

EDITOR'S INTRO

This article is the first in a series of three. It takes Steve Bourne's caving travels in Vietnam and Laos up to (and stopping before) his visit to Son Doong (Son Doong is the largest known cave in Vietnam).

Cave visits in Vietnam – some unusual adventures

Steve Bourne

After the UIS Congress in Sydney July 2017, Liz Reed and I hosted a post congress trip. One of our participants was Augusto Auler, a geologist from Brazil. Augusto and I discussed caving trips, as you do when with fellow cavers, including the possibility of a trip to Son Doong Cave in Vietnam, purportedly the largest cave in the world. Augusto booked our places as soon as bookings opened in October.

When I saw the price, 70,000,000 Vietnamese Dong (VND) or about A\$4000 I hesitated slightly, but reading the promotional material which states “more people have been on top of Mount Everest than in Son Doong”, and the persistent rumours that the Vietnamese Government is still planning to install a cable car to and through the cave, I transferred my “hard-earned” to secure the booking and began planning my trip around the Son Doong expedition.

This was not my first attempt to visit Son Doong. ACKMA member Dan Cove invited me to join an expedition a few years ago, but we couldn't get a permit. Vietnamese company Oxalis Tours (“Oxalis”) has exclusive rights to take visitors to Son Doong and was limited to 500 people per year until this year, when the permit was increased to 900 when a through trip was established. It would appear that the number of people willing to pay the price may be reaching a threshold too, as spaces are still available this year at the time of writing.

Augusto also made arrangements to visit Xe Bang Fei Cave in Laos as part of our trip and a few other caves in Vietnam.

During my travels over 3 weeks, I visited 12 caves operated by public institutions and private operators, spending approximately 120 hours underground during that time!

Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park

Phong Nha Cave

I arrived in Son Trach, the village on the edge of Phong Nha KeBang National Park, two days before Augusto. I explored the village the first afternoon and found where boats departed to Phong Nha Cave, a very popular tourist cave close to the village. A boat to the cave if doing the two cave trip, Phong Nha and Tien Son is 400,000VND for up to 12 passengers.

I teamed up with a group of Germans and a couple from the US to share the boat cost and paid 250,000VND entry fees for the two caves. Phong Nha Cave is about 20

minutes by boat from the village. Motors are shut off once you reach the cave, the roof peeled back to allow viewing above and your boat is paddled through the cave.



Line up of boats at the entrance to Phong Nha Cave

There is no interpretation provided and the two ladies paddling our boat clearly had a lot of gossip to catch up on and spoke loudly for the whole time we were in the boat. This, combined with a Chinese group with a guide speaking through a megaphone made for a less than peaceful cave experience – but it was about to get a whole lot more interesting!

Phong Nha Cave is nearly 8km long with the tour visiting about 1km. On the return from the turn-around point, the boat docks and visitors step off to explore a high dry section of the cave. The number of people smoking was outrageous, with security stationed in cave taking no notice (and I suspect smoking as well). There are no bins that I saw so cigarette butts finish on the floor. I visited the cave 2 days later with Augusto early in the morning and cave floor was beautifully raked and swept. It appears that they accept the rubbish being dropped in the cave and simply clean each day.



Hundreds of people are in Phong Nha Cave at any one time

The cave has some very nice decoration - although getting good photos is a challenge with the number of visitors in the cave at any one time. It is a great cave and I am sure that the majority of visitors enjoy the spectacle. For those of us who have a deeper understanding and respect for the cave environment, it was a somewhat uncomfortable experience.



Visitors to Phong Nha Cave stand wherever they like for their photos. This appeared to be a professional photo shoot

Tien Son Cave (Fairy Cave)

This cave is a walk up around 600 steep steps from the Phong Nha Cave entrance which would explain why there was so few visitors in this cave. Aside from our group, I only saw two other people in the cave.

During the steep climb, I passed three vendors selling souvenirs and cold drinks. Each tried to sell me a beer on the way up but I resisted and said I would buy one on the way back down. The cave had incense burning at the entrance so I assumed some long-held religious significance to the cave, but then found information suggested the cave was found by a French explorer in 1930! I find it hard to believe the locals did not know about the cave given its proximity to Phong Nha.



Burning incense at the entrance to Tien Son Cave

Tien Son is heavily decorated and quite well lit, although, like Phong Nha, lampenflora is growing with lights on continuously throughout the day. The cave is accessed on a timber boardwalk which has had many repairs (with more needed) - in places this boardwalk was quite unstable. It was a peaceful experience after the masses in Phong Nha Cave.



