

President's Report

Andy Spate

Recently, I attended the 73rd Savannah Guides Field School on the Atherton Tablelands in Far North Queensland. This four-day school was conducted under the slogan "Tableland Timelines, Tales and Treasures". It was an amazing experience. Savannah Guides is in many ways a similar organization to ACKMA – but also different in many ways. More on the meeting elsewhere in the Journal. While in FNQ, I took lightning visits to Chillagoe and Undara (see articles at pages 20 and 21).

As you all know the 23rd Cave and Karst Management Conference will be held in May next year. Scott Melton and his colleagues have been working hard to get the conference organized – we thank them for their efforts. I met with Scott at Jenolan recently – all seems to be falling into place.

Elsewhere in this Journal you will find a "call for presentation abstracts" for both papers and posters (with a strict deadline of 23 March) and a reminder about the need to disseminate information about the Ken Grimes Award available to provide support to attend the conference.

Matters recently discussed by your Committee include banking, a very minor legal issue with the Journal and communication problems within the Committee created by IT rules at various departmental agencies.

As intimated in the September Journal, both Tim Moore and I will not be re-standing at the AGM as Editor and President, respectively. So, start thinking about new committee people. Consider putting your hand up and help running **your Association.**

A visit to Mulu

Steve Bourne

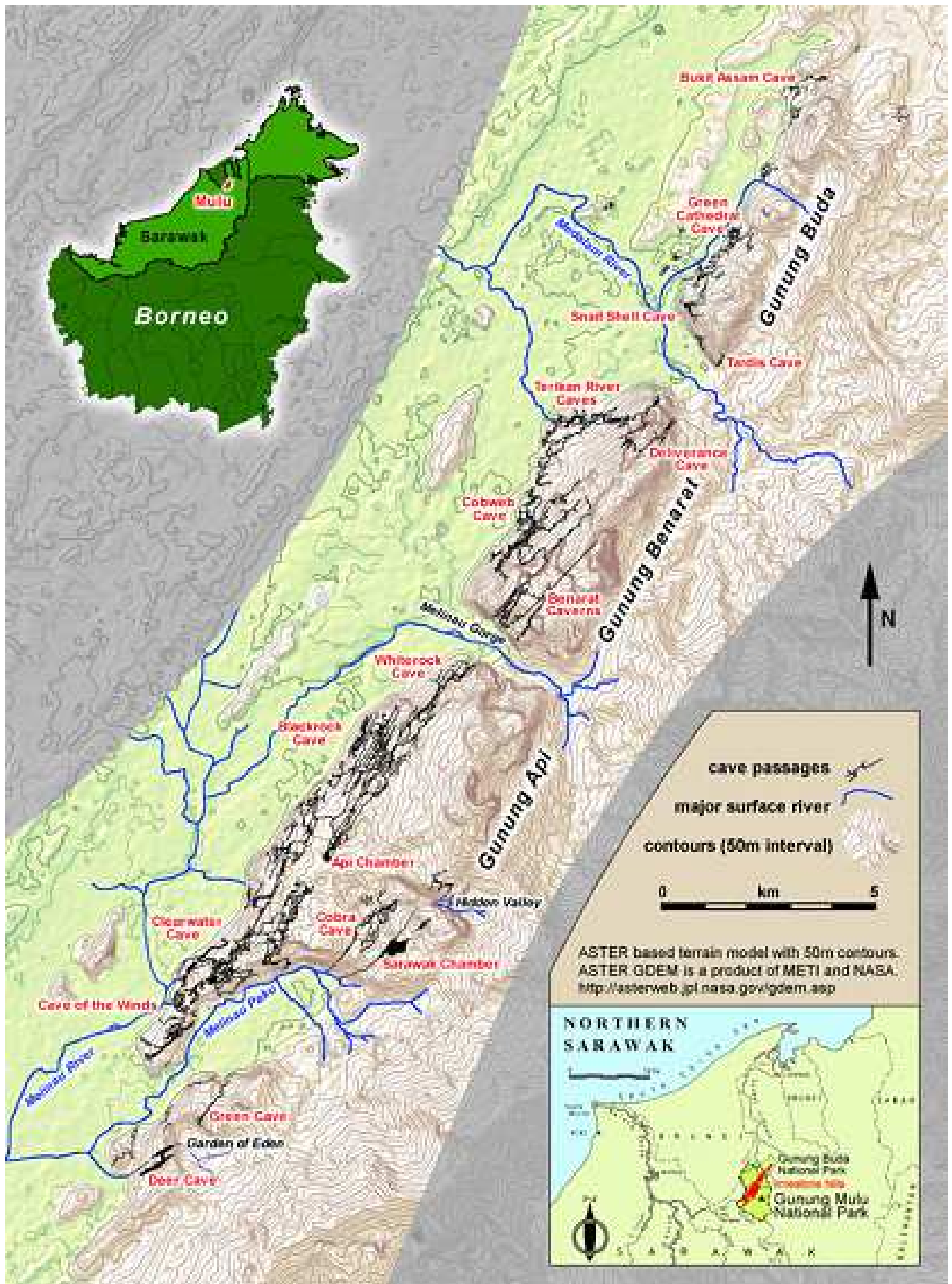
Mulu National Park is one of the great cave locations on the planet. Over 100 ACKMA members attended the Annual General Meeting "weekend", held over eight days in 2010, so the park is known to many readers. It is home to the world's largest cave chamber (by area), Sarawak Chamber, depending on how it is measured, and by whom, as well as Deer Cave, which had been regarded as the largest cave passage until the discovery of Son Doong in Vietnam. I had been there four times prior to this trip, including the ACKMA event while Brian Clark was manager. I had promised Hein and Andia Gerstner, ex-Cango Caves, South Africa, that I would visit them at Mulu when they took on the management

