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Caving



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Jul-Aug-Sep 2011

**To the Supercave
The Womb of Matamuhuri Valley
Into the darkness of Alutila
Inside Bat cave
Kudung
Exotic Dates**

 Kewkradong Bangladesh
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Editorial

It will be safe to say that not much of us would have a clear hint if we talk about caving. Yes may be! Now, what is cave? In general - it's nothing but a hole or an underground dark place. This will be the answer – no doubt. But caving? It is still a little mystery to us. What's that? By the beginning of the century we (in Bangladesh) have come to know more about Mountaineering (actually it will be wise to say Everesting! as our interest is concentrated in one single mountain that is Mt. Everest), Surfing, Biking, Bike touring and some similar spectrum of adventure terms in our daily life. It seems one was missing, it's not uncommon in our privet and small scale adventure-land in our Hills.

Caving is often undertaken for the enjoyment of the outdoor activity or for physical exercise, as well as original exploration, similar to mountaineering or diving. Physical or biological science is also an important goal for some cavers.

Virgin cave systems comprise some of the last unexplored regions on Earth and much effort is put into trying to locate and enter them by gaining access to new caves often requires digging or diving.

Yes, lot of us have already done Ali'r Shurango, Alutula Guha or the deep Bat Cave of Bandarban- by knowing or without knowing, we became a part of caving world and yes joyfully amateur cavers (without digging or diving though).

Like other outdoor and adrenaline sports, Caving is not as popular as MBX, MTB or Mountaineering. Though caving got started its journey as “Caving” back in 1860's. It was pioneered by Édouard-Alfred Martel (1859–1938) who first achieved the descent and exploration of the Gouffre de Padirac, France as early as 1889 and the first complete descent of a 110 meter wet vertical shaft at Gaping Gill, in Yorkshire, England in 1895. He developed his own techniques based on ropes and metallic ladders. For more, it's better to follow wiki.

List is too long to mention as its history and plenty of explorer contributed to modern day's caving.

In this issue we tried to wrap up some of our caving destinations and adventure trips. We have a number of caves already explored. Out of them, Alutula of Khagrachori, Ali'r Shurango of Alikadam, Kudum of Teknuf and Bat Cave of Modok Mohal namely the most known caves in Bangladesh.

There isn't much of adventure in our caves as none of those are vertically descending rather horizontal path through a certain place under earth. Still the feeling of getting into any cave is exciting. Specially the complete darkness! May be for the first time one can ever encounter the infinite darkness. Even in Bangladesh, a torch is necessary to explore it. Especially Ali's Shurong is quite long similar to Alutula. Kudum has a myth and most probably it has the highest ceiling and bats do lives here too.

Bat cave, the most inaccessible cave in Bangladesh is located deep in the Bandarban Hill Tracts nearly 160KM apart from town. From Thanchi, cavers needed to have a multiday trek. But it is worth it.

Blind Descent – yes it's a book but more like a modern day bible for caving. A publication phenomenon has only been in stores for two weeks and is already being compared to classics like Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air" and Robert Kurson's "Shadow Divers”.

James M. Tabor did his master work for caving! Though this widely known adventure writer awarded for Forever on the Mountain: The Truth Behind One of Mountaineering's Most Controversial and Mysterious Disasters. Tabor was also co-creator and executive producer for the 2007 History Channel special Journey to the Center of the World. Tabor is a former contributing editor to Outside magazine and Ski Magazine; his writing has also appeared in Time, Smithsonian, Barron's, U.S. News & World Report, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, and many other national publications.

Cavers' are not heroes like mountaineers but indeed caving is an adventure having the supreme combination of climbing and diving! None other adventure sports can offer this deadly combination of adventure in one pack. May be that's why only in last year, we could reach the deepest cave on earth (so far) may be yet another super-cave is hiding some darkest depth under the earth, waiting yet to explored! Try it sometimes for a change and happy caving

Shanti
Muntasir Mamun
Editor-in-Chief

*Finding what is available in
God's nature candy*

Exotic Dates

texttrinode.sk

Dates – most certainly one of the most commonly known fruits in Bangladesh. Though originally this sub tropical country is not a good place for growing or cultivating dates. Still for many reason, date is popular in many ways especially during the month of Ramadan.

When Muslim's fasting hours are ended up by dates. So, more religious and physiological belief makes dates' a seasonal (at least) choice for many of us. But our journey through Date gave us amazing information and truth about this small-tiny unnoticed fruit. Here is the analogy of dates!

Dates have been esteemed by Middle Eastern cultures for thousands of years, with references to them in the Koran and the Bible. Dates are believed to have originated around the Persian Gulf, and have been cultivated since ancient times from Mesopotamia to prehistoric Egypt, possibly as early as in 6000 BC. In later times, Arabs spread dates to the north. The palm trees have been grown in grove plantings, since the ancients understood the food value of the dates and the exotic appearance and shading on the landscape of the desert sands. Palm trees were often planted near an oasis as a source of water, shade and food.