Timber boardwalks and lighting cables in Tien Son

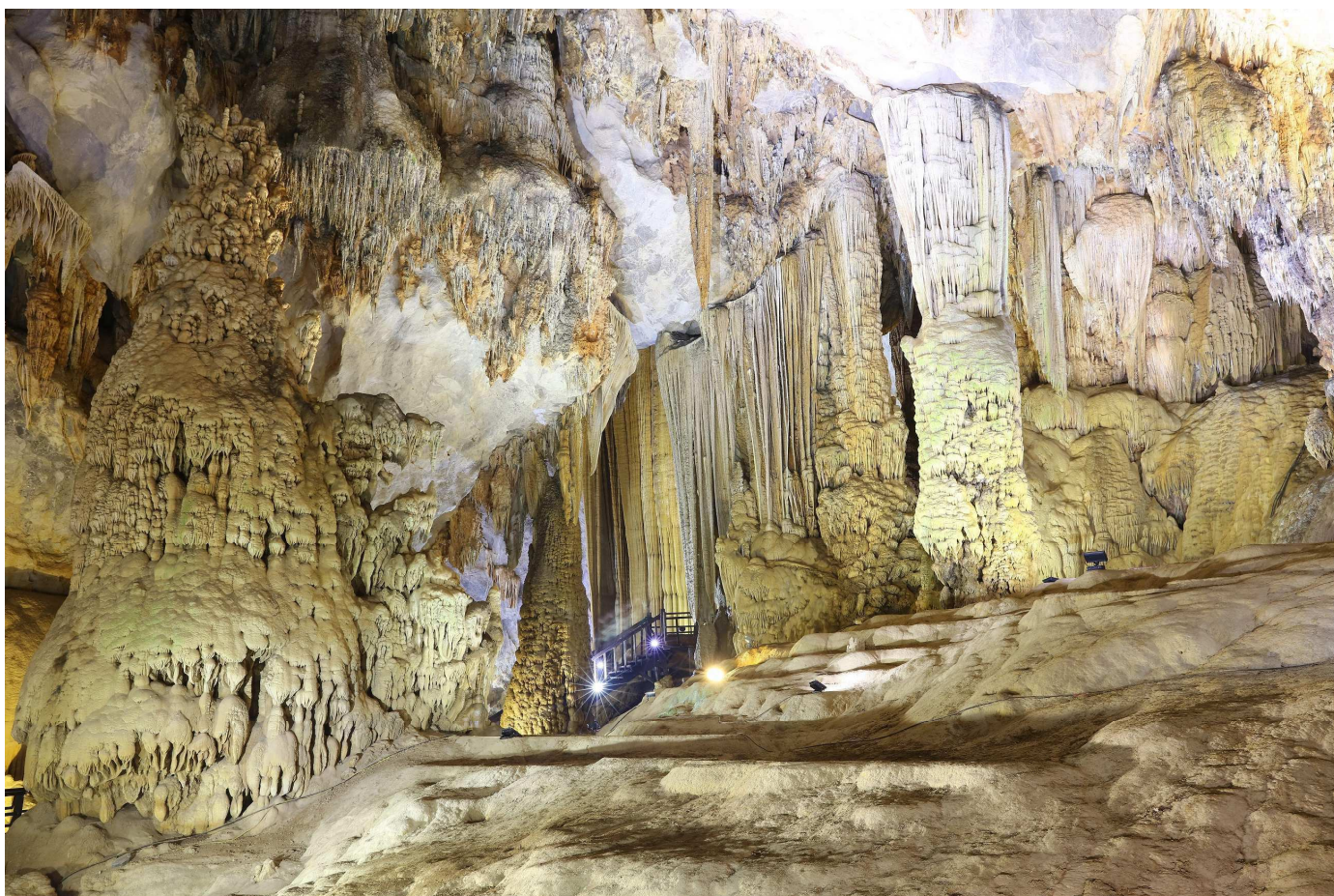
On the way down the hill, each of the ladies I had promised to buy a beer from had it ready so I had no choice but to drink three beers on the return journey. As would you expect, the further up the hill, the more expensive the beer! Still cheaper than water in Australia though!

Paradise Cave

Paradise Cave was discovered by a local man in 2005. Cavers from the British Cave Research Association explored and mapped its 31 km length. The cave is of impressive dimensions apart from length, with a height of up to 72 m and a width of up to 150 m.

