

PHILIPPINE KARST ADVENTURES: PART 3 - PALAWAN

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In early January 2017, I found myself back in the Philippines yet again, this time destined for the wonderful karst world of Palawan (pronounced Pal-LAU-won). This long cigar-shaped island is located west of Manila, pointing towards Borneo,

being approximately 450 km long and 50 km wide. The northern half of the island is mostly tropical tower karst, featuring some very spectacular mountains.



Arriving by outrigger motor boat



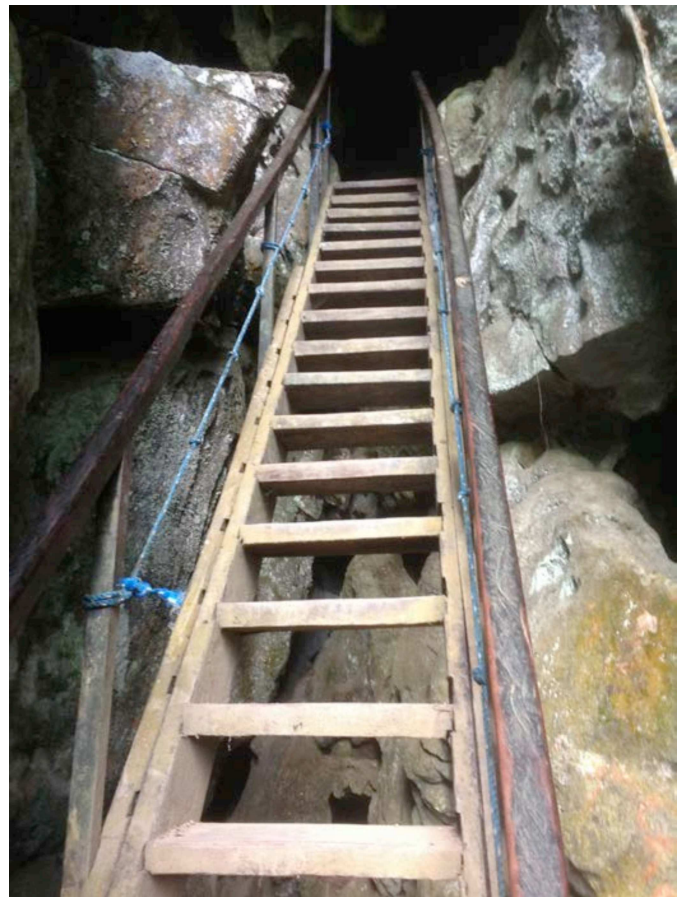
In the boat ready for the Underground River tour

The greatest attraction of Palawan is its world-famous Underground River Cave; which is a RAMSAR site and is concurrently World Heritage-listed. It has been on my karst bucket list for a very long time! It is located within the quite large Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, some 50 km north of Puerto Princesa, the principal city on Palawan Island.

It is bordered by St. Paul Bay to the north and the Babuyan River to the east. The City Government of Puerto Princesa has managed the National Park since 1992. The entrance to the subterranean river is a hike or boat ride from the coastal town of Sabang.



A view out of the Underground River Cave



Infrastructure and rigging – Ugong Rock Adventures

St. Pauls Underground River Cave is more than 24 km long and contains an 8.2 km long underground section of the Cabayugan River. The river winds through the cave before flowing directly into the West Philippine Sea and is navigable by boat up to 4.3 km in from the sea. The cave includes several large chambers, including the 360-meter-long Italian's Chamber of approx. 2.5 million m³ volume, making it one of the larger caverns in the world. Until the 2007 discovery of an underground river in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River was reputed to be the world's longest underground river.

The area also represents a habitat for biodiversity conservation. The site contains a full mountain-to-the-sea ecosystem and has some of the most important forests in Asia. It was inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site on 4 December 1999.

In 2010, a group of cavers discovered that the underground river has a second floor, and small waterfalls inside the cave. They also found a cave dome measuring 300m above the underground river, rock formations, large bats, a deep water hole in the river, more river channels, and another deep cave.



Signage at Ugong Rock Adventures



The toilet - Ugong Rock Adventures. Not good...