© Mustafiz Mamun/Bangladeshphoto.com.bd

When people consider buying dates, it is mainly for use in a fruit cake or cookies or especially during the month of Ramadan it is widely used for Iftar, but dates are also a wonderful alternative to a fruit snack. While many people don't often consider eating a couple of dates for a snack, if they only knew what was packed inside these small fruits, they would probably begin adding them to their diet. In fact, researchers at the Department of Health and Human Services in London referred to them as an "Almost Perfect Food," based upon their nutritional content and possible health benefits.

The Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry, reports that dates are an excellent source of antioxidants, primarily carotenoids.

There are many types of carotenoids, so there is no current RDA for them. Carotenoids are listed by the World's Healthiest Foods Encyclopedia as pigment compounds that help produce vitamin A in the body, build the immune system, and protect the cells from damage. Antioxidants are continually being studied for their positive effects on cancer protection. The antioxidant capacity of a food product is measured by the USDA's ORAC scale. ORAC stands for Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity. This judges how the antioxidants in the food fight the free radical damage in the body.

Tit-bits of dates

ENERGY BOOSTER. The easily digestible date is the ideal snack to fuel activity. A serving of power-packed dates contains 31 grams of carbohydrates, which include 3 grams of dietary fiber and 29 grams of naturally occurring sugars such as fructose, glucose and sucrose. Dates provide quick energy to a tired human body, making them a great choice for a pre-workout snack.

GOOD SOURCE OF FIBER. Dates are a saturated source of dietary fiber. The American Cancer Society recommends people consume 20 to 35 grams of dietary fiber a day. Consuming just seven dates a day gets you there!

Dietary fiber comes in two forms – soluble and insoluble. Each serves a valuable function. Insoluble fiber increases the rate at which food moves through the digestive system. Soluble fiber may help control diabetes by decreasing elevated blood glucose levels. Fiber is needed for elimination of toxins from the body and to help lower the risk of many digestive disorders, even colon cancer. The Mayo Clinic also lists fiber as being necessary to control weight, blood sugar and cholesterol. Dates are also high in sugar, but it is natural sugar which makes them an excellent sweet treat, which is what has earned them the right to be referred to by many as "nature's candy."



CHRISTIANITY

Fruit production and references to fruit are more prevalent than vegetables in the Bible. Ever since man ate fruit from the forbidden tree, he has been having horticultural problems. Of course, fruit plants have been very useful throughout the ages, i.e., the first skivvies owe their existence to a fig bush (Genesis 3:7). Hence, the brand name Fruit of the Loom! Since the fig played such an important role in man's first wardrobe, it was obviously considered to be one of the most important fruits. It is mentioned in at least 25 books of the Bible.

The medicinal value of figs is described in several passages such as Isaiah 28:29,
"For Isaiah had said, Let them take a lump of figs, and lay it for a plaster upon the boil, and he shall recover."

Yet fig culture had problems then just as it does now. Such problems were emphasized in Christ's parable of the fig tree in Luke 13:6 - 9, He spake also this parable; "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none.

ISLAM

The date palm, mentioned more than any other fruit-bearing plant in the Qur'an, is a symbol often associated with Islam and Muslims. Throughout the month of Ramadan, dates are a common ingredient in the Muslim diet.

The Prophet said:

"Break your fast by eating dates as it is purifying,"
(Ahmad).

On the basis of this Hadith, Muslims insist on breaking their fasts with dates. However, in another Hadith, the Prophet said,

"If you have a date, break your fast with it, if you don't have it, break the fast with water as it is purifying."
(Abu Dawood)

According to another Hadith,
"The Messenger said: Ajwah dates are from Paradise."
(Al-Tirmidhi)

Ajwah is one of the excellent varieties of dates grown in the Madinah region.

Dates are also high in sugar, but it is natural sugar which makes them an excellent sweet treat, which is what has earned them the right to be referred to by many as "nature's candy".

HIGH IN POTASSIUM. Dates are opulent in vitamins and minerals such as vitamins C, B1, B2, B3, B5 A1, copper, iron, magnesium, manganese and phosphorous. They are also one of the best natural sources of potassium. One tiny date has more potassium than a big ol' banana!

Potassium is an essential mineral your body needs to maintain muscle contractions including the vital heart muscle. Potassium is needed to maintain a healthy nervous system and to balance the body's metabolism as well. As you consume potassium, you excrete sodium, helping to keep blood pressure down.

