



## **Mulu Caves Project**

### **Sarawak-UK Expedition to Gunung Mulu National Park.**

#### **Preliminary report from the Benarat 2024 expedition.**

The expedition arrived in Gunung Mulu National Park on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2023 and departed on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2024. Once preparations had been made at Park Headquarters the expedition left for Camp 5 on 31<sup>st</sup> December and stayed there for an eighteen-day period.

The expedition's sole focus was on the caves of Gunung Benarat with the following objectives.

#### **Primary Caving Objectives;**

1. Locate the Upper Cobweb entrance from the outside.
2. Further explore the high levels of Cobweb Cave. North via the Just a Mile. South via Moonshadow.
3. Explore any passages in Cobweb which might lead to a connection with the Terikan River System.
4. Investigate the cliff face entrance in the south east corner of G. Benarat.

Secondary caving objectives;

1. Explore other leads in the Cobweb Cave
2. Revisit Gawai Cave and other surface features in northern Benarat.
3. Other objectives which may present in the field.

General objectives

1. Review survey database and resurvey 'fake' data where possible.
2. Cave Photography.

**Results.**

**Locating the Upper Cobweb entrance.**

This entrance had only ever been noted from within the cave. By using a combination of GPS technology and a local tracker the entrance was located from the outside on the second day of the expedition, high on the steep, rugged limestone hillside. A two hour walk from Camp 5, it was used for all exploratory trips to the high levels of Cobweb cave.



*The Upper Cobweb Entrance from within. Photo:Tim Allen*

### **Further exploration in the high levels of Cobweb Cave: north**

A new section of the active river passage was discovered from passages which descended over 200m vertically from these high levels. This amounted to the longest section of the major drainage route yet explored under G. Benarat. The large passage sumped up and downstream after nearly a kilometre.

Other side passages off Just a Mile produced smaller extensions to the system and still hold potential for further discoveries.



*The Serendipity Streamway. Photo: Mark Burkey*

### **Further exploration in the high levels of Cobweb Cave: south**

Several locations were looked at in passages south of the Upper Cobweb entrance. Most of these were side leads in the Moonshadow extensions which formed the connection from Moon Cave and Benarat Caverns to Cobweb Cave in 2007.

Peaches at Popcorn offered a spectacular descent over huge mature speleothems but petered out in a calcite choke. Other pitches along this route were dropped with limited success.



Just Desserts, part of the original 2000 discovery, was revisited but nothing new found.



*Peaches and Popcorn. Photo: Mark Burkey*

### **The Cobweb Cave to Terikan River System connection**

This was not achieved. However, the new passages discovered in Cobweb bring the two system closer together. The gap between the two has narrowed to just 115m. An eventual connection does seem likely and would create a system around 90km long.

### **Climbing the south east cliffs of G. Benarat**

An entrance feature, first properly recorded in 2015, has been the objective of several Mulu Caves expeditions. Finally, after four days of climbing on the vertical cliff face the entrance was reached. Unfortunately, Corner Cave proved to be little more than a large overhanging alcove.





*The entrance to Corner Cave, high in the Benarat Cliffs. Photo: Tim Allen*

### **Other leads in Cobweb cave**

A few other leads were looked where possible entry might be gained to other sections of the river but nothing was found.

### **Gawai and other surface features in the northern end of G. Benarat.**

With all the other exploration going on, no time remained to investigate this part of the mountain.

### **Other objectives which presented themselves during the expedition.**

Some short caves and other features were discovered, mostly in the Cobweb entrance area.

### **The Survex database.**

The database was updated with all the new discoveries. Only a small amount of re-survey work was undertaken. This was mostly in locating new side passages into to existing framework. No areas of 'fake' data were visited.

### **Cave photography.**

The expedition was fortunate to have photographer Mark Burkey in the team. And some excellent photographs of the new discoveries were taken. Other members recorded the expedition on mobile phone camera, both in still and video, with surprisingly good results.

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### **Impact and output**

The expedition worked well with National Park management and staff and was pleased to achieve its aims of having a minimal impact on National Park resources. The expedition supported the local population as much as possible through direct employment.

The team worked well together throughout. It was unfortunate to lose two valuable team members early in the expedition. One to injury and one to a close family bereavement.

The full report of the expedition will follow once field data is completed and all work written up. In addition to formal reporting the expedition expects to promote its work through social media channels and Descent Magazine for example <https://ukcaving.com/board/index.php?threads/breakthrough-in-mulu.31424/>

## The Stats

The expedition showed that despite a lot of hard work new cave passage was difficult to find under Benarat. The larger new finds in Cobweb were very remote, over six hours caving from the Upper Cobweb entrance. The discoveries chart below are field calculations only and may differ to those produced in the final report.

Cobweb	Serendipity extensions	1094		
	Fill your Boots	259		
	Peaches & Popcorn	167		
	Hex extension	32		
	Dutch Rubber	200		
	Moonshadow pitch	87		
	Criminal Damage	69		
Woodpecker Cave		160		
Genuflection Cave		18		
Corner Cave		68		
Rattan Cave		50		
<b>Total</b>		<b>2204</b>		

## Finances

Fielding an expedition of this nature comes at a significant cost. The budget falls into three main categories; Flights, insurance and field costs. All have risen considerably in the last few years and we are pleased that our careful budgeting met all its targets. While each individual member contributed significantly to the expedition, we are extremely grateful for the grant assistance given to us by the **Mount Everest Foundation** and the **Ghar Parau Foundation**.

## The team

From the UK - Tim Allen (leader), Laura Appleby, Mark Burkey, Pete Hall, Becka Lawson, Frank Pearson, Will Pearson, Chris Scaife, Stuart Weston, Lisa Wootton, Mark Wright.

From Sarawak – Veno Enar, Steve Lian, Balang, Jimmy and Jarah.

## **Acknowledgements**

In Sarawak

The Chief Minister of Sarawak

The Sarawak Secretary of State

The Director of Forests, Sarawak

Controller of National Parks and Nature Reserves

Controller of Wild Life

Protected Areas & Biodiversity Conservation Unit, Sarawak Forestry Corporation

The Sarawak Ministry of Planning and Resource Management

The Resident, Miri Division

The Sarawak Immigration Department

The Sarawak Police Department

Gunung Mulu National Park Management & Staff

In the UK

Mount Everest Foundation

Ghar Parau Foundation

Matt Kirby

Howard Jones

Dick Willis

Members of the Mulu Caves Project