

Water Fun Park & Tourist Caves, Amidst Tropical Tower Karst.

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A recent caving trip took me to the karst area of Bantimurung Bulusaraung National Park, in the Maros regency, Pangkajene district of South Sulawesi, Indonesian. The nearest commercial Airport is at Maros just under an hour drive from the National Park. In the other direction (South) from the airport is the major city of Makassar where most essential supplies can be purchased. Bantimurung National Park is 43,750 hectares in area and 45 kilometers to the north of Makassar. It contains the limestone tower karst of Maros Pangkep, the second largest karst area in the world after the one in South-Eastern China.



Tower Karst at Bantimurung National Park.

Bantimurung NP is one of those out of the way places often overlooked by tourists. Yet it offers such a diverse range of karst landscape and amazing flora and fauna. The area certainly has not been commercialised in order to encourage foreign tourists, so one can still become immersed in the culture of the local people.

Alfred Russel Wallace, a British scientist who visited Bantimurung between 1856-7, dubbed the place the Butterfly Kingdom. The locals now take great prides in proclaiming the area as “butterfly capital of the world”. We saw numerous children and adults running around with butterfly nets as they can earn up to \$100 USD per day catching specimens. Local butterflies as well as imported specimens from New Guinea and other countries around Asia are pressed flat and mounted in picture frames for sale to the tourists. Some of the local elders we met were very concerned that the butterfly population had been dramatically reduced over their lifetime.

Bantimurung NP is a magic place of tower karst, rainforests, tufa waterfalls and caves. While in the area we visited a number of limestone caves which were open to the public. Other caves, not open to tourists were also visited under permit



Tufa waterfall packed with people in Bantimurung NP.

arrangements, but are not discussed in this article.

For tourists the entry to the part of the National Park containing the aquatic fun park is 20,000Rp (about \$2.20 AUD) per day, however locals pay considerably less than that. The fun park is in a small valley, enclosed on three sides by tower karst up to 100 metre high.

During the day, visitor numbers swell into the thousands, particularly on the weekends. By far

the majority are locals and Indonesian tourists from other islands. It is a place where families come to spend the day for a picnic, social or just a day out with their children. Car tubes can be hired for a small fee to ride the rapids below the tufa waterfall. A flying fox (aerial runway) is set up over a large pool for thrill seekers and water slides for young and old. There are many natural pools as well as man made wading pools for toddlers and deep pools for diving. Live bands play on a stage overlooking several pools, while food stalls, street artists, buskers and magicians are all out to impress for your dollar or rupiah. The place is alive with the sounds of music, conversation and laughter filling the air.

A substantial stream flows constantly from the vast area of tower karst clad in lush tropical rainforest and monkeys swing through the trees overhead. Many varieties of brightly coloured butterflies dart back and forth through the trees and among the people. A spectacular 15m tufa waterfall is the centrepiece as a large volume of water plunges with a roar to the start of the rapids used for tubing and on through the rest of the

aquatic park. The water is surprisingly warm, but cool enough to be refreshing, hence very popular with the tourists. Standing under the tufa waterfall and riding car tubes down the rapids is certainly a very popular activity here.

This was our gateway to the three tourist caves within the National Park. On one of our recreational days away from the permit caves, I walked from the park entry gate up past the tufa waterfall. Above the falls the river runs slowly through the deep gorge, fed from a large karst outflow. The roar of the waterfall grows dimmer and the one is surrounded by the natural sounds of jungle animals. The gorge walking track eventually leads to a cave entrance less than 10 metres above the stream. A small group of locals greet you at the entrance and offer dim lead torches for hire, if you don't have your own light.

I join the waiting cave tour group just inside the cave and to my surprise two women immediately leave their husbands to latched onto my sweaty arms. I don't know if it was my bright caving light or because I was the only lily white



Neil Anderson in Istona Toakola Cave.

Caucasian in the group, which attracted the women to me. ☺ Anyway it did make the tour rather difficult for me with these women constantly attached.

Gua Batu (Stone Cave)

This cave consisted of two poorly decorated chambers with a tacky mud floors. The chambers were connected by a short narrow passage with several wobbly stepping stones to keep visitor's feet out of the ankle deep water. Given that the majority of visitors were Indonesian, who preferred to remove their thongs or shoes and cave in bare feet, the stepping stones made no sense as most people washed their feet instead of using the unstable stones. The temperature underground felt like 27°C and with a lather of perspiration, I would guess near 100% humidity.

Entry to the cave is free, however there was an unofficial cave guide who appeared to belong to the budding entrepreneurs hiring torches to the tourists. My own caving light was far brighter than the ones for hire and that of the self appointed guide sporting an old kerosene Tilley lamp.

The Indonesian guide told tales of decorations which look like imaginary something-or-others as he directed people through the cave with the dim lamp. Thankfully an Indonesian on the tour translated the stories to English for me. Eventually we came to a small drip pool the size of a hand basin, in which it is obligatory for all visitors to wash their face and hands "to bring good fortune". I followed the guide's instructions and shuddered at the thought of how many sweaty hands and faces contacted that small pool per day.



Barefoot tourist in Gua Mimpi Cave.

