

2024

Papua Expedition

by Giacomo Grison

Return to Bukisi

In August 2024, I returned to Indonesia's remote province of Papua in the island of New Guinea to explore Goa Kali Maru (cave of the River Maru), an impressive cave which I had located on my trip last year. After spending two days in the city of Jayapura to stock up with supplies, I embarked on the journey by car and boat to Bukisi – the coastal village which serves as gateway to Goa Kali Maru – with my interpreter Marius and driver Lauren, both of whom I had partnered with last year.

We received a warm welcome in Bukisi and were reunited with several of the Dusay and Seseray clan members (the two clans in Bukisi that own the terrain on which Maru cave is located) who had accompanied us on last year's adventure. Long discussions with the clans took place the following day to reach an agreement to explore the cave. Thanks to the friendships established during last year's trip, the outcome of the talks seemed favourable, particularly with the Dusay clan that owns the lower section of the cave.

In 2023, while venturing inside Goa Kali Maru's lower entrance, I had reached a chamber where further progression required crossing the river's turbulent waters. While attempting this crossing (pictured on page 7), I was carried away by the strong current and narrowly avoided being pushed into a sump where the river disappears. This year, I learned that the Dusay clan have never attempted this passage themselves due to the risks involved, meaning that the large galleries I saw continuing upstream in the cave remain unexplored. A man named Yanus, leader of the Dusay clan, suggested that we could attempt the crossing with the help of logs and tree trunks to traverse above the water. Drilling and bolting to make the passage safer remained out of the question as the clan prohibited the use of equipment which could alter or damage the cave, which the Dusay people consider sacred.

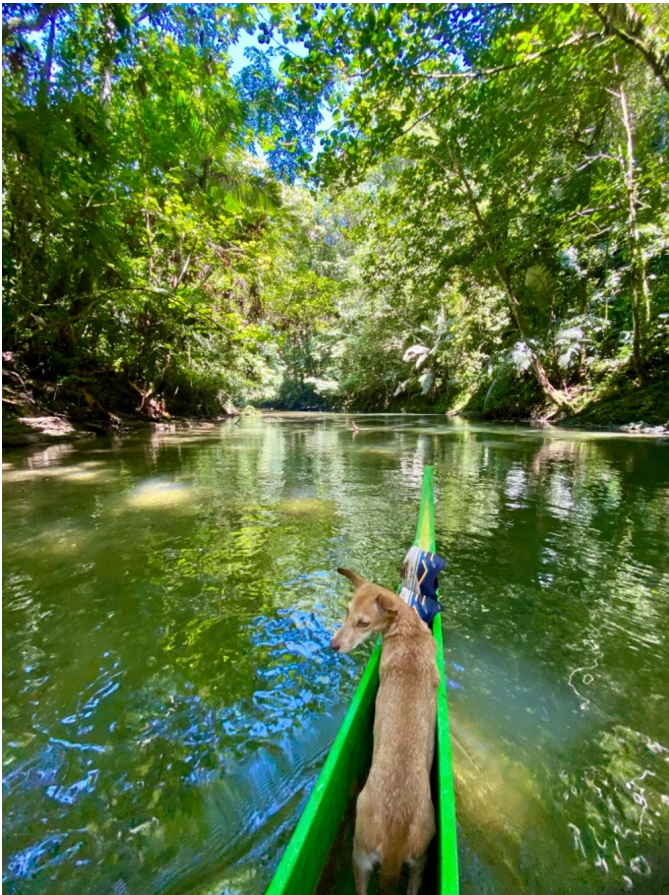
The prospects of exploring Goa Kali Maru's majestic upper entrance, controlled by the Seseray clan, was more uncertain, as the clan's two veteran hunters Kris and Adolof (whom I had met last year) were not present in Bukisi during our initial discussions. I was told that only a handful of veteran Seseray hunters have ever entered the cave from this entrance, which has been a closely guarded hunting ground for generations. It is inhabited by colonies of bats and of the larger flying foxes (Pteropodidae). Entering this breathtaking portal, which I had the privilege of seeing last year, was the main goal for this year's expedition, and I was told that Kris and Adolof were considering granting me permission and that we were likely to meet them in the jungle.

