

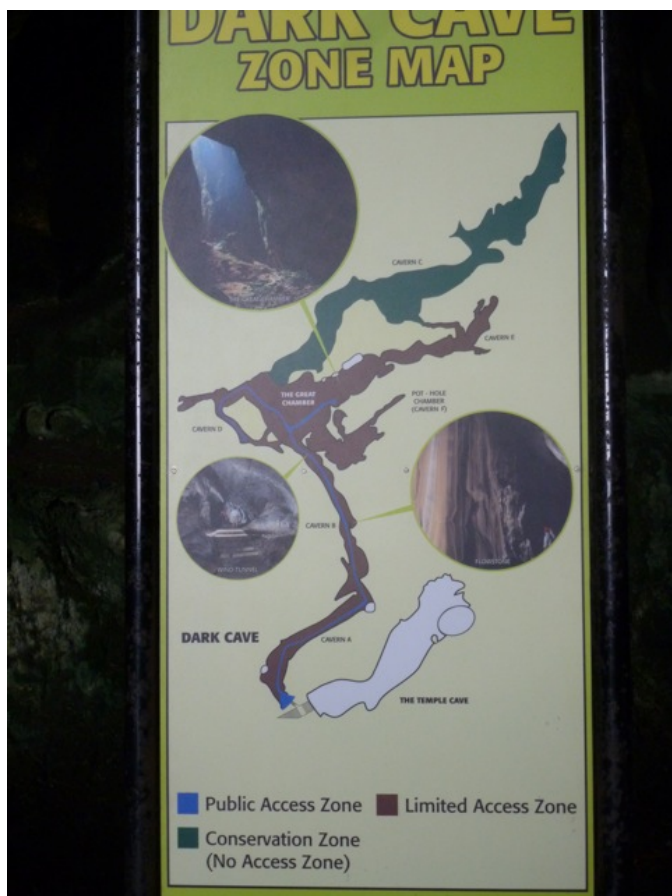
DARK CAVE, BATU CAVES, KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

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While spending a couple of days in Kuala Lumpur (KL) in April 2013 at the end of a visit to Malaysia, Rhonwen and I rode a KTM Komuter train out to the Batu Caves on the northern fringe of KL. The terminus station is right beside the prominent tower karst of middle to late Silurian limestone, with only a short walk to the wide concrete stairway whose 272 steps lead up to the well-known Hindu temple cave. About three-quarters of the way up the stairway, we took the turn-off to the left to the 'Dark Cave'. The reception and ticket sales desk is within the high and spacious entrance of the cave. We paid RM35 (≈ A\$12) each for the 'Educational Tour'. After about a ten minute wait we were met by a young female guide who issued us with a helmet and a small handheld LED torch and along with about 14 other tour participants we headed into the cave.



*Promotional image of Dark Cave
Photo: Dark Cave website photo gallery*



*Cave zone map at entrance
Photo: Miles Pierce*

We were pleasantly impressed with the quality of the approximately 45 minute tour during which the attentive and personable guide spent time explaining the significance of the cave life in particular, and the critical role of the resident bat populations. With the aid

of diagrams carried with her, the guide carefully explained how the bats brought energy, ultimately sourced from the sun, into the cave by way of the food they consumed outside and in turn left nutrients in their guano for the various small and larger trogloditic species. Some specimens of the latter were pointed out as the tour progressed and/or were illustrated in the folder that the guide carried. The associated importance of forest and other vegetation in the surrounding outside area to host food for the bats was underlined, pointing out the threats posed by the adjacent urbanisation and the nearby limestone extraction for cement manufacture (sounded familiar). The guide also talked about the physical development of the cave, both the part traversed in the tour and other parts, including a limited entry 'conservation cavern'. This included observing and discussing the origin of some magnificent wall ripples.



*Promotional image of Dark Cave
Photo: Dark Cave website photo gallery*

The guided tour was definitely 'educational', as promoted at the entry point, and I believe that the other local and foreign visitors who were on our tour, including several children, learnt something positive about the importance of caves themselves, their resident fauna and the context of the surrounding area. At the conclusion of the tour I commended our guide on the quality of the tour and her presentation of information. Unfortunately, neither Rhonwen nor I can recall her name.

Dark Cave, which comprises around two kilometres of passage, is managed and operated by Cave Management Group Sdn Bhd <http://www.darkcavemalaysia.com/site/> under the auspices of the Malaysian Nature Society. As well as the guided Educational Tour, CMG also offer a three hour Adventure Tour which incorporates the educational tour and is subject to prior booking and a minimum group of eight participants. CMG's worthy Mission Statement is, quote: 'To promote awareness, appreciation and knowledge of conservation for caves and karst in general, and Dark Cave in particular for our future generations'.

The Cave Management Group at Dark Cave is certainly doing a good service in seeking to inform and educate all their tour groups about the particular importance of caves and the delicate balance and interdependency of troglobytes and troglodites as well as the internal and extended external environment. Being in a tropical climate, Dark Cave is home to a broad collection of fauna species. (A 1967 paper by McClure *et al*, refers to 23 species of vertebrates and 151 identified invertebrate species. More have probably been identified since then.) Aside from this, the generally large passages, lit only by the LED lights carried by each member of the tour party, are quite impressive with some large speleothem development and interesting structural features that are also talked about. The Photo Gallery on the CMG website contains a good series of images of 'Inside Dark Cave'.

It was good to see firsthand the CMG's mission statement being followed through by our tour guide who was clearly 'committed to the cause' and skilfully maintained the tour party's interest. The relatively low-key Dark Cave tour with minimal physical development of the cave apart from some concrete paving, steps and hand railing, is in sharp contrast to the heavily visited and modified environment of the (non-dark) Temple Cave at the top of the main stairway. I recommend that any readers who visit the Batu Caves take the time to include the Dark Cave Educational Tour, or even make that the primary reason for going to the site. With the entry to Dark Cave about three-quarters of the way up the 'grand stairway', it also breaks the climb – in warm and humid conditions – if Dark Cave is visited before going on up to the Temple Cave.

The Temple Cave at the top of the stairway comprises two, non-dark, large adjoining caverns near the top of the tower karst. The entry to the first cavern contains stalls selling Indian trinkets, etc. with some Hindu shrines and sculptures further in. Another set of concrete stairs then links to the largely open to the sky second cavern containing further Hindu shrines and related structures. Crowds of devotees and other visitors mix it with mischievous macaque monkeys, and to us, the religious and cultural significance of the site was lessened by the crowds of people and the impact on the natural features.



*Cave spider
Photo: Miles Pierce*

Reference: McClure, Lim & Winn, 1967, 'Fauna of the Dark Cave, Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia', Pacific Insects, Vol. 9, No 3, Bishop Museum, Honolulu. (Includes cave map).