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Progress in Houay Saï

THE French-led Khammouane 2015 expedition to Laos returned in March with 14km of surveyed passage to its credit. The team comprised two American, one Australian, thirteen French and one German caver, who spent three weeks in the Thakhek area in central Laos and, once more, the Tham Houay Saï system was the main focus (see *Descent* 234).

During past years, the resurgence of the Nam Dôn river



and its double cave entrance Tham Khoun Dôn – Tham Houay Saï has received most of the attention and, at 42km, it is easily the longest in the country. However, the final sump has been a major hurdle for explorations to overcome. Fast progress being impossible at the resurgence, this year we decided to shift focus to the sinks feeding the system: Tham Kagnung, the main sink in the Ban Viang polje, was explored using canoes as far as the final sump some 3km from the entrance. In Tham Houay Saï sink, the second main sink, we undertook systematic surveying work, mapping an additional 4.4km and taking the cave to 10.5km long. There, we bypassed the final sump via a high-level passage and explored a large gallery to reach another sump. We also discovered a new entrance, Tham Cobra 2, thus facilitating access

Top: Bats Junction in Tham Houay Saï and (above) Stéphane Maifret in Tham Khoun Dôn
All photos: Serge Caillaud



to the far end of the network, and identified chimneys where we hope we will again bypass the flooded passages.

These three systems are converging and are only separated by between 1km and 2km in a straight line. All three caves being waterlogged, next year's expedition will probably be spearheaded by a team of divers, with the objective of making one or more connections: the system has a potential length of 60km.

Moreover, around the Ban Viang polje, the team explored five more caves that produced another 4km of survey data. In one of these, due to lack of time, we stopped exploration in a 50m by 50m gallery in the middle of a forest of huge pillars; it is something to dream of until next year!

Correspondent: *Eric Ardourel*



The Khammouane 2015 team in Laos



Conviction and rescue

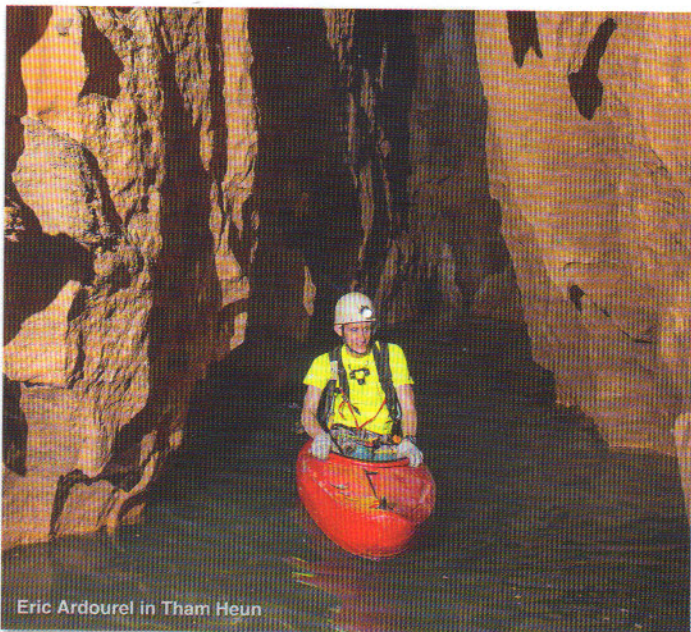
IN October a lightweight expedition was mounted to the remote Hidden Valley region of Gunung Mulu National Park in Sarawak, Malaysia, after a small cave entrance was spotted while studying aerial footage. The team found a beautiful, old phreatic cave (Conviction Cave) which now ranks as the highest known cave in Mulu. It was explored for 380m until a 100m pitch dropped into the further reaches of Wonder Cave, originally found during the 1978 Royal Geographical Society expedition.

Exploration was briefly interrupted when Colin Boothroyd fell approximately 35m while traversing a cliff on the surface in search of new entrances, sustaining a broken collarbone and three broken ribs. He was hauled off the ledge that had broken his fall and hospitalised overnight in a cave entrance before being accompanied on a three-day walk out, in extreme pain, back to the park headquarters. Colin's injuries were subsequently confirmed in Miri hospital and he's now recovering in Europe.

