

Southeast Asia 2017

Alberto Padoan and Martina Zambelli

Introduction

The overall aim of this expedition was to climb, hike and backpack across Southeast Asia.

The main objectives were:

- Climb challenging multi-pitch routes and visit some of the least known crags in Southeast Asia
- Return home safely having enjoyed the challenges and unique environment of Southeast Asia
- Encourage and inspire others members of Imperial College to stand up for a passion and follow their dreams, both within and beyond the climbing community
- Identify other potential objectives in Southeast Asia for future expeditions
- Promote Imperial College as a leading institution in the support of student-led expeditions
- Improve the knowledge, understanding and practices of the team members on rock climbing and environmentally responsible travelling

Team members

Alberto Padoan

Role: Expedition leader and equipment manager

Background: Alberto finished his PhD in Control at the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, with his VIVA not long before leaving for the expedition. He is now a postdoc at Cambridge University. He climbs regularly since 2012, and he has organised and participated to several short climbing trips in various locations in Northeast Italy, including Arco, Lumignano, Cinque Torri. He has also organised and participated to week-long climbing trips to Yosemite National Park, USA (2016), Costa Blanca, Spain (2016), Portland, United Kingdom (2015, 2016), Peak District, United Kingdom (2015), Joshua Tree National Park, USA (2014). He took part to week-long hiking in the Dolomites in 2014 and 2016, including parts of Alta Via 1 (2016) and via ferratas. Main routes included the hike of Tre Cime di Lavaredo, of Mount Pelmo and of Mount Civetta, and to a short hiking trip in Yosemite National Park (2016). Whilst in London and Cambridge, he practices regularly indoor climbing and bouldering.

