

Not the best way to explore a cave

November 1970, and we were back down from the mountains of Nepal, camped in a field on the edge of the road-head town of Pokhara. The British Karst Research Expedition to the Himalayas had spent a month clambering over the limestone that formed the bulk of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, only to find that it is almost entirely devoid of caves. But there were rumours of a cave near Pokhara.

Phil and Geoff had been for a walk past Pokhara's beautiful lake and had seen the outlet river disappear down a deep pothole. Definitely worth a look. So next day, Julian and I set out with ropes and ladders. Along with Lapka, one of the two Sherpas who had been our guides in the mountains.

Let us set the scene. A major supporter of our expedition had been Damart Thermawear, who were launching a new range of cosy-warm underwear, and had given each of us a generous stock of it, which had then become almost the expedition's uniform. And in those days of old, we had not only wire ladders but also carbide lamps. So a pair of Englishmen strolling across the fields in their underwear, with flames coming out of their foreheads, attracted some attention. Folks working in the fields asked Lapka what it was all about, and he told them we were going to go down the big hole where the river disappeared.

The locals all knew this hole, and also knew that nobody had ever been down it, so they walked on ahead to get a ringside seat for the promised events. By the time we arrived at the mysterious hole, there must have been at least fifty locals perched on every vantage point round the sinkhole. Perhaps over eager to show-case our efficient explorations, I strode purposely to the edge of the shaft, and promptly disappeared from sight.

The locals were certainly impressed by our technique; they knew that the pothole was at least thirty metres deep. However, my rapid investigation had not been planned. Just short of a rocky vantage point, I had stepped onto greenery that proved to be merely filling a narrow gully. Consequently, I dropped down this, and hurtled out into the main shaft.

Where I landed on a ledge, perhaps five metres below the rim.

Fortunate. In fact, incredibly lucky. This was the only ledge in the entire shaft; barely a metre wide and only a few metres long. And I was unscathed except for a few scratches and bruises. Peering over the edge, I could see the smooth walls of the shaft, and its waterfall, descending into darkness a long way below. Upwards, I could see the sky inside a fringe of rock and plants.

Julian's voiced drifted down from above, "Hello, are you OK?"

"Yes", I replied, "I am on a ledge. Send me down a rope".

"The rope is in your bag", said Julian.

Indeed it was, and it had been rather helpful in cushioning my landing on this rocky ledge. I extricated it, and tied one end round a convenient block of loose rock lying on the ledge. Whirling the rope and rock around, I aimed for the sky. From above, looking like a new version of the Indian Rope Trick. At the third rising of the magical rope, Julian caught it. And tied it off on nearby railings (which were in place to prevent people falling over the edge, but seemingly only sensible people who were on the path).



I pulled jumars from the rucksack, and slowly proceeded upwards.

Now see this from the viewpoint of the assembled locals. Foreign-looking man, dressed in his underwear, flame coming out of his head, walks across the fields to our very deep pothole, takes one look, and jumps down. Unusual, indeed true enthusiasm. Then an Indian Rope Trick, and he emerges from the depths. Seriously impressive.

So when I clambered over the rim, I was greeted by a round of applause from the assembled crowds.

Not wishing to imply that such had been an appropriate technique of cave exploration, we then produced our ladders and ropes to make a proper descent of the shaft. But that's another story, leading to discovery of the Harpan River Cave deep beneath those fields of Nepal.

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