role, but four years had passed since the promise was made and I still hadn't made it.

In 2018, I spent some time in Phong Nha Ke Bang National Park, Vietnam with Augusto Auler from Brazil and three of his friends. We took the Hang Son Doong 'expedition' and a number of caves as reported in editions of this Journal in 2018. The group was keen to visit Mulu, so I offered to coordinate the trip, based on my previous experience and knowing the manager and many of the staff. I sent the first e-mail on 19 July 2018 to start the planning and the folder finished with just over 200 e-mails. I only kept the e-mails that were important, from a planning perspective, so there were many more than this in the ensuing year. I provide this and a subsequent article as a chronological record as the itinerary worked quite well and will, I hope, be useful for others contemplating a trip to this World Heritage Site.



A view of the limestone of Mulu National Park (Garry K. Smith)



Map of the cave locations at Gunung Mulu National Park

It was not long after I drafted the first itinerary with Hein, senior guide Bian Rumei (who attended ACKMA 2009 in Western Australia) and Nina Binti Anuar (who is Hein's personal assistant) that Augusto contacted me to say the Brazilians would need to delay the trip until 2020. I had already invited Denis Marsh to join the trip while we were on the Nullarbor and he was committed to going. I really wanted to honour the promise to visit Hein and Andia and had been keeping abreast of news of a road construction that is getting closer to Mulu National Park. I hope it never happens, as it will place too much pressure on the natural resource and staff trying to manage it. So, I needed to find more people!

It's worth a few words describing how the team was put together. My friend, Julian Hume from the United Kingdom, had always been keen on Mulu but had a knee requiring an operation - not ideal for such a trip. We had to see how he came out of his March 2019 operation. I asked John Brush, as a keen traveller, two-time Mulu visitor and caver, and he was in. At the ASF Conference in Tasmania, in late December/early January, Denis suggested Garry Smith was interested. I knew Garry and invited him to join us for his second Mulu trip, he having also been at the 2010 ACKMA event.

I went on a bus trip at the conference and sat alongside Carey Barlow - I had never met her before. As you do at a caving conference, you talk about past exploits and future endeavours and the Mulu trip came up. Carey knows Tony White, one of the co-discoverers of Sarawak Chamber and Jerry Wooldridge, a UK photographer who took some early images of the chamber. She said she would love to do the trip. Do you invite a virtual stranger on a caving trip for two-and-a-half weeks? I thought I should at least find out a little information and was giving glowing references about Carey's caving exploits in Papua New Guinea in the 1980s' expeditions - no issues with Carey's capacity for Mulu! So this made five, plus Julian depending on how his knee operation went.

