

# OUT OF THE CAVE

The incredible true story of how 12 young boys became trapped in a flooded cave in Thailand—and the international effort to save them **BY REBECCA ZISSOU**

The boys entered this cave, expecting to stay for only an hour. But floodwaters blocked their way out.

HONGKONG/GETTY IMAGES; (COVER) ROYAL THAI NAVY FACEBOOK PAGE/AR PHOTO BOYS IN CAVE

**A**T ANY MOMENT, the mission could have gone tragically wrong. Already, the young Thai soccer team and their coach had spent more than two weeks trapped in a flooded cave deep underground. They had survived by huddling together on a small ledge just above the water's surface and drinking the condensation that formed on the cave's walls.

With oxygen levels underground dropping dangerously low and the chance of more flooding, rescuers had to get the group out—fast.

But saving the team from Thailand's Tham Luang cave seemed a nearly impossible feat. For starters, none of the boys were confident swimmers. Expert divers would need to guide them individually through flooded passageways, some of which were less than 3 feet wide and 3 feet tall. Each trip would take about five hours and challenge even the most-experienced divers.

As news of the desperate situation made headlines, thousands of determined volunteers from across

the globe—including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia—rushed to the Southeast Asian nation to help in any way they could. Meanwhile, millions of people around the world sat glued to their TVs, watching around-the-clock coverage of the cave as the drama played out over 18 days.

"The whole world was watching, so we had to succeed," said Kaew, a Thai Navy SEAL who took part in the rescue. "I don't think we had any other choice."

## Disaster Strikes

The ordeal began on dry land on June 23. That's when a dozen members of the Wild Boars soccer team—ranging in age from 11 to 17—and their 25-year-old assistant coach biked to the cave after practice. It was near the start of Thailand's rainy season—a time when sudden storms can dump more than a foot of water. A sign posted outside the cave warned people not to enter. The team ventured in anyway, leaving their bikes, bags, and soccer cleats near the entrance.

They had planned to stay inside for no more than an hour to do some exploring. It was supposed to be an innocent adventure to mark one of the player's birthdays. But Mother Nature had other ideas.

**"If you put your hand in front of you, it just disappeared. You couldn't see anything."**

The team had been inside the cave for only a few minutes when the skies opened up and heavy rains began to fall. In the blink of an eye, the cave transformed into a maze of flooded passageways that were impossible to navigate in the dark. The boys were now trapped.

Despite their growing fear, the team tried to stay calm. "I felt scared," 13-year-old Mongkol Boonpiam later recalled. "I was afraid I wouldn't get to go home and my mom would scold me."

As water rushed in, the group had no choice but to scramble farther into the darkness. They eventually took shelter on a rocky ledge deep inside the cave. From there, they watched the murky water rise around them—and waited.

It would be nine days before help arrived.

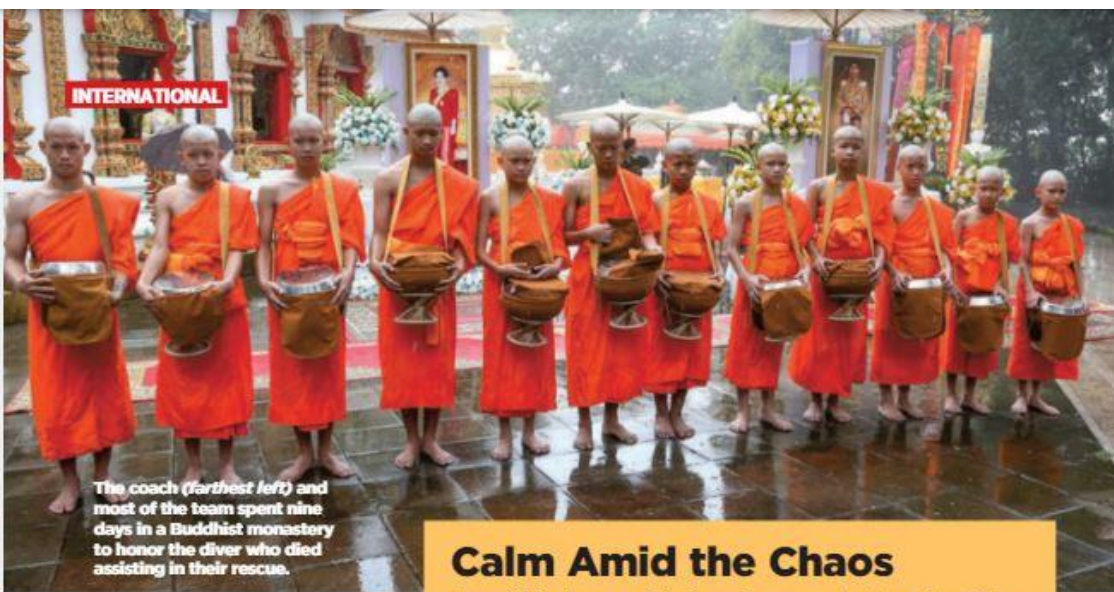
## Lost in the Darkness

When the boys didn't return home from practice that first night, their parents were terrified. Officials soon found the team's belongings near the cave's entrance and realized the young athletes must be stuck inside.