As people age, their kidneys become less efficient at eliminating sodium. Research has recommended that a higher intake of potassium (about 400 mg) can cut the risk of stroke by 40 percent.

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One of the top notations made by the London Researchers is the mineral content of dates. A minimum of 15 were listed, with the highest concentrations being the minerals potassium, magnesium, selenium and calcium. Potassium is needed by the body to help fight high blood pressure which can lead to heart disease, and to assist kidney function and one cup of chopped dates contains 964 mg of potassium, which is 28 percent of the RDA. Of the minerals listed, one cup of chopped dates contains 4.4 mcg of selenium (6 percent of the RDA); 63 mg magnesium (16 percent RDA); 0.3 mcg Copper (15 percent RDA= Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs); and 57 mg calcium (6 percent RDA).

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HELPS TOUGHEN TOOTH ENAMEL. This fruit has mineral fluorine that protects teeth, by empowering tooth enamel. Tooth enamel's hydroxyapatites (when in touch with fluorine to make hydroxyfluoroapatites) help improve the tooth's resistance to decay.

SEXUAL STIMULANT. Build your endurance with this love potion: a handful of dates soaked overnight in goat's milk with some cardamom powder and honey. It's an old mantra of making love. Try this today as it has been tried since last thousands of years.

REDUCES RISK OF HEART DISEASE. Dates have the highest concentration of polyphenols among all dried fruits; according to researchers at the University of Scranton (Penn.)

© Mahmud Ullah/ Kewkradong.com



suggest that dried fruits should be a greater part of the diet as they are dense in phenol antioxidants and nutrients, most notably fiber. Polyphenols may reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

SATISFIES YOUR SWEET TOOTH.

Dates have a low calorie count: around 23 calories for a single fruit. That makes dates important both for what they offer and for what they don't offer. Dates have no cholesterol, fat or sodium – making them suitable for health conscious people. Truth is, dates provide more calories than most fruits, but they make a great substitute for processed sweets, like candy. That provides a healthy alternative to help stick to your weight-loss routine.

A CROWN OF SWEETS. Dates work well in salads, oatmeal and yogurt. Chopped or slivered, dates can even be sprinkled on side dishes like rice, couscous or vegetables. To slice or chop dates, chill them first. The colder they are, the easier they are to slice.

WON'T RAISE BLOOD SUGAR

One of the main reasons people avoid eating dates is the belief that they will raise their blood sugar levels, but studies have shown that belief to be erroneous. The May 28, 2011, issue of the "Nutrition Journal" reports a study in which consumption of dates was tested on diabetics.

The study shows that while dates contain high amounts of natural sugars, they are actually a low-glycemic index food and did not significantly raise blood sugar levels after they were eaten. If you are diabetic, speak to your doctor before adding dates to your diet so that you can monitor your blood sugar levels and determine how dates affect you personally.



JUDAISM

The Seven Species (Shivat Haminim in Hebrew) are the seven types of fruits and grains named in the Torah (Deuteronomy 8:8) as the main produce of the land of Israel. In ancient times these foods were staples of the Israelite diet. They were also important in the ancient Jewish religion because one of the Temple tithes derived from these seven foods. The title was called the bikkurim, which meant "*first fruits*."

Today the seven species are still important agricultural items in modern Israel but they no longer dominate the produce of the country as they once did. On the holiday of Tu B'Shvat it has become traditional for Jews to eat from the seven species.

Deuteronomy 8:8 tells us that Israel was "*a land of wheat, barley, grapevines, figs, and pomegranates; a land of oil olives and date honey.*"

The seven species are:
Wheat (chitah in Hebrew), *Barley* (se'orah in Hebrew), *Grapes* (gefen in Hebrew) usually consumed as wine, *Figs* (te'enah in Hebrew), *Pomegranates* (rimon in Hebrew), *Olives* (zayit in Hebrew) usually consumed in oil form, *Dates* (tamar or d'vash in Hebrew)



into the
Darkness of **Alutilla**
textsaadbinhossain

Maybe it's our caveman past, but people love holes in the ground. Whether it's digging in the sand at the beach, peering into an apocalyptic sinkhole, or perhaps even dabbling in spelunking, we are fascinated by the underground.

When our worn-out jeep rolled through the twirling snake like hilly road towards Alutila in Khagrachori, I can assure that none of us had any idea or imagination going about the cave we were about to explore. Just a half hour short drive away from the Khagrachori Township, we said goodbye to our bikes and went on to see this cave everybody in Khagrachori told us about. It was probably just a way to spend some of our time before we were to leave for Dhaka that afternoon. We were just in the same battered and beaten up state as the jeep we were on, because we have just finished our 120 KM bike ride to Khagrachori the previous evening. We couldn't complaint much but the treacherous inclining roads had the best of us in the past two days. So, looking for a relaxed time-out, our jeep was heading for the infamous cave of Alutila with us. With no firsthand anticipation, none of us were ready for what this cave had to offer!

