



Panorama of karst pinnacles viewed from the Hang Sung Sot entrance in northern Ha Long Bay

Touring the Caves and Karst of Vietnam

Jim Patera with Dave Bunnell

TRIP NOV 2012

[Ed: In the March issue I presented an article about the Laos portion of Dwight and Mary Deal's most excellent Cave and Karst Tour; Jim continues the narrative here into Vietnam and I have filled in a bit of detail and included some photo essays particular to each segment. Because his article was a companion to mine, it starts with Day 10 as we crossed into Vietnam...]

DAY 10: LAOS/ VIETNAMESE BORDER CROSSING INTO VIETNAM

I will admit that being a Vietnam-era veteran, I felt a bit uneasy heading to Vietnam. Those feelings hit a high when we entered the building at the border and I saw it was staffed with many uniformed Vietnamese officers. Emotions of fight or flight filled my thoughts as I chose to try to sit calmly as we waited for our 'pre-approved' visas to be cleared.

After a long wait, I watched as the one officer working with our guides, held up one of our passports, made a quick call, then disappeared down the hall with the passport. Shortly one of our guides came over and quietly advised me that there appeared to be a problem with my passport.... A few minutes later, about a half dozen uniformed officers came down the hall with the first officer and headed for the spot where our guides were waiting. That was when all the electrical power in the building went out. I started to think about fleeing back to the Laotian border.

A couple of hours later, the power came back on, visas were OK'd, and just after sunset we were on our way. We were officially in Vietnam and on our way to Phong Nha.

DAY 11: PHONG NHA-KE BANG NP

Our first day at Phong Nha started with a bus ride to Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park (PNKBNP), which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Along the way we stopped at Zin Zin Pass overlook on the now paved and historically famous Ho Chi Min Trail. Later, we stopped for lunch along a beautiful stream. After lunch, we climbed aboard two junks for our afternoon boat ride to semi-developed Black Cave and Phong Nha Cave.

Black Cave got its name because of the black rock surrounding the cave entrance which looked like it could have been a lava from an early volcanic flow. We got to the entrance about the same time it started to rain. Inside the cave was an elevated walkway that went a hundred or so feet back into the cave, ending with the beginnings of large mounds of streambank mud. Some of the group took the option to swim a bit farther into the cave. I decided to stay dry and take a few pictures. That was when taking my 3rd or 4th picture, one of my strobes fired with an incredibly bright flash and I began to smell smoke. Scratch one strobe.

After an hour or so exploring Black Cave we climbed back onboard the junks and in a light rain headed on to the more developed Phong Nha cave.

Above the cave entrance were the signs of rocket blasts made when the US military helicopters tried to destroy the cave's store of weapons during the Vietnam (or as they call it here, the American) war. There was also a pontoon for crossing the river here that was hidden in the cave and brought out at night. Fortunately the cave was much larger than the US military had thought so almost no harm came to any of the wonderful forma-

tions deep inside the cave.

The entrance was located at water level, making it possible for us to boat a long way back into the cave. After about 10 minutes, our boat landed at a mud bank and we got out to have a look at the well-lighted, rather large formations that lined the upper fossil passage. The path was dry, mostly level with enough commercial lighting that I could grab a couple of cave pictures. For me it was just one more incredible cave I was able to visit on our karst tour. Another 'once in a lifetime' cave trip.

Later that evening, after a wonderful dinner at the Phong Nha Farmstay, we headed into town for a caving slide show given by Howard Limbert, who has spent years exploring the area caves, including the now-famous Son Doong .

DAY 12: PHONG NHA KE BANG NP

Every day of our trip was special, but this day was one of those very, very, very special days. Our tour group was scheduled to see the off-trail sections of the recently developed, Thien Duong (Paradise) cave. It was not the longest cave in the world, nor the deepest, nor did it have the biggest room or largest formations, but we were told that if someone were to add up the total volume of the whole cave system, it would beat all other caves in its Bigness. One word I could have used to describe it would have been HUGE! There are two main systems in the park, Hang Vom (of which Paradise is part), about 36 km in length, and the Phong Nha system, which includes Son Doong, and with over 62 km surveyed in its various segments.