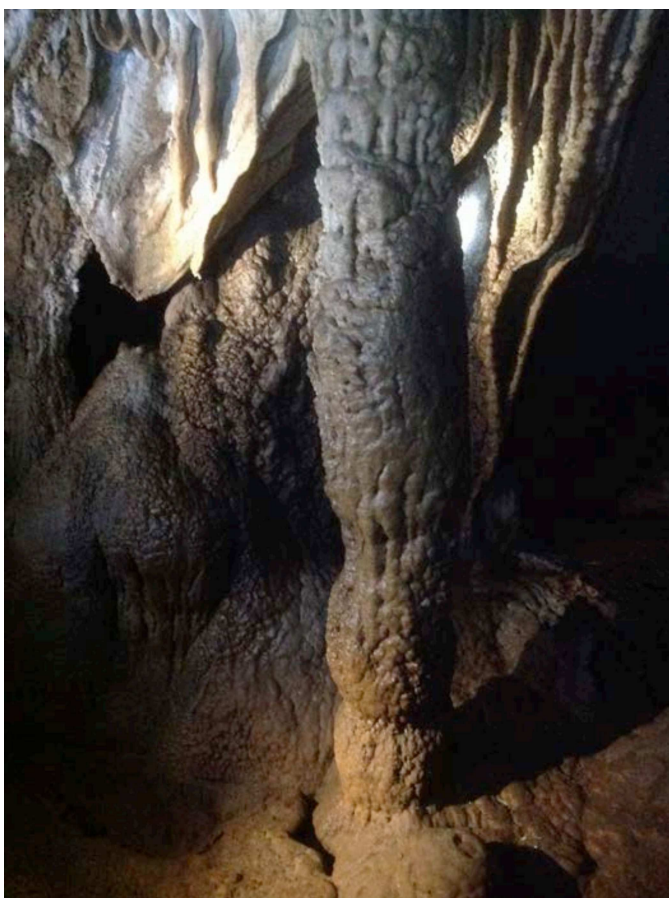
*At the top of the tower karst
– Ugong Rock Adventures*



Impressive signage – One Hundred Caves

The Puerto Princesa Underground River was provisionally chosen as one of the New 7 Wonders of Nature; officially confirmed on 28 January 2012. It is in excellent company, the other six are: Table Mountain – South Africa; Iguazu Falls – Argentina/Brazil; The Amazon – South America; Halong Bay – Vietnam; Jeju Island – South Korea; and Komodo – Indonesia. As will be quickly noted, caves and karst are prominent! Controversially, the Great Barrier Reef missed a gong...

So...having flown into Puerto Princesa from Manila, I hot-footed it to Sabang. The next day it was off to the Underground River Cave. I went without expectations (past Asian karst experiences suggesting that is a good idea...), but I hoped that management would be at least as good as the Monfort Bat Cave (see Part 2). I was not to be disappointed. Indeed, I found that, by and large, the Palawan people were very environmentally conscious. For example, the Island's laws make littering a serious offence;



Decoration – One Hundred Caves



“Bob Marley’s Hair”– One Hundred Caves

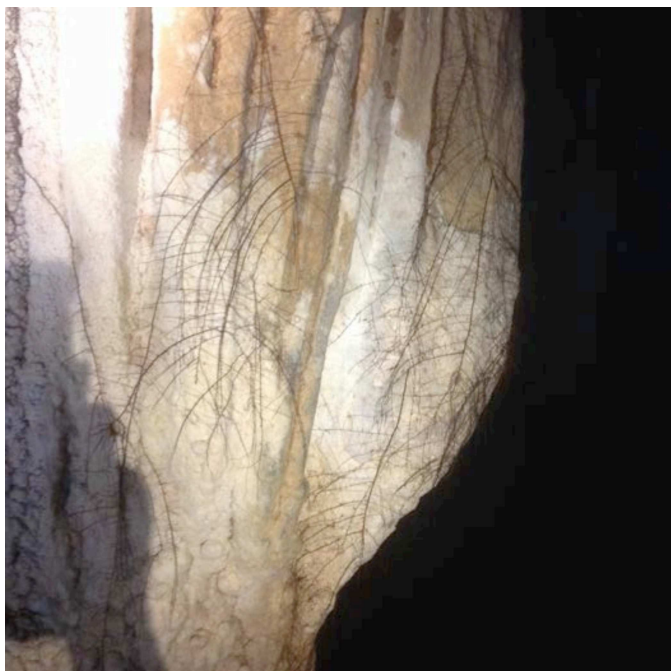
certainly Puerto Princesa was the cleanest place I have seen in the Philippines. The seaside hamlet of Sabang was the same. I boarded my small motorized outrigger boat at Sabang wharf.



Tree roots – One Hundred Caves

While one can take an hour's forest walk to the cave, most tourists take the boat option; both time-wise and probably because of the 'fun' of it. Each boat seats six people. There are about 100 boats that ply the 15 minute trip up the coast to the cave entrance area. Thus, they have the ability to move about 600 people per hour or so. I have not been able to ascertain visitation, but certainly the capacity of the tourist operation is several thousand per day. Given it is, arguably, the Philippines top tourist destination – that would suggest it receives a visitation well into six figures per annum.

Upon hopping onto one's motorized outrigger, one is given a life jacket with a number on the back, corresponding with the number of the boat emblazoned on its bow. Very organised; there is no way you can 'get lost', so to speak. Upon arrival at the beach near the cave, one alights through the waves, and walks a few short minutes to the side of river efflux, where (still



Tree roots on decoration – One Hundred Caves

wearing your life jacket...but now additionally supplied with a hard hat) one boards another small boat to do the cave tour. Each takes 6-8; and again there are a lot of them...