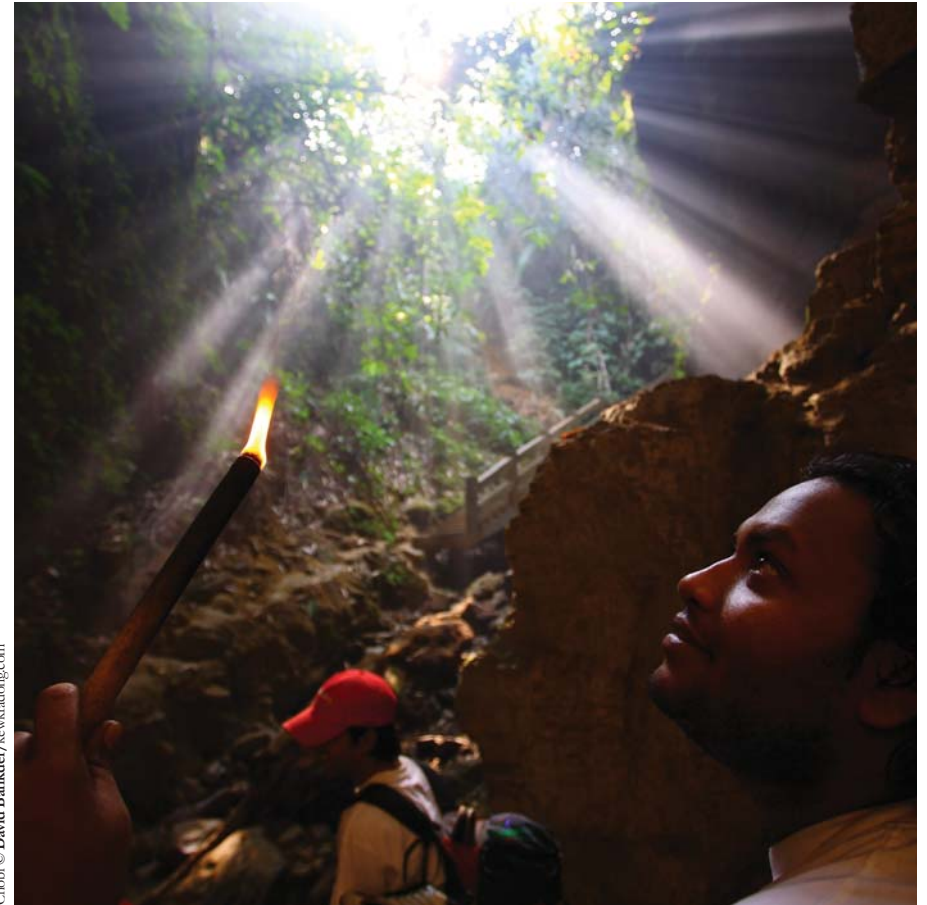
The jeep dropped us off at the road. But the actual cave was a short hike away. Through dense lush vegetation we made our way towards the entrance. It wasn't the rainy season there, yet the trail was moist from the seeping water from the sides of the gorge. Though the cave was not totally unknown to tourists, yet we hardly saw anybody like us heading that way.

But it was just the beginning, as we were making our way closer to the cave entrance; we just came to a sudden halt just in front of the big dark mouth of the cave. Bewildered.

From the opening of the cave, all we could see was darkness. A fellow local who was guiding us said the floor of the cave was knee-deep in water and the far end of the cave was fairly half an hour away which was a little too long in the dark for some of us. All we had with us were a few headlamps; we arranged for a few bamboo torches and tied our shoes to our daypacks. Barefooted, dazed and teeming with excitement, we headed in to take whatever this uncanny cave had to through at us.

In our first few steps, it was clear to us that it wasn't going to be as easy as we thought. The floor was very slippery, so were the walls of the cave which we had to hold most of the times to avoid ending up on the floor. But there was darkness. Darkness we seldom experience. The burning torches and headlamps we had, made it even more gripping on our nerves. Added to that, we had the thought that the entire hill was sitting on top of us.

The water flows through the entire length of Alutila cave and flowing like this for thousands of years, it carved the floor in surreal shapes and curves.



Chobi © David Banikder/keekradonline.com



The ceiling came down on us at some parts and we had to bend our backs to make way. The walls around us were covered in minerals that shone brightly in the light from our torches. Suddenly we felt we were back in time when our ancestors used to roam around nature's wondrous creations, holding flickering fire-torches in hand. At the middle of the tunnel, the water level rose to our knees and the floor became ever so slippery. At that part of the cave, the ceiling was a

good twenty-thirty feet above our head. In the lights of our torches, we could see a few bats that inhabit this dark abyss. It was all a very different experience for us.