Everything looked set for a new expedition to begin. Plans however were delayed by a funeral in Bukisi after an elderly person in the village passed away, and later by changing weather conditions which brought torrential rain that raised Maru River's water levels. After a few days waiting, the weather appeared to have settled and we loaded tents, food, and my caving equipment on the canoes. It was time to journey once again into the jungle.



Journey to the Hunters' Camp

We began paddling at dawn and soon met some women on the riverbanks who were busy peeling and pounding palm stems to produce Sago, a popular starch in New Guinea's lowlands used by the locals primarily for cooking. As we followed the river upstream, I spotted birds-of-paradise performing their ritual morning dances high up on the trees' branches, and a large-beaked bird known as Blyth's hornbill flew above my head.



The clear sky suddenly turned cloudy, and rain soon followed, forcing us to navigate stronger water currents. After around three hours of paddling from Bukisi we reached some rapids where we abandoned the canoes. Observing the force of the current down the rapids, Yanus said the crossing in the cave near the lower entrance would be too dangerous to pursue with this water level. We bypassed the rapids with a steep climb and made our way through the dense jungle along a loose and very slippery trail. Leeches and spiders were crawling up my trousers and shirt, and we hiked

under the rain for some time until we spotted smoke in the distance: the Seseray hunters had set up camp at Maru cave's lower entrance.

Sitting under a tarp in the depth of the forest were Kris and Adolof, who had been hiking for many hours during the night with other members of their clan and had been awaiting our arrival. We exchanged greetings and sat around their campfire, and after a short while I asked whether we could venture inside Goa Kali Maru's upper entrance. Kris was confident that this would be possible despite the rain, and he appeared enthusiastic to allow me to enter the cave. He said there were underground passages that remained unknown and suggested that we could explore them. As leader of the Seseray clan, he formed a hunting party and invited his son and three other younger hunters in their late 20s – none of whom had been to the cave before – to join us, in what felt as though this was becoming a caving rite of passage. Having gifted two waterproof headlamps to Kris and Adolof last year, this time I gave the spare headlamps I had brought with me to some of the younger hunters.

The Dusay party had begun setting up camp and we agreed that we would re-join them later that evening. I followed the hunters as they left the camp with their hunting dogs, accompanied by Marius and Lauren who said they would hike with us but would not enter the cave because they felt it was too risky.



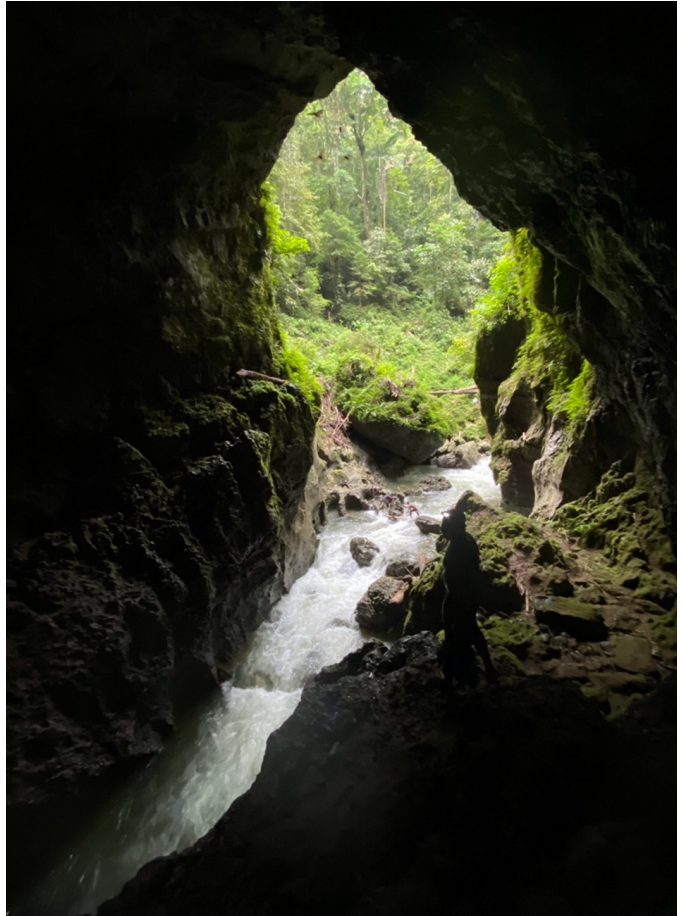
Upper Entrance and Galleries of the Serpent

After hiking for one hour and a half from the camp we reached the upper entrance of Goa Kali Maru, a Dantesque portal 40 metres high and 20 metres wide into which the thundering river disappears. It was raining – though not heavily – and the water current appeared stronger than it had been last year. Marius and Lauren sought shelter under a rock, while the hunters went to chop some trees and we would use their trunks to help cross the river.

