

## A SPELEOTOURISM IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

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Malaysia has some of the biggest and longest caves in the world, some caves are archaeological sites, others are beautiful with stunning stalagmites and stalactites, and maybe underground rivers. Some caves are home to a wide variety of cave fauna such as bats, swiftlets, snakes, and invertebrates.

The caves in the Gunung Mulu National Park, Sarawak, are internationally known. Mulu was inscribed as a World Heritage site in 2001. Some of the caves there are world record holders, such as Gua Nasib Bagus, which houses the world's largest chamber, Sarawak Chamber. Clearwater Cave is currently 11th longest in the world, at 151 km. Deer Cave is one of the world's largest cave passages. Niah Caves, also in Sarawak, is a famous archaeological site, where a 40,000 year old human skull was found and rock paintings that have been dated at 1200 years old. Sabah has caves well known for their birds' nest industry, Gua Gomantong being the most famous.

Malaysia is divided into two parts, the peninsula, and east Malaysia which is situated on the island of Borneo. Sabah and Sarawak are in Borneo. In the peninsula, the caves are smaller, especially in length, compared to those in east Malaysia.

The peninsula lies at the end of the southeast Asian mainland and the limestone mostly occurs as steep tropical karst towers rising from the valley floor. The last major outcrop of limestone is the Batu Caves, a famous hill located outside the capital of Kuala Lumpur. It is estimated that only one third of the surface of the peninsula is limestone.

In Peninsular Malaysia there are very few show caves open to the public. Speleotourism is not a common concept, and recreational caving is not a popular pastime. There are very few cavers in Malaysia.

The best known show cave is Gua Tempurung in Perak. It is located in the Kinta Valley south of Ipoh. The Kinta Valley extends about 20 kilometres both north and south of Ipoh and some 47 steep isolated hills, mostly of Permian limestone, rise precipitously from the valley floor to over 600m.

Gua Tempurung is a fine river cave with some large chambers, and was opened as a show cave around 10 years ago. It has suffered from lack of care and maintenance since being handed over to local authorities to manage.

Another well known show cave is Gua Kelam in Perlis near the Thai border. The cave is a 370m long tunnel through a hill. In 1935 a wooden suspension bridge was built through the cave, to allow tin miners to transport the ore. This walkway has since been used by pedestrians and motorcyclists to avoid the long detour up and over the hills. In later years the cave was fitted with electric lighting and turned into a tourist attraction. Other caves in this area have been mined for tin and still contain many relics left by miners. Attempts have been made to turn one cave into a tourist attraction.

Other caves in the country, generally located in forest reserves and state parks, are used for adventure caving activities. Some have been fitted with walkways and lighting.

Architectural tourism, and paleontological tourism relating to caves is a possibility that has not been developed. Many caves are known archaeological sites. In Kelantan there are a group of caves along the Nenggiri River where artifacts dating from the Hoabinhian and Neolithic periods have been found.

The Lenggong Valley in Perak has revealed the oldest complete human skeleton found, dated around 11,000 years. These bones, called Perak Man, were found in a cave. Perak Woman was found more recently and dated around 8000 years. Several other caves have revealed stone tools and jewellery. In the same area, but not in a cave, a stone workshop was discovered and thought to be 74,000 years old. Nearby Bukit Jawa has been dated at around 200,000 years which makes it one of Malaysia's oldest Paleolithic sites. The Lenggong Valley is an important area and could be the first human settlement in Malaysia. A museum was opened in Lenggong to display the archaeological information.

Also in Perak are the rock paintings of Gua Tambun. These Neolithic paintings are about 2000 years old, and the oldest known in Malaysia. They

were discovered in 1959 and feature some 25-30 haematite drawings of animals. Although a tourist signboard was erected some decades ago, no attempt has been made to preserve the paintings, which are exposed to the elements. The need for protection often occurs in the media, but still nothing is done.

Again in Perak, in Gua Naga Mas, is a unique example of paleofauna. A fossil of a mammal is embedded in the cave wall. Found in 1992 no real tests have been done, but the fossil is thought to be a leopard or some other cat, and may date back to the Pleistocene, 1.8 million to 10,000 years BP. The Department of Museums and Antiquities erected a signboard at the base of the steps leading to the cave but now the place is totally overgrown and the sign has gone. Also pieces of the fossil have been removed, presumably for use in magic. Nothing has been done to protect the fossil.

Cave temples are found in many places in Peninsular Malaysia. Batu Caves is a famous Hindu temple where the annual Thaipusam festival is held, which attracts almost one million devotees and visitors.

Around the city of Ipoh are many cave temples. Some are more than 100 years old and have

some intricate murals painted on the cave walls. In others, the cave walls have turned black from the decades of burning incense sticks. A few of these older temples have some interesting wooden structures built onto the cliff face and into the caves. Nothing is being done to preserve these, instead people prefer to build a new temple in front, and to cover up or destroy the old wooden historical frameworks.

And many of the older temples seem to be losing their appeal. More caves and rock shelters are being converted into new temples, and the latest trend seems to be Thai style cave temples. Maybe the old gods of the Taoist, Buddhist and Chinese beliefs have become less attractive.

A lot of money is put into cave temples. Some caves are developed for tourism, but often are not well maintained. But little is done to save some sites that have archaeological or paleontological interest. In Malaysia archaeology can sometimes be a sensitive issue due to the religion and culture. Therefore some sites are not really recognised as being important. It is a great pity when such natural treasures are not recognised and could disappear over time.



**Foto 1:** Limestone hills in Perlis



**Foto 2:** Naga Mas fossil



**Foto 3:** Nam Loong Ngam temple, Perak



Foto 4: Nam Thean Tong temple, Perak



Foto 5: Painting in cave temple



**Foto 6:** Racer eating a bat



**Foto 7:** Rubbish in Gua Tempurung show cave

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