



The Balcony Lookout, one of the postcard shots of Xe Bang Fai—note the boat in the centre for scale

A Trip to Xe Bang Fai Cave, Laos

Steve Bourne

A trip into Laos in April 2018 followed two weeks in Vietnam at Phong Nha National Park. Our crew consisted of four Brazilians; Augusto, Lobo, Ezio and Lilia. We hired Oxalis Tours from Phong Nha to transport us to the border where we were met by guides from Green Discovery Tours. Green Discovery Tours operates across Laos providing a number of ecotourism experiences.

Augusto had arranged for Green Discovery Tours to guide us in Xe Bang Fai Cave and also to transport us to and from the Vietnam/Laos border.

The trip didn't start well, with our guides delayed getting to the border by a lengthy traffic jam caused by a broken down truck. It took some creative driving to get past the initial jam and 50 plus trucks nose to tail on the "road" as we headed for our destination – Nong Ping village.

For one of the main routes between these two countries, the road was in an appalling state.

It was a long day of travel on very rough and dusty roads, with a couple of interesting river crossings before we reached the village of Nong Ping late in the afternoon.

Nong Ping is on the edge of the Hin Nam No National Park, which is contiguous with the Phong Nha National Park on the Vietnam side.

Apparently, after our day of travelling, we were about 50km from where we started, having had to drive around the mountainous park.

We were met at our accommodation by Terry Bolger, with whom Augusto and I had been communicating while arranging the trip. Terry was assisting Roo Walters and his British team in 3D scanning of Xe Bang Fai Cave.

Xe Bang Fai Cave is approximately 14 km long. The Xe Bang Fai River shaped a 7 kilometre underground course through the limestone, creating one of the largest active river cave passages in the world. The active river passage averages 76 metres in width and 53 metres in height, with a maximum width of 200 metres and a maximum height of 120 metres.

In addition to the size of the cave passages, the cave is superbly decorated with speleothems, including many large and beautiful stalagmites, flowstone draperies, cave pearls and gour pools.

A 61 metre long gour basin is considered to be the world's largest gour pool in a cave.



An enormous stalagmite that had been tipped over in a flood and grown again.

The cave is available for daily tours led by the local villagers. Their equipment is basic. They use traditional wooden boats and provide torches for each visitor. These dim torches show very little of the cave but the few visitors we saw seemed to enjoy the experience. Very low numbers visit the cave each year (Bolger et al in ACKMA Journal 109) with just 390 non-Lao visitors in 2015/16. Guides wait in a small hut with some interpretation provided in a shelter. With visitors only arriving spasmodically, the guides seem to spend most of the day sleeping and smoking. As reported in Bolger et al, the cave does provide an important source of income for the local community.

Green Discovery Tours uses inflatables which are far more stable and easier to use. Our guide went by the name of "Tick" and had a very good knowledge of the cave. On our first day, we put our boats, in well downstream, and paddled up into the cave. We decided the best plan of attack was to go to the end of the cave where the Xe Bang Fai River enters the cave, and work our way back taking photos and exploring where Tick indicated we could. The river was quite low and we had to portage the boats across eight rapids on the way through the cave, in some cases quite a strenuous lift across large rock piles. It took us about three hours to negotiate the 6.2km of cave river passage plus the river we had paddled before we made it to the cave.



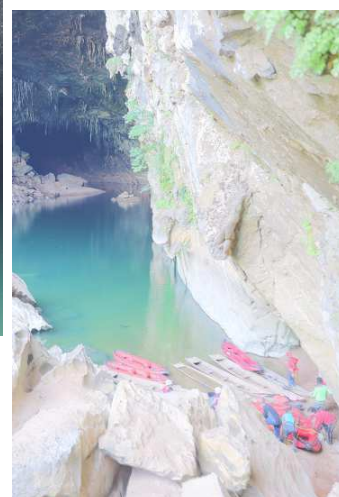
Preparing the boats to paddle to the cave. Entrance (exit point for the river) in the background

Each year the cave floods as monsoonal rains hit the area, and at the cave entrance (exit as we visited it), evidence of the flood levels is truly staggering. Water can reach 80m in depth at the constriction at the entrance (which must be a truly amazing sight). The dry passage which runs off near the entrance was nearly full of sediment and Terry told us it can change dramatically from year to year.



A view of the cave's entrance (right)

Lilia near the cave entrance near the bottleneck that causes the river to rise dramatically (left)



We lunched at the cave entrance and took a series of photos (the options were almost unlimited - everywhere was great scenery). After a few hours of photography, we set off for home. The trip back with the current was far quicker, taking about 1 hour and 20 minutes with most rapids able to be negotiated in the boats.