With impressive strength and agility and despite the strong current, Kris and Adolof entered the water and positioned the logs between two rocks: crossing to the other side was the only way forward to enter the cave. I followed, carefully taking some steps on the half-submerged trunks, trying to resist the current and not to lose my balance. I was almost at the other side when my foot slipped; I fell into the turbulent river and was pushed against some rocks where I managed to pull myself out of the flow. I then clambered out of the water and re-joined the others, who were glad to see I was unharmed.

From here, we freeclimbed a slippery five-metre-high vertical passage and gained access to a ledge on the river's orographic left-hand side, from where we continued deeper into the cave, some ten metres above the level of the river. The sight was spectacular: Maru River continued its way into the darkness in a tunnel of huge dimensions, with hundreds of flying foxes hanging from the cave's ceiling. We abandoned the main river section and entered a smaller side gallery on the left. Here, I saw a long, black snake-like creature swimming in a stream: I thought it could be a freshwater eel, but the hunters later told me it was a snake. I did not get the chance to take a good look at the creature as a memorable scene began to unfold around me: a flying fox accidentally flew straight into my face and dozens of others flew past us while hunters caught

some of them with their bare hands, brutally smashing them on the rocks to kill them.



(Picture: Hunters crossing the river are dwarfed by Goa Kali Maru's upper entrance)

I progressed deeper in the gallery, followed by Kris, while the others remained behind. The tunnel soon became a labyrinth of passages heading off in every direction. This section was quieter with no bats around, perhaps the reason why even the most experienced hunters have rarely ventured here. Kris and I climbed up a muddy slope and descended into a gallery with some modest formations, until the passage became too tight to continue. We then ventured into other passages, trying to keep track of the directions and avoiding getting lost. At one point I saw a small squeeze and Kris made a gesture suggesting he did not know where the passage led: I crawled for 15 metres and emerged into a small chamber. Kris followed and we continued exploring other small galleries. From the point where I saw the snake, we spent perhaps half an hour inside these galleries that must be around 500 metres in length, and then rejoined the others in the main river tunnel.



Despite being some ten metres higher than the river level, the Galleries of the Serpent almost entirely sump during floods, as hinted at by the logs piled up at their entrance. The section is nowhere near as impressive compared to the main river tunnel, and I did not get the chance to photograph it. It is nonetheless of great importance for the hunters given the presence of many flying foxes that are easier to catch in small spaces, unlike in the 40-metre-high main gallery.

Daring River Crossing Near the Sump

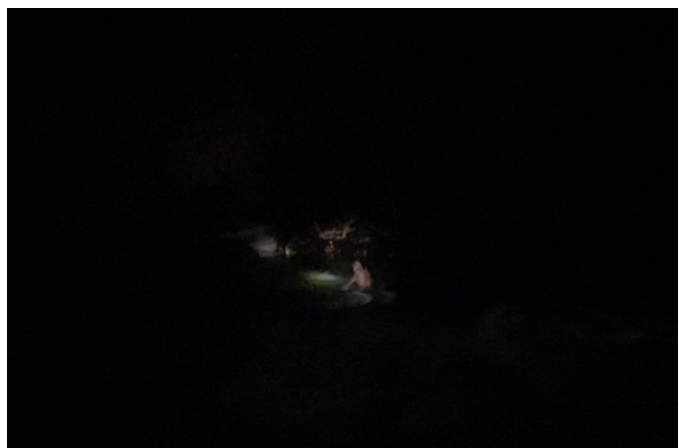


We descended a steep slope to re-join the riverbank, where the main gallery becomes even wider, and the ceiling progressively lowers. It was very slippery and one of the hunters fell on his back, luckily landing on the sand unharmed. I pointed my headlamp at full power towards the depth of the

gallery and observed how the river disappeared into a sump clogged with large trunks and logs.

