

# Cave and karst touring in Laos

(with a few management observations)

**Text and most photos by John Brush**

**Canberra Speleological Society Inc**

In February 2019, five members of the Canberra Speleological Society Inc (CSS) spent 8 days enjoying a range of cave and karst experiences in the Khammouane Province of central Laos before heading on for more of the same in northwestern Thailand. While our focus in Laos was on three large river caves (Xe Bang Fai, Konglor and Nam Non caves), we took the opportunity to also visit several smaller caves and spectacular surface karst features close to where our travels took us.

Our party (Neil Anderson, Marjorie Coggan, Giles Thomson, Caitlin McCluskey and me) was joined by Terry Bolger (a current ACKMA member and former CSS member), who now lives in Laos, and his partner Noi.

To maximise our time in the karst areas, and based on Terry's advice, we engaged Green Discovery Laos, an adventure travel company, to develop an itinerary for us. After extensive email negotiations, we ended up with an almost all-inclusive package that included transport from (and back to) Nakhon Phanom Airport in Thailand, a driver, an English-speaking guide, accommodation, drinking water, access fees and most meals. As 4WD transport is needed to access the Xe Bang Fai area, midway through the trip our minibus was exchanged for a 4WD twin-cab ute and we all squeezed into that and Terry's 4WD.

Much of our route coincided with The Loop, a 450 kilometre road trip through the rugged karst and sandstone country of central Laos. Lao authorities are actively promoting The Loop as a 4 to 6 day trip and many of the listed features of interest are caves and karst scenic sites, along with a smattering of cultural and archaeological sites. There are basic guest houses and restaurants along the route but other facilities are limited and road conditions are variable. Consequently, The Loop trip appears to be most popular with young foreign backpackers wearing shorts and T-shirts riding rented step-through motorcycles. Think in terms of lots of exposed skin.... or bandages). Interestingly, the only site we saw along The Loop where foreigners appeared to spend much time was at Konglor Cave.

There are no designated National Parks in Laos, but the Government has set aside 20 National Protected/Biodiversity Conservation Areas covering about 14% of the country's land area. Most of the features described below are in the Phou Hin Phoun or the Hin Nam No Biodiversity Conservation areas.

Green Discovery met us at Nakhon Phanom Airport and drove us across the Mekong River bridge into Laos. After completing border control procedures, we met up with Terry and Noi and commenced our Lao journey by heading north from the delightful river-side town of Thakhet. The plan was to travel through Khammouane in a clockwise direction (the official Loop route goes in the

other direction). The features described below are in the order in which we visited them.

## **Khoun Kong Leng**

Khoun Kong Leng (Evening Gong Lake) is a scenic karst spring and lake located about 50 km (or 1 hour) from Thakhet. The lake is apparently revered by locals who believe it has mystical powers and the ability to ring a gong on full-moon evenings. The lake is about 50 metres in diameter and is fed by an underwater spring that is also the source of the local river. The lake is a blue-green hue and sits amongst shady trees with a stunning backdrop of rugged limestone cliffs.



**Khoun Kong Leng karst spring and**

Facilities are limited to a walking bridge across the head of the river, a short walking track around the lake and basic picnicking and toilet facilities. Swimming is allowed in the river but not in the lake. The area is very popular with locals but does not appear to attract many foreigners, perhaps because it is not well signposted and word has yet to filter out that the access road is now completely sealed. While the lake is within the Phou Hin Phoun Biodiversity Conservation Area, there is not much evidence of active management. There are signs prohibiting swimming and fishing in the main spring area of the lake, a prohibition which visitors appear to respect.

## **Limestone Forest Viewpoint**

Located beside Highway 8 in the far north of Khammouane Province, this viewpoint provides expansive views of jagged limestone ranges in the Nam Hinboun National Protected Area. There is a paved viewing point within a few metres of the road and from there, a path and concrete steps lead a short distance to the top of a hill where there is a substantial roofed pavilion with seating. Nearby, there is an elevated steel viewing platform.

Rubbish and recycling bins have also been provided. However, to our disappointment, we watched someone empty all the bins, separate the recyclables (cans and PET containers), stuff the rubbish into garbage bags, walk to the edge of the shrubby hilltop and dump the bag contents over the side. The sight down-slope was not pretty and suggested the bin-emptying ritual was a well-established procedure. The detritus amongst the shrubbery also indicated the area is frequently used as a toilet.

