

Touring the Caves and Karst of Laos

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Back in 2008 I spent 10 days exploring a fantastic river cave in Laos, on the Xe Bang Fai. Though an awesome trip, I didn't see a whole lot of the country other than the capital, Vientiane, and some nice karst in Khammouane Province. So when Dwight Deal told me he was putting together one of his "Focused Tours" to include caves and karst in both Laos and Vietnam, I was immediately drawn to participate. I'd never been to Vietnam but I'd long been intrigued by images of the flooded karst of Halong Bay.

Laos is truly blessed with karst. The figure on page 9 shows the many areas of significant karst. We hit only a few but saw some of the more significant caves in the process. Most of these caves were in one form or another show caves, usually not lit (though many had electrical wire slung through them), most not developed in any way other than sometimes needing to hire a guide from a local village, or pay a small fee for access. The good thing about this setup is that you had caves you could explore on your own with a mellow guide, and the fee meant that the locals had a stake in seeing that the cave was well treated.

Briefly, we flew as a group from San Francisco to Bangkok, 15 of us altogether, and there we met up with two other group members who came from Australia. Our group was probably 3/4 cavers, and others who were not primarily cavers but had a karst-related science background, such as

Eve who is a hydrologist for USGS. Most of us were aged 50 or above, not surprising as our leaders Dwight and Mary are in their 60s. From Bangkok we flew to Vientiane, capital of Laos, where we immediately departed via road for our first destination, Vang Vieng.

Our travel was on a small bus which had to transport all of us and our luggage, and fortunately Dwight had warned everyone to pack light. The bus was provided by a tour company who also gave us two nice guys as guides and a driver. The two guys spoke pretty passable English. Our true cave expert was actually an American caver living in Laos for awhile, Terry Bolger, who had been looking for caves and assisting with surveys on foreign expedition groups passing through. The French in particular have done a lot of work there, and another group of Germans and Dutch are active in northern Laos.

Vang Vieng is a small tourist-oriented town on the Nam Xong river, and lies at the southern end of a long and scenic karst ridge. We were based in the Ban Sabai bungalows, a charming set of rooms right on the river with outdoor dining and views of the karst. This karst houses scores of caves, many of them open as tourist attractions but with limited development. We also learned that just a few months ago this town had been quite the hangout for lots of hard-partying tourists, and there had been zip lines across the river and other attractions but the government had put the kabash on it (people were

having too much fun, mixing intoxicants with river water and getting injured or killed) and tourism was down considerably.

During our welcome dinner we noticed a lot of groups of long skinny boats manned by crews in colorful uniforms paddling by at top speed. This it turned out was in preparation for the next day's Dragon Boat Festival, to mark the end of a 3-month long Buddhist Lent period. As part of it various villages fielded their teams to compete in team paddling races.

Our first day's outing involved a fairly long drive north towards Kasi and a cave that Terry had mapped called Tham Khoun Lang. It's part of a nature park that includes trails to waterfalls, some nice forest, etc. But along the way I spotted a very cool-looking temple through the bus window and suggested we stop. Now I've visited several dozen Buddhist temples before but this I think was the nicest, with the usual bright color schemes and Buddha rendered variously as a four-faced figure, and as a half bird-half man motif. A large green and red naga (serpent or snake deity, a common figure in Lao Buddhism) was coiled outside one of the smaller temple buildings. What really added to the milieu, though, was the nice ridge of karst that provided a backdrop for the structures. We only had about 10 minutes here before being rushed back to the bus, but I snapped a few dozen piccies. From then on it became kind of a joke for me to keep asking if there were



This page: Vang Vieng karst. Above: Dragon Boat racers.

any more “temples by karst” to stop at.

Meanwhile, at Khoun Lang we did a steep hike up to an entrance high on the cliffside. We had a couple of guides from the local village who led us in. These guys had no shoes, no helmets, and most amazingly, no lights! And yet, we could barely keep up with them in the cave. The cave itself was basically a series of large interconnected rooms divided by formations, a few nice ones among them. It was all sort of standard stals and flowstone. I got my first multi-flash cave pictures of the trip, and was happy that many in the group were keen to help out with flashes and modeling on this and subsequent trips. In return I made all the cave photos available to everyone in the group afterwards.

