

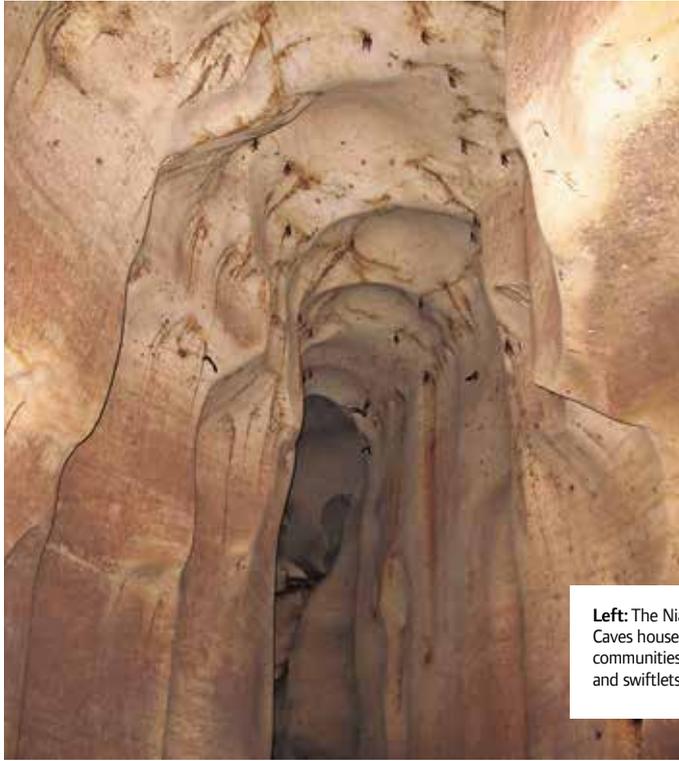
# The giant caves of Sarawak

Mother Nature has been quite generous with the gifts she has bestowed upon Borneo, Asia's largest island. Some of the most fascinating of these are the caves that have been naturally carved out over thousands of years. Of the few accessible to the public, the caves at Gunung Mulu National Park and Niah National Park offer visitors a glimpse into magical underground worlds.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS **YD BAR-NESS**

The island of Borneo is filled with natural marvels and surreal scenery—the tallest trees of the tropics, hotspots of coral biodiversity, towering mountains, and some of the largest caves on the planet. When water reacts with the calcium in a rock, it sometimes corrodes a part of it, and over long periods of time, this corrosion creates hollow caves with spectacular geological formations and hidden spaces.

The caves at Niah National Park date back to Palaeolithic times and provide for magical views.



**Left:** The Niah Caves house large communities of bats and swiftlets.

Many of the caves on Earth are remote, dangerous, or remain undiscovered. But in Sarawak, a Malaysian state within Eastern Borneo, the UNESCO World Heritage listed Mulu and Niah Caves have been developed to allow the world a peek into these magical places. Both are accessible from Miri in Northern Sarawak—Niah by road and Mulu via a short airplane ride.

### **Wonders down under**

After flying over seemingly endless palm plantations, we approach the Mulu Caves. The jungle here is at once reassuringly wild and alarmingly misshapen. From above, the dissolving nature of the geology is readily apparent—the hills appear to be crumbling in on themselves. The heavy tropical rainfall carves sinkholes and flows into and through the hillside, and the paths that it leaves are the magnificent caves.

This cave complex has been protected as Gunung Mulu National Park since 1974, and tourist infrastructure has been put in place nearby. I stayed in a clean and cheerful backpacker's homestay. A common room