Once the rescue was completed, a bolt climb in the final chamber of Wonder Cave enabled the main way on to be relocated and this soon broke out into a large trunk passage heading into the core of the mountain. It was followed for some 1.5km through old, decorated phreatics and beautiful vadose canyons, to a point directly below the summit of Mount Api some 1.3km above. The strongly draughting continuation was abandoned due to lack of time.

After only two pushing trips, 33 leads head off in all directions and with no known cave anywhere in this part of Gunung Api it seems that this is the beginning of a significant new system in the largest limestone block in Mulu. As this report is being written the team is still in the field and we hope that the discoveries are not yet over.

Report: *Rob Eavis*



Eric Ardourel in Tham Heun



Ghar Parau surpassed at last

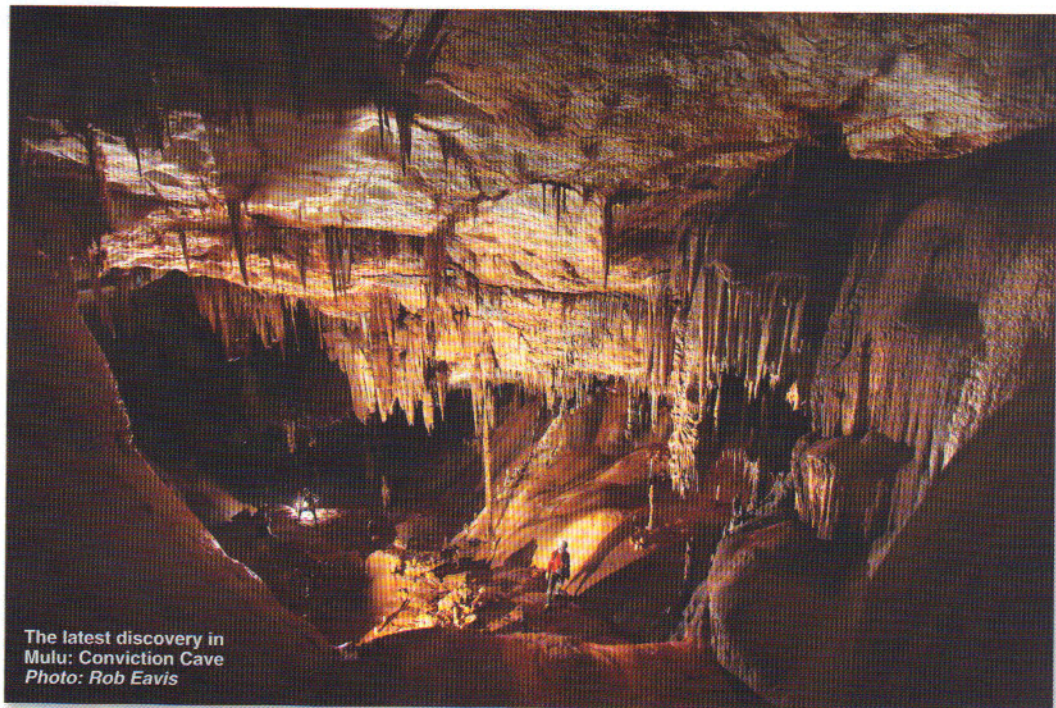
ON 7 September, after some days of exploration, a mixed team of cavers from different caving clubs from across Iran, reached a depth of -806m in Jojar, a cave located in Kermanshah province in western Iran, not far from Ghar Parau. This achievement moved Jojar to first place as Iran's deepest cave, unseating the famous Ghar Parau (-752m), originally explored by a British Team in 1970 and '71, after a period of 43 years.

In 2014 a team from the Iranian Mountaineering and Sport Climbing Federation reached a depth of -568m in Jojar and the group supported this latest expedition through the provision of equipment, while some of its members and instructors participated in the exploration.

During the expedition 2,256.8m of passage were surveyed and the cave was left ongoing. Needless to say, the Iranian cavers are making plans not only to explore deeper into Jojar, but also to locate and explore other entrances in the region. This achievement is testament to the recent rapid development of cave exploration in Iran, and the way in which Iranian cavers and clubs have embraced modern techniques and begun to collaborate in exploration.

Thanks go to Mahmoud Hashemi (the Secretary of IMSCF) for supplying information.

Report: *Simon Brooks*



The latest discovery in Mulu: Conviction Cave
Photo: *Rob Eavis*