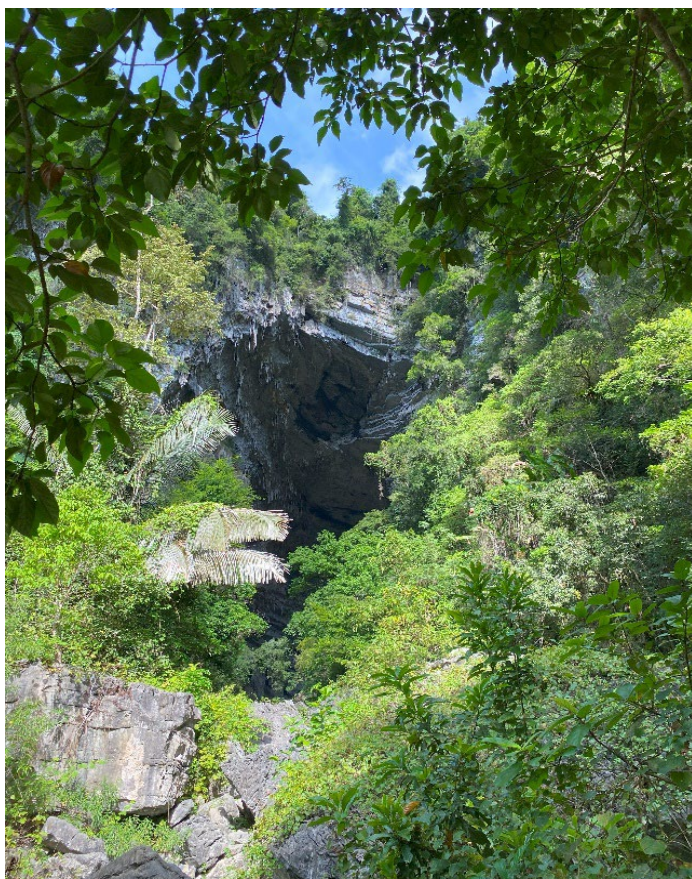


Travel: Caving in Phong-Nha An Anonymous Review

Home of the world's largest cave, Hang Son Doong, the Phong Nha - Ke Bang National Park in central Vietnam is one of the most spectacular locations I've been fortunate enough to visit. Though Hang Son Doong is open for tourist expeditions, it will take six days and set you back \$3000 USD to explore it, both of which were luxuries my travelling companion and I could not afford. Luckily the Oxalis Adventure group operating out of the Tan Hoa Commune, offers a variety of other tours ranging from single day tours to multi-day adventures. After plenty of consideration we decided on the two-day, overnight Hang Tien Endeavour, which was described as being of 'level 3' or moderate difficulty (this proved, in my opinion, to be an understatement).

After spending a night at the Central Backpackers in Phong Nha town, we were picked up from the hostel by our Oxalis guide, Dat and driven around 40 minutes to the Oxalis base camp on the edge of the national park. While at the base camp we were advised of what would be needed for the overnight trip, which aside from essentials (insect repellent, sunscreen etc.), would be brought directly to the campsite by the Oxalis team in the true spirit of 'Glamping'. After a safety briefing from Dat, we donned hiking boots and waterproof daypacks and hopped in the van for a short drive to our point of entry into the park.

Our first day of the Hang Tien Endeavour involved a mild hike to our campsite, which was already enough to have our party of seven (excluding guides) working up a sweat. On arrival at the site we were met with a delicious, traditional Vietnamese lunch spread prepared on site by a team of Oxalis chefs. We then made our way to the first of the three caves we would explore during the trip. The 'fun' cave, which derives its name from the bat droppings lining the cave floor was, I will concede, underwhelming. The formations were nothing spectacular and the journey into the cave only involved walking.



After returning to the campsite, we swam in a naturally occurring 'infinity pool' in the heart of the jungle, a mere 50 metres from the site. This ended up being one of the many highlights of the trip. After another wonderful meal and some traditional Vietnamese rice wine - 'happy water', it was time for ghost stories and bed before an enormous second day.

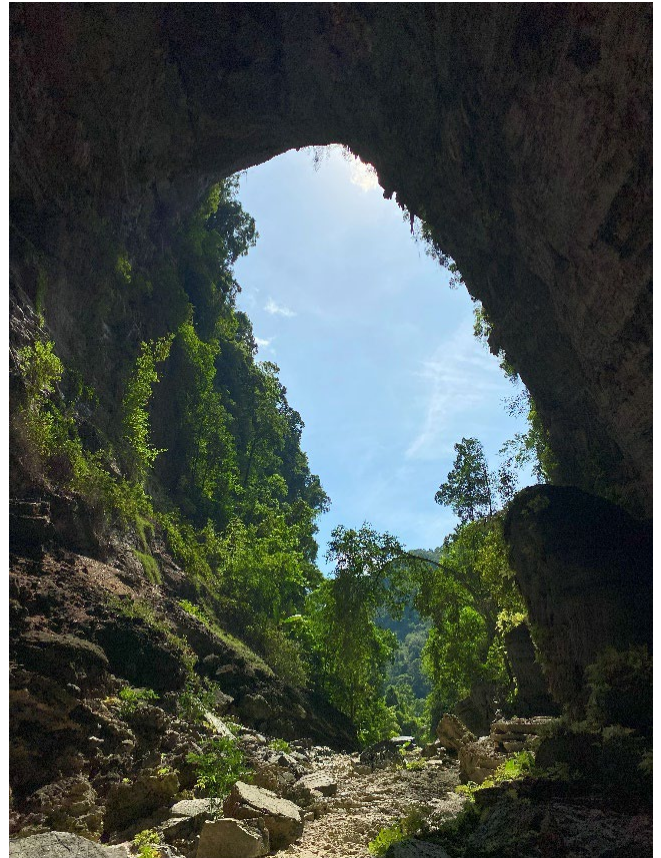
It was an early start, followed by a half hour hike to the entrance of the second cave. Described by Dat as being 'medium sized', the huge entrance to this cave was nothing short of spectacular. The entrance and cave itself, featured huge formations, though they unfortunately experienced some damage due to flooding in the wet season.

It was the most adventurous of the three caves, involving a few small free climbs and one small abseil, which less experienced cavers may have struggled with due to the simplistic safety equipment. We finished our adventure in this cave with a ladder climb, where proper safety equipment was available to those who required it.

Another short hike later and we arrived at the final cave of the trip. Due to ongoing exploration, tour groups are only able to enter the first section of the cave which features breathtaking formations though, similarly to the last cave, they had been damaged in flooding.

We ate a pre-prepared meal in the ‘naturally air conditioned’ entrance of the cave before beginning our three-hour hike out of the national park.

This is where I believe the ‘level 3 - moderate’ rating of this adventure to be an understatement. The hike required a level of physical fitness which I, as a 20-year-old of average fitness, was only just able to meet. This part of the journey also required climbing and could more be described as ‘trekking’ than hiking, however it offered incredible views from the top of the mountain and many spots along the way. Luckily after hiking the first of the three ‘mountains’, when we encountered the remaining two, they seemed like speed bumps.



We celebrated the conclusion of the hike with a cold beer (or iced tea) and were awarded an Oxalis medal which now hangs proudly on the wall above my desk at home. This is an experience I would recommend to anyone who asks and almost anyone that doesn't. While I would suggest that the caving itself is only part of the experience, it is well worth doing and unlike any other caving trip I have been on.

