

# Philippines Karst Adventures:

## Part 5 - The El Nido Karst

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The El Nido karst area is, to say the least, iconic. It is located at the top end of the Philippines island of Palawan - basically, the top half of Palawan is karst. My first Palawan karst experience was in January 2017, when I visited the truly fabulous world heritage-listed 'Underground River Cave' (at Sabang Beach, see map) - one of the 'New Seven Wonders of Nature'(1) and, without question, it should make anyone's list of the top 10 cave/karst sites in the world(2). It is located mid-Palawan.

I visited the El Nido karst on a separate trip in June 2018. The geology of Palawan is, in many ways, unlike other parts of the Philippines. It is largely tropical coastal karst - consisting of towers, cones, huge depressions and large caves. The El Nido area, with its innumerable tower karst islands, is often compared with Ha Long Bay in Vietnam.

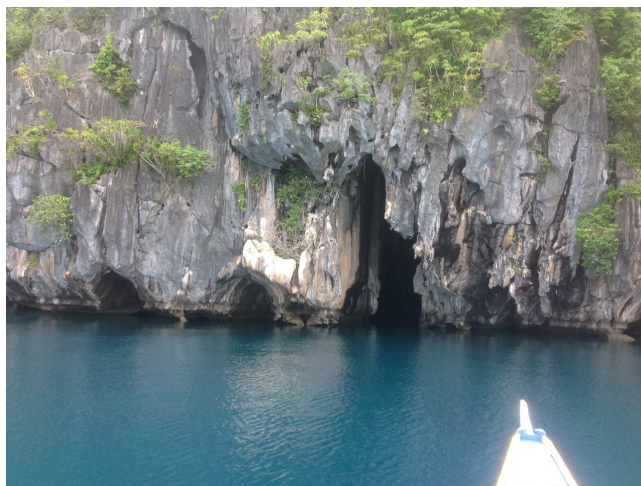


A brief geological abstract is as follows:

- 'Several features suggest a long and multi-stage evolution of the Palawan karst, whose age ranges from Pliocene to present. The southern and northern sectors of the area differ in their altimetric distribution of caves. In the southern sector, some large caves lie between 300 and 400 m ASL and were part of an ancient system that developed at the base level of a past river network. In the northern sector (El Nido area), some mainly vadose caves occur, with a phreatic level at 120-130 m ASL. Morphological features include horizontal solution passages and terraced deposits,. The age of this phase is probably Early Pleistocene, on the basis of assumed uplift rates. The more recent caves are still active, being located at the current sea level, but they show more than one cycle of flooding and dewatering (with calcite deposition).(3)

While there are several resorts dotted around the El Nido area (from very reasonable to very pricey!), I stayed in a pleasant hotel in the El Nido township, right 'on the

beach'. The town is not large, is quaint, and 95% of its employment is tourist-related. There are four standard tours available, bookable anywhere you stay. These are imaginatively named Tours A, B, C, and D! All involve a day trip on an outrigger motor launch to various parts of the El Nido karst. You can buy a ticket to a group tour (thus helping to fill each boat) - the cheapest option; or you can book a private tour (costs more, of course). Tour A is the most general, most run, and most popular. 'Everyone does it', including me! All tours include an exotic lunch on an equally exotic beach.



Tour B, however, is the one that, for the likes of you and me, is not-to-be-missed! One gets to enjoy white-sand beaches, snorkelling, but also visit two caves. The first merely involves a close approach to a very interesting large cave entrance - known as 'Cathedral Cave' - at sea level, in a tower karst island. The second involves 'proper caving'; if caving in togs and thongs can be called proper! Here, you are taken through a slight squeeze into a large, and largely concealed, sea cave; again morphed at sea level in a small karst island. Interesting and fun. It has interesting speleothems and large tree roots - not dissimilar to Capricorn Cave, at Rockhampton. Similar morphology, of course.

So, management? The outrigger motor launches, of which about 100 operate daily in peak season (January to March/April), are individually owned and operated by locals, although they all cooperate, as it were. They do have very strict rules about waste - nothing (such as lunch remains etc) is left behind, and nothing is thrown into the sea. As a result, every location I visited was quite pristine. Very good stuff indeed. Even El Nido township was, by general Philippines' standards, quite clean and tidy. Every night the El Nido township beach is filled with pop-up restaurants specialising in local seafood - you choose, they cook. Very pleasant.

In short, if you are after a great karstic holiday and experience, El Nido definitely fits the bill!

### References

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New7Wonders\\_of\\_Nature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New7Wonders_of_Nature)
2. See ACKMA Journal No 106, March 2017.
3. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/esp.2078>