Istona Toakola Cave

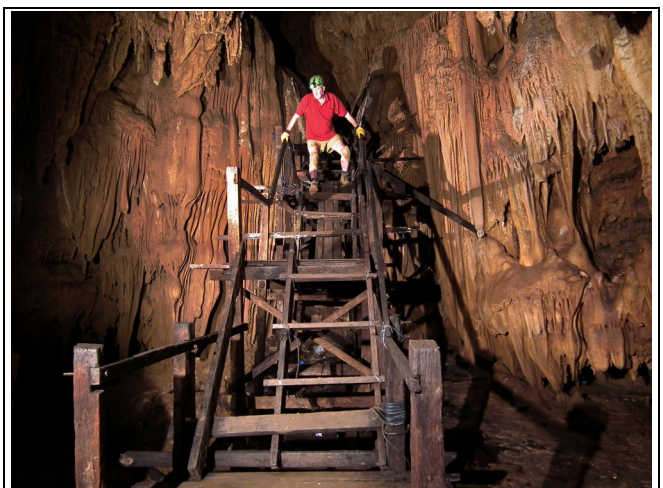
Access to this cave is via the path leading to Gua Mimpi cave, as discussed later. Istona cave consists of one large cave passage several hundred metres long. The decorations are very large and quite spectacular. Access to the cave is easy by walking down a dirt and rubble scree slope leading to the relatively flat floor of the cave passage. The floor is generally damp earth with very little mud. There is no infrastructure in this cave and of the three tourist caves within the aquatic park this cave is least visited, despite the entrance being just 20 metres from the Gua Mimpi Cave main entrance.

Gua Mimpi (Dream Cave) is considered a "self guided" cave by the NP management.

This cave originally had one entrance, then in the late 80s a second entrance was opened up by digging at the rear of the cave. This made it possible for a 900m through trip. Around 1989 a rock and concrete path was constructed to the entrance and a hardwood timber walkway



Lashed together tourist walking through Mimpi Cave.



Neil using same walkway in Gua Mimpi Cave.

installed through the cave's length. This included several staircases up to 8m high with staging platforms and viewing areas. The majority of the 2m wide walkway was constructed on timber stilts about 1 metre off the muddy cave floor.

The narrow winding concrete pathway leading up the hillside to the cave entrance, has greatly uneven height steps flanked by a concrete rail or barricade (both sides of the very narrow path). It looked more like a drain constructed to direct running water down the side of the mountain, not as a single lane tourist path.

At the start of the cave the timber walkway looks very impressive but within a short distance it quickly degrades to a suspended series of occasional planks. Visitors still use the walkway until they reach a point where it just becomes too difficult to straddle between the missing planks. Here it becomes safer to walk in the mud beside the broken down structure.

Presumably there was originally some form of lighting along the path as electrical cable and clips can still be seen attached to part of the structure. In its hey day this cave when lit would have been very impressive as there are some very interesting decorations scattered throughout the large passage ways.

One of our party who had visited the cave in 2003 said the structure was unusable at that time. Today the walkway has deteriorate to such an extent that it is very unsafe to use, but many tourists per day still make the perilous journey through the cave, dressed in good clothes, footwear grasped in hands and one dim torch between 8 or 10 people. I found it quite amusing as groups of bare feet tourists passed by dressed in good clothes, mothers clutching babies, dads

holding the hands of youngsters, feeling their way through the cave by the glow of a dim light. The timberwork strewn over the floor squelched in the tacky mud as people pass by. The landings and stair case ladders are sort of intact, held together with electrical cable, rope or fencing wire and the handrails are just hanging on, ready for the slightest weight to push them over.

The majority of the timber itself appears to be in good condition as planks are still solid and unbroken, however it is the steel bolts and nails which have rusted through to allow the structure to fall apart. I am sure this expensive structure would have still been standing solid if non corroding fasteners had been used during the initial construction.

The exit from this cave is up a very slippery mud slope with just a few toe notches kicked in the mud. Then there are a few precariously suspended flexible timber planks to tightrope balance across in order to reach the surface. From here a narrow goat track winds its way between tower karst covered in lush vegetation. The track is a far cry from what most would consider tourist friendly as it traverses sections of exposed cliff where one wrong step could result in a fatality.

The path eventually leads out of the NP, down to a gravel road, through part of a village and back to the park gate.

The pristine water from the various streams in the National Park /aquatic area converge to form a river at the park boundary, then flows under the single lane road bridge near the park entry gate. On the downstream side of the bridge, dwellings and shops overhang steep banks of the river. I was amazed at the considerable amount of rubbish in the creek just outside the NP. The



Timber walkway in Gua Mimpi Cave.



Timber walking in Mimpi Cave.



Neil Anderson in Istona Toakola Cave.

source soon became apparent as I gazed downstream to see a huge basket full of rubbish (food scraps, bottles, plastic etc) being thrown out the back window of a restaurant, straight into the swiftly flowing clear water.

Despite the considerable pollutants, this whole river is diverted several kilometres downstream into a large concrete and stone canal which flows for tens of kilometres through villages and rice fields. People can be seen bathing in it with soap, washing clothes and in many places water is siphoned off to grow rice and other crops.

General comments

The aquatic park is a fantastic playground for locals and tourist alike and the facility is kept very clean and tidy by employed cleaners. It blends in well with the environment and certainly brings great joy to thousands of people on a daily basis.

I found the Indonesian people are very friendly, helpful, patient and polite. I think many westerners could learn a lot from their culture in

this respect. Having said that, there are several practices relating to rubbish disposal which Indonesians could greatly improve.

For cave management authorities, lesson to learn from Gua Mimpie Cave is that it is not worth the expense of putting infrastructure into a cave unless it is designed to be aesthetically pleasing, non polluting and durable. ie. must be able to withstand the corrosive and destructive nature of a cave environment.

What an asset for tourism and additional revenue earner for the NP, these caves could be if the infrastructure had been constructed with lasting fasteners and the lighting maintained.

All photos by Garry K. Smith