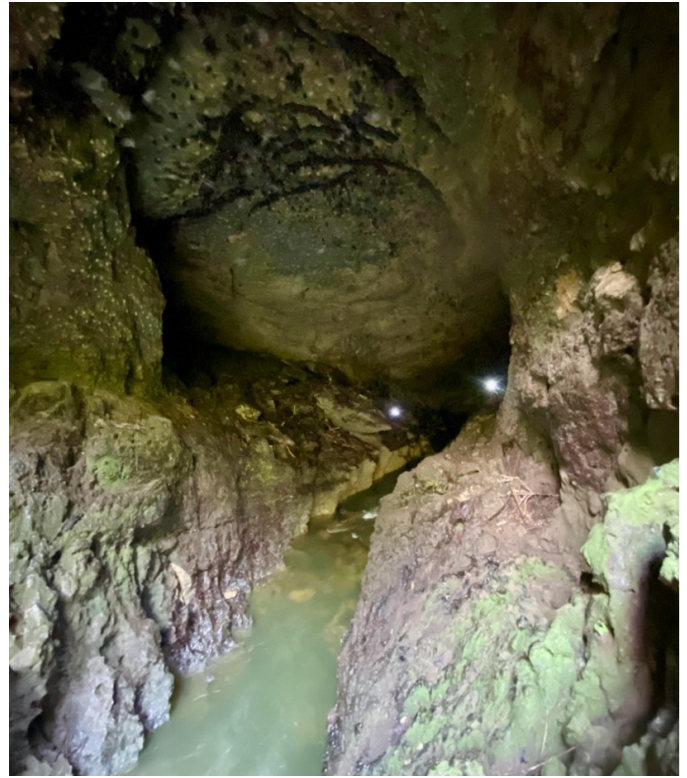
Located approximately 400 metres from the upper entrance, this was a different sump from the other one located inside Goa Kali Maru's lower entrance, which I had reached last year. The upper sump divides Maru cave into two sections: the cave's higher section of impressive proportions, owned by the Seseray clan, and the longer and largely unexplored lower section owned by the Dusay clan. This meant a traverse between the two entrances – which are approximately 1.7 kilometres apart – would most likely be impossible for a caver to attempt, and I realised there had been some miscommunication last year when I wrongly understood from Kris and Adolof that a through trip could perhaps be made. The presence of the first sump also explains why the upper section of the cave occasionally floods when the devastating force of banjirs (floods) pushes trunks at over ten metres above the river level. It is certainly a place to avoid during bad weather and I was starting to seriously worry about the rainy conditions outside.

From the riverbank we followed Kris as he crossed the stream at a point where it was wider, allowing to walk on the riverbed with the strong water current at chest level. As I moved forward into the river trying to resist the current, I nervously looked at the sump just some thirty metres away, thinking that losing my footing there and then would have meant being carried straight into the sump by the current. Fortunately, we all safely made it to the other side, and I realised that many tiny aquatic creatures I had never seen before were crawling all over me!



After the crossing, we walked into a side gallery, on the orographic right-hand side of the river, which continued for 150 metres or more. This semi-submerged gallery offered a disappointing sight: its waters were strewn with plastic bottles swept up by the floods from the human settlements near the Cyclops Mountains, some 25 kilometres upstream. Sadly, human waste is most likely a reality shared by other river caves in New Guinea and serves as a reminder of the threat we pose to these pristine yet fragile ecosystems.

Kris carefully progressed into the gallery, jumping from one log to another, until half-way he turned back. The rest of us preferred not to venture inside given the risk of falling into the sea of plastic. I was uncertain on whether this passage had any potential for further progression in the future, but I felt it wasn't worth pursuing this time.



The Audacious Seseray Hunter

From this point of the cave, I followed Kris and Adolof on a very exposed climb onto a ledge that made its way back upstream to the entrance portal, some 15 metres above the river, but on the opposite side from where we had entered. This climb offered incredible views of the cave and the jungle, where I spotted Marius and Lauren in the distance. The ledge ended in a small, exposed balcony from where it was impossible to progress any further.