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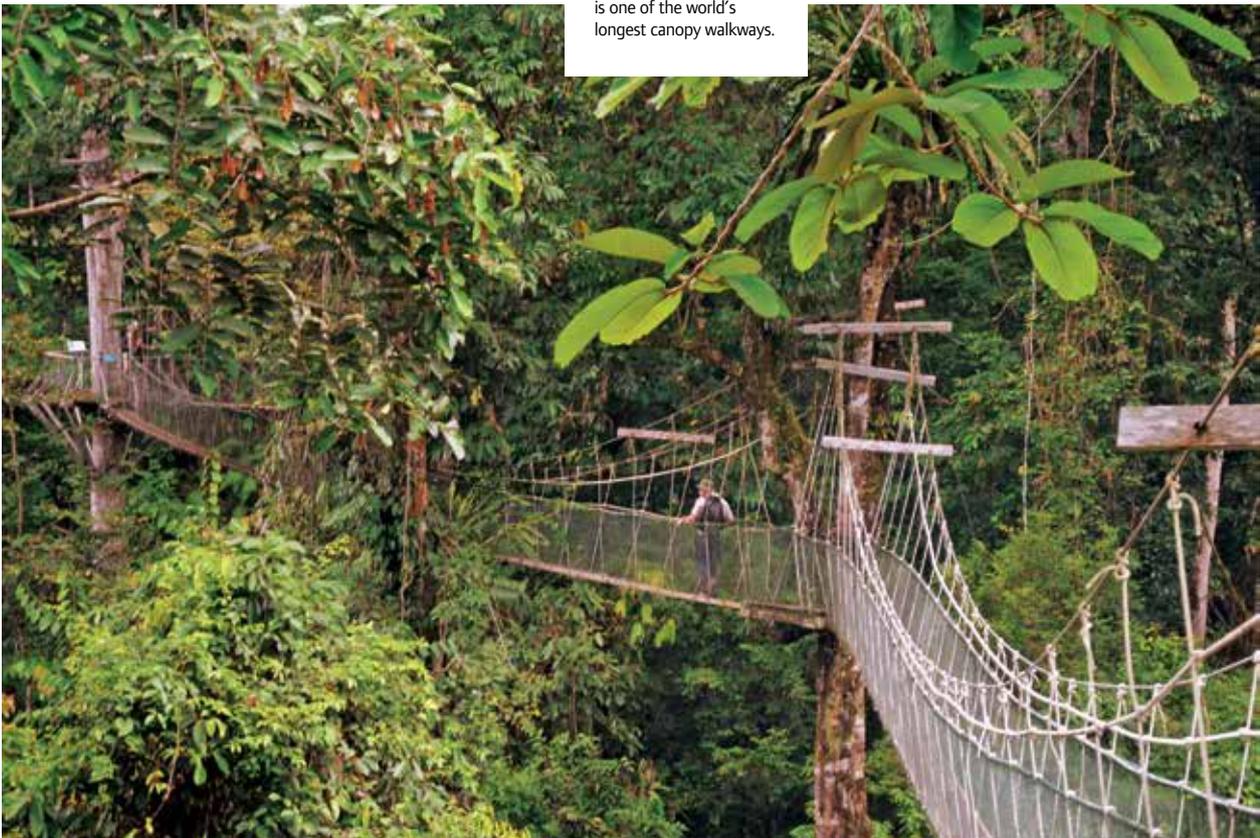
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**Because of the sensitive and dangerous nature of both the caves and jungle, only a handful of tracks are open to solo walkers.**



