



Number 310
October 2002

www.m-c-g.org.uk
Founded 1954

Meghalaya 2001: Caving in the Abode of the Clouds

By Julie Hesketh

To be honest, I couldn't even place Meghalaya on a map when it was suggested I joined the Abode of the Clouds Expedition in 2001. For me now, it represents some of the best caving I have ever done, in an area of massive potential- ironic as "The Underground Atlas" of the world comments that in India "It seems that there will be no caves on a world scale nor any karst features of outstanding significance" – a point that caused much mirth each time we clocked another kilometre on our trip total – though to be fair the "Atlas" did pinpoint our exploration area as having some potential.

Meghalaya is part of the far north east of India – a part of the world until recently closed to outside visitors, mainly due to the unstable political situation. Free access to visitors had been restricted to foreigners since the Wars of Partition. To the north is the State of Assam and to the south and west, the border with the low-lying Bangladesh. There are three main ranges of hills in the State each with a distinctive tribe – the Garo Hills, Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills. These limestone hills rise up to 2000m in places so there is lots of potential.

This was to be the largest expedition to Meghalaya to date – by a truly international team of Brits, Germans, Swiss, Indians and an Austrian. The aim was to revisit the Sutnga area, explored in 2000. In addition, a reconnaissance trip was planned to Borsora - an area never visited by Western cavers, close to the Bangladesh border. It was this area that I went to with a small team. A recce had previously been made to the area in 1997 mainly by Meghalayan Cavers – led by Brian Kharpran-Daley, a member of the Meghalayan Adventurers Association (MAA)– who co-ordinated this year's expedition from the Indian end. Attempts to explore the area in more detail had been thwarted by access difficulties – local political problems – mainly militant rebels – made permits to visit the area elusive. This year however, the authorities seemed happier to let us into the area.

The whole team convened over a number of days in Guwaharti after a long flight and an overnight in Calcutta (and unexpectedly breakfast in Bangkok, courtesy of Royal Jordanian Airlines). We were taken by bus to Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya to stay near Brian's house and the HQ of the MAA. Brian, his wife Maureen and family were wonderfully hospitable during the whole visit and seemed barely to notice that 26 cavers were making their home their own and even more amazingly, managed to make crates of beer magically arrive at just the right moment. Every evening.

The MAA have a well-stocked storeroom of rope, wetsuits, buoyancy aids, carbides and all sorts of other useful items that have gradually built up over time. Some British expedition members even leave personal kit there, certain to return year on year. After having been introduced to the legendary Meghalayan parties and the local "pick-me-up" of beetel nut - a dry nut that contains a mild stimulant - chewed with lime leaf that the locals seem to love (the most worrying side-effect though is that it turns your mouth and teeth bright red and makes one produce lots of red saliva) and, more importantly, packing kit and shopping for additional supplies, the group, who, by now had swollen to around 25 people was ready to go. We split into 2 groups – I was in a small group of 6 people who were off to Borsora to recce and the rest of the group who were off to Sutnga to revisit and extend last year's efforts. I have to say that I

From the Editor

Welcome to a new-look MCG News! We've come a long way from typing with an old-fashioned typewriter, then *really* cutting and pasting with scissors and glue. On the way we've used a BBC A computer with 16k ram, then a BBC B, IBM 286, 386, 486 and now an all-singing, all-dancing Notebook. During all that time the layout of the newsletter has hardly changed.

We've taken on board suggestions by members (not all of which are printable!) with a view to giving the newsletter a slightly more modern look. We hope you like it.

Group Information is now on the last page instead of page 2. The main article on page 1 now continues on the next few pages. Snippets of information will be found in text boxes (like this one) alongside the longer articles. We also intend to include more colour photographs but need you to submit them!

If you want to know more, then turn the page!

In this issue

Meghalaya 2001	pages 1-5
MCG Forum	page 5
Ogof Draenen	page 6
Burrington closure	page 7
Spare lighting	page 7
Ireland 2002	pages 8-9
Daren Cilau	page 9
Xmas dinner	page 9
Group information	page 10

was generally unaware of the “tricky” political situation surrounding Borsora and happily packed my stuff and headed off to Borsora with my team: Simon Brooks, Paul Edmunds, Kristine Jantschke, Herbert Jantschke and Lindsay Karphram-Daly, Brian’s son.

