

A person is rappelling down a dark rock face on the left side of the image. The person is silhouetted against a bright, overcast sky. In the background, a range of jagged, mountainous peaks is visible under a hazy sky. The overall scene is dramatic and adventurous.

EXPEDITION REPORT
CHINA, 2019

Summary

The trip was deemed a success with everyone returning without injury (scratches, blisters and insect bites aside), having sampled a small portion of China's rock and culture. Less climbing was done than expected due to a combination of recent imposition of bans in certain areas, challenging approaches, the heat and for some, the exposure and fear of falling when outdoor climbing. However, the majority of these hurdles were overcome, and much was learnt in regard to logistics and climbing, in addition to a newfound appreciation for climbing accessibility in Europe and the US.

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Imperial College Exploration Board

Old Centralians' Trust

The Royal School of Mines Association

The Lord Mayors' 800th Anniversary Award Fund

Imperial College Mountaineering Club

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Expedition Overview:

The base for climbing activity was Getu-he, a small village south of Guiyang, Guizhou Province (appendix 1). Our team of five departed on 2nd August 2019, travelling for four days via air, high speed rail, and local bus services to reach the valley. Upon arrival, we spent six days sport climbing crags including White Crag, Oliver's Crag, Rastaman Crag, Divers Crag, Left of Red and the CMDI Wall. This included multi-pitch routes >80m in height on Left of Red and the CMDI Wall (appendix 2).



Unfortunately, due to the recent imposition of a ban on climbing in the Great Arch area (appendix 3), it was decided to travel to Yangshuo, Guangxi Province. Yangshuo is more fully developed as a climbing area, promising more varied climbing. This proved a fantastic opportunity to develop our climbing abilities in more specialist sport climbing disciplines such as cave climbing, which are not widely possible in the UK or Europe. In Yangshuo we spent a further three days climbing on crags including Treasure Cave, Brothers Cave and Baby Frog (appendix 4). We wild-camped in Brothers Cave on the final night, making it possible to maximise the amount of time available to climb as the expedition drew to a close.



Amended Itinerary

Day 1-4: Travel to Getu Valley from London.

Day 5-11: Explored Getu, climbed at White Crag, Oliver's Crag, Rastaman Crag, Divers crag, Left of Red and the CMDI wall. Had a couple of unplanned rest days due to a rainstorm and exploring the national park.

Day 11-12: Travelled to Yangshuo

Day 13-15: Climbed at Treasure Cave, Brothers Cave (camped) and Baby Frog.

Day 16-18: Travelled back to London from Yangshuo

An Overview of the Location

We ended up climbing in 2 different locations: Getu Valley and Yangshuo. Our first climbing location was the Getu Valley, located in the Guizhou region of China. Getu is a small, one road village an hour and a half outside of the Ziyun. It first gained acclaim as a climbing location in 2011 when Petzl bolted routes in the Valley and used it as a location for one of its Rock Trips. The Getu Valley boasts huge limestone cliffs and caves, and hundreds of bolted sport routes, ranging



from single-pitch to 8+ pitches. A large climbing arena has opened up in the valley where national climbing teams compete. Despite it's growing popularity in the international climbing community, there were relatively few visiting climbers, and the locals often seemed surprised to see us. Since Getu was so small, all of the crags were walking distance from the village.

Our second climbing location was Yangshuo, located in the Guangxi region of China. Yangshuo is a city of 300,000 people and is located near the larger city Guilin. Unlike Getu, Yangshuo is a bigger city with many options for food and drink. There are over 25 crags near Yangshuo and over 1000 bolted routes of all levels. Since the crags were fairly spread out, a motorbike was needed to get to the crags every day.