I am aware that some ACKMA members were able to visit Paradise Cave prior to it being opened - Arthur Clarke and Brian Clark (and maybe others). I recall Arthur presenting images of this cave at an ACKMA conference.

The cave was opened to visitors 3 September 2010. An access road and internal road of this cave was built by a local company (Truong Thinh Group) and the cave has been opened to tourists since 3 September 2010. The car park is 1.6 km from the entry of the cave, and tourists can go by golf cart or walk on a paved road to the cave mouth. And only 1 km is open for tourists.



One of the many spectacular scenes in Paradise Cave

Paradise Cave is a spectacular cave – comparable to Postojna Cave in Slovenia for scale and sheer volume of speleothems.

An entry ticket is 250,000 VND although there did seem to be some flexibility in pricing if you happened to get to the ticket office at the same time as a tour group.

I visited the cave twice, once on a package tour and a second time with Augusto. On the second visit, a tour guide took our money and purchased tickets for us at 180,000 VND, presumably pocketing a small commission for the service.

Like Phong Nha, it is self guided, often with hundreds of visitors in the cave. I recommend visiting early or late in the day to avoid the masses. Tripods are allowed in the cave but with hundreds of people moving the timber boardwalks, obtaining quality photos is a mixture of patience and good fortune.

The cave has literally hundreds of cave shields. These are a less common type of speleothem, but in caves where you do find them, they often form in large numbers. Two that spring to mind are Dominica cave in Slovakia and Cango Cave in South Africa. **Editor** - for an image of these cave shields, see next page



Examples of cave shields in Paradise cave

The infrastructure is generally still in good condition as is the cave. Security cameras have been installed and guides/guards are located throughout the cave, but are fairly inconspicuous. A concern is the lighting system; very bright and left on all day. I saw few signs of lampenflora yet, but one suspects it is only a matter of time before it develops under the conditions found in this cave (**see example below**).



Dark Cave

I visited Dark Cave as part of a day long package that included the Botanic Gardens and Paradise Cave. When I purchased the day tour (1.3M VND) I was advised to bring bathing gear for Dark Cave. It was needed. Access to the cave was via a 400m zipline, this sounded like fun! When our group arrived for the tour, we were asked to change into our bathing gear and proceed to the zip line. Then the bad news – if you weighed more than 90kg, you couldn't go on the zipline for safety reasons. As much as I tried to make out I weighed far less than I looked, I was drafted out of the zipline queue (with three others) for the raft to the cave. Our group regathered near the zipline and entered the cave.

Dark Cave is so named for the black cave walls at the entrance. A river flows gently from the cave and we swam and waded upstream. The light supplied did not allow for a good look at the cave, but I soon learnt that this cave tour was not about the aesthetics nor understanding the cave environment, but having fun.

We were guided through a narrow slot passage winding its way off the main cave passage, to a mud filled pond, where we were encouraged to frolic as a group. Who could argue? Once in the pool, we quickly learnt why this was special. It was impossible to sink! In fact, if you became horizontal, it was extremely difficult to get your feet back on the ground.

After lolling in the mud for a while, we wound our way back to the main passage and washed off as we left the cave. It was not the most cave friendly activity I have ever done, but was probably low impact on cave values given the small section of cave used for the tour. After exiting the cave, we used rafts to make our way back to the main visitor centre. Except me. I decided I would swim the 400m as I had been swimming 1000m every morning for summer in Australia. The tour operators were not amused!

This ended our day tour and we were invited back to the visitor centre to enjoy a bottle of local rum. Our group excelled and we consumed 2 bottles of rum and a generous Australian bought the beers for the long drive (20 minutes) home.

Dark Cave is clearly targeted at the young backpacker market and does very well at that. For the young at heart though, the package that included the Botanic Gardens and Paradise Cave as well, I thought it was good value.

Right - Making “survival preparations”. With the anti-dehydration pack for the trip home from Dark Cave



Oxalis Tours

Hang Tien One Day Tour – US\$88

Augusto now joined me. The Hang Tien Caves are about 70km from Son Tranch. Oxalis staff collect you from your accommodation to transport you to the Oxalis centre at the village – the start of the cave tour. Augusto and I were joined by 11 others for the tour. As we were an oversized group, two guides were provided for the tour. The guides, Dong and Thi, made an exceptional effort to learn everyone’s name on the drive to the Oxalis centre - seemingly easily remembering a dozen names of multiple nationalities. Dong and Thi were really high energy, which I learnt was typical of Oxalis guides over my tours at Phong Nha.