Divers from the Thai Navy →

Rescuers gave the boys food, water, and blankets while they waited to be brought out of the cave.





The coach (farthest left) and most of the team spent nine days in a Buddhist monastery to honor the diver who died assisting in their rescue.

SEALs and other rescue groups were quickly called in to begin searching the 6-mile-long cave system, the fourth largest in Thailand. At the same time, experts set up dozens of machines to pump water out of the cave. But as fast as the water was forced out, heavy rain caused more to pour in.

Plus, parts of the cave were so dark that the rescuers could barely see underwater.

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Meanwhile, an estimated 1,500 journalists had set up camp nearby. On July 2, the world breathed a sigh of relief when it was reported that two British divers had found the boys, weak from hunger and with minor injuries—but, amazingly, alive.

**"We had to succeed. I don't think we had any other choice."**

## Calm Amid the Chaos

How did the boys and their coach manage to stay calm while trapped underground for more than two weeks? Experts say meditation may have helped. The ancient practice involves quieting the mind by focusing on the present moment. It has been shown to reduce stress, improve mood, and even decrease physical pain. The boys' coach, an expert in meditation, reportedly guided them through the technique.

Meditation is an important part of Buddhism, Thailand's main religion. It has caught on worldwide too. In the U.S., 18 million people—about 8 percent of American adults—say they meditate regularly (including Katy Perry and LeBron James!).

To give it a try, sit quietly and focus on your breath as you inhale and exhale for five minutes. If your mind wanders, just bring your attention back to the process of breathing. For more tips, download a free meditation app like Headspace or Calm.

"We weren't sure if it was for real," said 14-year-old Adul Sam-On about seeing the rescuers for the first time. "I was shocked."

### Looking for a Solution

Now that the boys had been found, how would the rescuers get them out safely? One option: Wait for the floodwaters to go down. But that might take months—and more heavy rain was expected. What about drilling a hole in the top of the cave and pulling the players out from above? The cave's walls

might collapse, experts warned.

While officials raced to figure out a plan, Thai Navy SEALs brought food, water, and oxygen tanks to the team. A doctor and several divers stayed with them in the cave to monitor their health. Their coach, Ekkapol Chantawong, who had previously spent 10 years as a monk, led the players through meditation exercises to keep them relaxed and to conserve their energy (see sidebar, above). The boys passed the time by playing checkers with the rescuers and

writing letters to their families, which the SEALs delivered.

"Dad, Mom, don't worry about me," wrote 11-year-old Chanin Viboonrungruang. "I am fine. Please tell [my aunt] to take me to eat fried chicken. Love you all."

### Time to Act

Experts were still trying to decide on a plan when the operation to save the team took a tragic turn. On July 6, a veteran diver died after running out of oxygen in the cave while attempting to deliver supplies. With that, the rescuers knew it was time to act.

On July 8, all eyes were on Thailand as the harrowing operation began. One at a time, each boy—fitted with an oxygen mask and diving gear—was led more than 2 miles across jagged peaks, through underwater caverns, and over steep inclines until they reached the cave's opening.

Two days later, on July 10, people on the scene erupted in applause—and relief—as the last member of the team safely emerged. Throughout Thailand, crowds of people danced and cheered in the streets. The rescuers hugged and high-fived.

"We did something nobody thought possible," said mission commander Narongsak Osottanakorn. "We are all delighted."

### "I Still Can't Believe It Worked"

In the days after the rescue, the team was quarantined in a local hospital to reduce the risk of spreading any possible infections. Afterward, most of the boys and their coach spent nine days in a Buddhist monastery—a common

## Exploring Thailand

The Southeast Asian nation is home to more than 66 million people.



### Map Skills

1. What is the capital of Thailand?
2. What is the approximate latitude and longitude of that city?
3. In which direction would you travel to get from Hanoi to Chiang Mai?
4. Thailand has coastline along which bodies of water?
5. About how many straight-line miles separate the cities of Yangon and Vientiane?

practice among young Thai men—where they paid tribute to the volunteer diver who had died assisting in the mission.

Since then, the players have returned home to their families, happy to be safe and adjusting to their newfound celebrity. At least six movies about the team's ordeal are currently in the works.

But for now, people around the world are just relieved that, against all odds, the mission to

save the team was a success.

"So many things could have gone wrong, but somehow we managed to get the boys out," said Chalongsai Chaiyakham, a major general in the Thai army. "I still can't believe it worked." ♦

With reporting by The New York Times

**WRITE ABOUT IT!**  
Write a short story from the perspective of one of the players saved from the cave, a rescuer, or a concerned spectator.