



CHILLAGOE CAVING CLUB

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JUNE 2015 NEWSLETTER

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Vietnam -The Kingdom of Caves (Part 2)

(Winfried Weiss)

Day Two of our Son Doong adventure dawned slowly. I could see the mist coming in from the main entrance of Hang En and flowing through the cave. It was almost hypnotic, except for the cacophony of birds waking up to greet the day. Breakfast was again 5 star and I went for an explore on my own. Hang En is basically a huge river passage heading straight through the mountain and exploring it on your own only makes it seem bigger. I climbed high up a scree slope behind the cave, to a saddle that allowed me to see the dim light of the cave exit in the distance. By the time I got to the top the camp had faded into silence and darkness. I was just alone in this huge underground space, something I won't forget for a long time.

We broke camp and began the trek through Hang En. The place is huge and the river twists and turns between silt and pebble banks 50 metres high. Our guides tell us that during the wet season this cave can fill almost totally with water. Halfway along, at the top of a huge earth bank there is a boulder with a huge tree trunk perched on it – seeing that made me believe them.

The exit of Hang En is of course gigantic and leads into a narrow river valley flanked by limestone cliffs hundreds of metres high. It was an oasis of butterflies at the exit (hundreds of them). After an hour of following the river we stopped at the stream sink into Son Doong – impassable we are told. A short but steep 20 cave. It's kind of underwhelming actually. There is no huge entrance, it's just a 20 metre doline leading to a smallish entrance with a huge breeze blowing out of it. The entrance drops away steeply across flowstone formations and drops some 80 metres in total to the river below. When we entered the cave a heavy fog enveloped us as we descended via handlines to the river.



Main passage – Hang En

© W. Weiss



The Hand of Dog – Son Doong

© W. Weiss



© W. Weiss

Exit of Hang En (Paco in the middle)

This cave is so large it has its own weather pattern and on some days it can be totally clear, other days foggy and damp. As we reach the river it's difficult to gauge the size of the passage. It's large and wet, and there is a lot of breakdown to cross as we make our way along the right bank. The rock is sharp and black and the huge whorls and jagged points in the rock are a testament to the volume of water that must thunder through here in the wet season. The river level on our trip was low, making for a pleasant wade in most places.



© W. Weiss

Camp One – Son Doong

The river was crossed twice on our way to the Hand of Dog further along the passage. It's no exaggeration that once you begin to climb up from the river along the passage you can literally see for over a kilometre towards the first daylight of the cave, called Doline One. The fog continued to roll

in and out, making photography difficult and giving everything a sort of eerie glow. It was fascinating to see the lights of other cavers ahead of me glowing in the distance, toiling up the next steep slope or over a formation.

Camp 1 is situated near Doline One, hard up against one side of the cavern wall. It sits high above the river on a sandy ledge, overlooking a spectacular vista of stalagmites, boulders and gigantic gours. Being behind the main group I was just able to tag onto a party heading down to Fossil passage, near the river level. Fossil passage sports beautiful black limestone, worn smooth, with brilliant white fossils everywhere.

The passage itself leads on, water filled, for many hundreds of metres, down to the main river. I decided to take a swim and spent an awesome half hour or so swimming along the passage, deep blue green water disappearing underneath me and the enticing passage ahead. I stopped eventually, foiled by a 2 metre high flowstone waterfall that was just a tad too slippery to free climb back up. Still, the 300 metres of the passage that I did see solo, were beautiful and majestically silent. Just me and the cave. A little reluctantly I swam back to join the rest of the group and headed back to camp.



© W. Weiss

Card game antics – Paco on timer

Dinner was soon served back at camp. Another feast, followed by rice wine and a game of cards with Thanh, our local guide. Some things never change – and playing cards with penalties is one of them 😊.

Day Three commenced with a climb through some house sized boulders and breakdown. The rock was very sharp and jagged and the track snaked its way through, above, below and around the rocks terminating at the bottom of a very steep slope, perhaps 100m high, heading towards the top of the doline breakdown pile. The slope was climbed a few at a time as it was very loose and wet.



