



photography: Stephen Smith

## Batu Caves

**Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia** — At the base of the mountain a wedding is in full swing, inches from the parking lot and a stone's throw from the congested highway to KL. A Hindu priest waves his hands over incense and fire. He blesses an offering of oranges as a tabla drum and singa horn pierce the early morning air. Ganesh and the gathered sit content, undisturbed by a pounding jackhammer and concrete saws blasting away behind the temple. Adorned in rivers of gold bracelets a young bare foot bride glides through the dusty construction site leading to the temple. As a witness and backdrop to this timeless ceremony it would be hard to beat the sheer face of one of the two largest limestone massifs in South-East Asia and home of the Batu Caves.

To reach the cave entrance you must climb 272 steep steps in the heat and humidity. It is the kind of place you'd think could only exist in the movies, a place where Indiana Jones might tread. The upper reaches are guarded by the antics of an army of macaque monkeys panning boldly for breakfast and a gentle

girl with a snake wrapped around her neck. At the cave's mouth echoes of bird chirps bleed into the pitched squeaks from battalions of fluttering bats. As you venture into the mountain's belly Hindu deities burst from the walls.

On entering the massive complex there appears the first and only sign of commercialism. Far from the actual main cave, a tiny souvenir shop's fluorescent and neon lights punch popsicle colours into the darkness. But like the Vatican vendors hawking plates of Saints nothing can rob the place of its grandeur. It is estimated by geologists that it took Mother Nature 440 million years to carve this stone cathedral.

As I approach the Temple or Cathedral Cave the grandest of the caves, it glows in sunlight cascading through a ceiling opening 100 meters high and 80 meters across. A priest approaches and asks me where I am from, nods politely and moves on without a sound. A proud father cradles his baby boy about to be blessed. The child's head is shaved and powdered yellow. He attentively watches a family of long tailed monkeys racing along the cliff face.

Since the cave's discovery many have staked claim to its riches. The Batu Cave is an important religious site for Malaysian Hindus and home of the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, arguably the most famous Hindu temple in the country. The caves also contain several shrines and the Sri Subramania Swamy Temple, and since 1892 the Thaipusam festival held in late January has been celebrated there. Every year the three day festival attracts over a million pilgrims and tourists from around the world.

During the Thaipusam devotees visit the caves, some carry elaborate Kavadis, frameworks holding metal skewers and hooks which are used to pierce the skin, tongue, cheeks and nipples in acts of contrition and penitence. Most others though simply come to pray and bathe the deities with milk called paal kundam.

The Dark Cave which is below Temple Cave is 2000 meters long and is home to a large number of endemic cave animals and you must gain permission from the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) to visit.

Naturalists revere the Batu Caves as home to a diverse array of flora and fauna, hosting 28 species of moss and 38 species of ferns. For fauna there are at least five species each of frogs, bats, lizards and snakes that reside here.

There is also the Gallery Cave at the foot of the steps to Temple Cave which has an art gallery with statues and wall paintings depicting scenes from Hindu mythology.

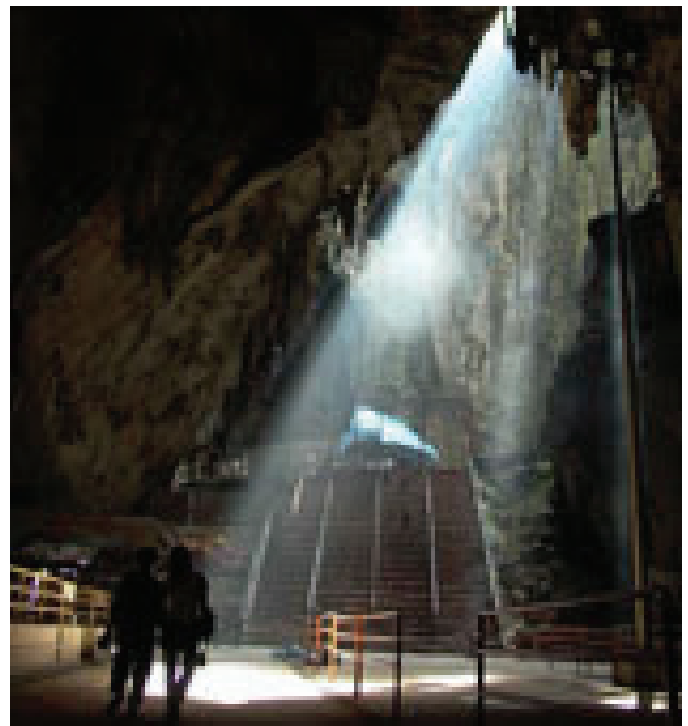
Recently splunkers have discovered they love to explore the Dark Cave which contains astounding stalactites and stalagmites along its relatively untouched two-kilometer network of caverns. The rock climbers have also made their mark on the mountain. But none has been as destructive to the natural ecosystem as the miners who continue to quarry the rich limestone deposits. All this activity has played havoc on this isolated and extremely sensitive ecosystem.

Dr Kiew Bong Heang, a University Malay zoologist who has been at the forefront of protecting the caves has made it clear that poorly conceived land-use is threatening the area. In an interview with The Malaysian Nature Society he explained, "Without a good structural master plan the Batu Caves can deteriorate until it becomes a very unsightly place. There is not a big patch of natural vegetation on top of the hills and there is an age-dependent deterioration of genetic material taking place, which is a non-visible process. That means that isolated species, such as the monkeys that call Batu Caves home, are actually the living dead. They are doomed to extinction."

There is also the visible problem of vandalism on cave artifacts, and recently the MNS foiled a large-scale attempt to steal guano that would have been an ecological disaster for all of the cave-dwelling insects and animals.

If something is not done to protect it, there is a real danger that the fate of the Batu Caves will be as clear as the graffiti written on its walls, and that this wonderful limestone massif will degenerate into a lifeless sterile monument.

But for now I am just tickled to be here, delighted by the playing monkeys and mesmerized by the massive scope of this place. I begin photographing and soon lose all track of time. Suddenly, I realize



photography: Stephen Smith

that I am alone in the vast temple, even the priest was nowhere to be found. I savoured the moment, then slowly made my way to the cave's mouth. A few new worshippers filed passed me and smiled. Looking down, the stretch of stairs is now empty, few are eager to climb up in the heat of mid-day. I begin my descent alone.

In the distance the wedding party was leaving too. They turned and gave a parting glance and they seemed to be waving to me. Or were they on their special day waving good bye to the other wedding witness, the holy mountain? They were too far away to tell, but I like to think it might have been both.