Soon we could see light on the distance; it was the opening we were heading towards. When we finally made all the way there, the light from the outside welcomed us back. Suddenly, we could appreciate the light, greenery, the calm breeze and our sense of sight even more. It felt like bliss to be back over the ground.

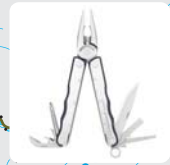
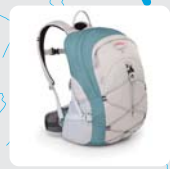
It wasn't a horrifying experience at all; rather, an experience like none other we ever had. Just as trekking on the hillsides, it was a journey within the hill itself. And frankly, it was just as gripping as the experience outside. But the silence and the darkness that brings obscurity in to our senses cannot be compared to any other. And exploring means just that to us.



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Āli'r Guḥa

The Womb of Matamuhuri Valley

Not far from Myanmar border, Ali Kadam - an ancient human habitation - lies near Matamuhuri valley. It was 15th July 2011. . In the afternoon, when our locally-engineered noisy car stopped near the Matamuhuri river, the placid sound of Matamuhuri's wave

suddenly refreshed our minds. It was drizzling that day. We had eight people in our team of which no one knew what we were going to experience that day. Did we really need to know much? Did we really need to know that we had to cross a brook to go to Ali Kadam cave? All we knew was that some beautiful



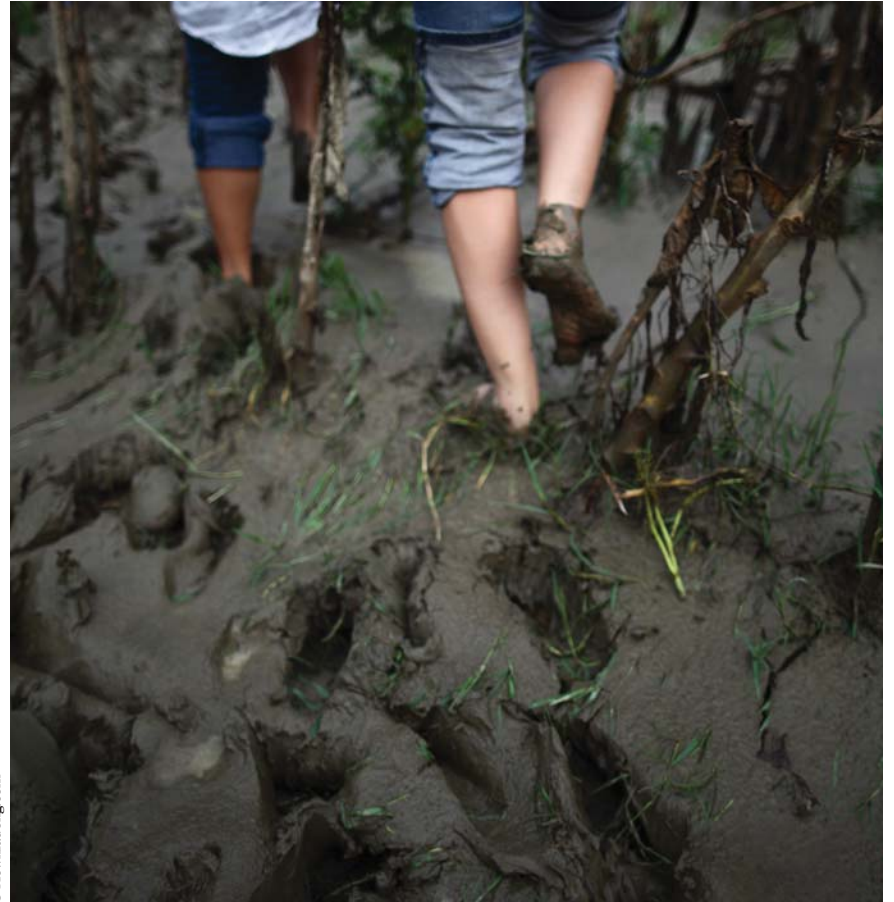
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unprepared for rain, unaware of the existence of rocky waterways and muddy steep path, were ready to face anything that comes on the way. We took a boat to go far from the village dwellings, a place where the resonating Matamuhuri's waves were flattering the lustrous beauty of the green valley. As the boat anchored in a muddy bank, we all had to leave our shoes in the boat and folded our pants to the knees. The time to walk in the wilderness started after a few minutes when we came in front of a steep and

muddy path by a deep stream made invisible by some unknown wild trees. Any incautious step could easily let us slip off the path to the invisible deep stream lying 10 to 15 feet below. We were very cautious in every step and finally when we crossed the slippery path, squashing the wild plants under our feet,

we arrived in a narrow valley with two rocky hills on our both sides. Suddenly it seemed we all entered into an entrance of a castle, the walls of which is covered with moss-like plants. Beneath our feet was flowing clear water. Our bare muddy feet, getting clear water and the touch of rough rocky surface, suddenly got energized. Unsurprisingly, we found some little friends of earth trying to caress our beautiful legs. Some of us who did not like to be adored by those tiny friends started to shout out loud "earth-worm, earth-worm"! Ah, never ever show that you are scared because the heroic friends are going to tease you for the rest of your life if they see a little sign of fear in your eyes.