In February, Garry contacted me regarding a member from his caving club, Melissa Hadley, joining the trip. Accommodation was proving difficult in the park at Mulu, so I was hesitant to add too many people. After much to-and-fro, Hein negotiated a deal with the Marriott Resort adjacent to the park, advising them that I was the nephew of an Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott!

Julian came out of his knee operation well so we were seven: Denis Marsh, John Brush, Garry Smith, Carey Barlow, Melissa Hadley, Julian Hume and me. It was an experienced group; Melissa by far the youngest at 37, with an average age of 59. A group from diverse backgrounds - most only knew a couple of other trip members - so would this work? It is interesting when people have to send photos to each other so they can recognise on another at the airport! By end of April, everything was locked in for our August trip.

I 'sold' the trip to everyone as a full-on caving and cultural experience but it also had a serious management side. Hein sought our advice on several in-cave

management issues and the three ACKMA members in our group had previously visited the area and had seen the area change over time and so were able to suggest some enhancements. In addition, we had also offered to give the staff presentations on a range of cave and karst topics that was likely to be new to them. Our aim was to broaden their knowledge of caves around the world. It was difficult to find a time that suited everyone, but we managed to squeeze in three presentations on our last full day in the area.

We flew from our various destinations and all arrived in Miri, Sarawak, on 8 August 2019, and met for a drink and introductions at the Marriott Hotel. I had arranged a taxi for 8.00 in the morning to travel to Niah Cave for the day, and warned the group that I am not patient and it would leave at 8.00. That set the tone and everyone was on time for the rest of the trip - mostly!

Buses run from Miri to Niah, but a taxi is a better option with a group. We paid MYR520 (Malaysian Ringgit - about MYR2.8 to A\$1.00) for the day, with the driver waiting patiently until 4.00 pm when we finished our cave exploring. The entry fee is MYR20 to the park, plus MYR3 for a return trip in a boat across the river.

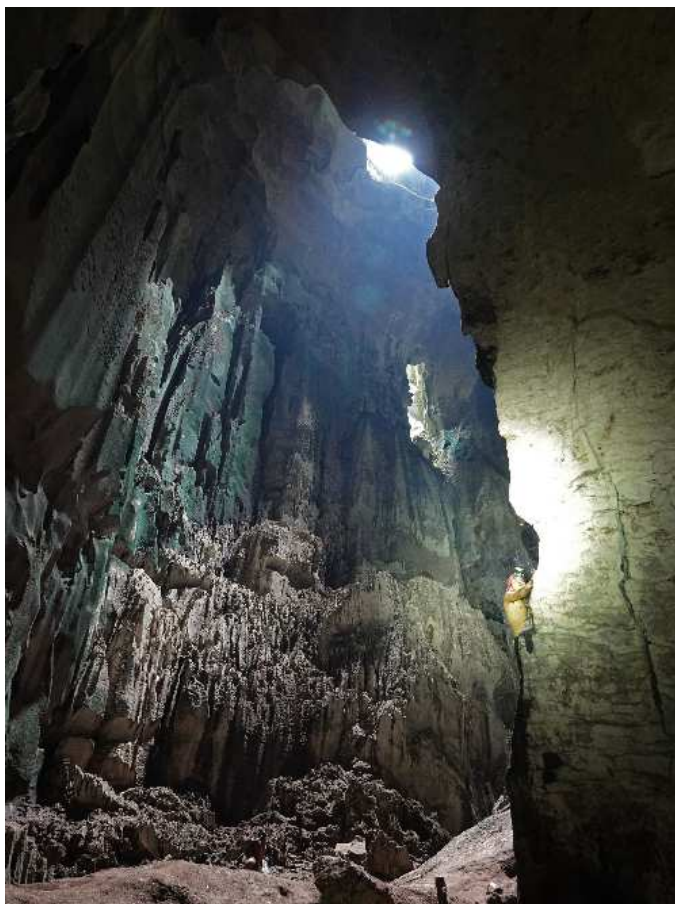
The caves are self-guided. I recall seeing security guards on a previous visit to Niah but did not see any this time. The caves are accessed via a raised boardwalk, a bit over three kilometres to Traders Cave (Gua Dagang), a shelter cave which was being excavated by Australian researcher, Darren Curnoe. Unfortunately, the researchers had completed their field season but we could still view the excavation. Traders Cave has a long history of human occupation and the research has revealed much about human settlements in South East Asia. See <http://theconversation.com/we-found-evidence-of-early-humans-in-the-jungles-of-borneo-87336> for a summary of this work.