Martina Zambelli

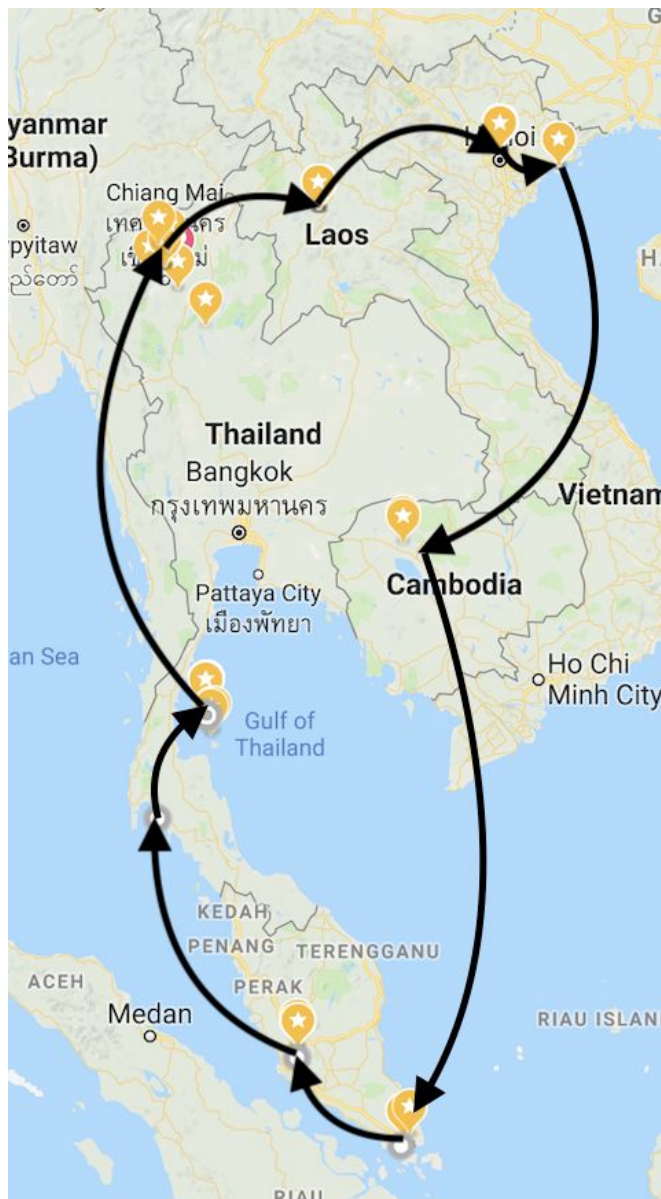
Role: Logistics and treasurer

Background: Martina finished her PhD in Robotics at the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, with her VIVA not long before leaving for the expedition. She climbs regularly since 2014, and she took part to short climbing trips in various locations in Northeast Italy, including Arco and Lumignano, as well as week-long climbing trips to Costa Blanca, Spain (2016), Portland, United Kingdom (2015, 2016), Harrisons Rocks, United Kingdom (2015). She also took part to day-long hiking in the Dolomites, Italy, since the age of 12, and to week-long hiking in the Dolomites in 2014 and 2016, including parts of Alta Via 1 (2016) and via ferratas. Main routes included the hike of Tre Cime di Lavaredo, of Mount Pelmo and of Mount Civetta. Whilst in London she practices regularly indoor climbing and bouldering.

Itinerary and diary

The Expedition covered all the main areas that were planned from the proposal:

- Start in Singapore (convenient hub for international flights) --- 2 days (17-19/12)
- Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur and Batu Caves --- 2 days (19-21/12)
- Thailand, Krabi region: Ao Nang, Railay, Tonsai --- 7 days (21-28/12)
- Thailand, Koh Tao --- 6 days (28/12-3/01)
- Thailand, Chiang Mai: Crazy horse buttress --- 5 days (3-7/01)
- Laos, Luang Prabang --- 2 days (7-9/01)
- Vietnam, Hanoi and Cat ba --- 6 days (9-15/01)
- Cambodia, Siem Reap --- 3 days (15-18/01)
- Singapore to catch our return flight --- 1 day (19/01)



While the original expedition proposal was planned over 7 weeks, we had available only 5 weeks due to constraints dictated by both of our new jobs. This forced us to squeeze our trip into 5 weeks and shorten some interesting parts. Unfortunately, Alberto also suffered from a pulley injury in one of his fingers. Due to this injury, we refrained from physical activities in the first 5/7 days of the trip. Nonetheless, we were able to climb most of our objectives and visit the main areas of interest!

The map shows our final itinerary.

Diary

Singapore -- 17-19/12

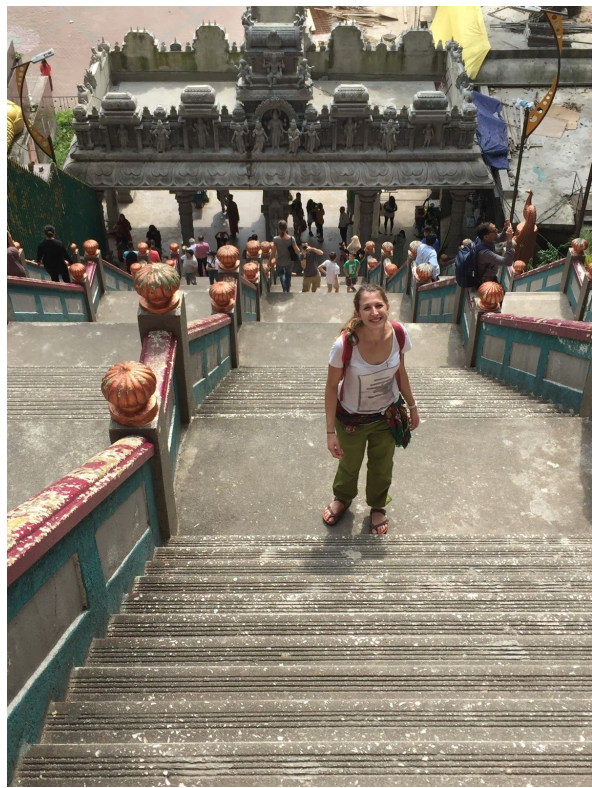
We began our expedition in Singapore, an easy hub for our international flights to and from Southeast Asia. Alberto had been travelling to Australia for a conference just before the beginning of the expedition. We only stayed 2 days in Singapore to acclimatise with the hot weather (and food) and to recover from jetlag. We decided to meet in front of the only Starbucks in Singapore airport. We were absolutely psyched to start the adventure together.



