

Gunung Mulu National Park, Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo

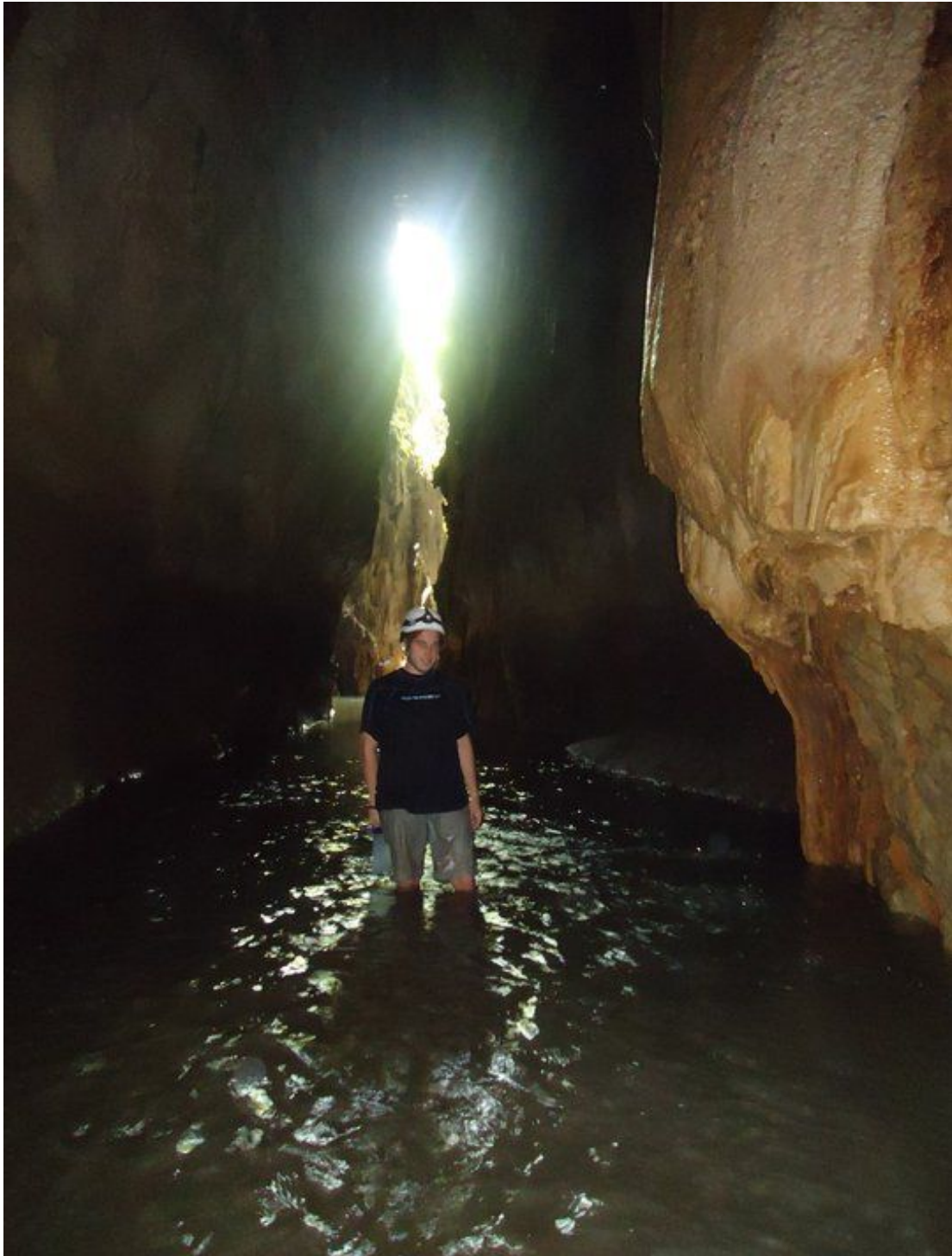
September 2010

Leah and I arrived in Borneo from Singapore on the 12th of September (and for anyone interested, we had visited India, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma) and mainland Malaysia prior to this), stayed overnight in Kota Kinabalu, where we went to the awesome night market, and then flew to Mulu via Miri on the 13th. The flight to Miri went mostly across the sea and passed over Brunei – if we'd been there a few days earlier we'd have been given a goody bag from the sultan, as he does this every year for his birthday - and after almost missing our connection, we headed inland, looking down at the still-dense rainforest, which shows devastating signs of deforestation in places, and landed at the tiny airstrip of Mulu.