On our way back, Kris climbed downward a little and suddenly jumped several metres further down into the river, narrowly avoiding submerged logs and rocks, and was carried by the strong current back to the point where we had crossed the water near the sump. I was stunned by his courage and, while tempted to emulate him, I decided it would be wiser to follow Adolof – who was carrying half a dozen dead flying foxes – on the climb back and we once again reached the crossing near the sump.

This time I tackled the crossing with less confidence (perhaps I had had more time to think about the risks involved) and halfway across I nearly froze, afraid of losing my footing on the riverbed. Adolof,



who saw me struggling, walked back into the river a few metres and stretched out his hand, which I grabbed to pull myself out. I will be forever grateful for his help at such a critical moment!

We returned to the ledge near the entrance, and there I took some rope out of the bag and passed it through a natural anchor, enabling us to then safely descend the five-metre vertical drop we had freeclimbed on the way into the cave. Some of the hunters gladly grabbed the rope as well and we all made it safely down the drop. We then passed the turbulent entrance crossing – this time I managed not to fall into the river – and regrouped with the others at the entrance. We were all very excited about the adventure, even more so the hunting dogs to see their owners back from the darkness, and we took group pictures before heading back.



Cave's Folktales and Further Exploration Prospects

That evening, at the camp, I listened to Dusay folktales about the cave's origins. According to one

such tale, one of Bukisi's ancestors named Maruway, who lived in the Cyclops Mountains in ancient times, gave birth to Maru River after spilling water from his flask. Maruway, the tale narrates, later descended into the valley and created the cave as his home, digging out the large tunnels through which the river flows underground.

Yanus explained one of the tale's key takeaways: life in Bukisi, located on the estuary of Maru River, would not be possible without the existence of the cave, which forms a natural barrier and protects the villagers from the devastating force of the floods. I observed that the higher sump indeed acts as a first barrier, while the lower sump diverts most of the river's waters to submerged passages leading to the ocean. Yanus explained that the cave's role in protecting the village is one of the key reasons why the locals treat it as a sacred territory, in addition to its use as a hunting ground.

Torrential rain fell during the night. We decided to postpone any further attempts to explore Goa Kali Maru from its lower entrance beyond the crossing I had reached last year. One alternative option to this crossing would be to rappel some 40 metres down a shaft into the chamber near the lower entrance. The shaft's trajectory, however, appears to land dangerously close to the sump and would require bolting and rigging a safer descent line leading away from the sump. Permission from the Dusay people to place bolts in the cave however is – for now – off the table as far as discussions are concerned.

We headed back to Bukisi the next day, and spells of bad weather eventually forced me to postpone further attempts at Goa Kali Maru. Exploration prospects in the lower section remain promising, with over half of the river's underground section remaining unexplored. I hope to pursue these prospects with the locals' help on my next expedition.



(River Crossing near Sump in Cave's Lower Section, 2023)

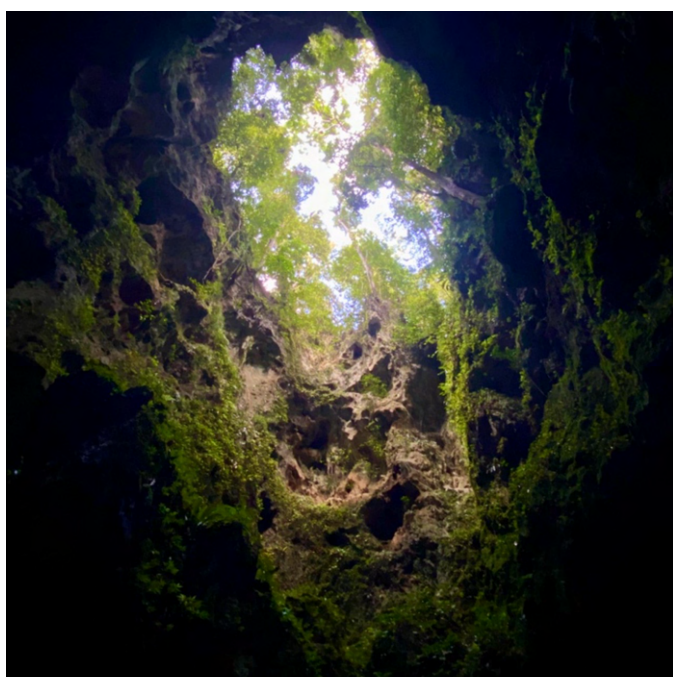
Ambora Cave

With plans to explore Goa Kali Maru's lower section halted by the rain, I headed west with Marius and Lauren to a village named Ambora, located near the small town of Demta. We had heard last year of a large cave here also named Ambora, hidden somewhere in the jungle and only known to the locals. We befriended the owner of the land where Ambora cave is located, and he showed us the way to the cave's entrance which can be reached just a short drive from the village on a dirt road followed by a walk down a forested hillside near the ocean.