We did not know that an exquisite charm was waiting for us on the entrance of the Ali Kadam cave until we caught the sight of a ladder that leads to the mouth of the cave.



© Kewkradong.com

The step from the top rung of the ladder to the slippery mouth of the cave was the most dangerous step of the whole caving trip. Slipping at this step could mean injuring a person for whole life because one can only fall on the sharp edge of the rock lying just below the ladder. Once we all got into the cave safely, it seemed to me that a spiritual journey had just started. An obsequial splendor engulfed my mind as we moved inside the cave. Is there a limit of how dark darkness could be? We all turned on our headlamps and started to go inside. We could not see where our bare feet were stepping in the dark. The fear of unknowns escalated as we heard a sudden stroke. Being curious, we lent our ear to the rustling sound coming from inside. . As we moved closer we heard the bats flapping. Probably the bats also understood some adventurous men and women had arrived in their territory. So, they started to proclaim their illusive togetherness and might. Yes, we are human being. We fear darkness as much as the bats fear unknowns.



© Kewkradong.com

I suddenly felt that in this world all creatures are made to feel insecure, to feel the depth of death, and to feel the need to lit a light in darkness. In the darkness, the coexistence of some adventurous minds and the bats confirmed our mutual tolerance and the diversity of our identity as living creature. We spent about half an hour trying to feel the mystery of darkness. It reminds me of Khudiram, the youngest revolutionary of the Anti-British Movement, who lit fire in the heart of thousands of youth of Bengal when he was hanged by the British.



© Indranil Kishor/btef.info

The great maverick soul, once in his childhood, dared to conquer darkness by going to an old abandoned castle where nobody ever dared to go. When we were coming out of the cave, the sun was about to set. The green mosses on the rocky hills turned dark green.

We took the same path to come back. By that time we learned to take careful steps. Some of us slipped off and some of us had mud all over our body. But one thing we all had in common was the smile on our face after a day long walk. I felt it was a smile of blissful happiness, a universal expression of conquering the darkness.

Ali Kadam cave, with all its darkness and its living bats, lives in our mind as a solemn beauty. When I look back I feel that the beautiful valley of Matamuhuri carries the darkness in its womb – the womb that gives birth to the light and sound of Ali Kadam.



HIV/AIDS Advocacy World Tour on Bicycle

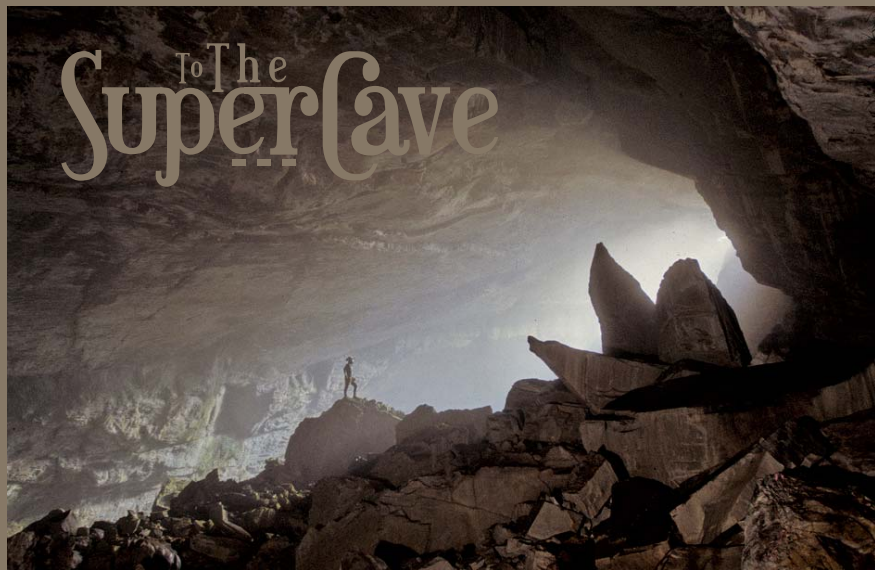


June 2008, a group of youth set off for an advocacy world tour on bicycle to aware likeminded people about HIV/AIDS. Group of three started their journey from Thailand. This was no other commuting or touring but finding the local organizations and delivering the advocacy materials were prime objectives of the team.