Borsora is about a 5-hour drive from Shillong and lies right on the Bangladesh border in an area known locally for its coalmines. The very morning we left however, Borsora hit the headlines in the Shillong Times for another reason – a local businessman had been shot dead 2 days before by bandits who we think were basically trying to extort money from the coal mining companies. The area was also known a little for its insurgency problems and so you will not be surprised to hear, that, by now, I was a wee bit nervous about this whole idea. I was bundled into the jeep, by the rest of the team who seemed far more relaxed about things than I did – making light-hearted threats of using me as bait for the bandits!

Borsora lies on the other side of the Ranikor River – a major psychological barrier for the politically nervous – there is no bridge, so a huge wooden raft took us and the jeep across. We finally arrived in Borsora shortly after nightfall. Instead of the picturesque, rural Garo village we had been expecting, we found a depressing, black coal-mining town, coated with a thick layer of black soot, blown from the numerous bings around the settlement. My heart sank as white eyes stared at us from the sooty faces of the miners. I perked up a bit when the local police took us in for tea and explained to us that we would be staying in Mr. Anderson’s house – Anderson was the man who owned the whole mining operation in the area. My sense of humour took another tumble, though, when the local police shared their map of the area with us – labelled “crime map” – outlining where armed militants had last been sighted in the thick local jungle. We all perked up a bit however when we found our accommodation – a well equipped colonial style bungalow on a promontory overlooking the town.

We had about a week to find cave. Local enquiries yielded tales of a large entrance a few miles away, in another mining town – Cherragoan. Our journey there took us past armed guards and many checkpoints as the road wound along the border with Bangladesh. Shocked at the number of armed guards, I was slowly waking up to the fact that despite our permit to travel in the area – this place was far from ready to welcome tourists. Our “good lead” yielded a disappointing 8m of passage.

The surly looking locals proved friendlier and more helpful than first impressions led us to believe and soon Mr Ma Ma, a local miner was called to recount his memories of a large cave entrance, at the base of a steep cliff, being mined for low-grade coal. The miners offered us transport up the steep road towards the cave in a Shaktiman lorry – a monster of a vehicle used for transporting tonnes of coal. Our jeep was effectively useless on this terrain. I learned quite quickly that I was never really going to be clean on this trip – the combination of staying in a coal-mining town and using this type of transport meant that the coal-dust was going to be ingrained – for a long time. We walked down the steep sided valley into the gorge below, accompanied by the sound of miners hammering away in the cliff-faces above and to the crashing down of spoil.

We were rewarded by a spectacular limestone amphitheatre with a huge dry riverbed running through the centre. At the downstream end, there was a 12m by 20m entrance that Herbert, Paul and myself set about exploring. Bat guano coated the entrance of the cave – that gave the cave its name – Krem Khlieh Kherthang (KKK cave) – the Bat Cave, and I did my best to find Dan and Fiona the elusive wingless flies they were trying to collect as part of their biological study of Meghalayan caves. We explored upstream to a fork in the passage – in one direction to a small dark lake choked with the trunks of trees obviously washed in during the rains and in the other direction to a small pitch that terminated our trip for that day. We found the others upstream from the amphitheatre, in another huge gaping entrance – even more spectacular than the first (at 40x40m) – with a refreshing entrance pool fed by a waterfall over impressive limestone cliffs. This cave, after 5 days of exploration and

surveying, eventually yielded nearly 3km of passage and we linked the 2 entrances together via a series of driftwood-choked crawls. The most spectacular of the passages was a huge square shaped passage bored out by floodwater – long and straight. The many large tree trunks wedged across the passage that we were forced to clamber over were a reminder of the phenomenal floods Meghalayan caves take during the Monsoon. Our small pitch led to knee-high water, populated by large, warty frogs and fish and took us back to the surface.

Our trips into this cave were marked at the start and finish by tea provided by the local miners – thick, syrupy sweet stuff, typical of Meghalaya, brewed with spices and loaded with milk and sugar. Occasionally they shared a meal with us but we had to move fast every evening, in order to get back across the armed border controls that closed at 5pm.

Local intelligence pointed us to another village called Kunjoy, with tales of a large river cave. Consulting our “crime map”, we realised that this was in an area of private roads run by the Anderson mining family and as such, was possibly a focus for terrorist activity, but accessible to us as we had the assistance of the Anderson Firm. Simon, Paul and myself took the jeep up to the village – the road was particularly rough but we thankfully left the grime of Borsora behind and wound up the steep road to the lovely Garo village of Kunjoy, stopping en-route to look at a gaping shaft our driver had seen – our estimation was that it is at least 80m deep. One for whoever returns next year.