Traders Cave, Niah National Park (Garry K. Smith)

Niah Cave has a spectacular entrance. Apart from a building in the entrance, the first thing you notice is long pieces of timber hanging from the lofty ceilings. These are used by bird-nesters to reach their prizes. We were lucky on our visit as bird-nesters were active, with one offering a quick climbing demonstration.

We observed two of them, tens of metres off the floor, climbing what appeared to be sheer walls. There are the occasional fatalities here but, given the nature of the activity, it is amazing there are not more. A management agreement has been put in place to restrict bird-nesting to a set period, as bird numbers were dwindling from the pressure of collecting. The cave has bird-nesting poles throughout and a couple of daylight entrances. An unfortunate by-product of bird-nesting is large amounts of rubbish in the cave, including lots of plastic water bottles and spent batteries. Only small sections of the cave are totally dark and these have many bats.



Above—A bird nester gave us a climbing demonstration (Garry K. Smith)



Left—Bat in Niah Cave (Steve Bourne)

One passage exits Niah Cave and a further 500 metres or so on is Painted Cave. Previous visits, with time restrictions, meant I had never made it to Painted Cave (Kain Hitam), so I was pleased to finally see this cave. It has paintings on the walls (as the name suggests) and some basic signage. We had our lunch at the entrance of this cave before walking through to the other end. From here, it was about a five-kilometre walk back to the boat to cross the river and to our taxi, which we reached at the agreed time of 4.00 pm, to head back to Miri. Day one – 10 kilometres of walking, three caves - a good start!



Julian photographing a painting in Painted Cave (Steve Bourne)

Several years ago, Brian Clark (then manager at Mulu), Lisa King (then working for Sarawak Tourism) and I developed a proposal for Niah Caves. We could see a fantastic opportunity to develop the site for tourism well beyond its current offering. Our proposal received a positive hearing from the government but was ultimately discarded. Unfortunately, my observations now suggest the site has declined further from when this proposal was presented.

Mulu is a short flight of just over 30 minutes from Miri. We had the afternoon flight, which gave us time for some sightseeing and shopping for supplies for our field days in Mulu. We arrived mid-afternoon and were greeted by a beaming Hein Gerstner and Bian Rumei. They assisted us to the Marriott Resort and, after booking in, we took the resort “bus” to the Park HQ, the first of many such trips.

We returned to the park and it was great to meet up with the staff again. Kenneth Nilong was assigned to be our main guide, with Nick as his support guide. Kenneth attended the ISCA Congress at Jenolan Caves in 2014, so some ACKMA members may recall him. Our other assigned main guide was Lawai, who came to the Naracoorte ACKMA AGM and Guides’ Workshop this year. Several of the other staff had also been to Australia to ACKMA events, which is a credit to Mulu managers, Brian Clark, Alison Pritchard and, now, Hein Gerstner. I also recognised several other staff I had met in Mulu previously.

We were eager to get a cave in for the day and walked the four-kilometre boardwalk to Deer Cave to watch the bats exiting the cave. The bat exodus had been irregular, but this night was excellent, with a large crowd in attendance.

A tourist group came through at one point and were brilliantly dressed for cave photos, so were seconded for models. We exchanged e-mails in the cave and forwarded photos post trip. They were delighted. What a great way to meet new friends!



Bat hawk catching a bat (Garry K. Smith)

After watching the bat flight, we headed back to the Park Café for our dinner, having booked a table on the advice of Hein. When we entered the café, we could see a table with a large sign “Steve Group”, which subsequently became our name for the duration of the trip. The Park Café is a great place to dine, good quality and good prices, but you do need to beat the nightly Deer Cave crowd so booking is recommended.

Our planned itinerary was to include the Garden of Eden trip on our first full day in Mulu. Tragically, just a couple of weeks before our visit, one of the park staff and a visitor lost their lives when floodwater in the rear of Deer Cave suddenly rose and washed them away. The tour was closed while investigations were completed so we instead brought forward one of our other tours - Racer Cave.