On the return from this long drive we went up to a high pass with spectacular views of the karst. Here we encountered a small group of children in a little rice field by a pond and they happily posed for pix from almost the entire busload of us. We didn't have time to see another cave but the quality of the karst far exceeded the cave we'd just seen so we were happy campers.

The next day was the big festival day. Some of us got up early and went into town to see some of the local Buddhist temples which were gearing up for their festivities, with food and chanting monks. Some of the dragon boat teams were practicing as well while we ate breakfast. That morning we took a short ride to Tham Phoukham ('Cave of the Golden Crab', and it really has gold crabs in the pools), another minimally developed cave. A handwritten sign here offered guide service, light rental, and “flip-

flop” rental. I guess the latter might be an improvement over visiting caves in bare feet as many of the locals do! Phoukham is a fairly large cave system of which we saw only a part. Initially we entered a very large entrance chamber, well-illuminated with daylight through a second large entrance. In the middle was a reclining, life-sized golden Buddha where one could leave offerings or light some incense. Beyond were a series of moderate-sized rooms and some nice formations, again your basic cave stuff but some nice color and one cool large stalagmite with a nice window in it. I got the ever-photogenic Judy to pose in the window, suggesting it would be a good profile picture, and sure enough, a couple weeks after the trip I was pleased to see her using it on her Facebook page.

After coming down from the cave, dripping with sweat, we were able to take a quick dip in the “Blue Lagoon,” a cave spring-fed river we had crossed on our way to the cave.

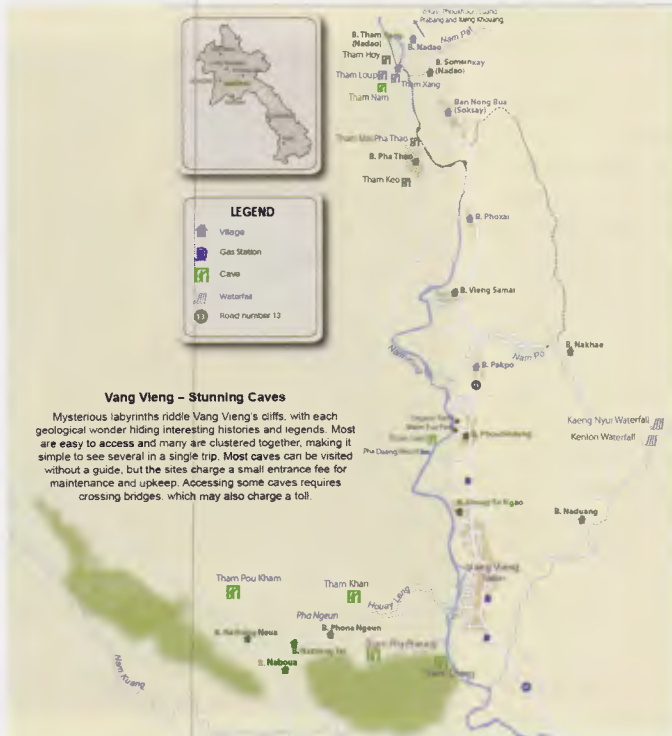
Coupled with some cold BeerLao from the local concession stand, we were fully refreshed.

After this whirlwind tour it was back to our home base for some lunch. The area around our bungalows was swarming with local tourists, as it was a primary viewpoint for the Dragon Boat races. We took in a bit of that before heading out for our next set of caves, also quite nearby. The first of these was called Elephant Cave, and is another small Buddhist temple cave. This one contained a number of brightly painted carvings on the walls, and golden Buddhas in various poses: reclining,



From Laumanns, M. & Price, L. (2010): Atlas of the Great Caves and the Karst of Southeast Asia. – Berliner Höhlenkundliche Berichte, vol. 40+41, 366 pp.; Berlin. Used by permission of the first author.

standing, or seated. Most novel to me was Buddha as a mermaid, nursing what appeared to be a small monkey child. We spent a few minutes here taking pictures, until Dwight herded us on to the main event, a river cave called Tham Nam Xang. This is a cave you explore on an inner tube, provided for a small fee by local concessionaires. For propulsion you pull yourself along a series of



Tham Khoun Lang



Above and right: Buddhist shrine in the entrance chamber of Tham Phoukam

cables that they've strung through the cave. The passages in the cave was of modest size but mostly in beautifully sculpted elliptical tubes, with some flowstone and draperies here and there. There was one small beach in the middle of the passage where we had to get out and carry the tubes across, and this made a good perch for some dry-land shooting down the passages. I didn't try anything much more ambitious than a two-flasher in the water passage as there was another cave on the agenda for today...

