expedition

I had been privileged to have been invited on the Caving in the Abode of the Clouds Project 2015. Together with the Meghalaya Adventurers Association, the only caving club in India, Simon Brooks and Brian Kharpran Daly, joined by Thomas Arbenz, had been running an international expedition to explore the vast cave complexes of this little known Indian state since 1992. It had been successful, identifying over 1,500 caves and yielding over 400 km of newly found passage.

Meghalaya sits in the far North East of India, north of Bangladesh, and South of Nepal. It is the only region in India with extensive limestone and, with the highest rainfall anywhere in the world, is almost riddled with world class cave systems. Getting to them, however, is tricky. The provincial capital, Shillong, has been described as 'India for beginners' in terms of the swarming crowds, noise and bustle of the market lined streets. The narrow streets, allowing barely two to pass abreast in the market areas, gave the expedition time to stock up on jungle essentials

including pencils for the surveys and pillows to make three weeks in expedition tents a little more comfortable.

### Getting Started

At Brian's house, during the next two days, the multinational team began to assemble from various hotels and guesthouses across the city. The team consisted of 32 cavers from India, UK, Switzerland, Romania, Poland, USA, Austria and The Netherlands. In addition there were 5 research scientists looking into the flora and fauna of the newly discovered caves. Many of the team knew each other from previous Meghalayan adventures and much catching up occurred.

Stacking tackle onto four 4x4s the following morning the team headed out into the jungle. It was a five hour drive to the campsite and we arrived as darkness drew in. The campsite had been built by the support team who had hacked away at the jungle, creating a clearing by a rocky track down by the river. The camp was made from bamboo lashed together to form loos, shower blocks, kitchens and shelters. The shower block had a sliding door across each cubicle. This was, technologically, far



in advance of the bucket of hot water on the floor which stretched the definition of 'shower' to its limit. 'Loos' are left to your imagination.

Tents were hastily erected and the team assembled to start planning the expedition. Suitably scaled and detailed maps of the area do not exist. The expedition, with Thomas' computer expertise, builds its own from satellite images. GPS trackers placed in vehicles and surface survey teams are overlaid to show the roads and significant features and, by the end of the expedition, surveyed caves form part of the map to assist in the search for new passages.

### Finding the Caves

The expedition then fell into a daily routine. Up at 0700 for tea and kit preparation before the first of the day's curries at 0800. Teams would then form to explore and survey unknown underground territory. Surface teams would also set out to meet up with guides. These are men from the local villages who were paid a small sum to show us features in the jungle which they thought might lead to caves. To those new to the area, the word "Khublai" was very useful for those without local language skills since it variously meant 'Hello', 'Goodbye', 'Thank you' and 'How are you?'

These surface forays met with a mixture of results from huge rivers emerging from the mountainside to shallow pits. However, any one of these might provide a window into a system kilometres long. All had to be checked and recorded. The true magic lay in the underground beauty with meandering river passages leading through stunning formations decorated with scintillating Huntsman spiders and only the occasional tarantula nest. The passages were decorated

...Each cave is surveyed using the latest systems...

with stalactites, stalagmites and clusters of cave pearls.

For me, the highlight from the caves was the discovery of Krem Am Krang. A beautifully decorated entrance, echoing to a waterfall at one end, with stunning stalactite decorations, 15 feet high, in large chambers downstream. As we surveyed the cave upstream, past the waterfall, we met up with a team who were surveying downstream and linked two caves. The day only got better when we met up with the downstream survey team of Krem Muhabon. We now had a 2.4 kilometre through trip down through the mountain with some of the most beautiful cave passage I had seen in years.

Each cave is surveyed using the latest systems of caver designed laser devices sending the data via Bluetooth to the hand held screen on which the map was being drawn. Of course, batteries fail and water seeps into electronics and often the back-up of paper, pencil, a compass, clinometer and length of measuring tape is the only way to accurately survey the new cave. Each day ended back at base camp with curry (again) and an evening of transferring all the data, surveys, descriptions and photographs onto the expedition computers.

### Coming Home

After three weeks of this routine, the expedition drew to a close with 15.3 kilometres of new passages discovered, surveyed and photographed allowing a deeper understanding of the land and environment which contributes to this beautiful corner of India.

As for Tudor's cave? It finished after 30 metres and we got back to 'Marissa' as the sun was setting... on expedition not every small hole turns into the world class cave systems we had discovered and mapped.



#### PHOTOS

##### ABOVE

The Entrance Chamber to Krem Am



#### PHOTOS

##### TOP

Abseiling the 12 metre pitch in Krem Um Krang. Photo – A Harp

##### ABOVE

Toby Hamnett Climbing the Waterfall in Krem Am Krang. Photos – SE Buduran

##### RIGHT

Toby Hamnett in Farey Grotto, Krem Am Krang. Photo – SE Buduran