**Left:** The entrance to Mulu Cave with the lush Bornean jungle for a backdrop.

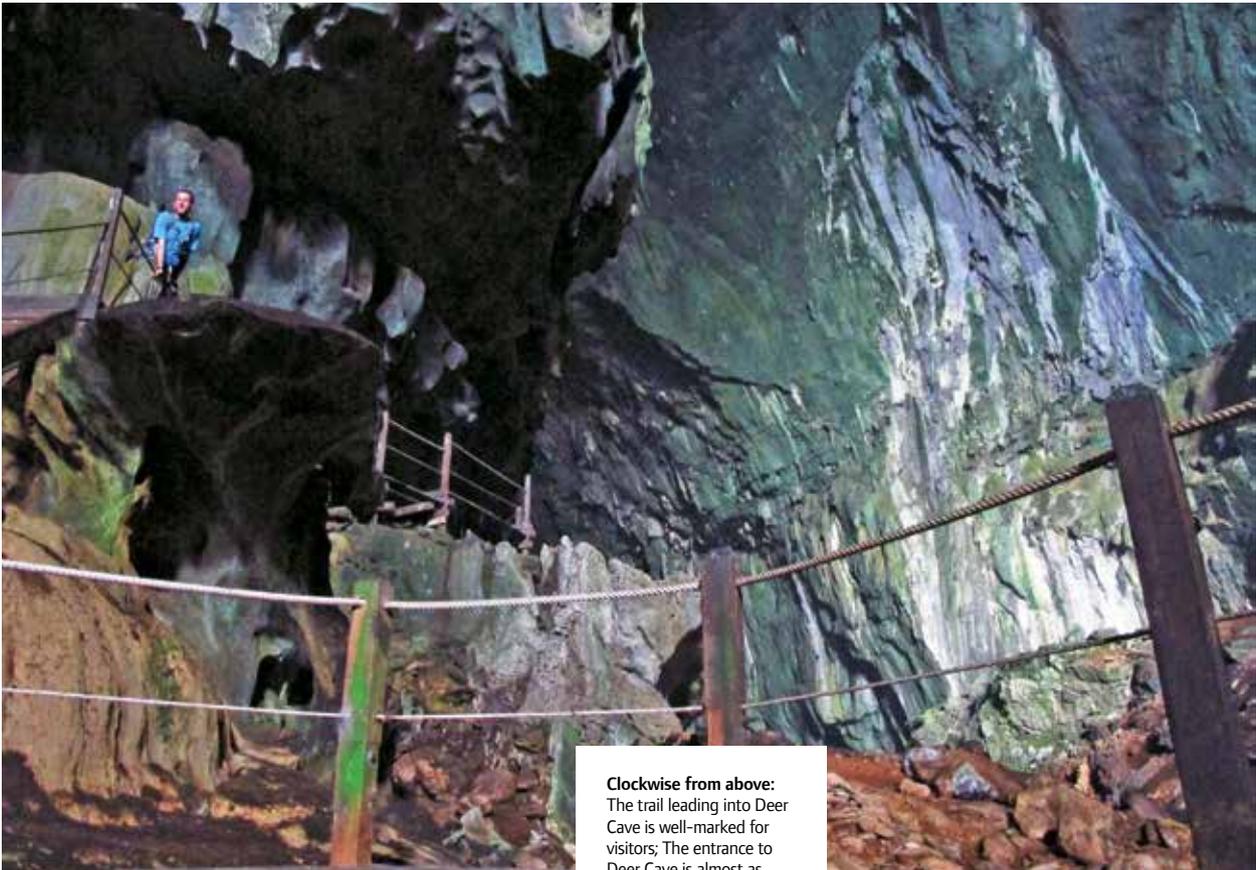
**Below:** Running across 480m, the Mulu Skywalk is one of the world's longest canopy walkways.



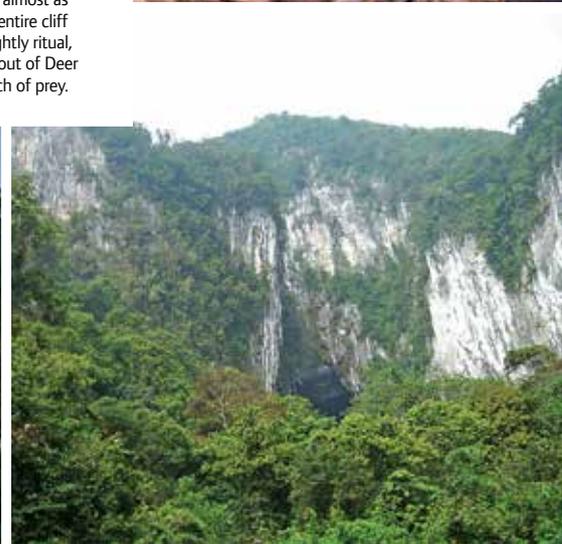
offered travellers a space to share their adventures above and below ground and to compare notes on what to do next.