If local development plans come to fruition, it will soon be possible to take a long zip line ride across the valley, affording close-up views of the jagged karst (and the rubbish!).

### **Konglor Cave**

Konglor is a huge river cave that can be traversed from end to end (about 6 km) in a long tailed boat.



**The busy boat-launching area in Konglor Cave**

In earlier days, a decade or so ago, cavers who had been there regaled eager listeners with stories of a remote village that could only be accessed by taking a boat trip through the cave. Food, farm produce and people all had to go in and out by boat. Sadly, that was stretching the truth. The Natane village has roads, vehicles, farm machinery and even a shop selling cold beer. So, there is, and for many years has been, a road connection to the outside world, albeit a long and tortuous one.

In theory, Konglor Cave is within the boundaries of the Phou Hin Phoun Biodiversity Conservation Area. However, according to interpretive signs near the cave ticket office, the cave is managed by the Konglor-Natane Ecotourism Association. The signs also note the first through trip of the cave was by rowing boat in 1920. Today, the trip in a petrol-engined long tailed boat takes

about an hour. The cave is a major tourist attraction and many local villagers derive direct income from the cave by offering boat rides. Other locals benefit by providing accommodation, meals and drinks or by selling handicrafts. There is an entry fee to the area of 2000 Kip (about 30 cents) per person and a round trip by boat (carrying 3 people) costs 100,000 Kip (about \$16).



**Man-handling boats through a cascade near the upstream entrance of Konglor Cave**

In the cave, the water is clear, the stream passage is big (mostly 20-30 m wide and 10+ m high) and there is some good decoration in a high level area that has been electrically lit and fitted with protective handrails. Both were results of a New Zealand aid project, which I seem to recall involved a couple of well-known ACKMA members.

Konglor is an impressive cave, but our trip through it was a little disappointing. The boats were noisy; the air was thick with exhaust smoke; and, apart from several short sections where we had to get out of the boats to cross gravel banks, there were few opportunities for closely inspecting the main stream passage.

It was also disappointing to see that lampenflora is taking hold in the decorated area – the lights appear to be left on all day.

### **Tham Nam Non**

Tham Nam Non (Tham = cave) is a complex river cave system with a huge, intermittently active stream level and extensive upper level passages.

French cavers have mapped nearly 30 km of passage and it is reputed to be the second longest cave in Laos. It is located about 12 km northwest of Konglor Cave. Terry and Neil had visited the cave before.



As our group sat in the restaurant of our very comfortable guesthouse (Spring River Resort) one evening, we planned our trip over a cold Beer Lao or two using an A4-sized map of the system. The guest house owner (Thomas, a Swiss national), overheard our discussions and asked if he could join our trip the next day. We happily agreed to this.

Next morning, our arrival at the cave was delayed by the need to pick up food for lunch; obtain entry permission from the local village chief; and arrange and pay for the obligatory village guides. We scored 3 'guides' ('guides' as they proved to offer nothing by way of guiding services), swelling our group to 11 participants. This was a little large for my liking but, as the cave was reputed to be quite spacious and free from bottlenecks, group size was unlikely to be an issue.

From where we left our vehicle, it was a very easy 10-15 minute walk to the entrance – an immense gaping hole at the base of an imposing limestone wall. Inside, the stream passage was at least 30 m wide and 30-40 m high. At the time of our visit, the passage was dry, apart from a few residual pools a kilometre or two in. The streambed was mostly large water-tumbled cobbles that were quite tiring to walk over, for kilometre after kilometre.



**Walking up the dry streambed in Tham Nam Non**

Daylight penetrates into the cave about 400 m and it was only at that point we realised our local guides were completely devoid of lights. Here, one guide turned around and headed for home, Thomas lent one of his spare lights to another and the third, an elderly gentleman, just followed along in our pools of light. He continued in that way for more than 2 km. Then, at the start of a climb to a series of upper level passages, he refused to continue despite our urgings and indicated he would sit and wait until our return. He was very pleased

to see us return several hours later.

There is no way anyone could visit all passages in this immense cave on a single day trip. During our planning session the previous evening, we had decided to aim for the Gallery of Gours, which none of our party had previously seen. What an inspired choice it was! The passage is about 500 m long and contains an immense variety of gours in all shapes, sizes and colours.