Let's be together, let's stop AIDS, believing this motto, the team delivered the message to cities to cities on different continents. This initiative directly brought the benefit to the Millennium Development Goal/MDG.

Trino will represent a photo story in its every issue as part a part of the team's conjugation with adventure and advocacy.





Chobi ©Failuremag.com

Alexander Klimchouk, Bill Stone, and the race to discover the Mount Everest of caves.

Exploring the world's deepest caves is often described as the subterranean equivalent of climbing the highest mountains. It's an apt comparison, as there are more than a few similarities between speleological expeditions and high altitude mountaineering.

textjasonzasky/failuremag

Both typically require vertical climbing, for instance, and both manifest the ever-present threat of falling to one's death, being crushed by rock (or ice), or getting swept away by a flash flood (or avalanche). But if anything, venturing deep below the earth's surface is even more stressful, because caves are invariably dark, wet, and drafty. (Imagine being sequestered in a pitch-black room, soaking wet, with an air-conditioner blowing on you, for days or weeks at a time.) And caves are often deafeningly loud. (Imagine the sound of a thundering waterfall confined to an enclosed space). Never mind the often unseen threats—rabid bats, venomous snakes and fist-sized spiders, and microbes that cause horrific afflictions like histoplasmosis and leishmaniasis.

Of course, none of the above has deterred the world's elite cavers from attempting to find—and reach—the bottom of these caves. American Bill Stone, a structural engineer, spent years exploring and mapping in southern Mexico before establishing Cheve (CHAY-vay, 4,869 feet) as the deepest cave in North America. Then in October 2004, Ukrainian Alexander Klimchouk, who holds a doctorate in hydrogeology, reached the dry bottom of the world (6,825 feet) inside Krubera (KRU-bera), which is found within the Arabika Massif in the western Caucasus Mountains, in a region of Abkhazia in southeastern

Republic of Georgia. (In August 2006, Ukrainian cave diver Gennadiy Samokhin reached Krubera's ultimate depth of 7,188 feet.)

Last week, I interviewed James M. Tabor, author of the best-selling new book "Blind Descent: The Quest to Discover the Deepest Place on Earth" (Random House), to discuss the ongoing race to find the world's deepest cave, the physical and mental challenges of extreme caving, and why the unendingly patient scientists at the forefront of this endeavor haven't received the same level of attention and accolades as other boldly-going-where-no-one-has-gone-before adventurers.

"Extreme cavers have to deal with more failure than just about anybody else," quipped Tabor at the outset of our discussion, noting that nine of ten cave passages are ultimately blocked by breakdown or boulder chokes—or simply come to a dead end. "Cavers have to be the most persistent bastards," he contends, "as they're the only explorers who don't know what the next ten yards will look like, because there's no way to get any advance imagery."

But by the late 1980s cavers had reached the limits of traditional open circuit scuba equipment in terms of deep caves, because there were only so many of those forty-five pound tanks that one could carry down.

So Stone decided to create a rebreather, which allows a diver to re-breathe his or her own breath. It took him ten years to develop one in his home laboratory, and the model that he invented is now being marketed [for recreational use] by a company called Poseidon, which is headquartered in Sweden.

The Poseidon Rebreather [Discovery MKVI] weighs about forty pounds fully charged and gives a diver eight to twelve hours of continuous time underwater. Stone remained underwater for twenty-four hours with a prototype, and the only problem he had was staying awake. Stone might have failed in his quest to find the world's deepest cave, but his impact and legacy seems likely to be much greater than that of Alexander Klimchouk.

I could not agree more. There's the rebreather, but I also think we have not seen the last of Stone. For almost eight years he has been working on a NASA-sponsored program called ENDURANCE [Environmentally Non-Disturbing Under-ice Robotic ANtarctic Explorer]. [Stone Aerospace] has built a big orange robot that looks like a flyer saucer and is about the size of a Volkswagen, which NASA plans to fly to Jupiter's moon Europa, where it will land and melt its way down through Europa's icecap, then drop down into the water ocean that they believe is beneath,

and send information back to Earth. In 2009, they tested it [on Lake Bonney] in Antarctica. In addition to cave exploration, Stone may one day be remembered as a space explorer.

Since we've discussed Stone, tell me about Klimchouk.

Klimchouk's focus has been more single-mindedly on cave exploration—finding deep caves and exploring them to their very bottom. He is particularly interested in the hydrogeology of these caves—aquifers in particular, including how they are formed, how they are polluted, and how to prevent them from becoming polluted. His legacy is going to more as a classical speleologist.

Have either Stone's or Klimchouk's teams made any important scientific discoveries during their cave explorations?