The attention to detail with Oxalis tours is excellent. We were provided a briefing of what we could expect on the tour; footwear for those with unsuitable boots; and valuables safely locked away.

Our cave was a 20-minute drive from the centre along a 4 WD track - except we were in a mini bus! Half way into the journey, we had a flat tyre. This was only a minor issue as the flat was quickly removed and the spare.... nowhere to be found!!! An urgent radio call back to base had a spare van to us quickly and we made our way to the drop off point for the cave.

Then it started raining.

A light rain fell for the entire 6km walk to the cave, up and down very steep and slippery paths through Vietnamese jungle. When the jungle parted to reveal the cave entrance, we were rewarded with an amazing view. An 80 m high entrance disappearing into a mountain!



Approaching the 80m high entrance to Hang Tien

A light snack at the cave entrance and some photos, and then we entered the cave. Not far in, the cave roof went up considerably (remember the entrance is 80 m high!) with an enormous dome in the roof - 100m or so high (see below). At this point, I started to slow the group as I photographed the best scenes, which were plenty!



The cave had bats, great cave decoration, and some good scrambling to reach the end of the cave. Here we enjoyed lunch and some great daylight views from the cave exit.

The longer tours (there are Hang Tien 2, 3 and 4 day tours) continue on and explore more jungle and caves beyond where we turned around. We made our way back along the 6km path to meet the mini bus, fortunately without the rain of the morning walk. Dong and Thi sang most of the way while the rest of us huffed and puffed our way home.

With the delays of the flat tyre, it was about 12 hours from pick up to drop off, and I thought fair value for the price paid for the tour.

Hang Va Tour US\$353

This is another Oxalis activity- this time a two day trip visiting Nuoc Nut and Hang Va Caves, which are located within the Phong Nha National Park. This National Park was just a short 15-20 minute drive from our accommodation but still time for the guides and group to learn each other's names. This time, the 10 member group comprised German, South African, Canadian, Brazilian, English, Belgian and of course Australian.

The walk to the cave was much easier than to the Hang Tien caves and we were quickly into the darkness and wetness. The tour information does warn you that your feet will be wet for most of the time and that good foot hygiene is important. I was well armed with powder and dry socks and didn't have any issues, but I did see several examples of "footrot" during my time in Phong Nha. If you ever tour here, take seriously warnings about looking after your feet!

Nuoc Nut Cave was mostly walking passage with some good photographic opportunities. As soon as I extracted my Canon 5DSR from my bag, I was the designated trip photographer. This was great as I had willing models for each shot.



Our guide, Annetta, was brilliant, excellent knowledge of the cave and jungle plus a good eye for where photos could be taken. I enjoyed the tale of the king cobra in the cave and lamented our group was not so lucky. It's difficult to judge the length of the cave we explored that day, but suggest it was more than 2 km to the end (and then a 2 km return trip if needed). Nuoc Nut and Hang Va Caves are very close together, but groups would need to exit one to enter the other. However, a guide had recently found a connection which Annetta was keen to try, as was our group, so we donned our life jackets and swam through a passage - quite narrow in places - and exited through the Hang Va Cave entrance to our campsite in the cave doline.

On this tour, participants are required to carry all of their clothes, cameras and any other personal items. The great thing is porters carry the tents, water and food - plus a chef is at the camp site to cook your food! We had a great night of food and the local rice "wine" (= whisky - a potent brew similar to what some ACKMA members would have tried at the 2010 Mulu ACKMA AGM). The English girl was particularly enthusiastic on the rice wine (and spent numerous trips during the night outside her tent restoring fluid balances to the appropriate levels).

I awoke at about 5 am the next morning and explored the jungle near the camp, spying monkeys, pygmy squirrels and other wildlife. By the time the rest of the group crawled from their tents, the best wildlife viewing was over. The chef and porters also woke early and prepared a breakfast feast. Caving trips have never been like this before!

Hang Va Cave

We set off into Hang Va Cave at around 9 am. I was very keen to see the calcite towers that this cave is famous for and feature on many promotions. We were instantly wet again, so no point in starting with dry clothes. As designated photographer, I was in high demand with some excellent scenes in the stream passage and at a small waterfall. Enthusiasm waned when we reached the end of the main passage and I wanted someone to pose under a shower from the roof so I had to do that one myself.