Simon Brooks described the Group’s move to Kunjoy, where we set up home for 5 days, as a “calculated risk” as the area was reputed to be a stronghold for Garo militants. For me, however, it was the highlight of the trip. It began with a slightly nerve-wracking recce to Ronga River Cave with four armed escorts but Kunjoy proved to be a wonderfully friendly village – away from the macho feel of Borsora. The many children would follow us around the village and we soon found our favourite tea-house, where the lady of the house allowed me into the kitchen to watch her make puri – a fried flat bread, which we ate with our tea.

Our accommodation was an “Inspection Bungalow” or “IB”. These are government owned colonial-style buildings used by government employees when travelling. They are extremely basic with concrete floors, little or no furniture – the IB in Kunjoy had only a table – and a small kitchen area with room for a wood fire for cooking. Toilet facilities were basic and there was no electricity. But it was in a friendly village and after Borsora it felt like paradise!

Ronga River Cave could be heard before it was seen. A pretty 30 minute walk out of the village, down valley, took us past small abandoned mines and along a broad dry river valley towards a series of small rocky climbs up to the raging resurgence that we could see from a distance. This could go big. Comparisons were made with the entrance of Meghalaya’s longest river cave and we were eager to explore – stopped by the large entrance pool. Surveying began in earnest the very next day. We were quickly brought back to earth however with the discovery that this 20x25m entrance led to only a few hundreds of metres of passage before resurfacing upstream to a dry river. I explored the dry riverbed alone for about 1km, clambering over boulders the size of Garo houses. This yielded only a low, tight cave with an extremely loose roof and a too-tight shaft of about 40’. A falling boulder from the roof that demolished my head torch reminded me just how foolish it is to cave alone in such remote areas. Back in Ronga River Cave, Simon and Paul had followed the river through the upstream inlet. This addition along with the maze of small but well decorated passages around the many smaller entrances of the cave eventually helped the site notch up just under 2km of passage though – some of it very well decorated. Not Meghalaya’s longest as we had hoped, but some fine caving nonetheless. Another thing that made this cave a memorable one was that during the 3 days we spent here exploring and surveying, we often emerged to find a troop of monkeys overhead in the canopy of trees above the entrance – led by an enormous male – obviously concerned the we were invading his territory.

Further explorations from Kunjoy found Herbert, Christine and Lindsay surveying Rongbaljong Cave that clocked up 620m of hard earned passage. Meanwhile, Mr. Boden, the village's Headman, took Simon, Paul and myself to a shakehole, 1.5km walk from the village that contained a cave called Umbelici. The shakehole was just a stones' throw off the main road, though we had to hack at undergrowth to reach it. The entrance was a steep incline that unfortunately was not negotiable without rope – rope that we did not have with us (we were unwilling to use Mr Boden's 8m of nylon rope on the 12m climb! So, once more we left a known lead for the next trip to Kunjoy.

After a final day of tying up loose ends, it was time to leave Kunjoy. We were in a hurry to leave as we would need to use the border road that closed at 5pm to get back to our base at Borsora. The good people of Kunjoy were in less of a hurry to see us go however and the lady of the house opposite our accommodation invited us in for tea. We could not refuse – the village of Kunjoy had been incredibly polite, if terribly shy, towards us during our stay but mainly curious and very friendly. As we sat in front of the house drinking hot, sweet tea, a crowd of children began to gather to see us off – around 30 or 40 in total – plus other assorted small beings – puppies, chickens, goats and lots of villagers – all came to wave us off. Kunjoy was a lovely, lovely place and it was a bit depressing to get back to Borsora – the only advantage being the ability to wash there – running water at last.

Our last day in the Borsora area was spent finishing off leads in KKK Cave for Christine and Herbert, whilst Simon, Lindsay, Paul and myself took the jeep to Nonghallom – another mined area that we had hoped might contain cave. Unfortunately this was not the case and the area was quite flat and barren with many abandoned villages and those that were left were extremely poor and felt a little hostile. We drove on to Nongiri, a few kilometres from Nonghallom where we were shown a small cave that ran under the main road but unfortunately was not promising. Most interestingly though a little further up the road, the valley sides steepened and the sound of a stream could be heard at the base of the valley that we could not hear back at the small cave. It is my guess that there is a resurgence here but unfortunately I did not have time to explore – definitely one for next time.