The Team



Melanie Flury

Expedition Leader

Age: 25

Climbing experience:

- Imperial Climbing and Mountaineering Society Member
- Outdoor Sport climbing grade 6a/b lead in Switzerland (Locarno, Solothurn), France
- (Ailefroide), UK (Portland, Peaks, Snowdonia, Wye Valley)
- Kings College London Mountaineering and Climbing Society Member
- Indoor lead climbing and bouldering 2 times a week

Other experience:

- Multiday hikes: 5-day hike in Norway and 3-day hike in the Pyrenees, guided day of glacier ascent with KCLMC in Ailefroide, France
- Skiing since childhood
- 2015 Paris Marathon finisher



Geraint Northwood-Smith

Technical Lead Climber/spider-monkey-mountain-goat

Age: 26

Prior Climbing experience:

- 2 years weekly artificial wall sport climbing at school
- Approx. 2 months outdoor sport climbing in China and Vietnam, grade 6a – 7a
- Intermittent indoor and outdoor sport climbing and bouldering over the past 7 years
- Weekly indoor sport climbing and bouldering over the past 4 months, and outdoor trips with Imperial College Mountaineering Club, grades up to 6c

Other experience:

- 6 weeks cycle touring in Japan
- 2 weeks alpine touring in the Lyngen Alps, Norway
- Overland journey from Shanghai to London by train, bus, car and boat
- 6 weeks geological mapping in Piauí, Brazil
- 5 months off-piste skiing in Nagano, Japan
- 2 weeks scuba diving in the Red Sea (PADI advanced open water course)

Further adventure and leadership training qualifications:

- 2-day departmental outdoor first aid course by Marlin
- Army Ski Foundation 1 course

- Royal Military Academy Sandhurst Module 1
- Army Main Board pass and Army Bursary
- Once called a 'spider-monkey-mountain-goat'



Tristan Dell

Treasurer/Lead Mountain Goat

Age: 23

Prior Climbing Experience:

- Regular indoor sport climbing and bouldering
- Outdoor experience: Clécy, France (multi-pitch sport); the Peaks (following trad/bouldering); the Gower (sport).

Other Experience:

- Prior experience mountaineering on one multi-day hike up to >4000m in the Indian Himalayas and multiple shorter 1 day/ 2 day hikes in the Alps.
- Competent skier



Bailey Lathrop

Logistics/Backcountry Expert

Age: 26

Prior Climbing experience:

- Imperial Climbing and Mountaineering Society Member
- Indoor lead climbing 3 times per week
- Outdoor Sport climbing grade 6a/b lead in United States (Horseshoe Canyon, Shelf Road), Argentina (Mar del Plata), UK (Portland, Dorset, Snowdonia),
- Outdoor trad (following) in Argentina (Bariloche) and UK (Snowdonia)

Other activities:

- Thru-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail (4260 km, 137 days)
- Overland 2-month journey across Patagonia region
- Various week-long backpacking trips in remote Chile/Argentina,
- Extensive backcountry fieldwork experience across US, Argentina, and Spain (over 9 months cumulative; geology and archaeology)
- 5 years working experience with the United States National Park Service (Archaeological Technician)



Maxine Dillon
Medical Officer

Age: 23

Prior Climbing experience:

- 1 year indoor bouldering & sport climbing
- Outdoor experience: Peak district (bouldering/following trad); Clécy, France (multipitch sport)

Other activities:

- Mountaineering: Guided multi-day hike >4000 m in Indian Himalayas; shorter day hikes in Alps, Snowdonia, Peak District.



**Mel and Bailey in high spirits after climbing multi-pitch on Blue Spirit (5a-6a),
CMDI Wall**

Learning Outcomes

Logistics in China

Rushed timings: Despite the almost total lack of information in English, a combination of translation apps and travel advice blogs enables fairly easy travelling on China's major transport links. We made all of our planned transport links, getting us to the climbing area after about a day of travel from one of the closest major airports (Chengdu) however at points this was a fairly close thing because of a couple of factors not taken into account in planning. These were:

- Faff at railway stations: despite generally being huge, airport-like buildings, China's major railway stations are commensurately busy, and an hour can easily be spent queuing to pick up tickets, going through the airport-style ID and security check and queuing again at the departure gate. In addition, Chinese cities are all very large and one may not be prepared for the time it will take to get to the station, which may be well outside the city centre. Even walking along the huge platforms to the correct train carriage takes a while. Therefore, it's important to put aside more time than the one and a half minutes it takes to buy a ticket, run through the barriers and leap through the closing doors at a tiny British train station!