Racer Cave is about a 25-minute boat ride from Park HQ. Boats stop at Batu Bungan village, where locals offer locally produced craft. Some of us tested our skill with a blowpipe, the traditional means for hunting in the region. Carey wanted a carved wooden bat and Kenneth introduced us to a local craftsman who offered to carve one. One mistake was made in that the price was not negotiated before the carving was done, but more on that in the March 2020 edition of the Journal.

Racer Cave is named after the racer snakes that live in the cave and feed on bats and birds they catch. It is a good introduction to Mulu. High humidity, lots of biology in the cave - racer snakes, bats, birds and a taste of large chambers (although they would get MUCH bigger). Offered to visitors as a two-hour tour, it took “Steve Group” about five hours. Garry, John and I each had cameras so, with Garry’s multiple flashes and great skill in setting up a scene, we took lots of photos (and I think bored our guides).



Above—The tourist group in Racer Cave (Garry K. Smith)

Below—Watching the bat exodus from Deer Cave (Steve Bourne)



I knew Garry was an excellent cave photographer so, after seeing his work the first day with his five flashes, decided not to carry my large camera through most caves and only took my small camera and tripod (as Garry didn't have one). This worked well, so I have a small part in the great images Garry provided for this article. I did carry the tripod many kilometres where it wasn't used, such as all the way into Sarawak Chamber.

I have a clear memory of Denis (when we finished Racer Cave on the first day at around 3.00 pm) asking, "Is that all we are doing today?" I assured him that taking it easy and pacing yourself in Mulu is a very good idea, especially when you have two full weeks of caving planned in the equatorial jungle environment. Our trip was planned to ease into it and build up to more strenuous activities as we became accustomed to the temperature and humidity.



The following day we stepped it up a little with the Clearwater Connection trip. This is available to regular visitors who have completed Racer Cave, as we had, and takes you from the Wind Cave (Gua Angin) entrance through approximately eight kilometres of cave - exiting the Clearwater Entrance. That only leaves around 250 kilometres more of this cave we didn't see!!!

It is a short longboat ride upstream from Park HQ, with the tour walking through the show cave section of Wind Cave before leaving the formed boardwalks to the undeveloped cave. Garry, John and I had each been through the cave before, with Garry having a photo idea he wanted to take. When we reached the river section of the cave, we spent quite some time setting up the photo and, after plenty of takes, eventually achieved the photo Garry was after.

Left—Melissa with a large shawl at the end of Racer Cave (Garry K. Smith)

Below—Garry had waited 9 years return to Clearwater Cave to take this image (Garry K. Smith)





Clearwater Cave, like many Mulu caves, has racer snakes. This skin was the largest we saw - Steve Bourne for scale (Garry K. Smith)

The Clearwater Cave tour involves a lot of walking through large, humid chambers, some nice decoration, some climbing and a couple of “squeezes” - although it is fair to say they wouldn’t qualify as a “squeeze” at many Australian cave sites. The short climbs can be a little tricky but have been made very safe (with knotted ropes and a short ladder in one section). This work has been completed by Kenneth, who was impressed by what he learnt at Jenolan in 2014 and took these ideas back to Mulu for implementation. Once you reach the river section, it is around a 1.5-kilometre walk to the exit. In 2006, I floated along the river all the way out of the cave but the water was too low this time to do that.

Our plans for the next four days saw us leave the comfort of the resort for three nights at Camp 5 to climb the Pinnacles and visit Cobweb Cave. It is around a two-hour boat ride to Kuala Litut.



The river was very low and we were in and out of the boat many times, walking and pushing the boat laden with our gear.

From the drop-off point, it is just under a 10-kilometre hike through the jungle to Camp 5. Fortunately, it is mostly level ground. As the leader of “Steve Group”, I volunteered to carry our food supplies to camp, so had my backpack of food and caving pack on my front. I didn’t help my task by adding cans of Tiger beer to celebrate after summiting the Pinnacles.

When we arrived at Camp 5, it was clear Julian, fresh out of the United Kingdom, might have been feeling the heat and humidity when he said “if the Pinnacles’ climb is anything like that ...” I had to inform him it was nothing like we had just done.