Our package with Green Discovery included all meals. A couple of locals cooked for us. We had purchased two of the local beers at the border (with the darker beer being the better of them).

We also had the local rice whiskey too, of variable and dubious quality and supposedly around 40% alcohol. I had been warned that one should stop drinking it when it starts to taste OK and I unfortunately started to enjoy it this night.

The following morning, I woke feeling really ill and almost decided I would not go the cave. Roo provided some serious pills which took the edge off whatever I had but I was so lethargic I struggled to drag myself through the cave.

I left it to Tick to do most of the paddling! I was sure it must have been the rice whiskey but after the effects of this left, I was still no better.

We paddled back to where we had finished photographing the previous day and set up some shots of the massive cave passage and speleothems.

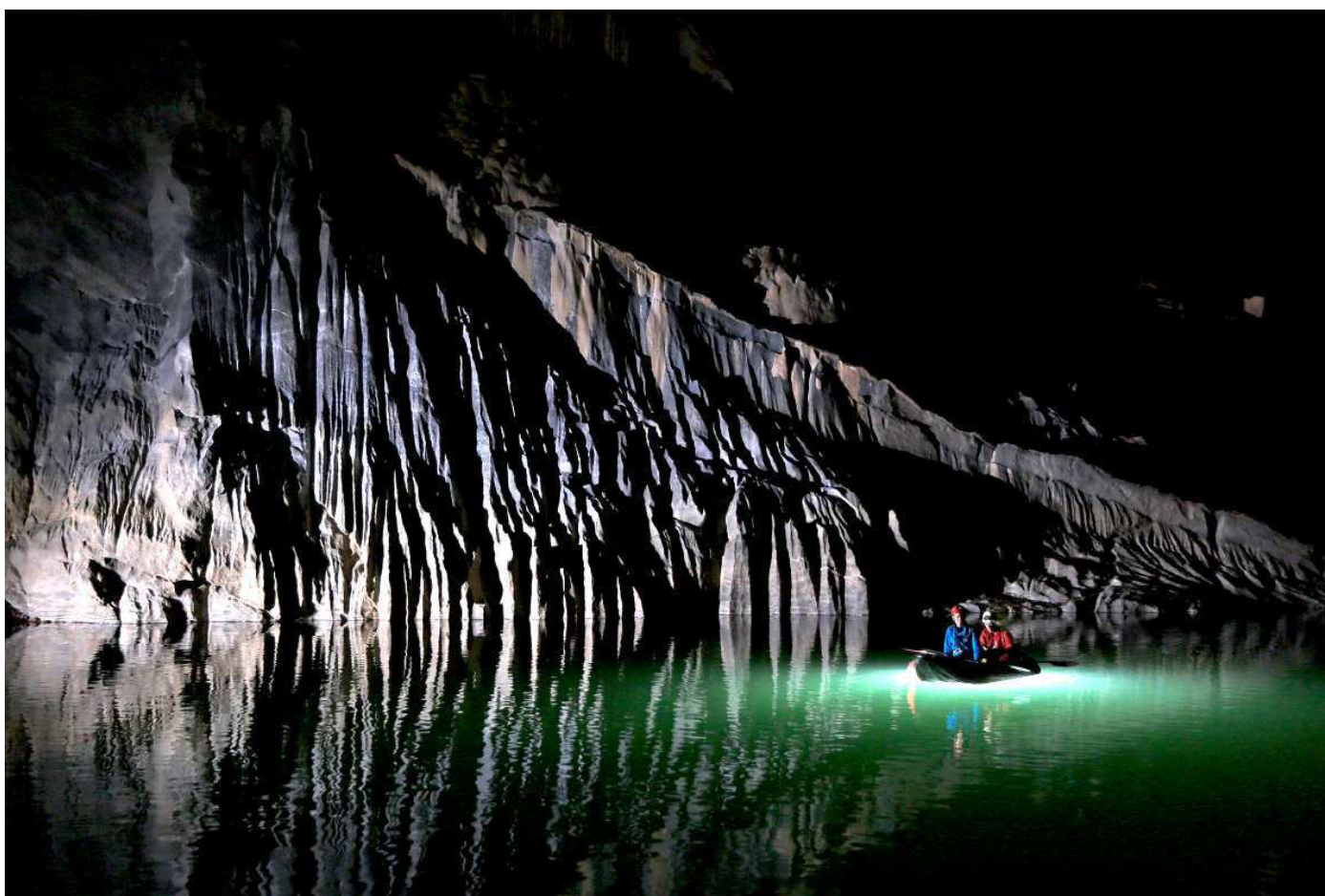
Ezio and Lilia were our models, with Ezio given the task of climbing large boulders and speleothems for photos. The combination of the size of the cave and the river noise meant radios were required to communicate to set up each shot. By lunch time we were at the large gours but I was so exhausted I went to sleep for an hour or so.



