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CHINA REPORT

Our covers go off to China; do some good work and come back and it is perhaps almost becoming routine, almost like the moon landings did. As such your editor has to press them to keep the rest of us informed and to put on record the work they are doing. They have just returned from another successful trip and I hope in the next edition to have a report updating us on their caving activities. Ged Champion has however been persuaded to give us a different slant on their trips to China and penned this before they went off on this years trip.

CRASHING OUT IN CHINA

Fairly late on in the organisation of the 2009 China Caves Expedition to Huanjiang in Guangxi, Southern China we were to discover that the World Bank were going to be indirectly funding some of our activities. Although this sounded very impressive we weren't absolutely sure what this would entail. Since 2003 we had talking to Guilin Karst Institute about organising an expedition to the Mulun National Nature Reserve, where some of the most extensive and stunning cone karst in Southern China can be found. No caving expedition had previously explored this area although our French colleagues including Jean Bottazzi had explored the Libo area to the north just across the Guizhou border. They had reported seeing a spectacular skyline of cone karst towers stretching to the horizon but none of them had crossed the Da Gou River which guarded the northern approach and inner sanctum of Mulun.

As luck would have it, Zhang Hai our trusty contact at Guilin Karst Institute had applied for permission to enter the reserve from Huanjiang and so the planning of the expedition started to gather momentum.

We set off for China a little depleted because some of the usual suspects were away on other assignments but we managed to recruit new blood from a reasonably reliable local source, the New Inn at Clapham.

We collected our equipment from the store in Guilin ensuring we had plenty of rope; our scouts in Mulun had informed us of many bottomless shafts just waiting to be descended. Huanjiang is just 4 hours from Guilin and easy to reach by road. Huanjiang literally means 'town on the bend of the river'. The town is a typical bustling Chinese county town with an impressive square where local people congregate. Huanjiang County has a population of approx 330,000 which comprises Han people but also Maolan, Molao, Zhuang, Miao and Yao minorities.

Mulun Karst Forest Natural Reserve is situated in the north of Huanjiang county and 72km away from Huanjiang county town, and comprises 90 square kilometres in total area divided into a protected, buffer and experimental zone. It was approved as a natural reserve by the National Council

of the People's Republic of China in 1998 and is well known for its work to preserve endangered flora and fauna. A tastefully sculptured scale model found at the park headquarters cleverly illustrates the impenetrable nature of its cone karst with virtually each and every cone diligently listed and labelled for research purposes. Our job was to locate, explore and survey caves in the park and assist biologists where possible to collect new species of cave fauna.

The park had attracted a generous award from the World Bank to support this endeavour so we would get free board and lodgings and transport. What the park hadn't done was to give Guangxi Forestry Commission sufficient notice to process the details of our authorisation and straight away we got caught in the middle of considerable red tape generated by local government officials, and to our dismay the park and the forestry commission seemed to be winning. As if this wasn't enough, an unsightly side show concerning the legalities of fauna collection in the protected zone was also developing and our Tasmanian biologist Arthur Clarke and his team would be seriously limited in what they could achieve.

Two Japanese scientists were the first real casualties and were told to leave town by noon the following day. The rest of us were virtually placed under house arrest within days and only allowed out of our hotel to visit sites agreed by our local government hosts during daylight hours. Lots of meetings were convened and even representatives of the World Bank were flown in to mediate. Initially we thought these politics would severely diminish our chances of doing any caving at all but then by chance an accommodation was reached and it was decided we could visit sites in the experimental zone with the purpose of comparing species with those eventually to be collected in the protected zone. It was never entirely clear where one zone finished and another began so therefore we were not going to argue as long as we could go caving and the shafts we started to recce looked quite appealing. So everything started to feel back on track until that was... **one of our vehicles went off the road!**

It started as a fairly normal day National Park 4x4s arriving late had been repaired from the punishing treatment on bumpy tracks the previous day. We set off north in the direction of Mulun. I was in the first jeep in the convoy. The driver got a phone call ... come back! Mike Peters and I immediately expressed our concern about another delay, something forgotten, or maybe another enforced change of plan. We reluctantly agreed to turn around and headed back towards Huanjiang. Within a quarter of a mile a roadside crowd had gathered at what appeared to be a location where a vehicle had gone off the road. Never for one moment thinking it was one of our cars, we all jumped out to see if we could help ... and then to our horror we saw one of the now familiar orange 4x4's lying on its side in a muddy paddy field surrounded by debris and a mêlée of people rushing around trying to help. The driver was trapped behind the steering wheel and the navigator Mr. Tan, not wearing a seat belt, as is the custom in China, had been thrown through the windscreen. Eddie, Harvey and student Jun were all staggering around blooded but just about mobile.

