



CHILLAGOE CAVING CLUB

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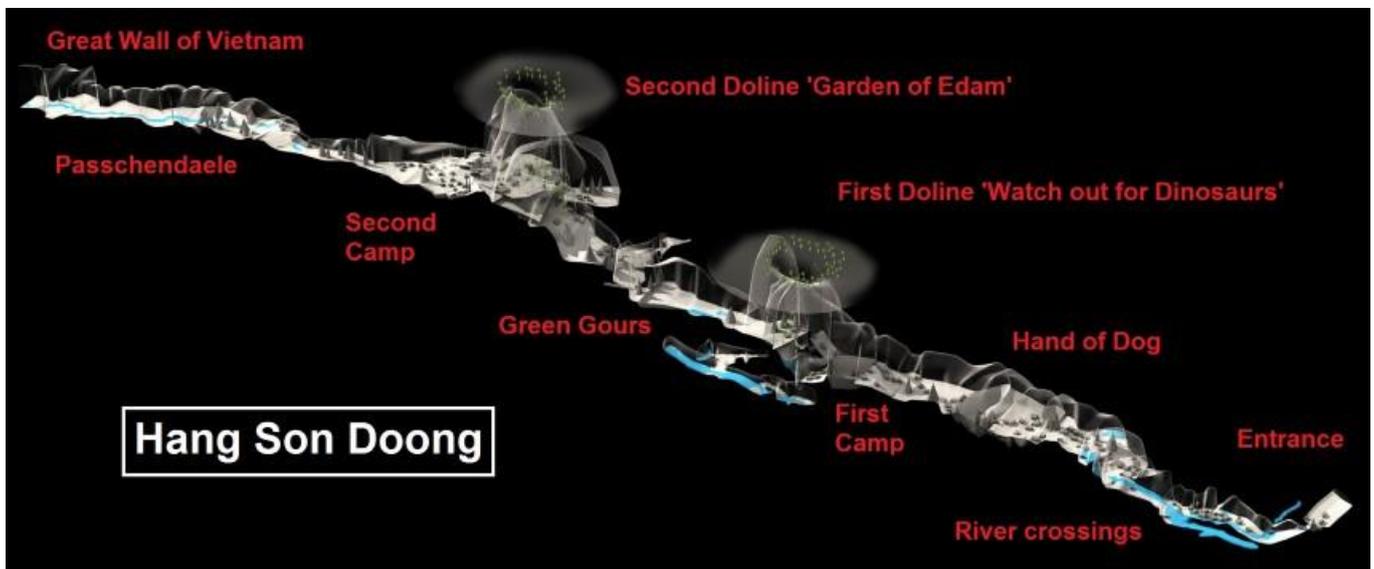
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NEWSLETTER

WWW.CHILLAGOECAVINGCLUB.ORG.AU



A map of Hang Son Doong

© Dr.Nguyễn Hiệu

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Vietnam -The Kingdom of Caves

(Winfried Weiss)

Every sport has a mecca, every occupation has a headquarters, every dream has a nirvana. I know we are all different but it's hard not to argue that Vietnam doesn't fit that bill. Vast underground cathedrals, abundant exploration potential, prehistoric rainforests, gorgeous formations – you have to ask yourself what Vietnam doesn't have.

In March 2015 the Chillagoe Caving Club decided to find out for itself and Paul, Paco, Grant and myself went to check the place out. We decided to find out if Vietnam really did have it all – and we found out in style by visiting the world's biggest cave – Son Doong.

Our journey really began in 2014 out at Chillagoe, when Paul (over a bottle of decent red by the way) suggested that we should spread our wings and begin to explore caves in far flung parts of our planet. Sounded like a great idea to those of us present, and the planning began.

There was the initial Google query about the world's largest cave, yielding some amazing photos and fulsome quotes about 'gargantuan passages'

and so forth. Then we moved on to reality and began thinking about specifics – ie how much time and money was this going to cost..... always a significant concern.

Eventually those problems came into focus and a group of four club members decided to commit to going with a company called Oxalis (the only way to get to see Son Doong) who had a very good website ;). Let me tell you, transferring several thousand dollars to a foreign country, via a website, without actually knowing if it's legit, is kind of exciting. Luckily for us this was no scam, and we did get confirmation of our booking.

I should mention here that for 2015 only 500 people are able to visit Son Doong, due to the strict permit rules set by the Vietnamese government for conservation reasons. Last year it was only 250 and next year there may be no trips at all. We later found out that our little Aussie group were amongst the first 10 or so Australians to ever set foot in these caves.

Anyway, the four of us decided to meet up in Da Nang, Vietnam. Da Nang is the closest international airport to our eventual destination, a little village called Phong Nha in Central Vietnam, not far from the border with Laos. Da Nang is a vibrant, busy place and was my first introduction to Asian traffic, scooters and motorcycles. UNESCO should list the traffic in Asia as a cultural heritage icon! It's that amazing.

There are rules, but no one really follows them. It's a mixture of knowing the right thing to do and just moving with the flow. As long as you keep moving, steadily, in the direction you want to go, everything will be fine. Most of the time anyway. Seeing a family of five travelling on a Vespa scooter, or a mattress being delivered on the back of a motorcycle is worth the price of admission by itself.



