

# PHILIPPINE KARST ADVENTURES

## Part 2 - THE MONTFORT BAT CAVE

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In April I was back in Manila for a second round of crowns and on this occasion, during the necessary dental interregnum, I decided to fly south to Davao on the island of Mindanao, thence to the adjacent smallish island of Samal to stay at the Pearl Farm Resort (and very pleasant it was too). However, I had a dual purpose in travelling to this location, as Samal is also home to the famed Montfort Bat Sanctuary – which I visited with considerable alacrity!



*My guide, Marly, in the superb Montfort Bat Sanctuary Interpretation Centre*

The Montfort Bat Sanctuary has been the home of a large colony of 1.8 million Rousette fruit bats (*Rousetteus amplexicaudatus*) since recorded history. They cover 75% of the ceilings and walls of their 75 metre long cave. According to Guinness World Records, it is the largest single colony of its kind.

Many species of bat in Asia are endangered simply because their greatest predator is man, who kills them for food, as I noted with the bat population of Boracay. Happily, the Samal bats are fully protected. The Inigo-Montfort family has maintained the area since the 1900s. Norma Montfort is the current owner of the 57 acres of land surrounding the cave. She enclosed the property to discourage any possible bat hunters. Additionally, she hired 24 hour guards to protect the bats. In 2011 she was named Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund Hero. The cave is, not surprisingly, heavily aligned with Bat Conservation International.

The site is open to the public daily. I undertook a tour with the lowest possible expectations, given my past experiences of Asian cave and karst management. I have never been more pleasantly surprised in my life! The cave has five entrances – a widish normal type cave entrance, plus four collapsed doline entrances. It reminded me to some extent of a ‘mini’ Blanche Cave at Naracoorte.

The tour guide, Marly, was superb. She spoke excellent English, was highly trained, very knowledgeable as a result, and clearly had a huge passion for bats! The first point to make is that there is no public entry to the cave. As Marly quickly



*The main cave entrance*



*Bats clinging to the walls below a doline*

pointed out, unless you are an accredited bat scientist with at least a PhD, you do not get in! She had been guiding for over two years and had never set foot in the cave, nor did she have any desire to do so! Her interpretation was not just superb, it was compelling. She succinctly made the case for bat conservation, an extremely important message generally, but even more so in the context of the Philippines.



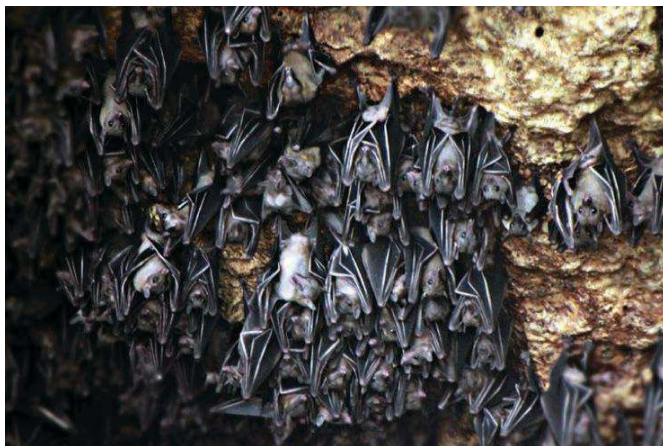
*Examples of interpretation panels*



*The bamboo infrastructure surrounding each doline – quite effective*

As may be appreciated, while not an expert; I do know a bat when I see one...but I learnt much. The Samal bats are very highly organised in their cave. The young bats reside collectively not far inside the main entrance. The next section of the cave, below the first doline, is inhabited by females. The next by males. Elderly bats, both male and female, live at the back of the cave below the last doline. I had never before been aware of this social structure amongst bats.

crows, rats, pythons, and lizards. I am advised the floor of the cave is 'crawling' with 10 foot long pythons. The predation of crows is interesting. Sick bats fly out in daylight, and are attacked by the many crows perched in surrounding trees; which I actually observed to occur.



*Rousetteus amplexicaudatus*

I plied Marly with many questions, some rhetorical to test her knowledge, and she did not falter. A very impressive professional and something I did not expect to encounter.

And the cave management? Tremendous! All dolines are fenced with bamboo, the usual material for such in the Philippines – it is quite effective. The barricading was at a suitable distance to ensure no intrusion on the cave, yet close enough to allow excellent viewing. The tour progressed from doline to doline, having started at the main cave entrance. I attended late morning, but one can also book a tour at sunset to view the daily circadian flight. I didn't get to see this, but 1.8 million bats streaming out of the cave would undoubtedly be impressive.

During the course of the tour I questioned Marly about predators. Other than humans (sigh...), the main predators are



*A view across a doline*