Kuala Lumpur -- 19-21/12

The second leg of our journey was Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, which we visited for 2 days. According to our plan, Kuala Lumpur should have been our base to climb at the Batu Caves. However, Alberto suffered from a serious finger injury just before the start of the trip, so it was impossible for us to climb during our time in Malaysia. We decided to visit the Batu Caves (and the nearby crag) anyways. The climbing looked absolutely beautiful. However, the caves are home to one of the most sacred temples in the country. Our impression was that some of the locals did not appreciate climbers in the area. The weather extremely was humid and hot. The second day Alberto presented symptoms of heat exhaustion. This forced us to have a rest day at the hostel.





Thailand -- 21/12 - 7/01

Thailand was definitely one of the highlights of our trip. The (high) expectations about the beauty of living and the quality of climbing in the The Land of Smiles were absolutely surpassed. Our experience in Thailand can be roughly divided into three main parts. We started our journey in the south, in the area of Ao nang, Railay and Tonsai. We then moved to Koh Tao, a small island in the gulf of Thailand. Finally, we spent some time in the north, in the area of Chiang Mai. The weather was not with us in several occasions forcing us to some (very pleasant) rest days. Luckily, Alberto's finger started to recover, so with careful taping we could climb extensively.

Railay and Tonsai -- 21-28/12

The small peninsula of Railay is located between the city of Krabi and Ao Nang in Southern Thailand. High limestone cliffs cut off mainland access and thus a short boat trip is the only

way to reach the crags. Railay offers very good quality bolted sport climbing routes on limestone from accessible 5a's to extreme 8c. Our favorite climbs in Railay include the classic multi-pitch routes "The King and I" (6a, 6b, 7b+, 6a) and "Humanity" (6a+, 6b, 6b+, 6b) and the sport routes "Missing Snow" (6b+ - Tyrolean Wall), "Groove Tube" (6a - Fire Wall), "Muay Thai" (6b+ - Muay Thai Wall). We will be definitely back here someday.







Koh Tao -- 28/12-3/01

Koh Tao is an island of the Chumphon Archipelago situated on the western shore of the Gulf of Thailand. The rock in Koh Tao is mostly granite providing incredibly good friction for feet and rock which dries quickly even after abundant rains. We decided to visit the crag known as Mek's Mountain. One of the highlights of our climbing time in Koh Tao was Alberto's (onsight!) of "The Bitch in me" (6c) and Martina's climb of "I got a feeling" (6a+).



Chiang Mai -- 3-7/01

Crazy Horse Buttress is situated in the Mae On Valley near Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. The crag rises out of the tropical jungle providing an area of excellent and varied climbing on golden, orange and black-streaked limestone. The crag includes over a dozen of separate cliffs which can be up to a hundred meters tall. The area is the perfect crag for intermediate climbers, with grades evenly dispersed through the F5a to F8a+ and the majority of classics lying in the F6a-F6c range. The highlights of our climbing time in this area included the mutipitch route “Into the Sun” (6a,6a+), and the “Flushed” (6b+). We could not climb some of our objectives, such as the “Blood, Love and Steel” (6c), due to the presence of massive giant honey bees’ nests which rendered the area dangerous.





Laos -- 7-9/01

The initial plan for Laos was to climb in the area of Vang Vieng to enjoy some limestone climbing. On checking the weather forecast for the area a few days before we found that rain was foreseen. So we decided to stay north in the area of Luang Prabang. Unfortunately, once we reached there Martina got sick and was forced to stay in the hostel to treat her cold symptoms. Meanwhile, Alberto explored the city and collected some information about the climbing of the area. Talking with local climbers, he found that the climbing area near Luang

