

Caving in the Abode of the Clouds - Part III

Synopsis of 1998 Expedition to Meghalaya, North East India

Between the 11th of February and 8th March 1998 a team of eight cavers from the UK, five from Germany, a Swiss caver and members of the Shillong (N.E. India) based Meghalaya Adventurers' Association completed another successful expedition to the State of Meghalaya in North East India.

During the course of the expedition a total of 27 new caves were explored and several existing caves extended to yield a total of just under 26 kms of new cave passage, taking the total length of surveyed cave passage in the State of Meghalaya to 95 kms.

The expedition divided its time between three separate areas, namely: Nongjri in the East Khasi Hills; Lumnsnong; and the Lukha Valley in the Jantia Hills. In the Nongjri area, Krem Lymput, partly explored in 1997, was extended to 6.5 kms in length, establishing it as India's second longest cave. Several other smaller caves were also explored. In the Lumnsnong area, Krem Kotsati-UmLawan was extended by another 2 kms to 21.2 kms in length, further reinforcing its status as India's longest and deepest cave. To the north of Lumnsnong, in the vicinity of the village of Musianglamare, significant extensions were made to Umsynrang extending it from its 1997 length of 1.7 kms to a new length of 4.8 kms. In the same village, Synrang Pamaing was extended from 1.6 kms to just over 6.2 kms in length, making it India's third longest cave. The current end of Synrang Pamaing is wide open, being a canyon style stream passage some 5m wide and up to 30m height with considerable potential for further extensions. However, the cave is beginning to present logistical problems in that it is now 5 hours of hard caving from the entrance to the end of the surveyed passage.

Following the brief reconnaissance made to the Lukha Valley in 1997, the area was revisited, revealing considerable speleological potential. One of the main finds here was Piel Theng Puok which proved to be a fantastic resurgence river cave, situated in a small gorge at the head of a 50m high tufa waterfall. This stunning cave is characterised by huge, square-sectioned river passage up to 20m wide and 30m in height and never less than 10m by 10m. The passage is punctuated by massive calcite gours/dams of up to 6m high. These latter features create large lakes and necessitated over 500m of swimming in the first 2.5 kms of passage. With the huge catchment area, the impressive size of the passage at the final point, numerous unexplored side passages, and the fact that only one third of the distance to the assumed sink has been found, the potential for extending the system is considerable. Piel Theng Puok is definitely one of the most impressive Indian river caves found to date.

As has been the style of previous expeditions to Meghalaya, equipment (including surveying instruments) has been left with the Meghalaya Adventurers' in order to assist them with further cave exploration. Plans are already being made for a return visit by two teams in January/February 1999 and February/March 1999.

Synopsis of Cave Exploration in Meghalaya since 1992

Meghalaya 1995 - Caving in the Abode of the Clouds III

The Christmas season of 1995 saw the return of another highly successful month long expedition to the remote tribal hill state of Meghalaya in north east India. The Anglo-German expedition comprised members of the Bristol Exploration Club (Dr Tony Boycott, Estelle Sandford and Chris Smart), the Orpheus Caving Club (Simon and Jenni Brooks) and H Daniel Gebauer, who worked in conjunction with local cavers from the Shillong based Meghalayan Adventurers Association and the Tura based Association for the Protection of the Environment and Conservation.

The expedition made excellent progress, building on the successes of the 1992 and 1994 visits, as well as visiting several new and promising areas. (The results of the two previous expeditions were published in March 1995 as "Meghalaya - Caving in the Abode of the Clouds" ISBN 0 9525523 0 2 and available from Chris Smart, 7, The Cottage, Farleigh Wick, Near Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire, BA15 2PU, UK priced £5 plus post and packing. Alternatively see the article in the latest International Caver (No 15) ISSN 0963-7095 published 1995).

In total 24 new caves were explored, photographed and surveyed giving just over 10 kms of new passage. 1995 finds included the spectacular 2.6 km long river cave of *Krem Kot Sati* where a 6 metre wide, 4 metre high canal passage was left unpushed after 200 metres of swimming and *Krem Pubon Lashing* where the largest cave passage yet found in the Indian sub-continent was surveyed at 50 metres wide. A lack of time meant that exploration is also unfinished in this cave.