We next hiked to another modest walk-in entrance with a large Buddha statue. This was Tham Hoi, and is connected hydrologically to Tham Nam Xang, for a system length of 5.8 km. Most of our exploration was in a single passage averaging about 6-10m high and 6m wide or so, with enough water ponded here and there to keep your feet wet. We didn't have a lot of time for photos, but this was one of the longer trips we did,

traveling 800 meters to where we hit a large active stream passage. This was a worthy turnaround spot to have reached as it was covered with a spectacular floor of rimstone pools and I used most of my limited photo time here. In another room along the way, we had climbed up and over a series of white rimstone pools. Apparently it all gets clean washed again in the wet season. We came out of this one after dark but the important thing was, we were back in time for another yummy dinner at the bungalows and the ever-present BeerLao.

Our next day we bid adieu to Vang Vieng and commenced a long day of driving across Laos that took us south, back to Vientiane and then east towards the Hinboun Valley in the Khammouane province. This karst region is home to Lao's largest caves. While we saw some nice scenery, there were no stops other than for food or bathroom breaks, and I have no photos. We were all glad to finally arrive at our lodging, the Sala Hinboun lodge, unfortunately after dark and having missed some spectacular karst views on the way in as a result. But on the way back we did get to see this in daylight.

Our next day was a full one with two major cave trips planned. The first was to Konglor cave, a big river cave which is the most significant show cave operation in Laos. I knew I would want to get some photos in this one, so when Dwight came up with an option for some of us to take an early boat down the river to it, direct from our hotel, I figured it was worth a bit of extra cost. We were promised great karst scenery along the way, and the expectation was that those of us doing this would get an earlier start in the cave than the rest of the group who took the bus to the entrance, and we'd all leave the cave about the same time. Well, who'd have thought that our boat guy, who has made the trip who knows how many times, would not only run out of gas, but also several times have to repair the shaft on his longtail engine which kept coming

loose and disengaging? Long story short, this all delayed us a couple of hours but we did finally reach the cave.

Here, other longtail boats are used to ferry passengers on a 7.5 km through trip to a second entrance, where they turn around and come back out. None of the river passage has any lighting and is large and dark. Along the route there is a dry, upper level meander passage where you are dropped off to see some formations that are illuminated with electric lighting, the only we saw actually working in any of these show caves. The boats drop you off at the beginning and pick you up after walking its length, on the other end. Compared to the Xe Bang Fai, which I had visited in 2009, and whose length is comparable, this cave pales aesthetically. Most of the passage was fairly uniform tube, with some nice shapes but virtually devoid of any formations except in the meander. We had an agreement with



Judy Fisher in Tham Phoukam



Terry Bolger in Tham Hoi



Buddhist icons in Tham Xang (Elephant Cave)



Tubing into Tham Nam Xang

the captain of our small boat to spend some extra time doing photos. So we went all the way through and I scouted locations where I could actually get out, of which there were few. Most notable was an area probably 500m from the back entrance where we had to get out to portage the boats anyway. Here, I broke out the flashbulbs and guns I'd brought for the big stuff, and despite communication problems in the rapids, managed a few decent shots of the huge passage here.

We got out of the cave mid-afternoon, having passed up a number of photo-ops because I knew we had another cave to visit. As it was, it turned out that the rest of the group other than our two boatloads' worth, had been sitting outside the cave waiting for us a couple of hours, even though only 5 minutes ride away from our lodging. At least they had access to BeerLao there! But we caught a little heat from Mary, and upon return Dwight, who hadn't realized that we had been delayed so long on our morning ride in. But it really didn't matter, as our evening plans were for a large cave that we could stay in until after dark. Dwight just wanted to be sure we found it in daylight.

