

Another world

After a near-fatal car crash Gregg Jaden was determined to live the rest of his life to the full, which is why he ended up in the world’s largest cave.



About me

In 2009 I was involved in a near-fatal car crash. It took over five years of mental and physical therapy and every ounce of my determination to restore my mind and body enough to enjoy physical activities again. However, this life-changing incident was a blessing – it forced me to slow down and assess how I was living



my life. During this time I also fell in love with photography. I had always enjoyed taking pictures, but this was different. I love travel and various forms of visual storytelling, and I wanted to find a way to combine my two passions.

How did your photographic journey begin?

I had a near-death experience, which revealed to me the need to be more creative and really contribute to this planet. I bought my first DSLR camera – an EOS 5D Mark III – in 2013 and began to experiment. I watched endless tutorials on the internet and read anything I could about how my camera actually worked and what it was capable of. I started toying around with long exposures, understanding light and compositional elements. I kept experimenting with different techniques. Finally, I was getting somewhere.

I opened an Instagram account and started testing more and more camera gear. I took hundreds of photographs, each time adjusting and applying what I had learned, bringing new techniques into my imagery. I began to make connections online with some talented photographers and also took part in photographer groups and photo meet-ups. I felt it was all beginning to come together. This was when I realised how much of an impact shooting nature and landscapes had on me. Even if it was just to inspire a few of my family and friends to get out and enjoy nature, it was worth it.

Rare opportunity

Hang Son Doong, which means ‘Mountain River Cave’ is located in Quang Binh province, in Vietnam. Fewer than 800 climbers have explored it – meaning more people have been to the summit of Mount Everest than inside this massive cave. It is the largest known cave in the world and, according to the British cave experts who accompanied us on the expedition, “There is no cave in the world so beautiful, with lush green openings.” The experts accompany us for safety and to ensure environmental and ecosystem compliance. The Vietnam government grants a limited number of permits each year to explore the cave, making it a rare photographic opportunity.



Why did you particularly want to explore Hang Son Doong?

I didn’t really have a particular goal in mind. I just wanted to explore some less well charted territory and shoot some cool photos.

I saw a picture of Hang Son Doong online, and I just felt I needed to go there. It had only been discovered in 1991. I planned this trip specifically for shooting images. I had already been experimenting with long exposures at night, so I had experience shooting in low light. The cave spans 200m high and about 150m wide. I wanted to showcase the grand openings and all the different interior textures, and capture the essence of what it feels like inside such an amazing creation.

Presumably you had to be physically very fit to undertake such a trip?

There was a lot of physical preparation required. I rock climbed at least three times a week, ran 4-6 miles at least four times per week, and on top of that I had to fit in four-mile hikes three times a week with my backpack full of all my photographic gear.



Above left Two climbers are dwarfed by the magnitude of Hang Son Doong. *EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II lens at 26mm, 0.8 seconds at f5.6, ISO 100.*

Above right The only way to reach the end of Hang Son Doong is by kayak. *EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II lens at 35mm, 5 seconds at f6.3, ISO 320.*

Opposite The last of the daylight at our first camp at Hang En Cave – shooting into the cave entrance. *EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II lens at 16mm, 25 seconds at f5.6, ISO 100.*

Where did your expedition start? Describe your journey to the cave.

We journeyed by van for about 90 minutes from the small village of Phong Nha, where we were based, winding through the mountains along the Ho Chi Minh highway. Once we reached the drop-off point at the top of the mountain we unloaded our gear and started on the trail, at temperatures around 30°C and 90% humidity.

After trekking for 4-5 hours we reached the village of Ban Doong, which is another highlight on the expedition. We ate with the local villagers and learned more about this unique indigenous group, which lives off the land in the middle of the jungle. We then trekked another four hours through the jungle, fording 20 or more river crossings – through water sometimes thigh-deep – while taking care to avoid green cobras and leeches, to get to the opening of Hang En Cave, the site of our first camp.

On the second day, further river crossings and a steep descent with a couple of rope climbs brought us at last to Hang Son Doong entrance. We then started the 90m descent into the cave by making a number of short climbs,



using ropes and safety lines. Over the next three days and nights we explored 5km of Hang Son Doong, encountering underground jungles, large passages with huge stalagmites, and a beautiful underground lake. Inside the cave there are doline openings where the light allowed us some of the best shots of the extravagant nature of the cave, its scale and the greenery of the landscape.

Describe the set-up of your camp.