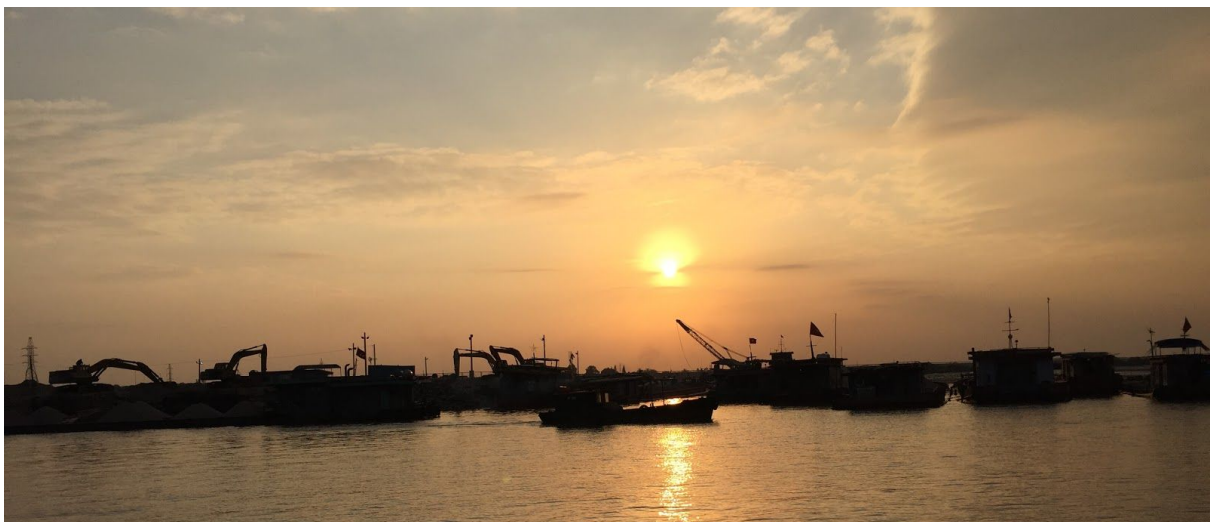
Prabang had been abandoned some years ago and that no trips are organised to reach it anymore. As a result, vegetation took over and most of the climbs in the area have rusty, unsafe bolts. This convinced the team not to climb, even when Martina felt better.





Vietnam -- 9-15/01

Arrived in Vietnam, we were soon faced with much colder weather conditions: maximum temperatures of 15 degrees hit us just after the 32 degrees of Laos. The conditions were however perfect for climbing. After a couple of days in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, we moved straight to our climbing destination: Cat ba, an island within the greater Ha Long Bay region, in the northeast of Vietnam. The Butterfly valley, one of the least known crags in Southeast Asia, turned out to be one of the most amazing climbing areas we visited during the whole expedition. The site offers a wide variety of well-bolted sport climbing on limestone, it is very well maintained and seats on the private land hosting the farm of a very friendly couple living there. The highlights of our climbing time there are Alberto's battle with "Very tot" (6c) and Martina's project "Where the wild things aren't" (6a+). The quality of climbing in the Butterfly valley was one of the best throughout the expedition.







Cambodia -- 15-18/01

Cambodia was the last 3-days destination of our journey. We decided to stay in Siem Reap, from where the area of Kampong Cham could be reached with a 3 hours drive. However, we found ourselves exhausted after the quality climbs in Vietnam. To avoid putting ourselves in risky situations, we decided to stay in Siem Reap for our last couple of days of journey.





Singapore -- 19/01

We finally headed back to Singapore, from where we flew back to London.



Conclusion

Overall most of the objectives of the expedition were met. We climbed challenging multi-pitch routes; we visited some of the most beautiful climbing spots (Tonsay and Crazy Horse Buttress) and some of the least known crags in Southeast Asia (Batu caves and Butterfly valley); we returned home safely having lived the experience of a lifetime; we have enjoyed the challenges and unique environment of Southeast Asia; we have improved knowledge, understanding and practices of the team members on rock climbing.

We hope to have encouraged and inspired others members of Imperial College to stand up for a passion and follow their dreams, both within and beyond the climbing community.

If we had the opportunity to do the trip again then there aren't many aspects we would change. Some suggestions for those willing to live a similar experience.

- Five weeks are good length. However a longer trip, ideally six to eight weeks long, would have allowed for proper rest time between different climbing sessions and more extensive exploration of the least known areas.
- Be lighter on gear. This can be also rented along the way in several local climbing shops.
- Different style of transport: having squeezed 7 weeks plan into 5, flying was the most (and probably only) effective way of travelling. However, this meant that we did not have the opportunity to explore the magnificent inland areas of the countries we have visited.

Potential objectives in Southeast Asia for future expeditions include the south of Laos, with a particular emphasis on the area of Thakhek, and Kampong Cham in central Cambodia (though at a different time of the year).

It was a fantastic trip that taught us a lot and let us live fantastic experiences. We look forward to the next adventure (which we are already starting to plan)!

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Imperial Exploration Board for making this trip possible. We would like to thank particularly Dr. Lorraine Craig and Dr. Phil Power for their ongoing support and advice.