The caving day in Paradise began with us adding our cave lights to our day packs,



Dave Bunnell

Overlook in PNKBNP towards karst containing Hang Son Doong



Dave Bunnell

Entrance signage to Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park on the karst

throwing them into the van. After a short drive we arrived at the entrance gate to the cave. It was so new and modern it looked like a gate into Disneyland.

On the other side of the gate and up the trail, we hopped into little golf carts. We drove along the narrow jungle path to the base of stairs that climbed up to a great rock fall. That's when the Disney ride ended. There were 524 stairs up to the cave entrance at the top of the breakdown. Of course once into the cave, we would need to climb down the same 570 meters to the cave floor.

Once inside the cave I was in awe at the size of the cave passage and the formations that filled it. The ceiling would have measured a hundred feet, the walls likewise. The formations were equal in grandeur to those in Carlsbad.

The formations along the walls looked like they originated thousands of years ago, as little seeps that made their way into the passage along fractures in the walls. There were also massive stalactites and stalagmites that grew in the middle of the passage.

Monuments to such great beauty can only be found in caves.

Stalagmites grew to heights of 60 feet or more. Halfway along the tourist route trail was one old stalagmite that had fallen on its side many millennia ago. On top of that fallen giant was growing a massive new stalagmite. I'd say an easy estimate of the size would be 20 plus feet in diameter for the fallen one. The top stalagmite was only a slightly smaller enormous stalagmite.

The tourist path went on for about one kilometer before it came to the end of the developed section of the cave. But we were a lucky bunch of cavers. Our fantastic Focused Tour guides had some special connections and got permission for our group to go far beyond the constructed path, permission to go 'off trail.' Hopefully, we would be able to go six kilometers farther to a 240 meter skylight called "Where Daylight Beacons."

We climbed off the elevated pathway, down a few short stairs, onto familiar cave mud. The mud covered the floor from wall-to-wall, looking like it had formed at the bottom of a lake. As we walked around a

large formation that almost blocked the entire passage, we left the developed cave behind.

As we walked along the passage I would occasionally look up to try and light the cave ceiling, which was perhaps up to 40-50 meters overhead. In many areas the walls were covered with massive flowstone formations that stretched on for hundreds of meters. Every so often we'd encounter a flowstone formation so large that it would almost block the entire passage, leaving only a small opening for us to pass through. I was amazed at the huge size of everything in Paradise Cave and how lucky I was to be able to see part of it.

Our trip continued on with the ceiling slowly lowering to a point where we needed to start crawling on hands and knees. A bit farther on our path ended on a mud stream bank with us looking into a flooded passage. In a drier season we could have used a small boat to cross the low passage to get to the big skylight entrance, but alas, it was sumped here and this became our turnaround point.

Returning back to the huge passage



Jim Patena

Entrance to Phang Nha Cave showing scars on cliff from aerial assaults during the Vietnam war



Jim Patena

Boat dock inside Phang Nha Cave

Caves at Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park

Photos by Dave Bunnell except as noted



Black Cave



Paradise Cave, developed section, below, above, and right



Phong Nha Cave



Phong Nha Cave



Paradise Cave, undeveloped section, above and Worthington in upper right



Jim Patena



on right. Judy Fisher in red and Tasha Michelson

we found our boxed lunches waiting for us. They were carried with us into the cave on the back of a young Vietnamese who wore only sandals and had NO light. Several of our group offered him our extra lights. With a big smile on his face he said no.

After lunch we headed back to the main tourist part of the cave, stopping occasionally at a gargantuan formation for Dave to take a picture. Over the next hour or so, I walked slowly along the elevated tourist path totally amazed at the cave's grandeur. Whoever was responsible for lighting the cave sure did an excellent job. I eventually returned to the entrance and the 524 stairs leading back down to the valley floor and our waiting vans. And so ended another incredible day and one more 'trip of a lifetime'.

