

Extreme Cave Diving in the Philippines



Our cave diving expedition to Samar, Philippines, had already been a huge success. Three of us, with myself as team leader, William Hudson from Alaska and Thomas Bodis from Germany, had already discovered and dived three new caves deep in the jungle. Samar has arguably more limestone caves than anywhere else on the planet, so while anywhere else this might be extraordinary, here they were just the appetizers for our planned main course: Langun–Gobingob cave near the town of Calbiga.

Langun–Gobingob is the largest cave in the Philippines, and one of the largest in southeast Asia. It was discovered in 1987, but the underwater sections had never been explored. The extremely rugged subterranean landscape made any expedition difficult, so we teamed up with Joni Bonifacio, the de facto cave expert in the area, and planned a three day, two night underground expedition involving over a dozen porters and a huge assortment of both diving and climbing gear.



It took us three and a half hours of trekking over a mountain trail to reach the entrance. We donned carbide lamps to pierce the blackness, our only sources of light for the next three days. As we began our

descent, the enormity of this cave became apparent. Steam rose from our bodies in the high humidity, and the sounds of bats and cave crickets faded as we continued downward.

After clamoring over rockfall for hours, we were met by an almost insurmountable obstacle: a sheer drop of twenty stories. We strapped into our harnesses and eased our way down, our hands and feet searching for holds anywhere on the slick stone face. An eternity later we all made the descent, and moved onward past fantastic formations to what would be the first of many river crossings. We slogged our way through mud up to our calves and water up to our necks time and time again, and finally we reached what would be our subterranean base camp for the next two nights.

The next morning we rose early for the final push to the cave extents, and immediately we had to negotiate a narrow fissure, wide enough only to slip down sideways. Again pulling out the rope, we lowered ourselves down and inched toward a tiny vertical slit starting a meter above the water level. We braced each other up to the opening, but from then on it was all fingers and toes, pulling and pushing on our sides until we emerged on the other side.



We continued downward, passing spectacular rimstone terraces and quagmires of knee-deep mud that literally sucked off our boots. As we neared the end of the explored cave, we reached another small cliff with a river five meters below. We donned our diving gear on the top of the cliff and rappelled down. Swimming downstream, we soon heard the sound of a waterfall. Off with our gear, down a line, and on again for the final push.

Adrenalin filled our veins as I tied off the line and we descended. The current was luckily not too strong – a strong current could indicate a narrow passage that could suck us helplessly into the abyss. We lined onward, and minutes later we saw a flat surface above us. We carefully surfaced, and discovered ourselves in an entirely new section of cave.

We continued our line, following the river through a rounded chamber about fifteen meters wide by five high. The passage continued straight approximately three hundred meters, then then a vast cliff cut across our path and the river turned to the left. The roar of another waterfall echoed from beyond.

As our line ran out, we realized that despite all of our efforts, we would need more equipment to further explore and map this huge new section of cave. We reluctantly returned to the surface, made our ascent from the water, and began the long trip upwards to our base camp.



The next morning we made our way back into the light of day, with thoughts of another expedition racing through each of our minds. A few hours of mountain climbing later, clinging to the slope by vines and trees all the while, we triumphantly reentered the civilized world, having accomplished our goal and having experienced the unique thrill of discovery.

Only through the support of organizations and individuals can exploration of our subterranean world continue. We would like to thank the following persons and agencies for supporting and aiding this extremely successful expedition: OMS; Cochran Computers; American Nitrox Divers International (ANDI); Mermaids Dive Center, Pattaya, Thailand; and Joni Bonifacio, Trexplore, Catbalogan City,

Philippines.

By Bruce Konefe

Bruce Konefe is one of the top cave explorers and technical diving instructors in SE Asia. William Hudson is a cave and technical wreck diver with caving experience in Mexico, Thailand and the Philippines. Thomas Bodis is a spelunker and technical diver from Germany.

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