

LOST IN THE GLARE OF THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN

– John Giulieri*

Famous for its mega metropolis, crowded trains and city streets, few take the time to note that Japan is a land of stunning natural beauty. From endless ranks of snow covered mountains to crystal blue lakes, volcanic coastlines and you guessed it, caves.

I first came here in early 2007 and made contact with a small but avid group of cavers. Like all things here in Japan their skirmishes in the dark unknown were arranged with military style precision and gusto. However I soon discovered that this analogy also included the lack of sleep, early rises and 48 hour non-stop action that one expects from a military exercise. The main reason is that many of the limestone areas are not close to Tokyo and so one needs to travel far a field to reach the action. To their credit, they will travel for up to 8 hours each way just to get a few hours under the surface. To my own discredit, this kind of caper was not so much to my liking. Being spoiled by years of living on nature's doorstep and hampered by a very incompatible work schedule, I soon lost touch with the Tokyo cavers. Despite this loss it did not dampen my enthusiasm for caves in Japan.



The Sea of Trees

Mt. Fuji and the lava tube of the Sea of Trees

Being a land of turbulence and violent rumblings, Japan is a country beset with some of the most spectacular volcanic landscapes that I have seen. These being riddled with an abundance of lava tubes (although this fact remains widely unknown by the Japanese) make for a great escape from the city. The most famous and accessible from Tokyo is the Kawaguchi lake area at the foot of Mt. Fuji. This lake is one of five great lakes that were formed around Mt. Fuji when it last erupted. It is thought that at that time there were only three lakes which were subsequently broken up by lava flows. Even to this day, two of the lakes maintain the same level, suggesting that they remain connected by an aquifer or cave system. At one end of the lake stands the forest of Aokigahara or the Sea of Trees. This forest has a rather sinister reputation as a famous suicide area. Today as you approach the trail head there are many signs

advertising self-help groups and counselling services. The forest looks like it is straight out of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale. It consists of a dense Beech forest draped with hanging mosses and epiphytes, straddling a gigantic craggy, broken slag heap. The various trails meander their way through the tangle of trees avoiding the pitfalls and small caves that litter the forest floor.



Ticket gate at Saiko Bat Cave

The Saiko Bat Cave

In the midst of all this there are a number of show caves. These are easy to access; you can either walk the trails through the forest and risk finding a dead body (which happens disturbingly often) or use the public transport. Show caves in Japan are mostly self-guide walks that are lit continuously. They are examples of minimalist operations and cost reduction. At this particular cave you can pay your entrance fee, pick up your equipment and view the cave all without speaking to a single person. The cost is ¥300 (about \$3) and your ticket is purchased at a vending machine near the entrance gates. After grabbing a helmet you make the short trek through the forest to the cave. The scenery is much the same as the rest of the forest and other lava tube locations. There are a few nice faults in the lava floor highlighting how dangerous it can be to wander off the beaten tracks.

Once at the entrance you are reminded to wear your helmets and that this is a bat cave and closed during the winter months. The entrance is heavily gated and would make it difficult for even the most dedicated vandal. Upon entering the temperature drops to a nice 10°C. The tubes are short and you can quickly make your way through all of the passageways on offer. A few are permanently gated due to a small resident bat colony. The surfaces are like that of most lava tubes and are covered in splash, drip and rippling patterns. There are even a few lava mounds on offer. However for an old limestone cave guide like me, it was hard for the meagre pickings to deliver the same wow factor. Over all it is a nice little self-guided trip, taking only about 30 minutes from gate to gate.

Ticket vending machines



Saiko Bat Cave differs from many others in the area in that it does not retain the ice-cold temperature for which the Aokigahara tubes are renowned. Ice formations are a big feature of these other lava tubes and were even used as a mean of cold storage in past times. Due to the fact that the ice can be found all year round it was even harvested in the days of the Edo era and shipped to Tokyo and Kyoto.

With it's comparatively warm temperature Saiko Bat Cave lives up to its name and is the wintering site for a few species of micro bats. The cave is closed for most of the year, during which time you can find *horseshoe bat (Rhinolophus ferrumequinum)*, *Greater Tube-nosed Bat (Murina (Murina) leucogaster)*, *Big-footed Myotis (Myotis macrodactylus)*, *common long-eared bat (Plecotus auritus)* and *Little Japanese Horseshoe Bat (Rhinolophus cornutus)*. There were a few very nice taxidermed specimens in the visitors, centre including a few less common guests of the lava tubes.

While the facilities are in very good condition and the site immaculately clean there are a few management issues. Preservation of natural environments does not seem to be a big priority for many caves here. Like all show caves here in Japan they are lit non-stop during the day and the systems seem to use mains voltage (100v). As a result they are often plagued with carpets of lampenflora, although this does not seem to worry anyone.

Moreover caves are often equipped with temples or small shrines with guests usually making an offering of money or wine. With a long history of usage you can find these parts of the caves to be almost totally covered in coins, wine cups and incense sticks.

Entrance to Saiko Bat Cave



Caves in Japan

Whatever one might surmise from these behaviours, the Japanese love their caves and there are many show caves set up all over Japan. Three others can be reached on a day trip from Tokyo: two sea caves on the small island of Enoshima Kongo (*diamond*) cave and Taizo (*womb*) cave, the volcanic coast of Dogashima in Izu; and Nippara limestone cave in Okutama, the largest in the Tokyo area. All of these are self-guided tours and are relatively small caves with many interconnecting passageways that are continuously lit and unsupervised. Kongo and Taizo caves have the added aspect of being partly turned into shrines and having decorated hallways. One section even has a UV light to show up reactive minerals in the rock. All in all this is a vastly different approach to cave management and infrastructure than we are used to in Australia.



Lampenflora

Despite this I am told of greater, more pristine things yet to be seen further afield. I have the names of some of these and even a few vague ideas on how to get there. So armed with my trusty phrase book, a sense of adventure and my ¥300 entrance fee I remain blissfully lost in the glare of the Land of the Rising Sun.

Check out <www.youtube.com/johncaverns> for more pictures of caves in the Tokyo area and even some impromptu tour guiding.

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