

MCG NEWS



APRIL 1988 NUMBER 200 NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDIP CAVING GROUP

NIAH CAVES, SARAWAK, BORNEO

January 1988

by Vince Simmonds and John Beauchamp

After obtaining permits from the Sarawak Museum in Kuching we flew to Miri where we were to set off to Batu Niah. The roads were, in places, none existant and on the return journey were quite an experience being extremely slippery after a rainstorm. The bus seemed to spend as much time going sideways as it did in a straight line. However, we arrived at Batu Niah mid afternoon and decided to walk to the Park Hostel up river. We spent the rest of the day settling in.

Next day we set off to visit the Great Cave. The cave is reached by a 3km walk along a slippery plankwalk, it's also rather warm and sticky. At about 2km we saw a small cave just off the plankwalk so we decided to have a look. It turned out to be a smallish through-cave with a river flowing. Eventually the plankwalk began to rise sharply and soon we were at the Great Cave.

Before we actually entered the cave we could hear what sounded like rushing water, which in fact turned out to be thousands of swiftlets milling around. One of the things we noticed was a large amount of litter which seems to be thrown all over the place, mainly (it appeared) by the nest collectors.

The cave itself is massive, the roof in places must be 100m plus. The nest collectors (for birds nest soup) overcome this small problem by shinning up wooden poles without any safety aids, not a job I'd really fancy. The trails through the caves were fairly straightforward being more plankwalks. They are, however, treacherous being covered in guano (polite for bat and bird shit). In fact, guano is everywhere: on handrails, rocks, in shoes and down your back. And it smells. It's very humid in these caves and before long we were drenched.

There were some nice features in the caves, one particularly nice area is called Lobang Padang, a light shaft coming through a hole in the roof some 100m above. We spent a couple of hours walking around the cave before making our way back to the hostel and a well earned cold beer.

The following day we set off for the Painted Cave. The way to the cave is back through the Great Cave; Painted Cave is situated on the other side. Once through the Great Cave a plankwalk was located. This proved to be a little dilapidated so care was needed. The keys to the gates proved to be unnecessary because they did not fit and the gates were broken anyway.

The cave was quite impressive and a lot tidier than Great Cave. Painted Cave is a large through-cave about 50m x 100m in diameter and over 500m in length. The paintings the cave takes its name from are situated half way up the right hand side not far from the entrance. They are of "death ships" and men, the paintings are red (hematite) and they are up to 40,000 years old. They were only discovered in 1958. There are also a couple of the actual "death ships" which are like small canoes. These were discovered in the caves by archaeologists.

We had a quick look around the rest of the cave before making our way back for some more cold beer. Which was quite expensive, I may add.