At last it was time to go back to Shillong. We were to stay in Shillong for one night before moving on to Sutgna to meet the rest of the party who had been there since we left them 10 or so days ago. Lovely Shillong that hadn't seemed so lovely when we first arrived there was wonderful with its soft mattresses, hot water and showers and unlimited variety of food and beer – beer was something that was in short supply in the villages. We had our fill of all of these and the next day moved on to Sutgna

The Sutgna party had made their home in a large Inspection Bungalow – this IB was better equipped than the Kunjoy IB, with lots of tables and chairs and 2 rooms for sleeping. They had erected wash tents and this team had taken the expedition cook – a friend of Brian Kharpram-Daly's who served up wonderful, if spicy, food every morning and evening for the hungry cavers. A bit crowded with over 30 of us staying there, but fairly luxurious by most people's expedition standards. It was good to be back in the larger group and swap caving stories and hear about their major finds.

The team had clocked up a total of around 15km of passage in around 10 days on the Nonghlhieh Ridge – the major find being Krem Um Thloo – an extremely well decorated cave with some wonderful swims that was being rated as some of the group's best caving, ever. Initially the group had explored Um Thloo via an unstable boulder choke negotiated and explored by J-Rat and others. Subsequently however, further small entrances had been found. I spent my first day in the area surveying around one of these entrances with Roger Galloway, Mandy Edgeworth, and Alan Jeffreys.

It was in Um Thloo that I had my first encounter with a truly awesome Coral Spider, who contrary to the view that they are shy creatures, had other ideas and was very inquisitive. This culminated with Mandy and I squealing and hiding up a small rift

throwing stones at the beast who was at least the size of a dinner plate whilst Roger and Alan laughed hysterically, not budging an inch to help! We exited the cave the long way via the main entrance. What an amazing trip – probably one of the best and most beautiful caving trips I have ever done. We swam upstream, clambered over beautiful cascades, waded through deep pools and admired amazing glistening flowstone formations – a dream caving trip. Until the boulder choke that is. A horrid, unstable, muddy crawl to the surface was the disappointing end to one of the most beautiful caves I have been lucky enough to visit. Exploration in this cave continued after I left India and eventually a total of 12.4km of passage was found in the system. I probably saw around less than half of this.

I spent my last caving day surveying Krem Lyngkshaid – a cave with 4 entrance pitches that we eventually surveyed and joined up with Krem Moolale that had been located and surveyed by the Sutgna group earlier in the expedition. This cave was a fairly flood-prone river cave (though dry for our visit) with some spectacular avens parallel to the entrance pitch. Despite being so deep and inaccessible, some of the party had previously encountered a rather ravenous looking snake in one of the low crawls. Fortunately they had “dealt with” it prior to my visit!

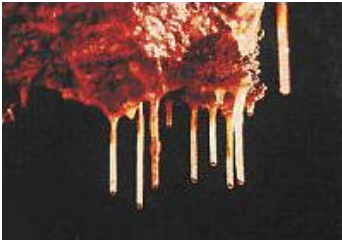
So, my caving had come to an end and 4 of us had to head back to the UK, leaving the others to complete another week of exploration. We said our goodbyes in Shillong – long and drawn out with farewell dinners and drinks with the locals. The day we left Shillong to take our flight from Guwaharti, I finally found out about the much discussed “bunns” or strikes that often hit Shillong – effectively the whole town stops working on strike days – transport included. We finally blagged a ride in a bus to the airport and flew back to Calcutta. Our stay in Calcutta was prolonged by flight difficulties too – partly compensated for by a day or 2 in a 5 star hotel luxury but no compensation for my own bath and bed.

In all, Meghalaya 2001 found a total of over 35km of new passage and individuals stayed on longer and added over 5km more to that total. Thirty new caves were explored and a number of sites were logged for future exploration. Since my trip, many of the group have been back to the Sutgna area and clocked up many more kilometres to the total with still more potential to find. It is just lack of sufficient holiday and my wedding this year that has stopped me from going back.