DAY 13: TRANSFER FROM PHONG NHA TO HANOI

The following day we headed off to the city of Ha Noi, the first stop on our way to Cat Ba Island in Ha Long Bay. The name Ha Long Bay loosely translates into 'descending dragon bay' and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

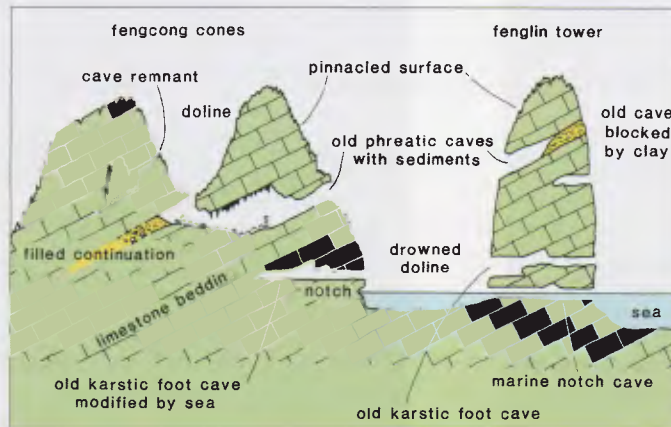
DAY 14: CAT BA ISLAND AND HA LONG BAY - TRANSPORT TO THE BAY

Leaving Ha Noi on the bus, we rode up to the port of Hai Pong where we transferred to a high speed ferry to Cat Ba Island. Landing at the main port on Cat Ba Island we transferred to another bus. From there it was a short ride to a small fishing port. We then climbed onboard a junk for the remaining voyage to remote beachside cabins in the southern part of the bay that would be our base camp. From there we'd spend the next four days touring a few of the many unique karst features Ha Long Bay had to offer.

DAY 15-16: HA LONG BAY—MORE KARST AND CAVES

Once we were settled in on Cat Ba Island, we spent the next four days touring the bay on wonderful little junks. Occasionally we would climb off the junk into kayaks to paddle through another one of the area's many sea caves. Many of the caves that were selected for our exploration had passages that bored through the limestone karst into lovely and very isolated blue lagoons, likely flooded sinkholes. (Waltham, 2003). A highlight of the southern karst was certainly Dau Be island (see the page devoted to this).

In addition to kayaking into a few of the many sea caves, we also journeyed to the more touristied northern part of the bay to visit two commercialized caves, Thien Cung Grotto and Hang Sung Sot. The developers of both of these caves had chosen to light them with bright colored lights, which we were told was the 'Chinese way' of cave



Cave types in Ha Long Bay (from Waltham, 2005, used by permission)

Waltham (2005) denotes several types of caves found in both fengcong cone karst and fenglin karst towers (the latter being the more isolated towers). Below is an example of a foot cave, possibly modified by wave action. Caves such as those on the facing page, lower left, have certainly been modified by wave action but were originally formed by dissolution.



Jim Patera

There is no shortage of caves to be explored in Ha Long Bay's flooded cone karst

Islands of flooded tower karst in Ha Long Bay (from Waltham, 2005, used by permission).

Ha Long Bay: Karst & Caves



Jim Patera



Jim Patera



Dave Bunnell



Dave Bunnell

Isolated karst tower



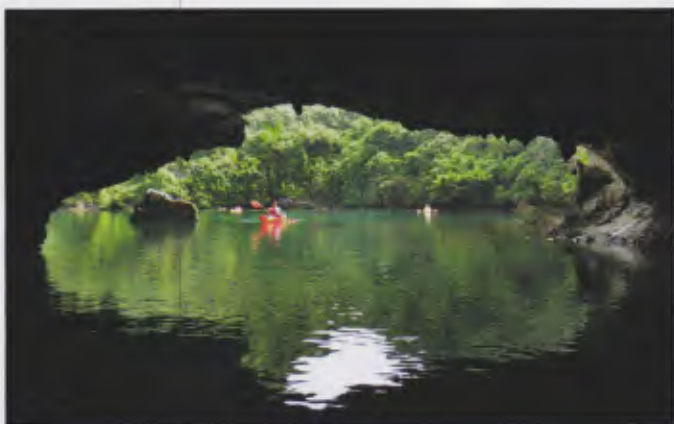
Jim Patera

View through the cave viewed on the facing page.