Ambora is an impressive cave with four interconnected entrances and an inner chamber that is 30 metres tall at its highest point. Many stalactites are present in the chamber, one of them reaching the floor to form a large column. A colony of flying foxes lives inside the cave, which is approximately 50 metres deep and 350 metres long. Known about for many generations by a few locals, Ambora can be accessed without technical equipment other than headlamps, though some steep passages are slippery and require care. When walking on the trail to the main entrance, one should be careful not to slip and fall into a small cave opening near the path that drops 30 metres into the main chamber.

I was pleasantly surprised by Ambora's underground scenery, and the cave's existence is further proof – besides the much bigger and more challenging Goa Kali Maru – that the rainforest stretching from Bukisi to Demta has great potential for cave exploration.

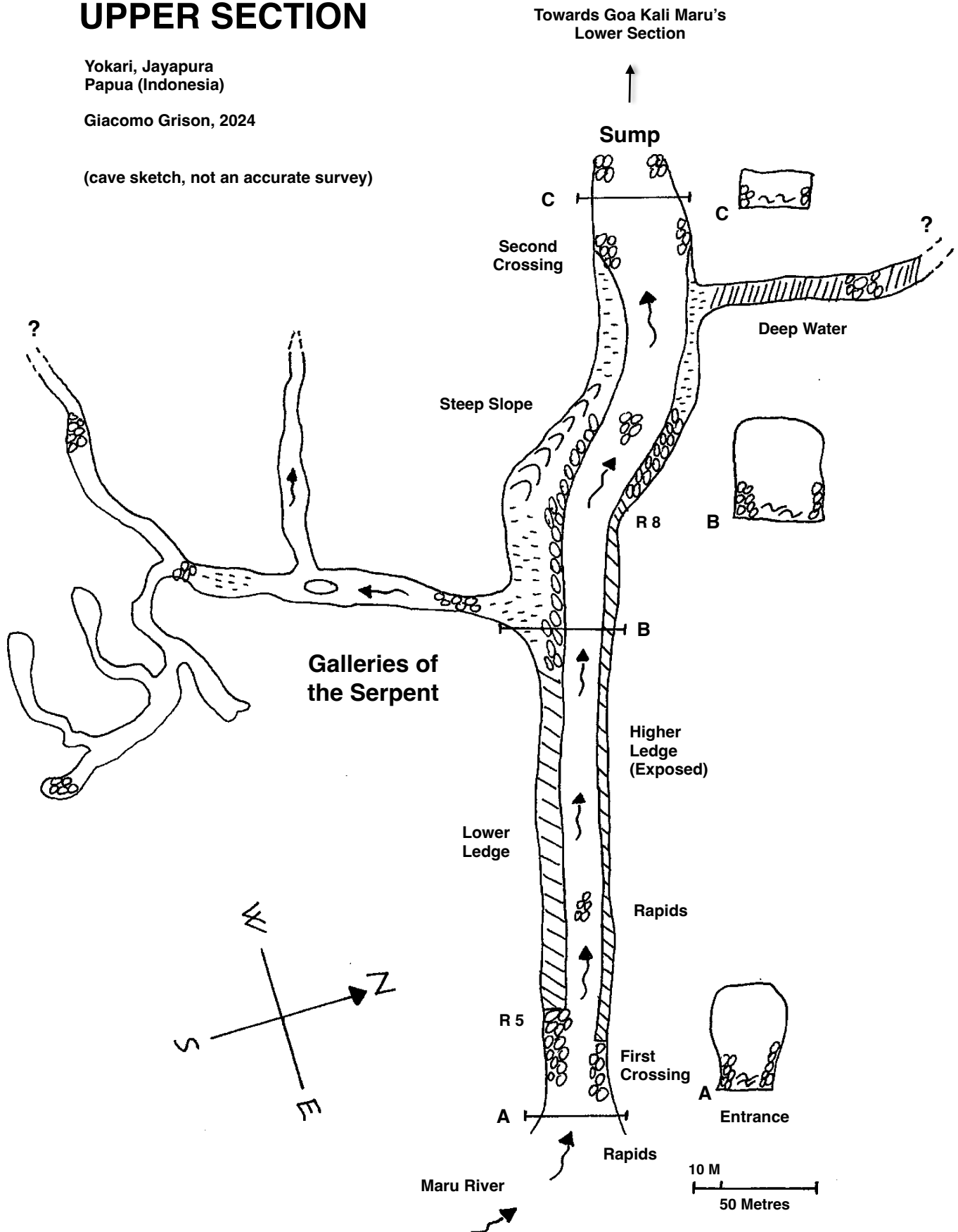


GOA KALI MARU UPPER SECTION

Yokari, Jayapura
Papua (Indonesia)

Giacomo Grison, 2024

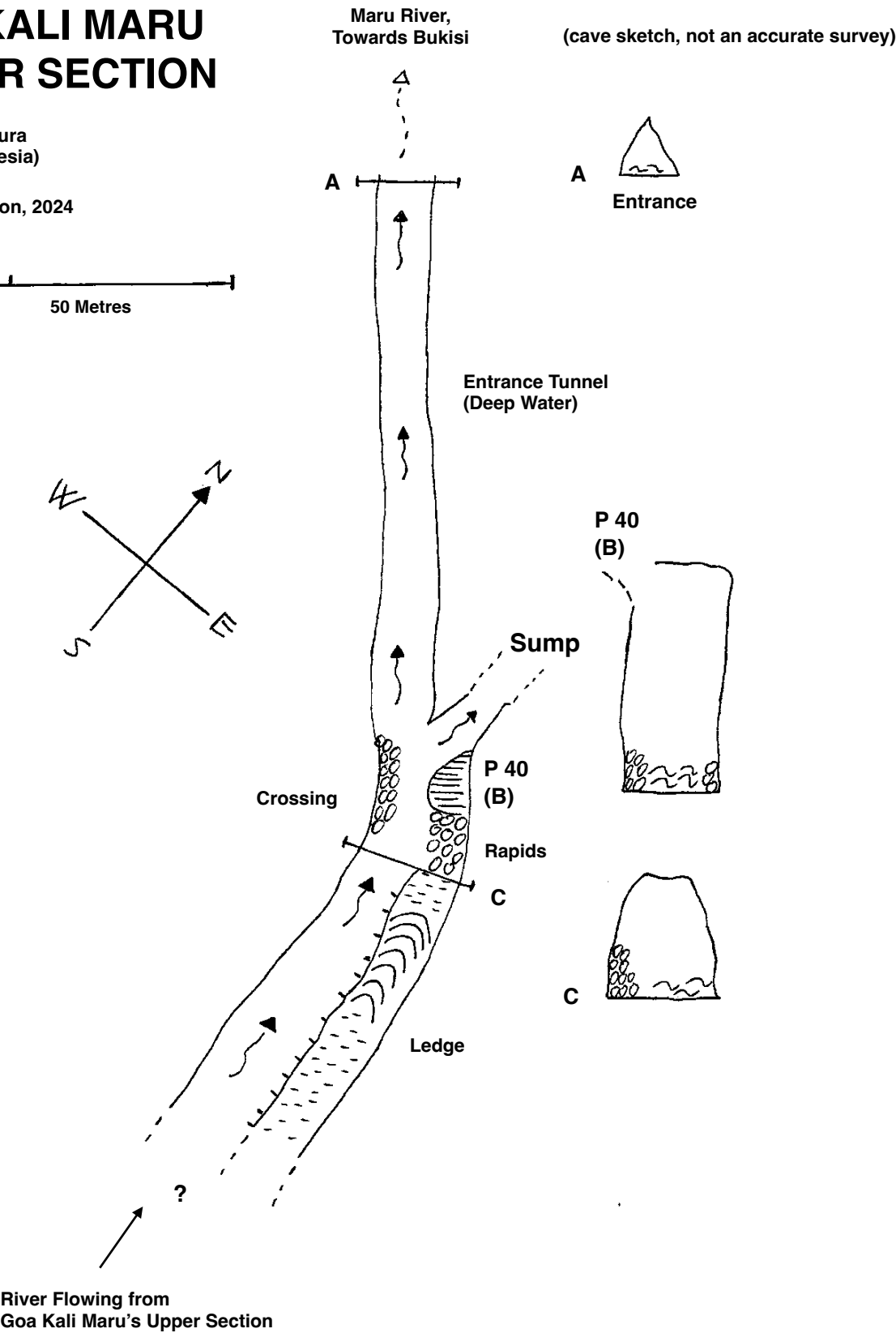
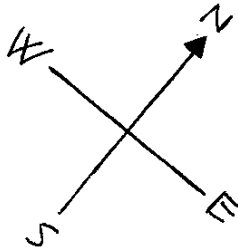
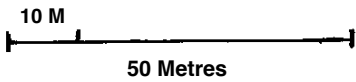
(cave sketch, not an accurate survey)