- Lack of central organisation at minor transport hubs: the rules for provincial bus stations are somewhat different to those in the major transport hubs. While most buses will run in the same way, the bus we wanted to get from Ziyun to Getu was one of a few minibuses which were seemingly unaffiliated with the bus station, and so asking at the ticket desk only led to confusion. The key was to find a young, student-aged local, who therefore spoke some English, to help us out, and we then quickly found a minibus driver. Once we knew what the minibuses looked like, and where to find them, it was easy to get back and forth from Ziyun.

SIM cards and cash: Our thus fairly rushed transport schedule had a knock on consequence that we had little time to complete other tasks before we left the major cities. The two most important of these were to acquire Chinese SIM cards and to draw out enough cash. Without SIM cards, we could not access the public WiFi, which always asks for a Chinese number to text an access code to, and so we were reliant on those who had fortunately downloaded maps of the area and the language for translation apps in advance to get around. As for cash, this was easy to draw out in cities where ATMs that accepted Visa, Amex etc. were often close by, but once in Getu we found ourselves low on cash and perilously close to not being able to afford the minibus ride back to Ziyun, where a single suitable ATM existed. The solution to this would have been to draw out all the cash we'd need in advance, since China is very safe and pickpocketing is a low risk.



Cash and ATMs: That said, we had drawn out enough cash to last us a few days, or so we thought, but we ran out much sooner because of the number of taxis we had to take to get between train and bus stations on our rushed schedule. A pool of money for cross-city taxi journeys, which are usually approximately ¥30 per car and take a maximum of four people, would be a good idea for future journeys.

Train bookings: A final thing that would have greatly aided our transport plans would have been to book our trains weeks in advance. Although we did book several days ahead, Chinese trains can sell out very quickly and so we were relegated to trains that were either non-direct, at awkward times or, as in the case of our last, seven-hour journey back to Chengdu, standing tickets, which was sub-optimal.

Climbing

The fear: A recurring challenge to our efforts to push ourselves while climbing, for a few members of the expedition, was the fear of falling. This was partially a natural part of the transition from mostly indoor climbing, where climbs are shorter and straighter, bolts are generally regularly-spaced and closer together and the fear of the unknown (the quality of the bolting, the age of the bolt, the strength of the rock etc.) is reduced, and partially a result of climbing on uneven surfaces, with frequent tufa prominences, which make a clean fall somewhat less probable. As normal as this is in climbing, it is something which must be overcome as it significantly hinders climbing ability and often leads to unfinished routes which must be then cleaned by someone else, reducing the overall time available for climbing at the top of everyone's ability.

This fear was overcome to varying degrees by fall training – a method whereby the climber deliberately takes safe falls at increasing fall distance to become comfortable with the notion of falling and trusting of the rope and their belayer. However, this was only after losing significant time to hesitant climbing and in future expeditions, fall training should definitely be part of the pre-expedition training.



CMDI wall, Getu Valley

The approach: Secondary losses to climbing time were due to time getting to the crag and setting up there. This became most apparent in the middle of the expedition when the team split into two to complete multipitch climbs, both of which had difficult approaches. Tristan and Geraint climbed at Left of Red – fortunately an approach had been discovered there the previous day but this took the whole team half a day. Melanie, Maxine and Bailey climbed at the CMDI Wall, the approach to which, that Geraint had previously used in 2016, had become completely overgrown resulting in the approach taking three hours of cutting through vegetation using sticks. While this is an unavoidable part of climbing in infrequently visited areas where the vegetation is thick, perhaps the use of machetes and/or drones could be considered for future expeditions, to cut through the vegetation and/or find existing paths, respectively. If one is lucky with crag placement, they could also bring binoculars or a good camera up a route that overlooks an approach to search for a path.

Personal admin: With regards to preparing to climb at the crag, Tristan and Geraint noticed that two climbers who joined them at Left of Red were much faster than them in getting set up and on the wall. These were experienced climbers who climbed mostly multipitch near their home in Spain, and so it was surmised that their self-administrative skill was a result of experience with a style of climbing that required it. However, perhaps rapid set up could be encouraged with maximising preparation the previous night and timing the tasks that take up the most time to see what could be improved. For example, we realised that ordering breakfast took up a lot of our time in the mornings, and it was better to eat a breakfast of snacks at the crag.