At the rear of each boat stands or sits your boatman, who guides the boat with a pole. He has a strong cap light, with which he highlights the cave's features during the tour. Every tourist is supplied with an audio set (hung around your neck), and ear plugs. It comes in many languages, and is set to yours and turned on by staff as you enter the boat. Thus it plays non-stop, in perfect harmony with the tour. When a feature is mentioned en route, your pole man immediately lights it up. It works very well indeed. You get to keep your ear plugs at the end, 'as a souvenir', perhaps more for OH&S reasons... I am sure there would be more than some who would not like recycled earplugs.

The tour audio was excellent. The intro on the geology and history of the cave was very good indeed. Not surprisingly, one was subjected to a modicum of 'fairy castle stuff'...more than a few Madonna and Child type formations, etc (this is a very Catholic country)...but mercifully not one Queen Victoria! That said, the tour was a wonderful experience. The quality of the cave; lots of seriously good – and large – decoration, was wondrous. The flow of the boats was clearly tightly managed; while you knew they were there it was not a diverting issue. The tour takes about 45 minutes of gliding through the cave in effective silence (other than the commentary in your ear); in and out along much the same route. Quite a peaceful experience actually.



Gearing up at One Hundred Caves

The management was excellent. No food or drink or smoking allowed; you were advised against talking too. Given the gentle, un-motorised boat journey, the cave impact of the tourism appears negligible. I asked one guide later about lighting the cave. You could do it...solar power, etc. He was dead against it...'it would destroy the experience'. I could not agree more. Aside from the fact that the cave, in terms of boatman, pole man guides, and support staff – plus ancillary businesses, probably employs over 1000 locals... So, all up, I would certainly rate the Underground River Cave, along with Ha Long Bay and the caves of Slovenia, as the greatest of my karst cum 'tourist cave' experiences.

Ahhh...but the joys of Palawan do not stop with the Underground River Cave! Sabang is bordered by karst aplenty... ranging from many very large mountains of limestone to karst towers big and small. The visual karst landscape alone is stunning, and mostly within the National Park. Very good! There



With my two young guides indulging in the Filipino national passion for 'selfies' – One Hundred Caves.

are many 'activities' one can do, including a 12 km karst forest walk (no time, sadly). But over consecutive days I did undertake two karst adventures.

The first was to Ugong Rock Adventures, about a 15 minute drive from Sabang. It uses a medium-sized karst tower. Your guide first takes you through a tunnel cutting under the base of the tower, then on a track/climb to the top of the tower. It was very carefully and thoroughly rigged. Once at the top you are helmeted and fully geared up. You have three choices. The first is a very significant abseil, while choice two and three are 'flying foxes' (called 'zip lines' in the Philippines) to the ground...the quick one or the slightly slower one. I chose the latter. It was fun!and very safely organised and run. The operation is a community-based enterprise, employing locals only from an adjacent village. I was most impressed with their care for the environment too, and their attitude to karst conservation. There was only one (fairly big) minus...behind the rigging area at the top of the tower was a toilet (with toilet bowl). Hmm... Nobody could tell me where the effluent went (as if I didn't know...); bit of an issue.



Glowworms in One Hundred Caves....they 'shouldn't exist' ...but they do!

On the next day, I visited an operation in another adjacent tower; this time an adventure cave tour called One Hundred Caves. Given the large tower it was in, and my memories of Capricorn Caves at Rockhampton and the tower karst at Chillagoe, I have no doubt it was accurately named! Again, this is a community-based operation of local villagers. My tour consisted of me, a friend, and two lady guides. They were both excellent; especially, somewhat to my surprise, their grasp of karst geology and local ecology was first class! We were helmeted and the cave itself was rigged where necessary. The guides were extremely careful where we put our feet and hands, and adamant we did not touch anything (sensitive) we shouldn't. I actually tipped both guides at the end of the tour, so impressed I was! Never done that before!

The cave(s!!) itself was fascinating. I was expecting the 'dry decoration' one associates with caves in Australian tower karst (a la Capricorn or Chillagoe) and that is what we initially got. However, to my absolute surprise once we got well inside, so to speak, the decoration became wet and active...very much like you would see at the likes of Jenolan or Wombeyan. The speleothems were impressive, some quite large – with some of the best and most expansive flowstone I have seen! But there was more...helicitites!! Albeit they were small, but there they were there! And if that didn't stun me enough, then the glowworms did!!! There was a reasonable colony too, and while there were pools of water at the bottom/middle of the cave, the glowworms were not above it. What? No way!

So, I afterwards contacted my old (young!) friend Australian glowworm expert Dr Claire Baker, who was also a bit non plussed. She suggested the cave must have very high humidity for the glowies to exist but not be over water. Just so; the cave temperature was 25°C and the humidity was right up there! I did ask Claire if there was anything in the literature on Palawan glowworms, but not having heard back, I guess not...

Overall, a wonderful adventure cave experience! Indeed, my entire karst experience in Palawan was just that...very little to criticise. How wonderful! If you can get there – go! But there is more...! At the northern end of Palawan Island is the El Nido area...full of wonderful karst islands and islets and said to rival Vietnam's Ha Long Bay. So, hang onto your hats (!) before too long I may subject you to Philippine Karst Adventures, Part 4!



Another local treasure – Elephant Cave...slated as a future (fully lit) show cave.