

Mendip Caving Group

NEWS

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LAWA CAVE, THAILAND

The tourist brochure starts, "If you are looking for a place... a little more remote, where nature offers the simple pleasure of sun, unpolluted and beautiful rivers, wonderful caves, wild animals in the jungle, waterfalls or an area of precious blue sapphire mining... the answer lies in this province... Kanchanaburi". Having been to this part of Thailand before, I reconfirmed that this is still a delightful area. True to Asian standards though, the brochures are misleading. The attractions exist and are worth seeing but getting to them is a different matter. A fistful of local currency and luck are needed to visit what is advertised.

The visit to Lawa Cave was more luck than a planned trip. Vince and I had teamed up with a local Thai couple and a German fighter pilot named Klaus and had shared accommodation on a house-raft at Sai Yok on the Kwai Noi River. Sai Yok is 104km north west of Kanchanaburi, the tourist centre of the area, and 233km west of Bangkok. The further from Kanchanaburi you get the less package-type tourists you see. This area is famous for the "Bridge Over the River Kwai" and the "Death Railway". However, Sai Yok seemed a nice enough place to spend the night. Anyway, it was too late in the day to do anything else. Teaming up with locals proved invaluable and being very hospitable people, they made sure we were not ripped off. During the evening we met up with more locals and planned a trip to the cave the following day. Lawa Cave is 31km down river from Sai Yok and as far as we could establish, only accessible by boat. So at 0700 the following morning we watched as our friends bartered for the best boat deal. The price was fixed at £18 in local currency for the return trip. An exorbitant price if you're on your own but not so bad when there are seven.

The trip takes just over an hour in the famous V6 powered longboats. At this time of morning the mist hangs over the river until the sun disperses it and the temperature hangs around 10°C so take some warm clothing. At the landing stage on the west bank of the Kwai Noi River a gentle slope leads to a plateau and a small beverage halt (inevitable!). A walk across the flat area passes chillies and wild cotton there for the picking. A series of steps zig-zagging up through the trees leads to a strongly draughting entrance. The cave was reputedly discovered by a village hunter and the Thai Fine Arts Department discovered cavemen's bones. A passageway leads down to a T-junction and turning left is a chamber with a second visible entrance. Unfortunately the chamber is filled with cave guides and a heavy odour of paraffin from the Tilley lamps. Without too much warning you are ushered by a 3ft high pied piper, lamp held high, into depths unknown. These little chaps don't speak any foreign language and are keen to rush you around the cave so they can be paid their 10BAHT (each person). It goes without saying that we did not stay in the party. The cave is of OFD2 proportions and very dry. It basically consists of four large chambers with interconnecting passages. The largest chambers are named: "Crocodile Chamber" which has an inverted rock formation in the roof resembling such an animal; "Grand Palace"; "Diamond Chamber" where the walls are of quartz and other reflective minerals. Most formations appear dry and inactive and include some fine gours, stal in the shape of musical instruments and thrones. A small Buddha (again inevitable) is also housed. Due to the cost of getting here, you are likely to arrive in some form of mixed group. So if you wish to explore for a couple of hours on your own be sure to make definite arrangements with the other passengers and the boatman!

When touring Kanchanaburi's attractions, plan a route that keeps the distances down and allow a lot of time and cash. A tent would solve your accommodation problems. An area not to be missed.

John Beauchamp May 1988