

PHILIPPINE KARST ADVENTURES: PART 4 - LIBUTON CAVE

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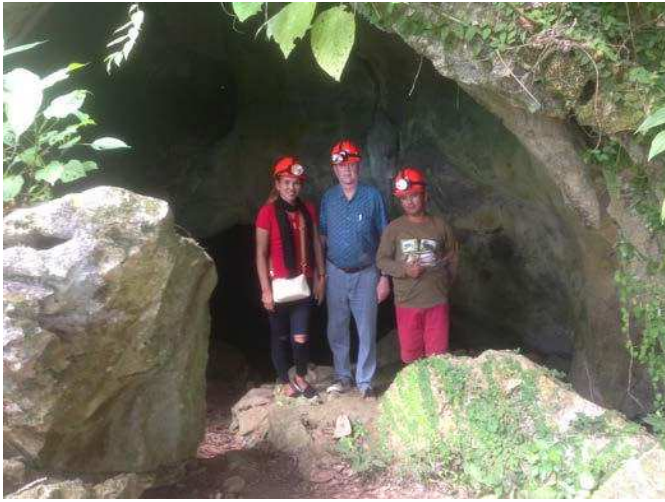
Signage at the Visitor Centre office. We thought the offering of massage therapy after a 'strenuous' caving session to be quite enterprising!

In mid May, I was in Mindanao, in the Province of Zamboanga Del Norte - largely to visit the family of my wife-to-be, Rasyi, in the city of Sindagan. About half way between it and the provincial capital, Dipolog, is the town of Manukan, and a few km to its east is the said Libuton Cave. It is possible to get there by local bus, but for very little, we merely rented a car and driver in Dipolog, whence we plied the 40 minute drive south to Manukan and the cave.

Similar to the adventure cave operations I described previously in Palawan, Libuton Cave is run by local villagers - about 30 of which are members of the Libuton Cave Guides Association (with tee shirts to prove it). All one has to do is turn up, pretty much 24/7. Upon arrival at the close-by village, guides will be miraculously allocated to you at no notice. You get two, for safety reasons.



Libuton Cave information centre



At the entrance to Cave One

There is 5 km of excellent concrete road from Manukan (past the Cave Information Centre) to the start of the track to the cave. The track itself is well constructed, with more than a few steps as necessary, along its approximately 600m traverse.

The cave itself is actually two, which are apparently unlinked, but relatively close to each other. They have been inspirationally named as Cave One and Cave Two! Both are through trips, with separate entrances and exits. The Cave One tour lasts about 40 minutes, while Cave Two takes about 90 minutes. The 'tour' consists of both caves. The cost is, per person, 40 pesos entry fee, plus 30 pesos helmet rental. Plus 'the group' (and there appears to be no size limit) pays 150 pesos per guide (ie: 300 in total). So all up, we paid 440 pesos...or the princely sum of circa \$Aus 12.00 (there are about 36 pesos to the dollar).

One tours Cave One first - the 'easier'. And it was, with little climbing and only one modest duck-under. The 'problem', however, is the cave is very muddy and wet...and the best footwear I had was a pair of flat soled sand shoes, with close to zero grip. Sigh... you would think after 30+ years' experience underground I would know better! In my own defence I will add that I had no caving plans on this trip; it just sort of popped up.



Typical 'dry' speleothems - Libuton Cave



Active wet decoration - Libuton Cave

Thus, at best, my trip through the cave was slippery... I did rather marvel at our two male guides, who both wore the standard Filipino footwear - thongs...also totally grip-less; although I suppose they have had 'years' of caving experience in them.

Cave One was studded with mostly dry decoration, with a few 'active' sections. It floods in the wet season, clearly to high levels on occasions, so the walls and attendant speleothems were largely mud covered.



Whip scorpion - Libuton Cave



Exit - Libuton Cave One

The flooding 'give away' was the significant number of washed-in 'blackened' coconuts that littered the floor and crevasses in various parts of the cave. In short, while far from unpleasant, the cave was unremarkable.

Having slipped and slid our way through Cave One, it was then time for Cave Two. I was advised that it was somewhat more energetic, with a number of crawls and the odd squeeze perhaps? So I graciously declined, citing my grossly unfortunate footwear. However, given that we would undoubtedly pass through Manukan in the future, I resolved to return for the delights on Cave Two then, with proper caving boots!

The management of the cave? Quite satisfactory as far it goes. Access is controlled by the local Cave Guide Association, and the two guides we had clearly had an adequate knowledge of the cave environment. They were careful we stayed on the route, as it were, as much as for safety as for cave conservation. Given it gets a watery pasting every wet season, it is fair to describe the cave as robust. We did tip the guides 200 pesos each at the end of the tour; given we were hardly overcharged for their services...

And yes, as I flagged in Part 3, I am definitely visiting the fabulous El Nido Karst in northern Palawan in early September...so you haven't heard the last of Karst in The Philippines just yet...