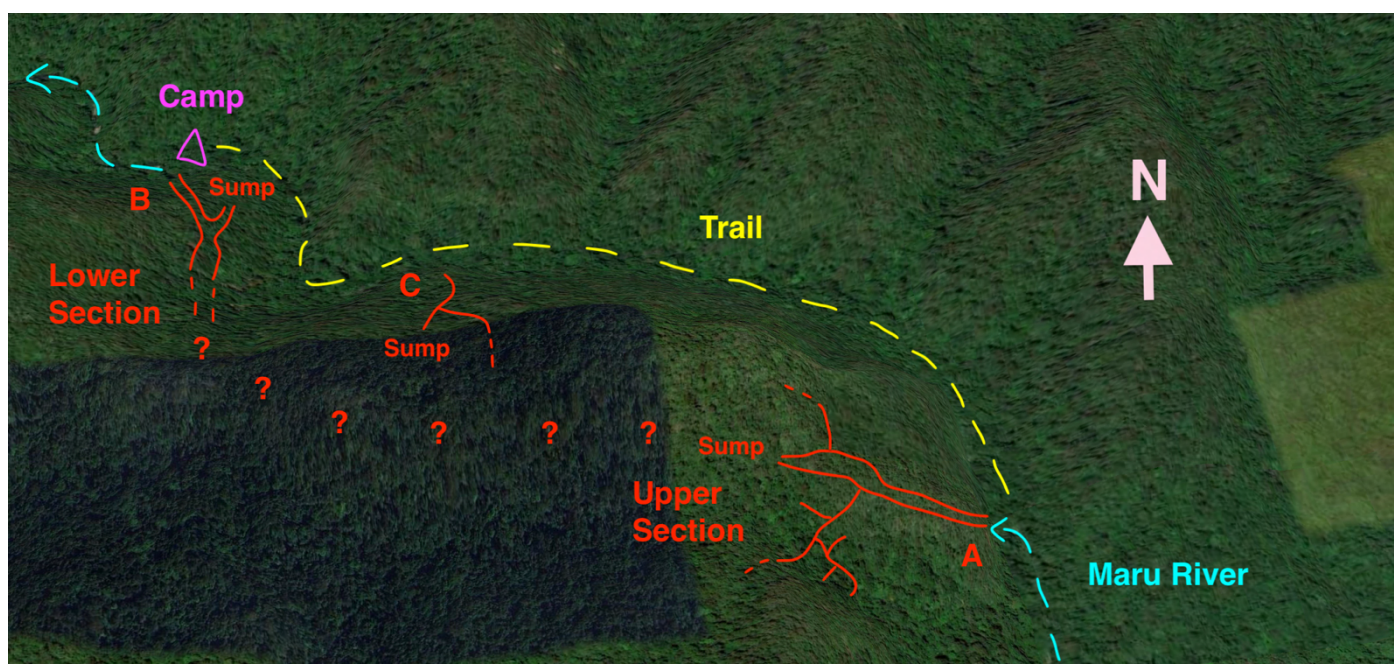
GOA KALI MARU LOWER SECTION

Yokari, Jayapura
Papua (Indonesia)

Giacomo Grison, 2024



Goa Kali Maru – Overview Sketch Map



Distance entrances A - B: approx. 1.7 kilometres in a straight line



(Pictures above taken during 2023 expedition, Giacomo Grison)