The Meghalaya team is led by Simon Brookes and they are always keen to hear from enthusiastic individuals interested in joining them in India – enthusiasm and a sense of humour is as important for this lot as caving experience and expedition know-how. So if you fancy an intensive expedition with good prospects of finding many kilometres of new passage with very friendly cavers and locals, in an interesting part of the world, look no further

IRELAND 27 July to 10 August 2002

By Roy Kempston



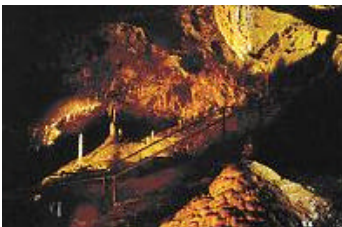
*Above and below:
formations in Crag Cave*

This year for our family holiday we (Fiona, Ellen, Neil and Nicholas) decided to visit Western Ireland. I apologise now that this article does not contain any mention of real caving, but we did visit two show caves. It's rather difficult to go on a two weeks holiday with five in our Mondeo and have room for caving gear as well (anyway that's my excuse!).

I went to Ireland for the first and last time about 30 years ago, so I was a little apprehensive about the changes that may have taken place to that slow old fashioned part of the world that I remembered. On leaving Rosslare it was obvious within a few miles that the magic wand of the EC had been waved over this 'deprived region' with new improved roads. However the further west we got it was noticeable that the roads increasingly needed another spell to be waved over them. It was still the same ceremony with the pouring of a pint of Guinness though.

Our first week was spent in a purpose built holiday cottage just outside of Castlegregory on the north coast of the Dingle peninsula in County Kerry, about 15 miles west of Tralee. This is the next peninsula north from the 'Ring of Kerry'. We had planned to climb some hills whilst there but during the whole week we were there unfortunately we never even saw the top 1300 ft of Mount Brandon's 3127 ft, which was one our planned peaks just to the west of our cottage. It's one of the problems that these hills catch most of the weather coming off the Atlantic, in what has apparently been one of the worst summers in Ireland for a long time.

Thus we had to confine ourselves to lower level activities, and can you get any lower than going underground? Thus the reason for heading 10 miles east from Tralee to the town of Castleisland. Here, is found Crag Cave discovered by Martin Farr in 1983 and advertised as 'Ireland's Most Exciting Cave', located in one of the less famous limestone areas. It's a well organised site with lots of covered walkways (I wonder why?) leading to the entrance which is down a square shaped circular staircase. There is the usual array of named stal shapes which the young guide endeavoured to bring to life. The cave is well decorated and not interfered with too much in the 350 m that is visited out of the 3.81 km total. The guide at one point got us all comfortable and then turned out all of the lights, to show how dark dark is. The cave has its own website www.cragcave.com which is worth a visit if only for the flock (is that correct?) of bats that follow your pointer around. I'll leave you to get the official information and tour there. When we were leaving the cave I had a chat with the guide and she thought that Martin Farr was dead, but I explained that as far as I was aware he wasn't!



Our second week was spent in a cottage about 250 yards from the village of Ballyvaughan, with its many restaurants and pubs (including 'Traditional' ones). The village is on the coast in County Clare right in the heart of the Burren, and from our front door we had a wonderful view of the bare limestone hills which included the hill with the entrance to Aillwee Cave facing us less than 2 miles to the south. We did lots of sightseeing, including a visit to the Cliffs of Moher on the south western edge of the Burren, which are spectacular with the cliff top 'path' clinging to the edge more than

200 meters above the sea. This is not a walk for the faint hearted and we were lucky that the blustery wind was coming off the sea, but the 4 or 5 miles stretch of flagstone cliffs have superb views out to the Aran Islands. We also visited lots of the limestone pavements with their many prehistoric tombs and wild landscapes, that are easy to reach and isolated at the same time.

There, I've kept you waiting for our visit to Aillwee Cave which is billed as 'Ireland's Premier showcave'. It's been well developed since the first tours in 1976, with plenty of parking, and when we were there on one of our few hot and sunny days it was a bit

of a honeypot, and we had to wait about 20 minutes for our tour. If you visit during more inclement weather there is plenty of room to shelter in the shop, from where the tour starts. The tour visits about a third of the cave's current 1034 meters system, and again the guide describes the bones and various shapes in the cave, as you pass the Cascades and Waterfalls. The way out from the end of the cave tour is via a blasted passage, which has been done reasonably well. The cave has its own website at www.aillweecave.ie with a good tour and description, if you're getting to be more of an armchair caver these days, like me!



Aillwee Cave
