

The Khammouane 2010 caving expedition to Laos RDP

The Khammouane 2010 caving expedition continued the work of the preceding expeditions organized in 2002-2003 and 2004 by the Association Pyreneenne de Speleologie and the Speleo Club San Marcel which surveyed 6 areas in the districts of Thakhek, Hinboun and Mahaxay.

The massif of Phou Nonglang, in the eastern part of the Khammouane karst, district of Boulapha, has been the objective of the 2010 expedition.

The massif lies between the Nam Ngo river, which bounds the karst area to the N and W, and the cave Tham Khoun Xe southbound.

The Phou Nonglang is close to the Vietnamese border, and as it was crossed by the Ho Chi Minh trail, it has been heavily bombed during the Viet Nam war.

The northern area coincides with the upstream flow of the Nam Ngo river, and it was first sketched out by a french team in 1996 and later by cave divers in 1998 .

To the south, Tham Khoun Xe cave, better known as the Xe Ban Fai trough cave, was the theater of Macey's epic explorations in 1904.

The inner part of the Phou Nonglang massif was never been explored by cavers before. This part of the country is still forbidden to the tourists and the clearance to visit the area is rarely given, yet a good tarmac road leads there in three hours from Thakhek.

The team was composed by 9 cavers, 3 french and 9 Italians; Mr Kham Nang, our cook, interpreter and local representative was again with us as in the past expeditions.

Differently from many other expeditions, usually supported by a Lao tourist operators, we decided to organize ourselves the logistics and the relations with the authorities.

At the beginning the negotiation with the local Tourist Administration in Thakhek was complicated and even adversarial until we spoke directly with the ATL Director.

Problems of bribery, at some levels of this administration, make the relations difficult.

On the ground we were supported by a guide provided by the Tourist Office in Thakhek and by a ATL's police officer.

The Phou Nonglouang massif ranges over about 150 km² with a summit at 750 m asl in the northern part and degrades toward SW. The massif is extremely karstified, featuring structures and forms very similar to the "tsingy".

In 8 days we explored the Phou Nonglouang NW and SW faces and quickly prospected the inner part of the massif.

We found 32 caves and surveyed 7100m of passages; almost all the caves lie on the karst border, close to the alluvial plain.

The main caves are (N to S):

Tham Kav – Tham Mak Nao (1,3 km), Tham Phankham (0,6 km) and Nong Tham (1,1 km) near Ban Kha Nyou;

Tham Cha Neun (0,7 km) and Koun Taliang – Tham Houy (0,6 km) near Ban Saang; Koum Kew Yao (1,6 km) near Ban Gamay.

(N.B. Ban = village; Tham = cave)

Nong Tham e Tham Kav are developed on major fractures, showing many entrances and open air sections. Koum Kew Yao features large fossile passages and block chambers. With the exception of Tham Peu Phou Houak all the caves lie in the resurgence zone.

We sampled some cave dwellers and took many photos.

In the last week part of the team returned to Ban Bounlou (Hinboun district, N of Thakhek) to continue the exploration of Tham Koun Nam Pakan II stopped until 2004.

We explored 700 m of new passages, pushing the length of the cave to more than 11 km. During the Khammouane 2010 expedition we explored on the whole 8,7 km of which 7,5 km were surveyed.

The expedition took place without problems.

The results are very interesting even if no major caves were found: the team's quality and the Khammouane karst beauty made up for this lack.

Editor: Michele Varin – Collettivo Khammouane 2010