They had all been rolled around like rag dolls in a tumble dryer. The stench and the grey murk of the paddy field mud and water seeping into the vehicle only added to the devastation.

We used dismembered car doors, the parcel shelf and anything that would form a platform over the mud. With no sign of accident and rescue services yet, we did what we could to assist, our caving first aid kits only sparingly used previously, now almost exhausted in minutes. Apart from the driver still trapped we managed to get everyone else on to dry ground. Jude and John were desperately trying to keep Mr. Tan conscious, mumbling and lying prostrate on a grassy terrace complaining of pain from his chest. Harvey's hand was so covered in blood the nature of the injury was barely discernible. Eventually help arrived, in the shape of a hospital doctor, nurse and assistants all dressed in immaculate white coats carrying drips on bamboo poles, quite an incongruous site amongst the mud, broken branches, twisted metal and equipment bags littering the scene. The gathered crowd of Chinese locals who until now had remained curious spectators were galvanised into action to clear an access route down the road bank and paddy field terraces to evacuate the injured. After finally getting them up the bank and loading the injured into the ambulance, the police arrived and started to direct the traffic which had managed quite well until they had arrived!

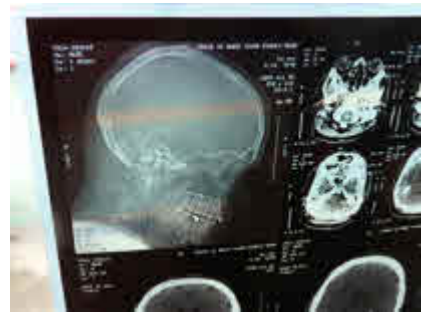
The rest of the day was spent at Huanjiang Hospital where the five occupants of the car were admitted. Eddie and Harvey were scanned, x-rayed and dressed etc. Harvey's injuries were principally to his head and hand, Eddie's mostly to his ankle and ribs. The driver and navigator had more severe injuries and were kept in a few days; our team, not wanting to be abandoned in a foreign hospital were discharged that evening.

The accident had been quite a blow to the morale of the expedition, leaving us with depleted numbers and our Chinese hosts behaving even more cautiously than normal. And yes, we did do some caving, in fact lots of vertical stuff, in fact almost exclusively vertical stuff. Most of the shafts averaged around 100 metres and though we discovered only short sections of horizontal passages we were treated to spectacular drops in some of the most impressive karst scenery in Southern China. We also descended a number of smaller Tiankengs and searched for clues and traces of resurgences of the elusive underground rivers in the area.

One of the highlights of the expedition was the Ganmei Shaft located a days journey from Huanjiang near the Guizhou border, requiring overnight stays in the farmhouses in the isolated village near to the cave. This shaft consisted of a spectacular 250 metres but sections of the drop zone were scarily loose. It was completed over a three day period by six different members of the team. Unfortunately the huge boulder strewn ramp at the bottom of the shaft ended in a blockage.

None of our finds were to yield a master cave so horizontal development did not feature highly on the expedition but

at least all expedition members survived another episode of exploration in China proving that as with any expedition, the transportation can prove far more challenging and dangerous than the exploration itself.



PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION

This years photographic competition winners were:

Best picture: 1st John Whalley A China cave scene (see page 74)
 2nd Mike Smith Andean/Bolivian Skyline (see below)

Best picture of a member on a meet:

 1st Tim Josephy El Chorro Gorge (previously published, Summer 2010)
 2nd Paul Dover LHG track clearing in the freeze (previously published, Summer 2010)

