

STOP PRESS

The World's Biggest Cave!

– Elery Hamilton-Smith

Most readers will have heard of the new cave just discovered in Vietnam. I have just received a brief message describing the cave from Howard Limbert who led the expedition. For many years now, Howard has been leading expeditions to the Phong Nha Ke Bang World Heritage Area, located in the Annamite Mountains of Vietnam.

The Annamites run virtually all the way along the Western Border of Vietnam. They are incredibly rugged and the karst areas are covered with sharp mini-pinnacles. But in turn, they are covered by one of the most difficult forests I have ever seen. I recall one trip when it took us 16 hours to go four miles!

The new cave – Hang Son Doong (Mountain River Cave) - is quite stunning with 3 X 200m daylight shafts entering the huge tunnel. In each of these dolines is a real lost world with complete jungle and 20m high trees. The team have not managed to reach the next huge shaft but hope to return soon to continue exploration. The main tunnel is generally 100m wide, although at times it goes up to 150m in width with a roof height of over 200m.

The cave however is not easy and as well as difficult access to reach the cave there are a number of difficult sections in the cave itself. To access the main passage you have to cross the big and fast flowing river twice. It rises very rapidly when rain falls, and so care must be taken. Unlike many Vietnamese caves there are some rather large boulders in the huge passage which makes route finding awkward at times. Trips to the end of the main 6k long huge passage and return to camp are in the region of 16 hours. This new cave will never be a tourist cave due to its remote location. So we all hope that Hang Son Doong will remain in pristine condition for many years to come.

I am personally absolutely delighted. My first visit to Vietnam was to make an assessment of the Phong Nha site for World Heritage purposes. After an assessment, I recommended that recognition be deferred, and the nominated area be expanded to the North so that it would also include the wondrous Ke Bang Forest and whatever caves were underneath it. That was done, and so, Hang Son Doong (and a multitude of other important caves) were saved.



Editor's Note: Brian Clark, the custodian of the 'former' world's biggest cave – Deer Cave at Mulu – is, of course, distraught (!!) we will need to 'cheer him up when ACKMA visits his 'pride and joy' at Mulu next year...!