A view downstream from the entrance (above)

Giant hexagonal cave pearls (left)

I managed to recuperate a little. Tick showed us some large cave pearls, including some hexagonal pearls which I had not seen before. Another most unusual formation had features that looked like karren, but in the middle of the cave. The source of water that created these was not obvious and these certainly require further study.



Karren caused by unknown water source (Alexandre Lobo@natureza_subterranea)

One column we photographed was possibly larger than anything we had seen in Son Doong, but without measuring it is very hard to compare. We had climbed high up the wall to get the shot – with a boat in the river behind, this made an outstanding photo. Unfortunately, my lens was not wide enough to capture the whole speleothem, but Lobo managed an amazing shot with his wide angle lens (see cover) .

We spent about 2 hours trying to get one photograph but then gave up – capitulating to the size of the cave, a rapidly diminishing supply of flash bulbs and general lack of enthusiasm to keep trying.

We enjoyed a great night with the British team and Lobo showed some great images. I looked up more about Chris Howes (one of the British team) who had some amazing cave photos and realised he is one of the best cave photographers. He unfortunately had an accident while in Xe Bang Fai, falling out of the boat and destroying 2 Canon EOS 5 cameras – a very expensive fall. At one point Roo yelled, “Bring a camera, don’t ask why, just bring a camera!” A very large centipede, nearly 30 cm long, had wandered into our building/camp site. We took photos and managed to catch it in a plastic bottle so it could be released into the jungle.

Roo had been working on his scan of the cave and announced the river passage had a volume of 25,000,000m³. The dry section of the cave is yet to be scanned.



This photo took quite a while to set up and get right!

Fluted shawls in the regular tourist section of the cave.



ACKMA Journal No. 114 March 2019

Augusto by a large cave shield.



I woke the next morning after an evening free of rice whiskey but still no better. At least I had ruled that out as a cause of my malady! We ventured into the cave once again for our last day of photography. We focussed (pun intended) on the cave entrance and tourist section of the cave. The infrastructure is badly in need of updating and would really rate as a “soft adventure” tour in Australia. Given the challenges to get to the village, anyone who makes it this far would not be put off by the mud and lack of handrails. The tourist section features some outstanding cave shields. It also had a most unusual fluted shawl formation. Augusto said he had seen a paper on these but I have not been able to locate it.

We saw some other international visitors on this day but they did not speak English so I could not ask them about their cave experience with the local guides – however, by their smiles, they had a good time.

My health had improved by about lunch time so I started to enjoy caving again. All too soon it was time to leave the cave for the last time and take the boats downstream to be picked up by the vehicles.



The “Donald Duck” formation (as we named it) with a boat on the river. The person in the foreground and the boat much lower give a another good idea of the scale of the experiences in this cave.

On our last night, Tick asked for some feedback on his tour. He had good knowledge of the cave, but didn't really provide proper directions about where we should walk and didn't seem to use any defined tracks. Very low numbers of people accessing the cave away from the river means the cave is still quite pristine above the flood level, but would be a concern if numbers increased and routes were not defined. The other challenge for Tick is that, because he is so fit and agile, we had no hope of keeping up with him, especially when we were carrying heavy packs of camera equipment. Green Discovery Tours provided excellent service for us but our feedback was that the guides could do a little better in managing their visitors to care for the cave.



The interpretation shelter. It had very good information prepared from numerous German-funded scientific expeditions.

We left Nong Ping in the morning to take the dusty trek back to the Vietnam border to meet Oxalis again and be taken to Dong Hoi. It was there that I learnt the value of checking that you have appropriate visas in place, as I was not allowed back into Vietnam. I tried to convince guards that I should be allowed to go with my Brazilian friends – even offering a “financial incentive” to them. All I got for my efforts was to be placed on a bus to go back into Laos. At the Lao border crossing, I again did not have a valid visa, my exit having been stamped an hour earlier. My world now consisted of a 1 km section of no man's land on the Vietnam/Laos border!

I managed to find the Lao guard who had stamped my visa and convinced him to cancel my having left the country. My bus journey then continued to the Lao capital of Vientiane, arriving about 10.00 pm that night. What an experience!

In Vientiane, my luck changed. I found a taxi driver who took me to a nice hotel. The next morning, I found a travel agent located in the hotel— what luck! A few well-placed US\$\$\$ and I was on a plane the next morning to Ho Chi Minh City, via Cambodia, to catch my connecting flight! I can't recommend travelling like this. Best to have visas in place rather than being shipped off to a city you haven't heard of and have no idea where it is!