Part museum, part open-air restaurant and part office building, the park headquarters is the starting point for most visitors. Here you can arrange to go on different guided tours—because of the sensitive and dangerous nature of both the caves and jungle, only a handful of tracks are open to solo walkers. At Mulu, you can visit the famous Deer Cave, one of the largest cave passages in the world (second only to the recently discovered Hang Son Doong in Vietnam). If you've scheduled enough time, and have the stamina and drive to venture further, you can organise trips into several other exciting caves, including the planet's largest known cave chamber by surface area—Sarawak Chamber—and the Clearwater Cave System, one of the world's longest interconnected cave systems.

The entrance to Deer Cave is a gaping hole in the mountainside that reveals a tunnel large enough to hide a small city. A hundred metres high, the main chamber stretches along for several metres. A river flows out at the bottom of the tunnel, having



**Clockwise from above:**  
The trail leading into Deer Cave is well-marked for visitors; The entrance to Deer Cave is almost as large as the entire cliff face; In a nightly ritual, bats stream out of Deer Cave in search of prey.



gathered rainwater from the mountain slopes and caves above. A path, which is mostly levelled and bordered by handrails, leads from the bright green of the jungle into the grey twilight of the cave entrance. A few tenacious plants grow in the dim light, but as you proceed underground, you enter a world of giant rocks and running water. Boulders larger than houses have fallen from the roof, and the river water pools and bubbles. Small lights illuminate the pathway, and if you have remembered to bring a torch, you can use it to examine the nearby rocks. Eventually, the excitement and chatter of the tour group gives way to hushed silence and

careful observation. Nowadays, it is rare to find a place in which people of all backgrounds are truly awed into silence, but in these caves, your words are swallowed up by the inky blackness.

The caves in this region are home to large communities of bats and swiftlets. Both can navigate in the dark using echolocation, and have made themselves a relatively safe home in the rooftops of the caves. Over thousands of years, their droppings have accumulated on the cave floor as salt- and



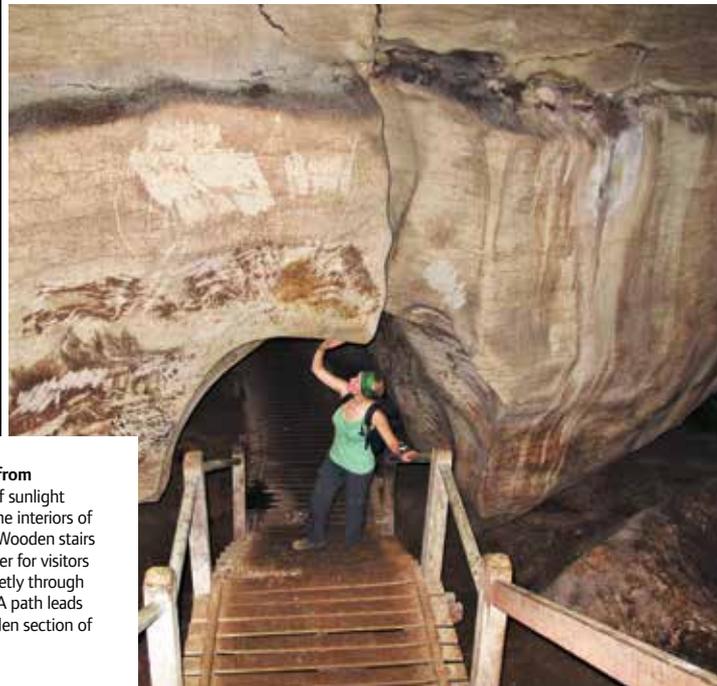
**Clockwise from left:** Rays of sunlight illuminate the interiors of Niah Cave; Wooden stairs make it easier for visitors to move safely through Niah Cave; A path leads up to a hidden section of Niah Cave.

and daring climbers scale preposterously rickety bamboo ladders to harvest these valuable nests. Unfortunately, the population of these birds is in serious decline.