Dave Bunnell

Above and below: Views from high points on Cat Ba Island



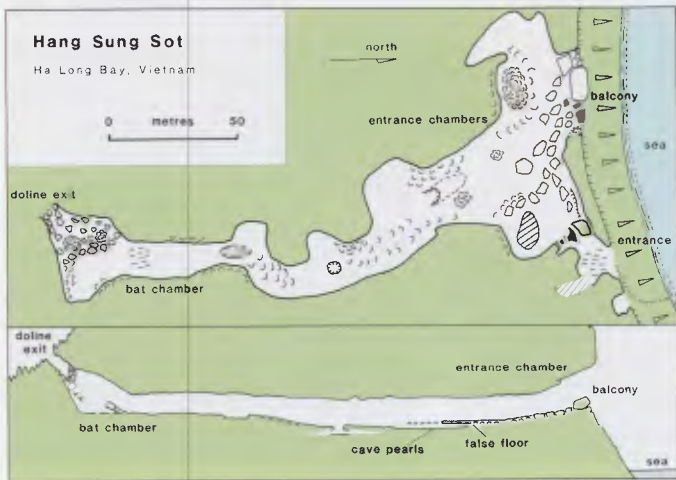
Jim Patera



Jim Patera

Ha Long Bay: Phreatic Show Caves

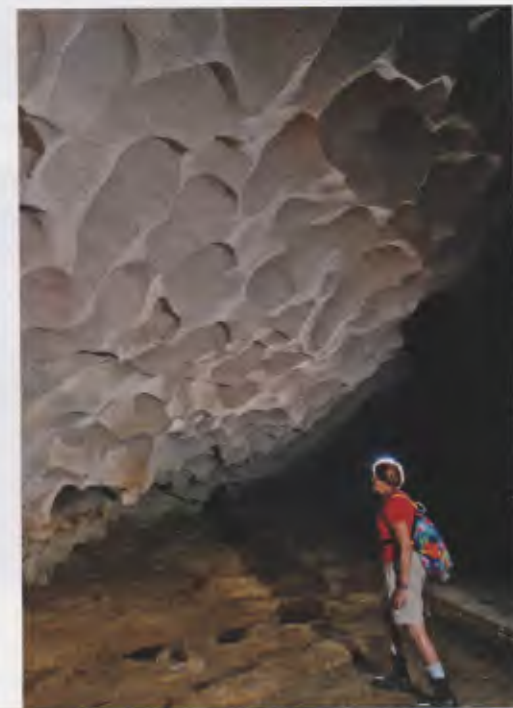
Photos: Dave Bunnell



Map of Hang Sung Sot (from Waltham, 2005, used by permission)

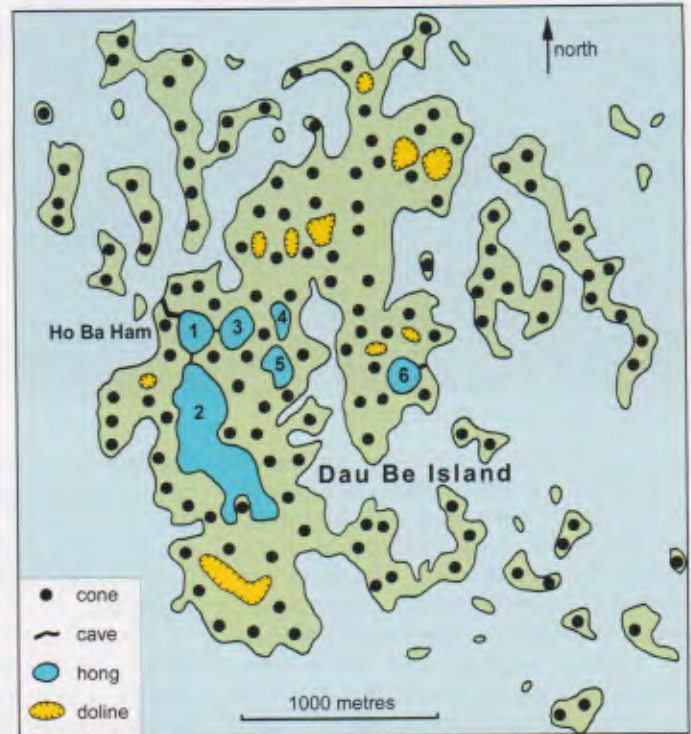
Photos, clockwise from upper right:

1. Dong Thien Cung
2. Dong Thien Cung
3. Huge scallops in Hang Sung Sot
4. Scalloped ceilings in Hang Sung Sot
5. Hang Sung Sot entrance