One of the things that is coming out of deep caves like the ones Stone and Klimchouk have opened up are life forms called extremophiles, which in the laboratory are giving birth to new families of antibiotics that are proving effective against MRSA and some of the really vicious drug-resistant bugs. I liken Stone and Klimchouk to Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong—the forerunners who open a virgin, alien environment and prove that

humans can get there. Some hard science comes out of what they do, but they are effectively opening the way for others to come behind them.

Why haven't cave explorers received as much media attention as mountaineers have enjoyed?

I've identified several reasons. First, we have spectacular mountaineering pictures going back as far as the 1920s. But until very recently we haven't had pictures from deep in supercaves because we haven't had the cameras and batteries that could withstand the beating.

Another factor is that cavers tend to be a secretive group and aren't all that fond of publicity. There's a reason for that. It's much easier for untrained people to find a cave and get in serious trouble than it is for someone to get on Mount Everest, for example. So cavers tend to keep caving and their activities out of the limelight by choice.

Another part of it is that caving is dark, wet, and dirty. It's a PR person's nightmare, and hasn't lent itself to the same kind of exposure that mountain climbers, divers, and astronauts more easily generate. But next year James Cameron [Avatar, Titanic] is releasing a feature film [Sanctum 3D] about extreme cavers.

What surprised you most when researching "Blind Descent"?

The immense scope and scale of the supercave expeditions; they make Himalayan mountaineering expeditions seem small in comparison. Not only do they cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, they require keeping scores of highly skilled people on site for months at a time. And as I mentioned, climbers are underground for up to a month, so the time on technical, dangerous terrain is triple or quadruple [that of high altitude mountaineering]. I had no idea how much was involved and required to get down into and back out of one of these caves.

What are the chances that an even deeper cave will be discovered in the next decade or so?

Those who have devoted their lives to researching the Mexican caves claim that Krubera is by no means the Mount Everest of caves. I did two and a half years of research for the book and talked to geologists who had no vested interest one way or the other. My considered opinion is that Krubera is not going to be.

It was Dr Reza Khan, the zoologist, who once told us about a mysterious cave somewhere in Teknaf. He enchanted us with the description and photographs. Elongated gap in the hills through which you can see the green vegetation outside. The cave floor filled with water. The picture remained with us as we dreamt of stepping into that cave one day. That one day came on a sun-baked afternoon. The Naf River was dappled with sunlight as our car rolled by. Half an hour later we lost touch with the river as the car swerved to a narrow lane. We were now passing through a beautiful village.

We pushed on and after half an hour's ride on a snaking dirt road we come to a wide clearing. A signpost announced that we were about to begin our trekking to the Kudung cave. We followed a narrow trail through thick bush.

After a few minutes the trail disappeared and we were left in total wilderness, we climbed the hills and made our own

way. At times we were coming face to face with impenetrable undergrowth.

Kudung

textinmahmed





But then there was no more going straight and we climbed down into a gorge sloshing with water. It now looked like some deep Amazon forest. The long leaves of ferns and unknown plants created canopies overhead. Logs, eaten by termites and withered by rain, lay across the gully. After an hour's walk, we came to another small clearing. In front of us was a towering hill. Its steep sides covered in ferns and creepers. "There it is," our guide pointed his finger into a huge dark patch in the hillside. "The cave."

We strained our eyes and advanced a few more yards. And then we heard the noise -- a strange high-pitched noise, as if somebody is hitting thousands of strings of a musical instrument. Then we saw the huge gaping hole like a wedge. And immediately I got that awful stench. Now we knew what the sound was about -- the cave is full of bats, thousands and thousands of them and filled with water. We could feel the bats flying close to the cave mouth as the high-pitched noise turned to a crescendo and then receded. We slowly stepped into the cave and were soon wading through waist deep water. The stench was now so strong that it was difficult to breathe. The bats were flying with a kind of frenzy. They flew low and wings batting desperately.

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Thousands of eyes looking like amber pinheads crossed the shafts of lights of our head lamps. The beams shifted to the wall of the cave and our eyes caught the strange contours and cavities set deep into the sides. Lime seeped by water had created strange and crooked patterns on the wall. Then we saw something sliding across the ledge of a cavity. Something long and slithery; A snake. The reptile was skimming the wall of the cave; it must not have any shortage of food with all these bats around. Then we froze with fear as something was swimming towards us. We could only see the trail left by the moving object on shiny blackish water and a small object keeping above water. Is that another snake? Should we try to go back and risk being stung? Or should we stay calm and let it pass by? It was now only a few feet away and we recognized it now -- a turtle, slowly flapping its legs lazily. Phew! We suddenly felt life back into us and we turned around. Outside it was getting dark fast and we had a long way to go back.

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