



Tsingy de Bemaraha Caves Expedition 1999

Tim Francis

Introduction

Well we're back from another jaunt to Madagascar and in between trying to get the journal together I'd thought I'd do a quick update for the newsletter. This year's expedition members were Pete Bennett, Ben Cooper, Tim Francis and Julie Hesketh. Due to a lack of holiday entitlement only three weeks could be spared for the trip. Logistics were fine tuned giving us a potential of 13 days in the field. We elected to take internal flights rather than taxi-brousse wherever practicable to minimise time lost due to travelling. This year the expedition also benefited from a Ghar Parau grant.

We decided to concentrate upon an area of Tsingy just to the south of the Manambolo River. Ben, Yong Shik and myself had previously explored a number of entrances in the area known collectively as the Arch Caves. It was our intention to tidy up the loose ends we had left, complete the photography and survey, and explore further caves in the area.

The Journey In

Our journey to Bekopaka went according to plan. A constructive half-day was spent in Tana sorting out currency and ordering maps and aerial photo enlargements from FTM. Then it was a 5am start to take an internal Air Mad flight to Belo-sur-Tsiribina. The views from the aeroplane of the countryside (deforested and badly eroded) below were fantastic. Our time in Belo was spent wandering around the market picking up provisions for the camp. A lift was arranged for the following day to Bekopaka and remarkably we arrived at the village bang on schedule. A slight hiccup over permits took a bit of sorting but two days later we were pitching camp on the banks of the Manambolo at Vazimba Canyon.

Cave Exploration

In the field the first few days were spent tidying up the loose ends at Arch II. New passage was explored and surveyed, and more satisfyingly we were able to locate Entrance 4 on the surface. A fine 15m daylight pitch was found in a nearby canyon, which was eventually tied into the 1998 survey. Another well decorated cave in the canyon, Pearl Cave, was surveyed and photographed. Entrance 3 was not located although I did manage to free climb out into the Tsingy to find myself at the bottom of a large shakehole. The tantalising lead we had left last year was eventually pushed, via a delightful up and over pitch, Peat's Pot, and a desperately tight calcite squeeze to the surface and hence entrance 5. It's rather hot work dashing around in there but in quick time we rigged and de-rigged all the various pitches whilst Ben completed his photographic record.

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Next followed a mad yomp across the Tsingy in the baking heat to try and find a large doline we had spotted on the maps and aerial photograph. The terrain proved exceptionally difficult to traverse and it took us over half a day to reach our destination. Swarms of insects had a field day particularly the horse flies, which had a nasty bite. The doline proved to be as impressive as we had suspected but the obvious cave at the bottom closed down. The size of the 'hanging death' has to be seen to be believed. Other tantalising black holes in the walls of the doline were not entered due to lack of time. After this we decided to pursue potential caves nearer the Vazimba canyon.

On a day off, back at camp, Julie had spotted a low sandy entrance right next to where we were sleeping. Pete and I pushed this horrendously flood prone cave for a hundred metres or so. The whole thing was liberally coated with black mud and dead sharp. I turned back when the claustrophobic conditions and the thought of an afternoon downpour got the better of me. We did not return but intriguingly this cave does show that resurgence caves in the Tsingy are a possibility.

The final caves explored were just next to the Grand Arch and originally found when an alternative overland route to Entrance 2 of Arch II was being opened up. A bypass to a 15m pitch was discovered which led to the discovery of hundreds of metres of passage. Lack of time meant that only 800m+ were surveyed but with plenty of leads left behind. This was the deepest cave we had found in the area so far with potential for far more below. There is a good draught in a number of places suggesting more entrances exist to the north. For me there was the tantalising possibility of pushing the cave towards Arch II. It was left to Peat and Ben to do the exploration of this cave for Julie had left camp early for a spot of Lemur spotting elsewhere and I had slashed my foot during a midnight dash to the toilet!

I think given the small amount of time and personnel we have achieved a great deal this year. Considerable amounts of surface and underground data were collected and hence expanding our knowledge of the region. We achieved a good balance between exploration, surveying and photography. The downside was that we were unable to devote much time to individual projects. The fauna in the caves was literally 'in-your-face' with frogs, butterflies and bats in abundance.

The Trip Out

After leaving the Tsingy we gave a brief verbal report to ANGAP (the National Parks body) before leaving Bekopaka. A bi-lingual report will follow and members should receive a copy in the New Year. The journey back to Tana was a little slower than on the way in with taxi-brousses taken to Belo and then on to Morondava. From there a flight back to Tana gave us a day and a half in the capital. Most of this was spent writing up postcards and buying souvenirs. Oh and eating!

The Future

There is already discussion of a return in 2001, hopefully to coincide with the eclipse. A lack of holidays means that a trip next year is not really a possibility. So in 2001 we will probably look at a different area of the Tsingy to the north of the Manambolo and further upstream. Here the depth potential is 400m. The area is a little bit more remote so the logistics could be a bit tricky. Supposedly crocodiles are more common here so that will make bathing a bit more interesting. A few more weeks in the field will be required but in terms of cost it's getting there that's the expensive bit. So book your holidays now!