Nouc Nut had water most of the trip, which made for some excellent photos



Stream passage in Hang Va

Part of the way back along the trip, we donned harnesses for the climb to the site I was so keen to see. It was a reasonably easy traverse for which many cavers would be more than happy simply to have a hand line (or not) but Oxalis has set these trips up to cater for all levels of experience. We had some on their first ever caving trip and a couple of us who had seen a few caves before. One of the German girls became quite nauseous and needed to be taken from the cave. This is where the quality of training of the Oxalis staff came to the fore again as she was quickly provided some medication to settle the problem and quietly escorted from the cave by one of the assistants. I felt very sorry for her as she still had to do the trek out to the meeting point with the bus.

The upper level of Hang Va is extraordinary. Massive gour pools that you need a ladder to climb up and down the other side, crossing what are large pools in the wet season, to reach the calcite towers. When Annetta, the guide, announced these were the only example of such a cave formation anywhere in the world, she was slightly deflated when I quietly explained that I had seen the

same formation (albeit smaller in Gastonia Cave on Rodrigues - which few people would have seen) and Augusto mentioned examples from Brazil.

We all agreed that what we were looking at was absolutely outstanding. I was slightly disappointed that the water level was low and the fabulous colours generated in promotional images could not be replicated. I would love to go back in the wet season and see this cave! We were allowed a good deal of time to take photos but could easily spend a whole day just in this section of the cave.

Infrastructure in the form of individual steel platforms just over foot size are placed on the floor for protection with ladders in place to scale the gour pool walls – yes, you need a ladder to get over them!! All of this infrastructure is removed from the cave at the end of the season as it floods. This must be quite a logistical and physical challenge but this infrastructure ensures the cave is well protected.



The extraordinary calcite towers and gour pools in Hang Va

Tu Lan (Rat Cave) One Day – US\$79

Augusto's friends Lobo, Ezio and Lilia joined us after we had completed the Hang Va trip. We joined a Tu Lan one day tour, back to the same area where we had taken the Hang Tien tour. Tu Lan is offered as 1,2,3 and 4 day experiences, exploring more caves and more of the jungle

in this area. Our guide was once again Dong, who had led our first trip. The promotions for Tu Lan use the movie Kong – Skull Island, as many scenes of the movie were shot here. We got to walk in the footsteps of Kong but he did not make an appearance.

When I got home, I watched the film and could make out the location of some scenes and compared them to my photos. Kong's home in the movie was a cave with a rather uninspiring name – Rat Cave. It was a fairly gentle walk to the cave, most of it on the concrete road constructed by Hollywood moviemakers with a couple of small river crossings just near the cave entrance. Rat Cave is modest by Vietnam standards but with some nice decoration and a few hundred metres of passage to the exit point. We checked this out and retraced our steps. Of the tours we did with Oxalis, this one had the fewest restrictions within the cave and the cave is showing signs of wear and tear. This could be from locals as much as paying tourists too.



Preparing to cross the river to Rat Cave, visible in the background

Toon Cave

We then walked to Toon Cave where the trip became a lot more interesting. Everyone was provided with a life jacket and we swam 150m into the cave to reach a dry point. The water is very pleasant and very clean so it was great fun floating through the cave. A green viper was spotted on the cave wall, but unfortunately no decent holds to stop and get a photo. I then realised that the only way the viper could have got there was also by swimming, so that gave us something to focus on.

Lunch was provided at the most exquisite camp site imaginable. A small waterfall as the cave exit falls into a crystal clear blue lake, with jungle 100m across the other side. Another swim and we reached our food. Yet another delicious spread of local delicacies - again with plenty of pork. The return trip through the dry section of the cave required the scaling of a 15m ladder. Once again, safety was a priority and everyone had a safety line.

On the return walk to the village, locals were feeding their water buffalo. I found it interesting that the people living within the Tu Lan Valley speak a language so different that our guides could not converse with them. An interesting custom is burying their dead in unmarked graves, although the grave site is carefully maintained. After around 15 years, the bones are excavated and placed in a small box with a concrete memorial and headstone.

Of the tours I did with Oxalis, this was the easiest and somewhat lacked the wow factor generated by the other trips. It probably would have been fine if I had done this trip first, but after Hang Va and Hang Tien, it was a second tier experience. On the other hand, Dong, our guide, said the 4 day Tu Lan tour is his favourite and has lots to offer.



After the swim through Toon Cave

To be continued