Family of five on a scooter !!!

© W. Weiss

The Waterfront Bar in Da Nang shall forevermore be the CCC hangout in Da Nang. Copious quantities of San Miguel Beer were consumed that evening at the enormous cost of about 800,000 dong each. Granted, this seemed to have been the most expensive bar in Da Nang, but that still equates to food and drink for a whole evening at about \$40 each. Not bad at all, and all served with a smile and great quality.



Late night out at Da Nang

© W. Weiss

After making our way back to the local hotel (Dai A hotel rocks – much better than the Westernised ones!) we did some sight seeing in the morning (ask Paul about how I got ripped off at the Marble Mountain lol) and then caught the sleeper train north to Dong Hoi. I recommend a sleeper cabin because that at least has air conditioning. The trip itself was fine, except that Paul was sure we had boarded the wrong train and were heading to Ho Chi Minh city! We did however board the right train, and drank the beer cart dry during the 6 hour trip north.



Grant relaxing on the train

© W. Weiss

Oxalis was true to their word, and we got a pick up from them upon arrival in Dong Hoi. It was dark, so we didn't get to see much, but after a 45 minute car ride we ended up in Phong Nha, at Ho Khang's

Homestay – the guy who found Son Doong in the first place.

Our accommodation was very good for the \$30 we were paying a night. Vietnamese architecture is unique, long and narrow, and our rooms were situated at the back of the family house, in a traditional style house facing the river. Comfy, if somewhat firm, mattresses, fans and mossie nets (think Cairns in summer) made for a decent first nights sleep. The food was excellent too – delivered on a scooter from down the road from a menu brimming with interesting items – I still stand by Wonder Balls. Simply the best!



Vietnamese architectural style of our accommodation

© W. Weiss

The next morning we had a day to sightsee, and we joined a tour encompassing Paradise Cave, Dark Cave and some local cultural and historical sites. Fantastic little trip and highly recommended if you only have a few days in Phong Nha. Paradise Cave is simply spectacular – the formations and sheer size are awe inspiring. It's a shame the tour only takes in the first kilometre of the cave, but what you do see is lit beautifully. The whole system is over 30km in length and – so we were told – contains some of the best river passage anywhere.

Then there is Dark Cave, perhaps the antithesis of pretty. The trip to that cave starts with a 300m zip line across a river. This is a fairly exciting experience when you weigh about twice what a normal Vietnamese man does. Paco hit the earthen stop wall, and I managed to break the safety tether on landing! 100kg does get a bit of speed up ☺.

After the zip line everyone swims into Dark Cave and makes their way, barefoot, through the cave. Again the whole cave (6km) isn't explored, but there is a fantastic little side trip to the most amazing mud I have ever encountered. Close your

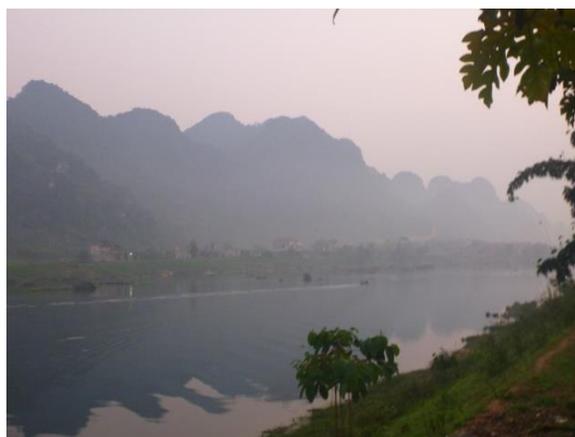
eyes and imagine swimming in thick, smooth, chocolate cream and you will have some idea of what this little experience was like. It's like swimming in the Dead Sea, you actually float on top of the mud. Amazing.



The crew enjoying the mud wallow

© W. Weiss

From what we saw on our little tour it was hard to imagine anything larger, bigger, better. The caves were already enormous – how much wider, higher could they actually get? A lot more it turns out. That evening we had a briefing at the Oxalis headquarters and met up with our guides and team. Adam and Ruth were our UK caving guides, both experienced and great company and Thanh was our local guide – and one of the funniest blokes out there.



Dawn over the river at Phong Nha

© W. Weiss

The next day dawned in a sea of pink over the river, highlighting the fascinating landscape surrounding Phong Nha. Huge towers of karst frame the landscape everywhere you look. Apparently there is a huge cave just across the river from our accommodation – but no one has found the way into the river system yet.... Maybe one day when they get bored of all the other caves out there.

The bus ride to the national park that covers most of the karst was easy enough and everyone was just a little on edge to get going. Our group was multinational – Canadians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Aussies, Brits, - and we had all been told about this long, tough walk to get to the caves. On our way to the trek trailhead the road passed large areas beside Highway 20 (the Victory Highway, also part of the Ho Chi Minh trail) covered in vines and impenetrable scrub.