**A view along the Gallery of Gours, Tham Nam Non**

Some were large, flat and shallow, others cascaded down steep slopes and some were just thin crusts of calcite on orange-coloured clay. They were spectacular and would be even more so when filled with water during the monsoon. As our trip was towards the end of the dry season, there were just a few remnant pools - one of which contained a hungry-looking pink-coloured crab.

At the base of a huge rock pile near the end of the gours passage, our party split into two. Several people, including me, decided to return to the main stream passage to take photos.

The rest opted to continue up the rock pile towards the Gallery of Pearls. Unfortunately, they had to pass through the aptly named Hall of Fog where they became geographically embarrassed. They could not locate the onwards route in the thick fog. Before long, the return route also became elusive, much to the consternation of the Green Discovery guide and the one remaining local 'guide', who later reluctantly admitted he had not previously been to that part of the cave.



Fortunately, Terry soon calmed everyone and set about methodically searching for the way out. Some hours later, both parties safely emerged from the cave for a late lunch just as the sun was setting.

Tham Nam Non also lies within the Phou Hin Phoun Biodiversity Conservation Area. However, there is no sign of any on-site management, other than the access controls provided by local villagers.

The cave attracts few visitors compared to nearby Konglor Cave and is in excellent condition. The delicate upper level areas are reasonably well protected as they lie more than 2 kilometres from the entrance and only a few cavers find their way there. The robust main stream passage is visited by a few intrepid travellers as well as by the locals who go there to collect birds' nests and for fishing.

### **'Hospital' Cave**

The entrance to Hospital Cave (so named by Terry) lies just a couple of hundred metres off Highway 8 about half way between Tha Bak and Lak Sao. Even from the nearby vehicular access track, the entrance and weathered concrete steps leading to it are not very obvious.

The cave is relatively small but has a spacious entrance chamber, some attractive decoration in side passages and a lower level pool. It is largely unremarkable except for the fact that it was used as a hospital during the Vietnam War. The entrance chamber is dominated by modern concrete steps leading to a well-kept Buddhist shrine. At first, there are few obvious signs of the cave's hospital days, but on closer inspection the rocky floor in an inner chamber is littered with small glass phials, broken medicine bottles and mysterious metal objects. In one area, a few phials left on a flat-topped stalagmite are becoming fixed in place.



**Glass phials, relics of the Vietnam War, in 'Hospital' Cave**

It is fair to assume that walls constructed above the pool date from its hospital days and were designed to increase water storage capacity in the cave.

The war-era relics in the cave have local heritage significance. Fortunately, the cave is not signposted and is well hidden from the nearby highway. It appears to be carefully looked after by local villagers.

### **Dragon Cave**

Located just a few kilometres from Hospital Cave, Dragon Cave is much easier to find. It is well signposted and the ticket office and parking area are right beside Highway 8. The cave has been developed as a self-guiding show cave and has been equipped with paths and lighting. The ticket price is 10,000 Kip (about \$1.50). From the ticket office, concrete steps, paths and bridges lead a short distance through forest and across the valley to the entrance.



**Self-guiding path to Dragon Cave**

Initially, the in-cave experience was not very pleasant as there was a stench of hydrogen sulphide (rotten egg gas) emanating from a bubbling and near stagnant section of the cave stream. Quickly moving on, things improved. Further upstream, the water was flowing and odourless.

The visitor route then continued along an abandoned stream passage and into a large chamber with a massive fluted column. This was lit with alternating displays of white, red, magenta, green, yellow and blue light. A colour to suit every taste. On the far side of the column, a well-used informal trail ascended towards a daylight hole. It appeared possible to exit the cave that way, but as we were pushed for time, we returned to the main entrance. On the way back to the carpark we made a short detour to a Buddha cave – an overhang cave, decorated with one large Buddha, several smaller ones and a profusion of prayer flags.



Dragon Cave has some interesting passages, a few noteworthy speleothems and the infrastructure is of a reasonable standard for self-guiding visitors. Moreover, we did not notice any lampenflora even though the lights appear to be left on all day. The entry price is reasonable and cave is worth a quick stop if passing by. If only the hydrogen sulphide problem could be addressed!

### **Xe Bang Fai Cave**

Xe Bang Fai is arguably one of the most spectacular and spacious river caves that can be visited anywhere. A canoe trip through the cave from one entrance to the other and then back again involves about 13 kilometres of paddling and several portages around breakdown piles.