So, after a hearty lunch, we set out for the longest (at the time, but now second longest) surveyed cave in Laos (30 km+) called Tham Nam Non. It involved a kilome-



Main streamway in Tham Hoi. We had just reached this when time forced us to turn around.

ter-long, scenic walk along a high cliff face, festooned with huge overhanging stalactites. The entrance to Nam Non is huge, as is the passage beyond, and we got there just around sunset, with just enough light to get a few nice pictures of the entrance area, some of my favorite from the trip. We were probably 200 meters into the cave when,

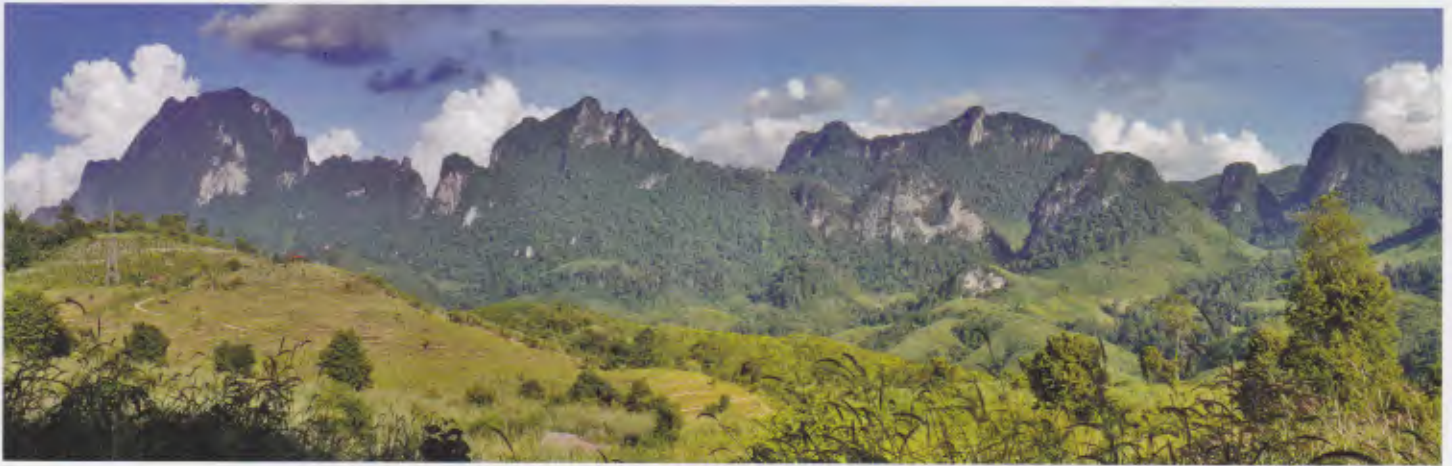
out of the blue, we heard a chiming sound. What the heck is that we wondered? Oh, said Terry, that's my cell phone! Yes, the cell service in Laos extends into areas that seem incredibly remote by our standards, and even reach underground. Ok, its impressive but a couple hundred meters further back there was no service...



Floating through Tham Nam Xang



Zane and Lao guide in a shallow part of Tham Nam Xang



Above and below: karst in the mountain pass enroute to Tham Khoun Lang, near Vang Vieng

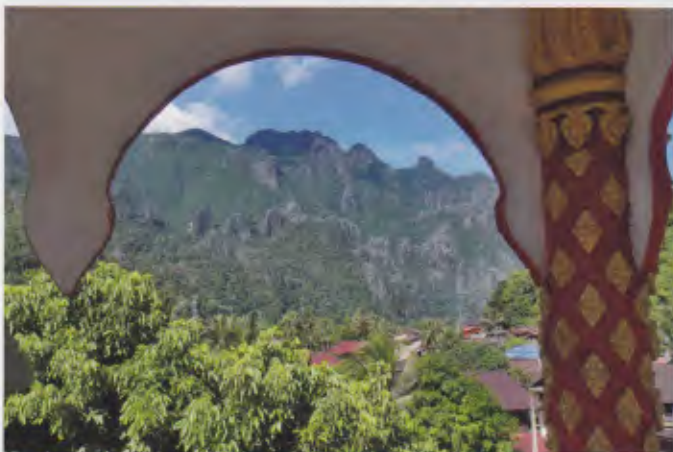
For a cave this size (over 30m across and as much high) it was amazingly easy to traverse, as most of it was floored with cobbles. While you could mostly avoid the small (in this season) stream, in some areas it had ponded up and full immersion was required. Not a problem in these warm caves though. We traversed this big passage for over an hour until some of the group indicated they were ready to head out. On the way out, as agreed, I broke out the flashbulbs and we managed to light this puppy up pretty well. It would be nice to come back and see the other 28 km or so of passage.

