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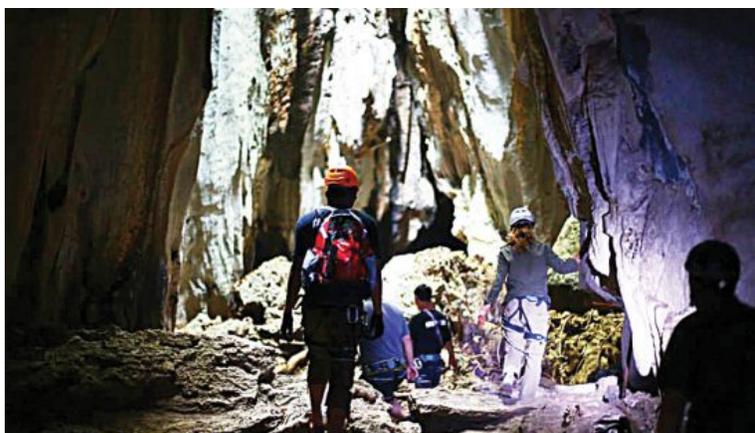
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Cavers explore Phnom Kbal Romeas near Kampot Town. COURTESY OF CLIMBODIA

## Between a rock and a calm place: Climbing takes off in rural Kampot

Sat, 6 September 2014 Chelsea Chapman

*Rock climbing and abseiling – until recently the exclusive domain of the Kingdom’s devil-may-care DIYers – is now available for the ordinary punter*

As I push off the rock wall and slowly start to abseil into the cave, ancient stalactites, growing at an average rate of 0.13mm a year, glisten in a single ray of sun.

This is Phnom Kbal Romeas, home to Cambodia’s first outdoor rock-climbing course, Climbodia. Belgian climber David Van Hulle discovered the site, a 15-minute drive from Kampot town, by chance.

“Last January, I got lost in the countryside and stumbled upon those caves by accident,” he says, speaking as we scramble down a via ferrata, across the top of the rock formation littered with narrow entrances to the caves and old fragments of US bombs.

“I just fell in love with the spot, and in that moment knew that I wanted to [create the course],” adds Van Hulle, who opened Climbodia in January and now runs daily rock climbing, abseiling and caving tours at the site.

Previously a quarry before the government declared it a national heritage site seven years ago, the formation boasts views from the top that extend from Bokor Mountain to Phu Quoc island.

“There are a lot of good rock formations in Cambodia, but these are the best,”

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A woman on a cliff face. COURTESY OF CLIMBODIA

Van Hulle says. "There are a lot of sites which are exposed to the sun or in the middle of nowhere or filled with mosquitoes ... or too hard – that is most common."

With a dozen climbing routes currently in place, the highest at 30 metres, and another 23 already planned, the course provides plenty of challenges. Van Hulle, who has been climbing for 17 years, says that the site still provides him with thrills.

"There are a couple of routes where you climb inside the cave, all the way to the top, and then you climb out of the cave so you are standing on top of the mountain and looking down at this huge hole – I have never climbed anything like that before," he says.

But most routes are suitable for beginners, who make up the vast majority of customers, according to Van Hulle.

"I have had a 66-year-old person on tour, and the youngest was 5 years old," he says.

Two climbing courses are geared to different levels of experience. The first teaches how to use a top rope, which allows the climber to focus on learning different techniques while having the safety of an attached rope to prevent them from falling.

For more advanced climbers, a lead-climbing course provides guidance for those wanting to gain experience in solo climbing, learning how to secure themselves at each safety point, to redo their anchor at the top and to then lower themselves.

Van Hulle, who imported the climbing gear from France and Germany, says the course complies with international standards.



Climbers on a via ferrata. COURTESY OF CLIMBODIA

"For me, it is very easy. It is to the same standard as back home in Belgium – when we do the bolting and the via ferratas, we follow strict rules," he says.

The organisation is sponsored by climbing specialists Petzl, whose equipment can frequently be seen in use at other Southeast Asian rock climbing meccas such as Vietnam's Halong Bay and Thailand's Railay Beach.

The site has already attracted a loyal following, according to its creator, who can claim to have created the basis of a "climbing community".

"People who like it, they come on a weekly basis. They follow the course and then keep coming and climb the routes that we build," he says.

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Contact author: Chelsea Chapman



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