**Geraint at the top of Clean Heal (5c+-6b),
Left of Red, Getu**



Tristan on Babylon (5c), Rastaman Crag with Pussa Yan in the background



View from White Crag



Maxine on Babylon (5c), Rastaman Crag



Bailey on Babylon (5c), Rastaman Crag



Campsite in Brothers Cave

Camping: One thing that saved time on the trip was camping at the crag. This was only done on one of the last nights due to being in a particularly suitable cave, but was an entirely positive experience and perhaps more opportunities to do so could be sought out in future.

Heat: Another limiting factor at the crag was heat – during the hottest days climbing was very taxing if the crag was in the sun, and more so if there was not a shaded belay spot to recover in between climbs. In future, more time could be spent planning to visit crags at times they would be shaded, and perhaps adopting a siesta approach to scheduling by getting up early and napping in the shade over noon time (as long as protection from mosquitoes could be afforded). In particular, climbing earlier and investigating approaches in advance for the multi-pitches would have saved long periods in the sun without respite.

Route navigation: One final note relates to a route climbed on the second-to-last day of climbing, which crossed a cave roof through an inverted forest of large stalactites. There was an erroneous placement to the second-to-last bolt before the anchor on this pitch, which was both difficult to clip and dramatically increased the rope drag, making it difficult for Melanie to lower Geraint off at the end of the climb. After multiple failed attempts to remove the clip by Geraint, Melanie seconded the route and had to leave the draw behind as it was in such an awkward position. In future, much more attention will be paid to bolt placement rather than clipping every unnecessary bolt along the route.



Geraint climbs Mini Pee (6a+), Brothers Cave

Interaction with Authorities

Bans on climbing: While interactions with locals were both essential and positive highlights of the expedition, despite the usually large language barrier, interaction with local authorities was not. Climbing is still a niche sport in China, and not seen as important for tourism or China's future and, both in Yangshuo and Getu, there is conflict between those responsible for developing these beautiful areas for tourism. In both places, the most famous climbing areas (both, perhaps not coincidentally, being large rock arches) were officially closed to climbing – most significantly this meant no climbing in the Great Arch at Getu. This may have had an actual positive or at least net neutral effect on the trip, as it resulted in our decision to go to Getu and experience a different and very vibrant part of the country and some more world-class routes. Nevertheless, the Great Arch was one of, if not the, central reason to choose Getu to climb in and out would have been good to know about this in advance.



The Great Arch, Getu



The Great Arch – No Climbing

Backup plans: Unfortunately, this is easier said than done – climbing in these areas has been banned in the past, but this was very much an unenforced rule, and it is not clear how we could have found out that the authorities had started to enforce this rule in advance. Nevertheless, the persistent encroachment of fenced and ticketed, 'no playing' zones in areas of natural beauty in China, which is still rapidly developing and changing year-on-year, is predictable and perhaps backup plans could have been made. Indeed, the group met a worker at the hostel in Chengdu who is an avid climber and highly recommended a lesser-known part of Lijiang for climbing, where he promised we could find free food and even coaching and some excellent big-wall climbing. With some research, perhaps we could have diverted there.



The Great Arch – Surveillance



The Great Arch – Do Not Play

Informing the community: One thing that can be done now is to advertise the change in situation at Getu to other climbers. The group are discussing plans to write a blog post or article to join the few out there on climbing in Getu, to update the community on the situation, and getting in contact with the existing campaign to stop development in the Great Arch and with Petzl, to see if anything can be done to open up the area for climbing again, perhaps even as an alternative to the very intrusive and destructive mode of tourism that is being developed in the Great Arch currently.



Financial Summary

Funding Received

Funding Body*	Total (£)
Imperial College London Exploration Board	3,000.00
Old Centralians' Trust	2,000.00
The Lord Mayor's 800th Anniversary Awards	400.00
Royal School of Mines Association Trust	300.00
TOTAL	5,700.00

*Details of funding body requirements below.