Our entire camp was portable and needed to be carried over massive boulders and up the rope climbs. Because of the amount of equipment, food, water and camping gear we needed 30 porters to assist us. They carried the camp and all our water filtration equipment and food while we carried our camera gear.

The sun started to set around 5.30pm, so we were in the dark much of the time after that. The cave is pitch black at night so our torches became our best friends. We had rechargeable headtorches and some rechargeable lights to illuminate the scene inside the cave for photographs. There was a generator for each campsite set up as a charging station. Here, we charged our camera batteries, phones, computers and any other small electronics.

Night-time was a great opportunity to take time-lapse images of the cave as it darkened and also long exposure shots, which showed the cave and tents glowing brightly by the water.

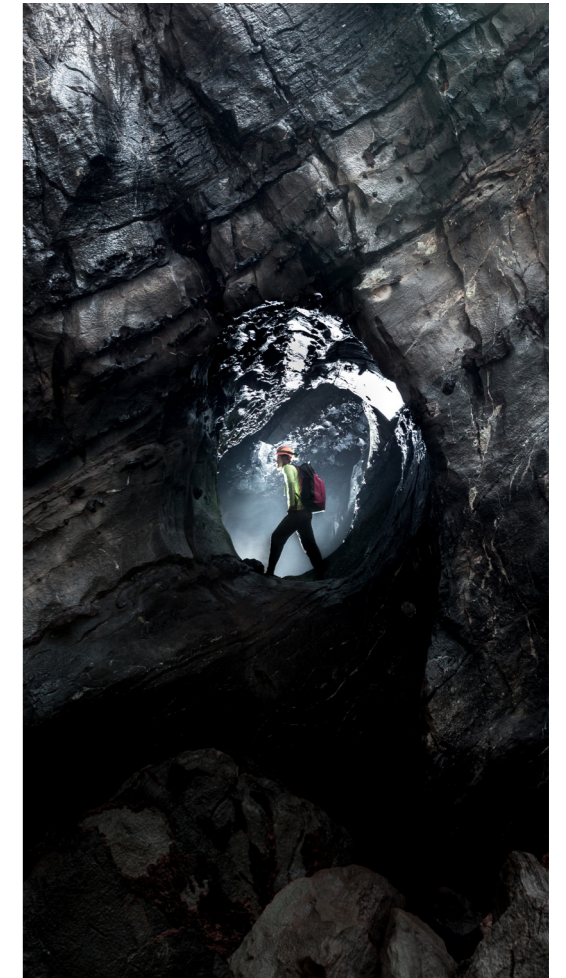
Above left Our camp at Hang En Cave, just after sunrise – shooting out of the cave entrance. *EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II lens at 16mm, 13 seconds at f8, ISO 100.*

Above right A dark passageway lit up inside Hang Son Doong. *EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II lens at 35mm, 2.5 seconds at f5.6, ISO 320.*

Opposite Huge 350 million-year-old stalagmites in Hang Son Doong. One of our team stands on a distant summit, illuminated by headtorch. *EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II lens at 35mm, 4 seconds at f5.6, ISO 320.*

Post-production

I use Lightroom for image editing. Mostly mild edits reducing warmth for accurate colour, brightening the dark areas while lowering highlights for increased dynamic range. The goal was to achieve good detail, but mostly what it felt like to be there.



Describe the physical and mental challenges and how you overcame them.

As a result of my accident I incurred serious injury, so one of my biggest challenges was making sure I stayed loose and pain-free during the expedition.

Some people found the cave claustrophobic, but I loved squeezing through rock tunnels where I could barely fit. The physical effort of rock climbing became enjoyable because we were rewarded each time with the most amazing photo locations I have ever seen. You soon forget how sore your body is.

What were the main photographic challenges?

One of the trickiest things about this type of expedition is the environment – cameras get covered in grit and banged around, lenses fog and batteries drain. It's dark and humid. It's difficult to light scenes with the limited light we had and the lights didn't last long, so you needed to prepare each shot in the dark before actually lighting it.

Picture the scene – carrying 9-11kg of gear for 60km over five days through some of the hardest wet boulder terrain, trying to stay stable and not fall off a cliff edge with 150m drop while snapping photos. And on top of that, getting the camera settings correct so you've got decent images to show for it.

My EOS 5D Mark III took the abuse well. The moisture and grit was the biggest challenge.



