

MCG News

Newsletter of the Mendip Caving Group

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Madagascar '98 - Tim Francis

As I'm sure you are all aware, five of us undertook a six-week, lightweight expedition to Madagascar in September and October. The team were Ben Cooper, Tim Francis, Yong Shik Park, Lettie Patte and Dave Tooke. Obviously we'll be doing a journal (expect something in the New Year) but just to whet the appetite here's an extract from the log book written by Ben describing the last day in the field at Vazimba Canyon. Apologies for any typing errors.

Friday 23rd October - The Last Day in The Field

Well, what a day we knew Olivier wanted to go home, but had thought we would be able to cave without him. But he explained that he was responsible to accompany us, and if he did not, after we had gone he would have to answer to ANGAP. After much 'umming' and 'aahing', he suggested a compromise, a 'sacrifice'. If we could be out of the cave by 12, Olivier would take us caving — but we would have to walk out. Well, there seemed little option. Olivier had made a pretty generous offer, and it was really up to us to act. It was still only 7am, so, all hands to the deck to pack camp. Tim and I had to shoulder the bulk of the weight, which fortunately was much reduced after few nights eating. But personally I was at my limit for a two hour hike. Amazingly, everything packed down very quickly and after a leg-knacking slog, we actually made it to the cave at 8am. Yong Shik bowed out on account of his shoulder, so it was a lightweight survey team of Ben + Tim. We had few hours.

There was just loads to do. Five leads to explore and survey 200m of attractive, large and spectacular passage to photograph, and also some surface photos of flora, etc, to take. In other words, a good 8 hours work. So we decided to explore passage, taking only a grade 3 survey to save time. We agreed to review where we were at after 2 hours. The passage looked unlikely, and seemed to close down after a couple of survey legs but then Tim climbed up a little, and so on and on it went. There was some tantalising large stal after 50m or so, which we hoped was a connection back with the main entrance leg, but we realised it was not. Then there was a major passage on the right but this closed down almost immediately. An awkward climb up, and a long 'argument' over the forward and back bearings, led into some different low level passage with crawls. And that led into hang on. There's another junction here. Major left-right T-junction. We decided to go right in order to try and get back to passage we knew. However, almost immediately, we spotted daylight — a new entrance. Tim had a look around but was unable to exit. We continued down the passage, which gets more difficult and loose with climbs, up, down, up.

I spotted a most unusual phenomenon. It was like a snail shell buried in sand with a lid, pushed to one side. I wanted to take a photo but realised I needed Tim's help to hold the flash — but Tim was the other side of an energetic and loose 5m hole. I left the camera and started to take a bearing, while Tim took in the tape measure which, whoops vanished down the 5m hole. Oh well, climbed down for it, but then when I got to the near station, realised I had left the compass. Fortunately Tim has a spare so we did not have to waste more time going back (it was now 11 am).

Very quickly we were at another entrance. Tim managed to climb out, but found himself 50' up a doline — but interesting with another entrance to the left and right, and tantalising black holes opposite. Unfortunately, no way down and it was now 12pm — time to go. Leads in the ceiling, several leads back in the cave, and one huge gaping lead forward this morning. We took the photo of the buried shell, found on the way up; then down back to the junction and with sweat dripping from my nose took some photos (through steamed up glasses and camera viewfinder) of the little stal grotto. Up and down the difficult climb, down Bloody Hell 2 (still very tricky, but not nerve wracking now) up Bloody Hell 1 (now almost easy) and out at 12:30. Sorry Olivier

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No one outside so yomped back through Long Cave to where we left the gear. Absolutely dripping now — even Tim. No one there, so Tim went back to the Archway to find them. Quick lunch of chocolate and biscuit crumbs (à la Ben's great idea to take the food caving), and then at 1:10, shouldered the gear for the slog out. After 45 minutes we stopped for water, we were all struggling — particularly after a wrong turn, where we had to reverse, and my legs were feeling the strain uphill. Olivier seemed to suggest that we still had 2 hours to go, which put a downer on our spirits, but we were confused because he also said we would arrive by 3pm. The GPS indicated we were still heading south, but very soon we turned west, clambered through a narrow gorge, passed some 'ancient' Vazimba pots (duly photographed) and onto flat ground. Great, no more hills, just blasting heat. Fortunately the GPS came into its own, showing us to be on a direct bearing for Bekopaka, only 2.5km away. Three hours was now not only possible, but also we realised that we would be at the river (and refreshment) in ½ hour. Luckily the ferry was just waiting, so after an amusing time watching an Isuzu 4 WD ground itself on the ferry, and blow exhaust bubbles under water, we made it across. Friendly greetings from the bar lady, who shook our hands. Unfortunately, the rum bottle that we had promised to return had got lost, but she let us off as the 'Camarades' gave her a welcomed bottle of cooking oil instead. All OK back at ANGAP, who seem to have let us off costs for tent and pirogue, and all OK at the hotel. Everyone seems very friendly and happy to see us now. Dinner of Zebu + Chips. Quite a day!

Ben Cooper

At this stage it seems almost certain that some of us will be returning to the same area next year (well I'm definitely going). Details are sketchy but the trip should be in August and last for 3 weeks. This means I don't need to take any more unpaid leave and we'll be back in time for the BCRA Conference. Expect to have to come up with £1500. It will be worth it.