### Into the light

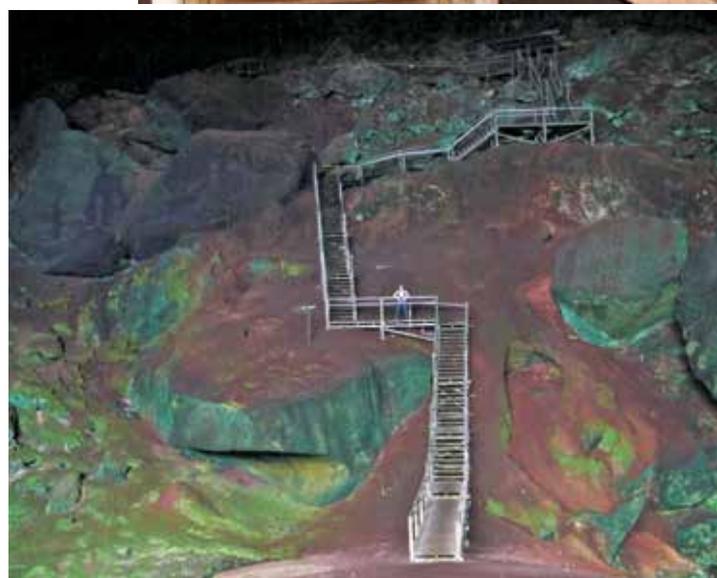
Closer to the coastal road network, an hour's drive south of Miri and the Brunei border, the caves of Niah offer a similar geology, but with far less formal guidance and interpretation. Niah is one of Southeast Asia's most important archaeological sites, with tools and bones providing evidence of human occupation dating back 40,000 years.

After purchasing tickets at the entrance pavilion, a small ferry brings you across a river to the Niah Caves. A short trail skirts uphill and into the rocks, where an overhanging roof shelters



nitrogen-rich guano, which is prized as a fertilizer and is a prime component of gunpowder. Deer Cave gets its name from the forest animals who, starved for salt, visit the cave to consume the guano for this vital mineral.

In the afternoon, visitors gather with their guides to a small amphitheatre near the entrance of Deer Cave. As the sun sinks toward the trees, an endless stream of bats begins flying out of a cave entrance high on the cliff wall. The colony consists of at least two million individuals, and each night, they eat 20 tonnes of insect life from the jungle nearby. The swiftlets are also the source of another strange industry. The nests of these birds are especially prized in Chinese cuisine, and in caves throughout the region, enterprising





The tropical jungles at Mulu and Niah are home to a host of unusual wildlife. Pictured (clockwise from left) are: Lantern flies, known thus due to luminescent markings; a green crested lizard; a giant cave cricket; and Four O' clock moths (*dysphania fenestrata*).

### Take a walk

Make sure that you schedule some time to traverse the Mulu Skywalk and see the forest from above. Stretching across 480m, it is one of the world's longest canopy walkways. From the Skywalk, limestone cliffs can be seen looming just overhead, dwarfing even the most giant of trees.



the remnants of historical accommodations. The cave itself is remarkably vast, and if you arrive at midday, a gap in the roof creates a magical skylight. Beams of light filter through the green vegetation and illuminate the complex shapes of the stalactites and stalagmites. The bamboo and metal ladders of the swiftlet nest-hunters stand perilously anchored to the roof—only the bravest dare partake in this dangerous trade.

The path in Niah is more challenging than Deer Cave, with steep wooden staircases and even less lighting—a torch will be invaluable. Niah Cave also offers a more intimate look at the rock itself. As the path winds through the cave, intricate details can be seen—spires, terraces, holes, and uniquely formed curves hint at the slow creative power of water and stone.

By the time you return to the jungle from the depths of the cave, you will have gained a new appreciation for the rays of light that provide life. You squint in the bright light; it's time to return to the familiar sunlit world.

### FACT FILE

#### GETTING THERE

Jet Airways' codeshare partner Malaysia Airlines connects Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad and Mumbai to Kuala Lumpur from where you can travel further to Miri.

#### ACCOMMODATION

At Gunung Mulu National Park, the Mulu Marriot Resort and Spa comprises traditional longhouse-style accommodation. There are also hotels and homestays available around the park headquarters. At Niah National Park, chalets provide a comfortable stay.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to [www.mulunationalpark.com](http://www.mulunationalpark.com) ;  
[www.sarawakforestry.com](http://www.sarawakforestry.com)