Sense of scale

Some of the images involved positioning climbers at the top of 400ft tall stalagmites. We directed them via walkie-talkie. The best images were at the beginning of each shoot, before the climbers got tired and began to move slightly during the exposure. At other times they found it difficult to stand perfectly still on the uneven rocks. The climbers were carefully positioned, adding punches of light, colour and – importantly – a sense of scale. Of course, the safety of the climbers was our prime concern at all times.

Above A river crossing in Hang Son Doong. *EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II lens at 23mm, 2.5 seconds at f5.6, ISO 320.*

Above right Climbing through lush vegetation inside the cave. *EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II lens at 16mm, 1/13 second at f5.6, ISO 640.*



I had lens wipes on me at all times to combat lens fogging. I wiped the lenses after every few shots, handling the lens carefully as my gloves were covered in tiny particles of sediment from bouldering to each location.

My biggest fear was travelling all that way and not getting any good photos! Sometimes we had only 15-20 minutes at each location, and most were a ‘one time only’ photo opportunity as there was so much trekking required to reach them. There was no going back for another shot.

Camera settings

I only shoot RAW – JPEG is too limiting in post-production – and always in manual mode. The shutter speeds varied – too long and I risked any climbers in the shot moving slightly, making them blurred. I mostly used settings from 0.8 second to 5 seconds.

I used ISO settings of 100 to 400, only once using ISO 800 for some internal cave shots which had zero natural light. I tried to keep the ISO as low as possible, while enabling enough exposure to capture the textures of the cave. I bracketed some shots in order to compensate for the blown-out cave openings. I also used a couple Hoya filters (a polariser and ND filter) to assist with these challenges, as well as the glistening moisture reflecting off the vegetation.

I tried to absorb all the textures that I couldn’t photograph while capitalising on the locations that I could photograph.

When did you go about planning each shot in terms of composition and framing?

Because the cave is so recently discovered and there isn’t much time to recce every potential



location, most of the shots were pre-planned. At dinner we would work with the cavers to find new angles and exciting ways to shoot the interior.

Upon arriving in Vietnam I had many meetings to prepare for the expedition with the cave experts leading us. They advised that the EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM was the perfect focal length and I wouldn’t need anything longer, so I didn’t take my 70-200mm on the expedition to the cave. Weight was the major factor. I didn’t miss the long zoom lens. It would have reduced the grandiose feel and scale of the images. The 16-35mm lens had the range necessary for all the shots I wanted – wide enough for the grandiose shots and, at the 35mm end, I could zoom in for tighter shots while still showcasing the background and awesome scale of the surroundings.

How did you light the images?

We only had two 30,000 lumen lights. It would have been nice to have had more lights as we only had a couple of hours to use them throughout the day until we were able to charge them at night at the campsite. However, lighting the cave too much made it look unnatural. We didn’t tend to illuminate the climbers – they were usually backlit, and I think these shots worked better than with more prominent lighting.

A lightweight tripod was essential. It was possible to shoot hand-held using higher ISO

Above At the top of Garden of Edam in Hang Son Doong. *EOS 5D Mark III, EF 16-35mm f2.8L II lens at 16mm, 1/8 second at f5.6, ISO 640.*

More of Gregg’s images at www.greggjaden.com

settings at a few locations, but I used a tripod for most shots featuring climbers, setting a low ISO value for optimum image quality.

Image storage and back-up must have been a particular consideration given the environment and potential charging issues?

I took 4 x 1TB G-Technology drives with Thunderbolt connectivity. I chose them because they are equipped with a sealed rugged case, and lightning cable for durability and fast downloading. I downloaded the images each night and made copies in my tent.

My cave kit bag

- EOS 5D Mark III
- EF 16-35mm f2.8L II USM lens
- Hoya filters (polarizer and variable ND)
- Lens wipes
- Lens cloth
- 10-day battery charger
- 5 x Canon batteries
- Plug-in charger
- Carbon fibre tripod
- 10 x CompactFlash cards
- 4 x 1TB G-Technology drives

Time for reflection

Photographing landscapes makes me feel a sense of peace. There are so many textures, smells and colours that overload the senses. It is a way to be able to feel Mother Earth and the magnificent energy that radiates from her.

When we returned from our five-day trip we sat quietly reflecting while enjoying a magnificent Vietnamese feast. It was hard to put into words what we all felt being engulfed inside a massive mountain and seeing earth’s amazing wonders first-hand. Many of us were emotional on leaving the cave.