Ha Long Bay: Dau Be Island

Photos: Dave Bunnell



Map of Dau Be island in the southern part of Ha Long Bay. The 6 enclosed lagoons labeled “hong” are presumed to be former dolines. The lagoons are connected via water-floored caves whose ceiling height varies with tide levels. (from Waltham, 2005, used by permission)





Dave Bunnell

The Perfume Pagoda in Huong Tich



Dave Bunnell

Jim Patera in a cave at Cuc Phuong NP

lighting. In both of the caves we found multicolor-lit formations filling the passage. The wonderful bright colors sure did change the view of the caves. Although my eyes enjoyed the play of colors, I found all the different the colors distracting, which made it difficult to pick out the individual formations.

In Hang Sung Sot cave, the second commercial cave we visited that day, we found the walls and ceiling covered with surprisingly large deep scallops, some a foot or more in size. I was told that the large size was only possible because they were formed by very slow flowing water, perhaps only a couple of inches per week. Faster water movement, I was told, would create smaller scallops; slower flow would create larger scallops with both extremes leading to none at all.

After four fantastic days touring Ha Long Bay and some of the caves of Cat Ba Island, we headed back to Ha Noi (again by junk, bus, boat, bus) where we spent the last day of our Focused Karst tour seeing more of the old city and sampling several more delightful Vietnamese meals.

FINAL 3 DAYS IN VIETNAM

After the organized trip ended, Dave and I stayed in Vietnam an additional three days. We spent those days on a private tour exploring some of the karstic sights south of Ha Noi.

The first day we were driven in a private car to the small town of Tam Coc, where we spent the afternoon floating along a small stream in a little sampan. The sampan was propelled by a woman who used her feet to row us past several flooded rice fields and though several small caves at the base of karst pinnacles. (Ironically, Waltham calls these type of caves "foot caves" in his paper).

On the second day, we traveled to Cuc Phuong National Park, Vietnam's first national park and the country's largest nature reserve. There we got to visit a small cave, which was discovered to contain remains of early habitation dating back 7,500 years.

The cave wasn't all that interesting, but the hike through the jungle sure was neat. Also at Cuc Phuong NP we had the opportunity to visit the Endangered Primate Rescue Centre and the Turtle Rescue Center located in the park.

On our final day exploring the area south of Ha Noi, we drove to the Perfume Pagoda, a large area with several elegant Buddhist temples. Since there were no roads to the pagodas, we were again rowed in a sampan on Yen Stream to a steep trail which led up the hillside to the Buddhist temples. As we climbed, we eventually passed the first two pagodas and finally arrived at the Perfume Pagoda, highest of the three temples, and located in a large cave chamber high on the mountain, called Huong Tich. Having done the long walk up, we opted to take the other route down, a cable car ride over the tower karst. Of course, we could have done it the other way around, but what fun would that be?

With our return to Ha Noi, we spent one more day touring the city and eating

fine food. The trip ended with the required long overnight flight back to the states. It was a remarkable flight that had us riding a jet stream that at one time propelled us with ground speeds of over 750 mph. And so ended my tour of Laos & Vietnam caves and karst, a truly once-in-a-lifetime trip.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Dwight and Mary Deal for leading such a great trip and our fellow travelers who were so helpful in their assistance with the cave photography. Focused Tours may feature excursions to this area in the future but no dates have been set. There are also many caves in PNKBNP that can be visited via adventure tours run by local operators, including the now-famous Hang Son Doong, aka "the world's largest cave."

REFERENCES

Waltham, 2005. Karst and Caves of Ha Long Bay. In *Speleogenesis of Karst Aquifers*, available at www.speleogenesis.info



Dave Bunnell

One of the many low but wide foot caves cutting through a karst tower

SOCIETY NEWS

I am pleased to announce that the National Speleological Society – Youth Group Liaison Committee has a new Regional Coordinator for the Northeast Regional Organization. Please welcome Carlos Peña to this position.

Carlos brings with him not only his caving experience, but plenty of experience

in environmental sciences as well as working with children and teens.

For more information about Carlos, please visit his Web site at http://caves.org/youth/nro_rc.shtml. For more information about the NSS Youth Group Liaison Committee, visit us at http://caves.org/youth/nro_rc.shtml.