Camp 5 was established by the British research expeditions and it consists of wooden huts, a kitchen area and an ablutions block. It is located on the bank of the Melinau River. The view is outstanding, with a limestone mountain with cave entrances directly across the river.

Steve and Melissa pushing the long boat (John Brush)

Our plan was to do the Pinnacles hike the first day and Cobweb Cave the second, but a guide at the camp, Undi, was keen to join our trip to Cobweb as he had never been there. This necessitated a change in order of activities. Undi was my guide on my first ever cave at Mulu - Racer Cave in 2006.

Cobweb Cave is approximately five kilometres from Camp 5 along the Headhunters Trail. It is not offered as a visitor product. It is located in Gunung Benerat, unlike the other caves we visited, which are in Gunung Api (**Gunung is Malay for "Mount" - ed**). I had arranged this through Hein prior to our trip, but knew nothing about the cave.

Kenneth told us his first trip to Cobweb Cave was as an eight-year-old, bird-nesting with his father, and that the cave name is derived from the multiple passages that look like a spider's web on the map. He hadn't been to the cave for over 10 years so it took some searching to locate the entrance, a few tens of metres off the level of the path.

Our other guides, Nimrod and Undi, were also on their first trip to the cave.

We spent a few hours in the cave but barely scratched the surface. At each junction, there were options left/right/up/down and Kenneth needed to determine the correct path. It was not heavily decorated, but has some really interesting erosional features caused through bat and swift guano and plenty of water.

There were several racer snakes - including one Garry photographed with a somewhat nervous Kenneth.



Kenneth with a racer snake, Cobweb Cave (Garry K. Smith)

Denis, Garry and John climbed a wall with the guides and took some photos while the rest of us stayed at a lower level taking photos or just looking around (or - in Julian's case - sleeping).



Garry setting up flashes for a photo in Cobweb Cave (John Brush)



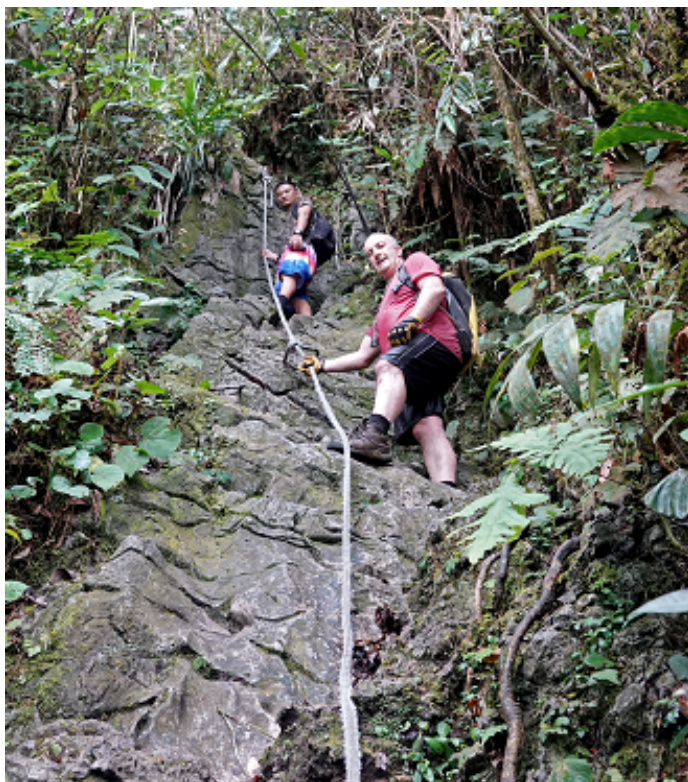
Cobweb Cave (Garry K. Smith)

I was gobsmacked to learn that one of the entrances we could see high on the cliff from Camp 5 was an exit to this cave - it would be a big trip through the cave to reach this. I would like to learn more about this cave. To explore more of it would likely involve a multiday trip.

On the return to Camp 5 at the river crossing, Melissa and I headed upstream to look at Melinau Gorge and the rest of "Steve Group" headed back to camp. This was a walk through mostly shallow water, slippery rocks and some great scenery. When we reached a delightful waterfall on the gorge walls, we turned back for camp. Our walk took us about 1.5 hours, which was pretty energetic after the five kilometres to and from Cobweb Cave and the cave trip itself.