**The party with their inflatable canoes about to head upstream in Xe Bang Fai Cave (Marjorie Coggan photo)**

Several side trips, involving climbs high about river level to spectacular speleothem areas are also possible. It takes a full day, 6 to 9 hours or more (depending on the number of photo stops) to experience all of this. Our party spent 2 days at the cave – a shorter trip exploring the lower 2 km on the first day and a return through-trip on the second.

As the cave has been described in detail in two recent Journal articles (by Terry Bolger in *ACKMA Journal* 109, December 2017 and by Steve Bourne in *ACKMA Journal* 114, March 2019), there is no need to do so again here. However, to repeat a few basic statistics from those articles, the cave has about 14 km of passage, of which more than 6 km is the active river passage, averaging 76 m in width and 53 m in height, with a 200 m maximum width and maximum height of 120 m.

The cave is located in the Hin Nam No Biodiversity Conservation area in rugged country close to the Vietnamese border. Road access, even in the dry season, is not good and requires a 4WD vehicle. The last 12 km of 'road' from Bualapha to Nong Ping, the village near the cave entrance, takes about 1 hour. There is only one basic guest house and a small shop in Nong Ping and tourist brochures advise visitors to bring their own food, just in case. However we thought meals at the guesthouse were excellent with a good range of menu options. And there were ample supplies of cold Beer Lao. The local shop also sold foul-tasting rice-based spirits that could be purchased for \$1.25 to \$1.80 a bottle, depending on brand. Our group could not agree on whether Coca Cola improved or detracted from the palatability.

Local villagers run trips in unpowered wooden boats from the first set of rapids at the cave mouth to the next series about 1.5 km in. On the way back, there is a stop for visitors to climb concrete steps to the Dragon Passage. This decorated upper level passage loops back to the main stream passage, ending at a balcony offering spectacular views down to the river and out to the entrance about 300 m away. Some of the decorations, including gourds and draperies in the Dragon Passage, are delicate and highly susceptible to damage by careless and/or uncaring visitors. At Terry's urging, villagers have marked a route with rope strung between metal poles to limit visitor impacts. Unfortunately, examination of photos on the Internet indicates that not all foreign visitors stay behind the ropes.

Although the wooden boat trips appear to be reasonably popular, only a small number of visitors attempt the through trip. A detailed breakdown of visitor numbers is not available but, according to Terry, in 2016 a total of 2700 people visited the cave - of which 390 (14%) were foreigners. The cave obviously has great potential to become a more popular travel destination, which will help to boost the local economy. However, for that to happen, significant improvements in road infrastructure and accommodation and other facilities for travellers will be needed.



**The upstream entrance of Xe Bang Fai Cave is reached after about 2½ hours of paddling**



The excursion into the downstream section of Xe Bang Fai Cave, which can be done with local villagers, is truly spectacular. However, the full magnificence of the cave can only be appreciated by continuing up-river beyond the second rapids and on to the upstream entrance. Gigantic passages, immense stalagmites, extensive cascades of gours, hexagonal oolites up to 70 mm across and a gour pool 60 m long and around 3 m deep (reputed

to be the world's largest), are just some of the features that can be seen. Undertaking such a trip requires lightweight inflatable canoes. For those that do not have their own canoes, it will be necessary to engage the services of an adventure travel company.

And Green Discovery appears to have a monopoly on this.



**An impressive gour cascade in Xe Bang Fai Cave – note the flood levels indicated by stranded debris on the gours (arrowed)**



**The big gour in Xe Bang Fai Cave. At 60m long, it is thought to be the world's largest**



## Hin Nam No Nature Trails

Towards the northern end of the Hin Nam No area, the Lao Government has developed several walks, one of which leads to three caves. On the caves walk, it would take most of a full day to see all three caves, which involves a round trip walking distance of about 12 km. In the time available to our group, we were able to visit the first two caves, involving a round-trip walk of about 8 km.

The walk to the caves starts at Ban Thongxam (Ban = village) but it is not signposted and the first section across paddy fields is not at all obvious. This is probably intentional as information on Hin Nam No states that local guides are essential for going to all cliffs and waterfalls and for entering caves. A guide can be readily hired at Ban Thongxam for a reasonable price.

The first cave, Tham Pak Tham (Cave Mouth Cave) is about 2.5 km from the village. It is an active outflow cave and it is possible, according to Terry, to swim right through and then continue up the surface stream to the second cave, Tham Nok Aen (Swallow Cave). We chose a drier but hotter and more enervating route over a ridge and down into a large blind valley. It is a through cave.