This, we were told, was a legacy of the rainforest being massively bombed and never recovering. The history of this land is replete with death and suffering, and hearing it from the Vietnamese perspective is sobering. One example was a bridge named the Bridge of Blood and Diesel – so named because many people lost their lives carrying canisters of diesel on their backs across the river during the Vietnam War. People carried the canisters because trucks were too easy to bomb... and many died.



© W. Weiss

One of the many river crossing on the trek in

KM 33 marked the trailhead for our adventure. There was a small shed there where we sorted our packs and gear, and the walk began. The trail meandered downhill steeply through the rainforest. The path is well trodden because a small village uses it as their sole access to the outside world. After about an hour, we encountered flat ground and began to follow a creek, criss-crossing it many times. High ridges of limestone surround us at all times, but eventually the valley opens out into a small plain where a local village is situated. The houses are wooden and situated on tall stumps as there are floods every year. The people were friendly but do not speak English at all. The green tea they offered us was nice, although our guide insisted that drinking too much would make us drunk. After a brief stop we left the village and

headed on, following the river downstream as it snaked past imposing pinnacles of limestone.

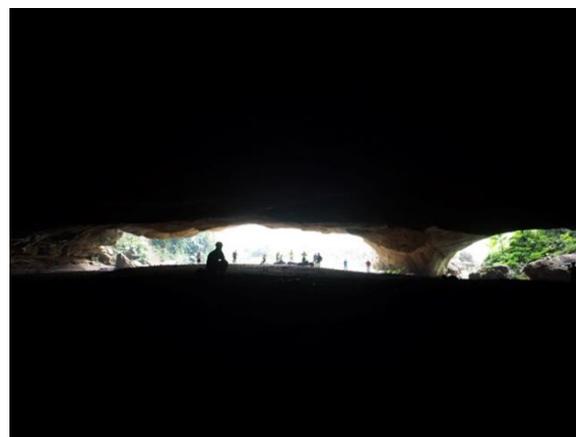


© W. Weiss

Winfried with the entrance of Hang En behind

After another hours walking we were able to see the massive entrance of Hang En in the distance, kilometres away. A huge arch in the cliff face quickened our pace – we were all keen to get there.

The river took a sharp turn and split, part of it spilling into a low, wide opening in the cliff – the lower entrance to Hang En. The group took a break and our guides handed out helmets and lights (Hope R4s) to eager hands. Finally we were in a cave!



© W. Weiss

Looking out of the lower entrance of Hang En

The river snaked its way through banks of river pebbles along a low passage and we followed it for about a hundred metres before diverging to the left and up over boulders. The passage led upwards and opened up onto a large boulder overlooking the massive main chamber of Hang En where our camp had been set up by the porters.

The sheer scale of this cave is almost impossible to portray. I climbed up the scree slope to the top of the main entrance and from up there the tents looked like small yellow specks. After at least an hour of exploring and taking photos I descended

into the camp, past the hot and cold swimming pools (hot river, cold cave water) and found my tent, neatly labelled and set up. No way could I complain about the service in this trip! The Oxalis crew was amazing. Our porters and cooks were world class at setting up camp and keeping us comfortable with minimal gear.



© W. Weiss

The evening feast in preparation

The afternoon was given over to more photos, exploring and swimming to wash off the sweat of the day. The water was cool and pleasant – with accompanying fish to nibble at your toes. Then it was time for dinner which our chef – yes a real chef – conjured up from supplies carried in by the porters. Roast pork, omelette, tofu, vegetables, roast chicken, noodles, rice – you name it we had it. The food was better than at a five star restaurant. And all cooked over an open fire in a cave! And of course the meal was accompanied by the local rocket fuel – rice wine.



© W. Weiss

Campsite in the main chamber at Hang En

At about dinner time the swiftlets started arriving back into the cave to roost. Literally thousands of birds nesting on the roof and walls above us. Adam, our guide, pointed out some sketchy vines leading up to the roof which, apparently, some local tribes people use to climb up and catch the birds as a rite of passage. When I say sketchy... I actually mean non – existent. The guts it would take to make that

climb over a 100 metres up without a safety is something I don't think I would have.

As the light faded, the world's big issues were discussed, in a place that can only be called special. Hang En is maybe not the world's largest cave, but it certainly is one of the most spectacular and special.

To be continued

Club AGM

Many thanks to members who made it out to the AGM. We only just had the numbers to hold the meeting and all positions were carries over to this year. Members are obviously very happy with the current executive and how the club is progressing.

The executive have purchased a new freshwater water tank for the clubhouse. The AGM minutes will be made available to members soon.

Up and Coming Events

May

- 31 May – SUSS arrive at the clubhouse

June

- 1 - 14th SUSS caving at Chillagoe
- 6/7th - Club Caving Weekend at Chillagoe.
- 21-26 June ASF Conference at Exmouth, WA

Ningaloo Underground 30th ASF Conference.

See Web Site : <http://ningaloo.wasg.org.au/>

July

- 17-19th - Club Caving Long Weekend at Chillagoe.

August

- 8/9th - Club Caving Weekend at Chillagoe.

Peter Bannink & Van Christensen (Secretary).