Negotiating the boulder choke

© W. Weiss

The top of the doline exhibited my first experience of a full grown rainforest in a cave. Although dwarfed by the 100m cliffs rising towards the surface the trees were still imposing at 20 metres in height.



Paco climbing up Doline One

© W. Weiss

Of note is an awesome set of gours that form a spiral pinnacle at this point. This vantage point allowed some spectacular views, and I could just make out the glimmer of light denoting the second doline further into the cave.

A short descent led us to some more awesome gours and formations and perhaps the most photogenic spot in the whole cave. Son Doong has many qualities and the combination of greenery and clean limestone rock made for perfect photographs. After a short lunch break we moved on along the gargantuan main passage of Son Doong. The river had left the passage at this point and we were

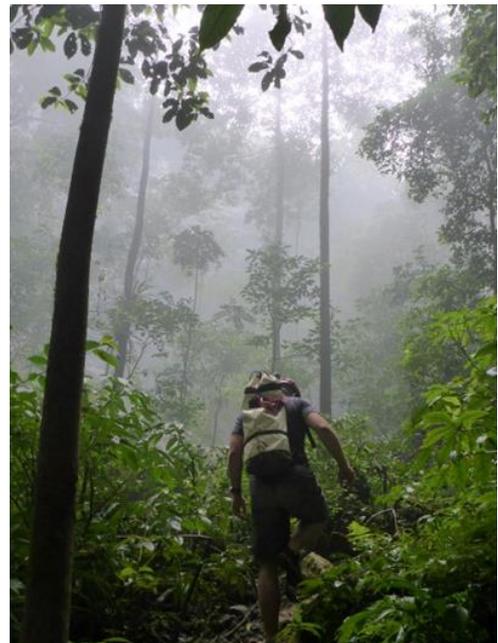
making our way across enormous formations, testament to the age of the passage.



Paul Osborne relaxing on giant gour pool formation

© W. Weiss

About an hour of walking led us to a vantage point over Doline Two. Unfortunately the misty weather did not help the photography and we continued on to another rainforest inside the cave. Crossing this damp piece of primeval forest was reminiscent of Jurassic Park. I think no one would have been surprised to see a pterodactyl flying above us.



Winfried climbing through the 'Garden of Edam'

© W. Weiss

The climb down into Campsite 2 was easy and brought us to a comfortable dry camp, on white chalky sand. It wasn't far to the end of the cave from here, well at least to the end of the easily accessible part. Some fabulous dry passage led us towards an increasingly muddy passage that morphed into a small stream dwarfed by huge mud banks on either side. Passing beneath the mighty Wall of Vietnam, the stream eventually sinks into

an impassable sump where everything is coated in mud. At this point our guides pointed out the bolted route up the Great Wall. This leads to the alternate exit to Son Doong, although rarely used due to the difficult climb up the Wall and loose rock.



The sump at the end of Son Doong

© W. Weiss

The return to camp offered many opportunities for photographs, although without large flashes, doing justice to these cathedral like passages was practically impossible. The fog came in again, thick and heavy, enveloping the camp while we had dinner. Everyone seemed a little tired that evening and bed was an early affair.



Camp 2 at dusk looking back to Doline Two

© W. Weiss

Our final day in Son Doong dawned slowly and quietly. I decided to take a short trip down Cormorant Passage before breakfast and was rewarded with the sight of a river of calcite crystals flowing through a sea of mud. The passage terminated in a tight little crack reminiscent of Chillagoe and the return to camp was over crust covered boulders and cave coral.

After packing up we commenced the walk back out of Son Doong. Our camp tonight was to be back in Hang En and walking back out and through Son Doong allowed us to enjoy the cave without taking photographs at every step.



Weather in Son Doong!

© W. Weiss

There is something to be said for just travelling through a cave, enjoying its beauty without trying to record it. I was lucky enough to be the last to leave Son Doong on this occasion, and I was sad to go, vowing to return one day.

The return trip to Hang En was spectacular, if uneventful. We were given another opportunity to enjoy the stupendous river passage that is this cave, actually the 3rd largest in the world. Instead of crossing the river banks we decided to follow the river as it meandered along the passage back towards camp. It offered a different perspective on the cave, particularly in one low and wide section beside the main passage.