The Holy Grail for me in Mulu was to get to Sarawak Chamber, the world's largest cave chamber. The park authorities were very difficult to deal with on this matter and had tested all my e-mail writing skills when I tried to organise this trip, so I was quite surprised when I went into the park office and found out that the trip would be going ahead, weather dependent, the next day. I was in Mulu for a week, and in this time nobody else was up for the trip, but the park rules state that a minimum of 4 people must be present on all caving trips (and it is absolutely forbidden to enter any of the caves without a guide), so I had to hire 3 guides!

At 7am on the 14th of September I met the guides: Henry, Joe and Paul – all local but with English names. The walk to Gua Nasib Bagus (Good Luck Cave) took 3 hours and was through dense jungle with bats, monkeys, hornbills, stick insects, tree frogs, vipers and leeches. Lots of leeches. They certainly knew how to make their bites painful, too. And they only went for me.



The first 800m of the cave is through a river passage 50m high. The water is chest-deep in parts and full of sharp rocks. Inside the cave, large spiders were abundant, as were crickets, bats and swiftlets, which make clicking sounds to navigate in the dark. One deep pool had a fixed rope to traverse and after 800m we left the river and started to climb upwards.



The climbing was fairly straightforward, but exposed, and the views incredible. We were in Sarawak Chamber – 600m x 415m x 100m. I went right to the end of the chamber, or at least until the boulder-strewn floor sloped upwards at such an angle that I could go no further. Henry told me that there are only 20 successful trips to the chamber every year, and hardly any ever reach the end. I am only repeating what I was told; the statistics could be very different. Inside the chamber, in whichever direction I faced, all I could see was my beam of light (and I had a powerful light) disappearing into the distance. The place was very humid and of all the attempts at a decent photograph of me in the chamber, this was the best. Obviously I looked good in all of them, but some had lots of droplets on the lens.



We had a swim in the traverse pool on the way out (Malaysian caves are a bit warmer than Yorkshire ones) and, back in The World, took a more adventurous route through the jungle, still 3 hours long though, so I ended up back at park HQ completely exhausted. I slept well that night.

For the next day I joined Leah and we explored some show caves. We travelled up the river by motorised canoe, stopping off at a local village, where the *Orang Asli* live in longhouses. The Cave of the Winds starts with a wide passage, which leads to the very impressive King's Chamber and then a 105m shaft, which is traversed about halfway up using a very large ledge. Next we went into Clearwater Cave, the longest in SE Asia and a strong contender for the title of cave with the greatest volume in the world. The trip was short but we had some spectacular views.

That afternoon we walked the 3km to Lang's Cave, quite small but the best decorated of the caves I saw in Mulu. After that we went into the most remarkable cave I have ever seen and the one that surely holds the superlatives record for world caves – Deer Cave, which has: the world's largest entrance, the world's largest passage, the world's largest bat population (around 3 million) and the greatest number of species of bat living in a single cave (12).



The cave was absolutely amazing, with enormous tree ferns in the entrance, beautiful formations, huge piles of guano and unthinkable dimensions. The entire passageway is in partial daylight and this show cave trip took us to within site of the exit, almost as wide as the entrance. After leaving Deer Cave, we sat at the bat observatory to watch the bat exodus. Every evening, those 3 million bats leave the cave in search of food, sometimes in small groups, sometimes in one long line. There is a bat hawk that attacks and eats the bats and we saw a few of those too. This was featured on BBC Planet Earth's Caves episode (as was the guano in Deer Cave) and is probably the greatest wildlife spectacle I have ever seen.



The following day, now all excited about caves and wildlife and the two together, we did Racer Cave, generally considered the best cave in the park for wildlife. We did this with 4 German girls who had never been caving before, but coped well with the mud and roped climbs. We saw a crab, spiders, crickets, tailless whip scorpions, centipedes, bats, swiftlets and racer snakes.



If you're very nice to the park management (i.e. you pay them lots of money) it is possible to do a trip right through Deer Cave into the area beyond, a real tropical paradise known quite rightly as Eden. This is what I did on the 17th of September, with Leah and 2 Lancaster ladies called Cassie and Jacky. Veering off the show cave route, the trip is a tremendous mix of ducking and diving under rocks, swimming through a stream and wading through guano. I tend not to split too many hairs over what constitutes having 'done' a cave, but felt very satisfied to have gone beyond the show cave route.



Of course we watched another bat exodus after the caving.

On our last full day in Mulu, I walked with Leah to Moonmilk Cave, quite short but completely coated with moonmilk and with a liana creeper growing the whole length of the cave.

We left Mulu on the 19th and flew to Sandakan (flying is really the only way to get around Borneo) for 3 days on the Kinabatangan, then did some whitewater rafting on the Padas River and a few days diving at Mantanani before leaving Borneo, heading to Papua New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand. But these are all stories that can be told another day.

Chris Scaife