Catering at Camp 5 is available for purchase if done prior to the trip. We self-catered with the load I had carried out there, with the Tiger beers carefully secreted in the river bed for retrieval following the climb. One of the staff working at Camp 5 was Robert Gani, who Brian had taken to the ACKMA Conference at Chillagoe and Undara in 2003.

The next morning, we awoke early, aiming for a 5.45 am departure to the Pinnacles. The climb is just 2.4 km long, but rises 1200 m with 18 fixed ladders in the last 400 m section. The guides assessed the weather conditions and decided it was safe to climb - if it is raining on the mountain, the climb is cancelled, as it becomes too dangerous. A Google search brings up a few fatalities that have occurred on this climb, so you do need to listen to guides carefully and not take it lightly. Climbers are required to reach checkpoints in a defined timeframe and, if not, guides will ask you to turn back. This is to avoid people trying to climb down in the dark, which would be a most unpleasant experience.



Steve on the Pinnacles climb (Garry K. Smith)

"Steve Group" was first to leave camp but we were caught by the first rest point by a small group of three. Melissa and Julian turned back early, both had not been feeling well and wisely decided against pushing it too hard. Denis reached the halfway point but was finding the pace a little too much and he, too, turned back. Garry was extra keen to get photos and I felt the group that had overtaken us was now slowing us down. With a group of loud, fit, young Irishmen singing on their way up the mountain coming fast behind us, I convinced guide, Nick, that Garry and I should overtake them, which we did. This gave us clear space to make a run at the viewing point, which we reached at 8.50 am - a reasonable effort, I thought. This gave Garry free access to the best points for photos with no one else at the small viewing point. John and Carey arrived about 20 minutes later and had held the Irish group at bay. This was a terrific effort from John, who had only recently recovered from pneumonia.



Carey on one of the 18 ladders nearing the summit (John Brush)

The Pinnacles are a collection of 50-metre high, razor-sharp towers of limestone, formed due to the very high rainfall and the vegetation that collects around the base that makes the rainwater acidic.

The Pinnacles is not the only such karst feature at Mulu, but is the most accessible. Kenneth told about others and said the walk "is just too tough". Given the effort to do this walk, I am not that interested in anything tougher.



Left—John and Carey at the Pinnacles (Garry K. Smith)

Below—Clouds and rain completely blocked the view of the Pinnacles a few minutes after the adjacent photo was taken (Garry K. Smith)

By 9.30 am, the last group was arriving and I felt sorry for them. The spectacular viewing conditions deteriorated suddenly, as clouds swept up through the valley, reducing visibility to just a few metres - and then it started raining.

We started the long climb down, which is probably more difficult than the climb up. The hand lines are essential, even more so with the light rain. These are all extremely well-placed, with knots at just the right spacings and the ladders at the perfect angles to make the climb easier. John and I had both completed the climb before and we both thought the second time around was every bit as tough as the first.



I ran out of energy about 200 metres from the end and had to sit for a rest, before catching up with Carey, John and Garry who were waiting at the foot of the climb for the triumphant group-walk back to camp.

I consumed 4.5 litres of water on the hike up and back. It was then into the river to wash the smelly clothes and retrieve the beers I had hidden under rocks in the base of the river. Not overly cold, but very welcome!

The afternoon was dedicated to rest for all except Julian. He decided he would walk to Melinau Gorge. I assumed he was going with the Irish group who had shown interest the day before and he headed off about 2.00 pm. I suggested that they go no further than the waterfall that Melissa and I had been to the day before. I awoke about an hour later and discovered Julian had gone by himself,

not a wise idea in the Mulu jungle. At 4.00 pm, I advised Kenneth that Julian had gone to the gorge alone and I walked the one kilometre to where the trail leads into the water, thinking if Melissa and I had taken 1.5 hours, surely he would be close to returning. Still no sign at 4.30 pm, so the guides prepared to start a search and headed off at 5.00 pm, with the sun starting to disappear behind the mountains. At around 5.20 pm, a rather dishevelled Julian appeared - he had just emerged from the river when the guides got there. He had somehow missed the waterfall that Melissa and I had seen and had kept going, obviously for some distance. It was a good reminder for us all that solo walking in Mulu is not a good idea.

..... Part 2 will appear in the March 2020 Journal