**The view through Tham Nok Aen (Swallow Cave)**



**View from summit of  
Pha Katai karst walk  
near Gnommalat**

It is possible to wade through at stream level, but there is also a dry bypass, which looks like it also takes water at periods of high flow. The downstream end is about 30 m wide and up to 10 m high and is a delightful place for lunch on a hot day and for casual explorations. On one side, the stream cascades through a side arch. On the other, there is a huge (but relatively short) dry passage that is reputed to have housed 3000 North Vietnamese soldiers during the Vietnam War.

### Pha Katai Viewpoint

On the outskirts of Gnommalat, the Pha Katai (Rabbit Cliff) karst walkway gives visitors the opportunity of climbing a near vertical limestone cliff and to inspect closely the highly fluted and razor-sharp karst surface at the top. From a pavilion on the summit, there are 360 degree views of the karst and surrounding country and down to Gnommalat. The entry fee is 10,000 Kip (about \$1.50).

The elevated steel walkway up the cliff is an impressive welding and engineering feat. It starts just behind the ticket office and ascends steeply (nearly 100 m over about 350 m) to the summit viewing pavilion. There are many steps and a couple of ladder climbs along the way. About halfway up, the route even goes through a short cave. The summit pavilion looked like it should have had a roof and sure enough, we soon saw sheets of crumpled roofing metal scattered among the fluted limestone; the result of strong winds, most likely. Unfortunately a lot of rubbish, mostly drink bottles and snack packets, has also been scattered amongst the karst, but strong winds cannot be blamed for that. Cleaning it up would be a challenge.

From Pha Katai, our group continued westwards on Highway 12 towards Thakhet for the final night of our trip. The highway meanders along flat valleys with limestone ridges and isolated karst towers on either side. There are caves in the area but regrettably, we did not have time to stop for a closer look.

## Conclusions

Our brief visit to Laos focussed on known caves. Many changes have taken place, especially in remote country areas, in the 20 years since I last visited Laos. However, for those who are prepared to spend more time and to push into more remote areas, there are good prospects for making new discoveries, especially if they have local knowledge or assistance. Mains power was virtually everywhere, the mobile coverage was good and most houses, even in small villages, had satellite dishes.

For some of the sites we visited, it would have been relatively easy to make our own arrangements. However, we also benefitted greatly from Terry Bolger's local knowledge and assistance. In addition, engaging Green Discovery enabled our group to fully experience Xe Bang Fai Cave and to travel through Laos in an easy and efficient manner. The road network has expanded and the main highways are in good condition. However, many secondary roads are in poor condition, lack bridges and are likely to be impassable during the monsoon season. It is also likely that accommodation and transport facilities and services will not meet the expectations of many international visitors.

The caves we saw are in pretty good shape but careful management will be required to ensure that they do not suffer as Laos becomes a more popular tourist destination. Nevertheless, Laos is a wonderful destination for travellers interested in caves and karst. There is so much to see and do.

## New Zealand Vice-President's report

### Peter Chandler

First, I would like to congratulate Andy on his recent AM award. I recollect first meeting Andy at the 1987 travelling conference. Since then, we've come to appreciate him as a "living treasure" on all things caves and karst as well as a great friend and mentor.

It seemed somewhat extravagant to travel to South Australia for the AGM weekend, but it was required, really, when assuming my new role as New Zealand Vice-President.

It really was great to catch up with everyone (and meet some new members too), and introduce my son, Kieran, to the organisation he grew up with (and had last attended the AGM at Mulu).

At the AGM Committee meeting, I suggested that the 2022 conference be held in Takaka, the principal town of Golden Bay on the South Island. Pre-conference and possibly part of the conference would be on the Nelson (airport) side, at Motueka.

As well as Ngarua Cave, entire mountains of marble and hills of limestone, and - rare for NZ - dolomite, there are also the renowned Te Waikoropupu Springs. This is the largest freshwater spring in the southern hemisphere and the spring water is equal to the clearest. The Springs are part way through gaining some protection, as land use in the catchment threatens the purity of this natural treasure.

It would then be time for a Waitomo conference in 2028 (or thereabouts) as coming up on the calendar about then is the expected handing back of the Waitomo Glowworm Cave operation to the Ngati Ruapuha and Ngati Uekaha Hapu Trusts in June 2027.