Pre-Travel Expenses

Item	Details	Unit Cost (£)	Units	Total (£)
Flights	KLM, London Heathrow (LHR) - Chengdu (CTU)	732.84	5	3,664.20
Visas	From UK, Switzerland and US; varying length	Various	5	741.00
Healthcare				
Travel Insurance & Membership	BMC Rock policy, Worldwide 1, 17 days	123.41	5	617.04
First Aid Training	Marlin, kindly provided by the Exploration Board	0.00	3	0.00
First Aid Kit	Lifesystems Mountain Leader Pro	71.99	1	71.99
Vaccinations	Based on individual requirements; approx.	150.00	5	750.00
Medication	Based on individual requirements; approx.	30.00	5	150.00
Other				
Climbing/camping gear	Our own, or kindly provided by ICMC	0.00	0	0.00
VPN	ExpressVPN, 30 days	10.69	1	10.69
	TOTAL			6,004.92

Daily Expenses

Item	Details	Approximate Unit Cost (£)	Units (per person)	People	Total (£)
Trains**	per unit	50.00	3	5	750.00
Taxi and buses	per day	5.00	7	5	175.00
Accommodation**	per night	10.00	14	5	700.00
Food	per day	10.00	16	5	800.00
	TOTAL				2,425.00

**Due to a lack of available online information pre-travel, trains and hostels were booked whilst in China.

Other considerations

Satellite phone and chip	Deemed to be unnecessary, not taken
Climbing Topo	Gebu: 0 GBP (online); Yangshuo 30 GBP (print)

*Funding Body Conditions:

Imperial College London Exploration Board: Submit detailed proposal incl. information on budget, itinerary, training schedule, risk assessment. Participants must make a personal contribution of at least £500 each to the expedition.

Old Centralians' Trust: Submit a report giving news of how well the trip has gone, accompanied by photographs to illustrate the conditions, views, and anything else of interest.

The Lord Mayor's 800th Anniversary Awards Trust: Must be aged 17-24, awards between £100 and £1000 awarded to an individual rather than a group. Must be able to demonstrate that applicants can fund a large project through their own efforts. Participants must submit a short, 750-word report.

Royal School of Mines Association (RSMA) Trust: Full approval by the Exploration Board required. Produce short, 750-word report including 3 photographs. This may be published in the Imperial Engineer.

Concluding Remarks:

From the outset, our objective was to individually develop skillsets required to plan and execute more ambitious exploratory exhibitions. We split this into a list of actionable technical objectives, relating to improving climbing ability, as well as personal objectives focussed on the more logistical aspects of executing an exhibition in an unfamiliar country, with the language barrier being a particular obstacle.

The most significant of the technical objectives was to learn multi-pitch climbing – that is sequentially climbing multiple sections of a crag in a continuous effort to reach the top, securing oneself and one’s partner at anchor points in order to pull-up the rope and climb higher than the limitation typically imposed by the length of a rope. This involves increased levels of exposure due to the height, and requires good rope admin, communication and stamina. All members of the expedition team climbed a multi-pitch route, with preparation including fall training, a method whereby the climber deliberately takes safe falls at increasing fall distance to become comfortable with the notion of falling and trusting of the rope and their belayer. This was critical to managing the fear which naturally comes with increased levels of exposure on higher routes.

Other technical objectives included climbing on a wide variety of rock types, which was definitely the case, with varied limestone routes in different settings featuring slabs, tufas, overhangs and cracks.

Climbing in caves was critical to further broadening the range of climbing styles engaged in, as routes are typically more overhanging, and rock can often be less featured.

Overall, the team returned to the UK without any injuries, having all notably developed our climbing abilities and experience. Experience is a crucial factor in outdoor pursuits, as unexpected situations can often arise in remote locations due to unpredictable factors such as the weather. As such, this in itself was a valuable basis on which to measure development and success, laying the foundations for team members to lead future expeditions with more ambitious objectives and in equally culturally unfamiliar settings.