In contrast to previous expeditions the use of single rope techniques was required and future visits will need a different approach as shafts of an estimated 60 metres depth were encountered. *Tetengkol* in the Garo Hills of West Meghalaya was extended further to 5335 metres and remains, currently, the longest in the Indian sub-continent, with the promise of even more cave passage.

By the end of 1995 the three expeditions had resulted in nearly 33 kms of surveyed cave passage in Meghalaya and the prospects for considerably more were excellent. In the meantime we were confident that the training given and the equipment left with the two local groups would ensure continuing development in this rapidly emerging karst region.

Meghalaya 1996 - Caving in the Abode of the Clouds IV

Following on from the successes of 1995 the first two weeks of March 1996 saw four German cavers including Daniel Gebauer (a member of the 1994 and 1995 expeditions) Georg Bäuml, Franz Baumgartner and Andre Abele along a lucky traveller from Israel arrive in Meghalaya and join the cave explorers of the Meghalaya Adventurer's Association to continue the survey of *Krem Kot Sati* (Lumshnong) and *Krem Lashing* (Pdengshkap) in the Jaintia Hills. As it turned out the karst at Lumshnong provided far too much cave and consequently the Pdengshkap side trip was postponed.

The highlight of the March 1996 excursion was the exploration of the beautiful River Cave *Krem Um Lawan* which became, with 6488 metres of surveyed passage and a vertical extension of 107m both the longest and deepest cave not only of Meghalaya or India, but of the whole Indian Subcontinent. The exploration of *Krem Um Lawan* along with other caves on this trip saw 8,992 km mapped in seven underground days setting the scene for the 1997 expedition.

Meghalaya 1997 - Caving in the Abode of the Clouds V

Between the 15th February 1997 and the 29th March 1997 a team of cavers from the UK and Germany teamed up once again with cavers from the Shillong based Meghalaya Adventurers Association to continue exploration of caves in the remote N.E. Hill State of Meghalaya. The main activities of the expedition took place in the Jantia Hills District near to the village of Lumnsnong between the 15th of February and the 5th March.

Building on the work of previous expeditions in 1992, 1994, 1995 and 1996 which have yielded in excess of 42 kilometers of cave passage, much of which is fine river cave, the expedition on this most recent visit explored and surveyed another 24.2 km of cave passage taking the total length of surveyed cave passage in North East India to just over 69 kms.

Notable achievements of the expedition include the linking and extension of the two caves of *Krem Kot Sati* and *Krem Um Lewan* to create a single system of 19.2 km in length with a vertical range of 187 m. This is now the longest and deepest cave in India and must rank as one of the longest in South East Asia. To the North of this fine river cave system another caving area was identified in which were found the caves of *Krem Rabbit* (998m) *Krem Umso* (1479m) *Krem Umsynrang* (1597m) *Krem Malo* (467m) and *Krem Synrang Pamiang* (1674m). Several of these caves have potential for further extension and *Krem Malo* was particularly interesting on two points. Firstly its entrance was a large 50m daylight shaft being the first serious vertical cave that has been encountered in Meghalaya. Secondly at the base of the shaft was a large Indian made (and remarkably intact) Tata Coal lorry that had fallen down the shaft when its brakes had failed some years previously.

Still in the Jantia Hills area, *Krem Lashing* initially explored in 1995 was extended to just over 3 kms in length much of which is along good sized passage of up to 50m wide by 40m high. Whilst another cave known as *Krem Lymput* yielded 2.7 km including some very large and well decorated fossil galleries not dissimilar in style to those that have made China Caves famous. Finally a new lead from the Cherrapunjee area saw the discovery of *Krem Lawkhieng* which at just over 2 kms in length makes the total length of cave passage known in the Cherrapunjee area in excess of 8 kms

Future Prospects - Caving in the Abode of the Clouds VI and beyond

To date some 84 caves have been visited yielding over 69 km's of surveyed cave passage. Several of these caves can be further extended and locations of another 150 are known. Potential is therefore considered to be adequate.