Next morning we made an early departure and got to stop at one of the scenic views we had missed due to our evening arrival a couple days before. It was an actual viewpoint (Sala) with a covered pavilion and an awesome, though a tad hazy, view of some great pinnacle karst. We were bound for the large city of Thakek, on the western border with Thailand, just a long stone's throw across the Mekong River.

Along the way we stopped at Tham Luang, a cave with large passages and a through-trip to a second large entrance. On the far side of this entrance there's a closed valley with a small village, and for these folks the cave is their only route to the outside world. The only development here was a cool wooden bridge that crossed the main



Pinnacle karst from the Sala viewpoint and below, Buddhist temple in the karst





Above: Dwight on the path to Tham Nam Nom. The cliffs here were better decorated than the cave inside!



Images on this page are all from Tham Nam Nom wand were taken with flashbulbs. With over 30 km of passage, and once the longest cave in Laos, it has recently been surpassed.





Tour boats at the entrance to Konglor



Dry upper level oxbow passage in Konglor

river into the cave, and a few more wooden bridges and ladders inside. I had a feeling it was meant more for the wet season as crossing the river at this time of year wouldn't be a problem. Most of the cave didn't have much to see other than big passage, and the far entrance which was kind of scenic. After coming out of the cave we met some locals who were hanging out by our waiting bus, a couple of ladies and a gaggle of kids. Zane had brought a bunch of little balls to give away, so I amused them by juggling them and then passing out the balls when it was time to leave. The kids seemed most amused, and I wondered if they hadn't seen anyone juggle before (at least, not some old white dude).

Thakek was the first big city we had stayed in, and it was bustling with activity and lots of people wanting to sell tourist crap to you, and a surprising dearth of tourists. We were all intrigued by the shop that sold bottles of liquor containing cobras, giant millipedes, and scorpions. I don't think they had any takers from our group though young Zane couldn't stop talking about going back to buy one. Lots of food options to be had here and even wifi at the hotel, our first.

Next day was our last day in Laos. We left Thakek early and headed due east, towards Vietnam. Along the way we stopped



Near the downstream end of Konglor we hit a shallow area where the boats had to be portaged.

at Than Nang Aen, probably the second most developed of the caves we saw. It too offered boat rides, but probably only a half a kilometer or so. But there were elaborate concrete walkways and wires strung for lights that weren't operating. It's a big cave (3.5 km) and when we took the boats (self-guided)

we were hoping to reach another rumored entrance. Well, once we reached an apparent end of the river, Jim and I got out and climbed over a bunch of breakdown to find that the river continued, no end in sight, nor signs of an entrance, and we would have needed to swim to continue or else haul the boats over



Downstream entrance of Konglor



Typical passage size in Konglor



Bridge inside the entrance to Tham Luang. Local villagers use the cave as their sole route to the outside world.

the breakdown. Which we might have done if we weren't once again pressed for time.

The cave had a big, elaborate sign outside and I suggested it was time for a group shot idea that had come together over time. In Vang Vieng I'd realized that the mere two t-shirts I'd packed wouldn't cut it for this humid climate, and so bought a few BeerLao shirts at the tourist shops. Others in the group saw them and pretty soon almost everyone had bought one. I suggested a group shot of everyone in their BeerLao shirts, and since we could also acquire BeerLao here, probably for the last time, we set up and shot the BeerLao view of everyone. No doubt other onlookers wondered about this group and our uniforms.

From the cave it was on to the Vietnam border and some delay time at customs. Some nervous moments as they disappeared with Jim's passport for quite awhile, and questioned a replacement passport one of our group had had to secure at the begin-



Far end of Tham Luang

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ning of the trip. But it all went smoothly as we had all gotten the requisite visa stamp in our passports before coming. On we went to our first destination in Vietnam, Phong Nha Ke Bang, home of giant caves including the alleged "biggest" in the world, Son Doong. But that's a story for a future issue.

Much thanks to Dwight and Mary Deal for leading a great trip! Their Focused Tours plans to offer future trips to Laos though no dates have been established yet. Their most recent tour was to Cuba.



The group poses in their BeerLao t-shirts at Than Nang Aen



Another boat ride, this time in Than Nang Aen