Main river passage – Hang En

© W. Weiss

The walk out on the following day was relaxing. Heading out of Hang En was almost sad, knowing that a return to this magical place would not be for a long time. We walked out in approximately four hours. Of particular note was the last hill, which had everyone except Grant gasping for air – he made it up in less than 30 minutes, apparently a record for non Vietnamese folk.

The trip back to Phong Nha on the bus was luxury personified. Nice soft comfy seats always feel great

after going without for a few days and a cold drink was very welcome. Part of the deal that Oxalis provides is to put people up at the Sun Spa Resort in Dong Hoi after completing Son Doong which was a nice taste of luxury at the end of the trip.



© W. Weiss

Karst and more karst – west of Phong Nha

We returned to Phong Nha the following day, and then embarked on another three day caving trip to an area called Tu Lan. That's another story for another edition of the newsletter. Suffice it to say that Tu Lan is vastly different to Son Doong. It's a maze of river cavers, interconnected and allowing cavers to move underneath and through mountains as easily as going over them. It just goes to highlight that Vietnam has an enormous supply of caves and caving. The area we visited is over 2000 square kilometres of karst, with more across the border into Laos. Perhaps 20 percent of it has been explored and who knows what other wonders, what other Son Doongs lie in wait for the intrepid caver. One thing is for sure – one day I will be back!

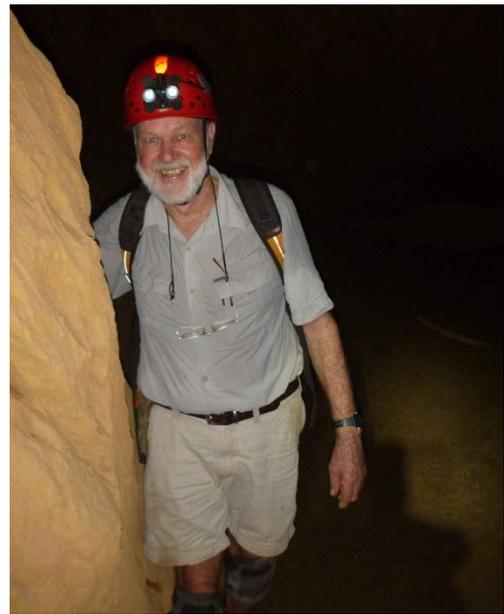
Rare Beetle Found!

In April Peter B. and entomologist Geoff Monteith (from the Queensland Museum) again travelled out to the Wallace Creek Karst region (for the day). This was another attempt to find specimens of the unusual *Mystropomus* beetle (in Ripple Cave), which has eluded collection on four previous occasions.

Despite initial dismay at not seeing anything in the daylight area, six specimens were soon found running around the base chamber, further into the cave. Geoff was also lucky to find two larval stages, which live in tiny burrows under rocks. The week Cyclone Nathan crossed the coast of Cooktown, must have created the perfect conditions in the cave for the beetles to become active.

We each experienced the wrath of the beetles as they were picked up, getting burned by a cocktail of chemicals that were sprayed at our fingers. The chemical 'jet' is so hot that smoke is generated and

the smell of burned cordite becomes prevalent in the air.



© P. Bannink

Geoff Monteith ecstatic at the find

Since then Geoff has been able to make direct comparisons with the closest epigeal (surface) population on Mt Lewis, over 100km to the south. Distinct morphological differences indicate that the cave specimens are very likely to be a new species, being larger in size, and having significantly longer legs and antennae.



© P. Bannink

The predatory larval stage extracted from its burrow

A few of the specimens will now be sent for genetic analysis in the USA, where their unique relationship with other *Mystropomus* populations revealed.

Geoff also found a rare Jewel Beetle on the walk back. *Temognalha (Temognalha) aquilonia* is only known from two other collected specimens, one of which was collected from Mt Molloy in the 1970's.



© P. Bannink

The rare Jewel beetle *Temognalha (Temognalha) aquilonia*

On the whole this was a very successful trip. Many thanks to Geoff for passing on the details of the insects he collected.

Up and Coming Events

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).



© P. Bannink

An adult *Mystropomus* beetle in Ripple Cave