

VENTURE



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**CAVE
EXPLORING**
Hang So'n
Đoòng,
Vietnam



Hang So'n Đoòng remains an unspoilt wonder, reached only by those fit enough to undertake a gruelling hike

"What a view," quips my guide, Hieu, as I gingerly traverse along a 50m-long razor-sharp ridge jutting up from a gaping crater carved into the depths of the Earth. I assume he's joking, because when I peer down, there's nothing but pitch blackness in the cosmic abyss. If I fell, the void would swallow me whole, but I'm more concerned about slipping and slicing my leg open on the edge.

It's day three of an expedition to Vietnam's Hang So'n Đoòng, the world's largest known cave. Estimated to date back as many as five million years, the cave is more than 5km long, 200m high and 150m wide – large enough to house a whole New York City block, complete with skyscrapers. And for something so big, it's surprisingly hard to find. It wasn't until 1991 that a local logger, Hô Khanh, stumbled upon the entrance in central Vietnam's Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park – an area smaller than Hong Kong – while sheltering from a storm, only to lose it again for almost two decades. In 2009, as word of his discovery spread, he joined an expedition recruited by the British Caving Association, who spent months retracing his steps. To get here today, our 10-person team has bushwhacked through jungles, waded underground rivers, and camped within vast chambers.

When I finally arrive at the end of the ridge, Hieu unclips my harness, giving me the opportunity to take in my surroundings. It quickly becomes apparent my guide wasn't joking about the view, only he was referring to the spectacle above us, not what lies below. I was so focused on my feet that I hadn't noticed the chasmal hole in the cave roof. This ceiling collapse – otherwise known as a doline – is the result of a seismic shift that took place around half a million years ago. Through the jungle-rimmed aperture, a sunbeam plunges into the cave like a gargantuan laser, illuminating the most outlandish sight of all: the final resting place of that collapsed ceiling is a thriving underground rainforest.

Here in Hang So'n Đoòng, there are plant species that went extinct on the surface hundreds of thousands of years ago. The cave is cooler than outside, but also more humid, birthing a unique ecosystem not found anywhere else on the planet. It's a challenging environment for a human: this morning, I awoke soaking wet after spending the night in a tent here. "Foot rot can set in if your feet don't dry," I had been warned before setting off on the expedition.

At Hieu's heels, I climb up from the abyss towards the light until I'm engulfed by the subterranean jungle. A gigantic, otherworldly stalagmite coated in green moss rises from the foliage. "We call that the wedding cake," announces Hieu, even though it looks more like an enormous clump of mould. "You can climb to the top if you like." Cresting it, I absorb the 360° vistas and can hear birds chirping on the surface, just a few hundred metres above. So untouched is this place that it's easy to put yourself in the shoes of Hô Khanh, discovering the cave for the first time.

Today, more people have summited Everest than have penetrated Hang So'n Đoòng, but that could soon change. Once its status as the world's largest cave was confirmed, Hang So'n Đoòng



Trekking Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park



The 90m-high 'Great Wall of Vietnam' awaits cavers at the end of their journey

RYAN DEBOODT, OXALIS ADVENTURE GETTY IMAGES

was immediately added to many adventurers' bucket lists. To cater for this increased increase, in 2014 a Vietnamese real-estate developer proposed the construction of a 10km-long cable car to ferry visitors from Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park to the cave; this plan was rejected by local officials, however, following widespread opposition from environmental activists. In 2016, even President Obama joined the debate, declaring during his final address to the Vietnamese people, "Natural wonders like So'n Đoòng cave have to be preserved for our children and our grandchildren."



Join the expedition

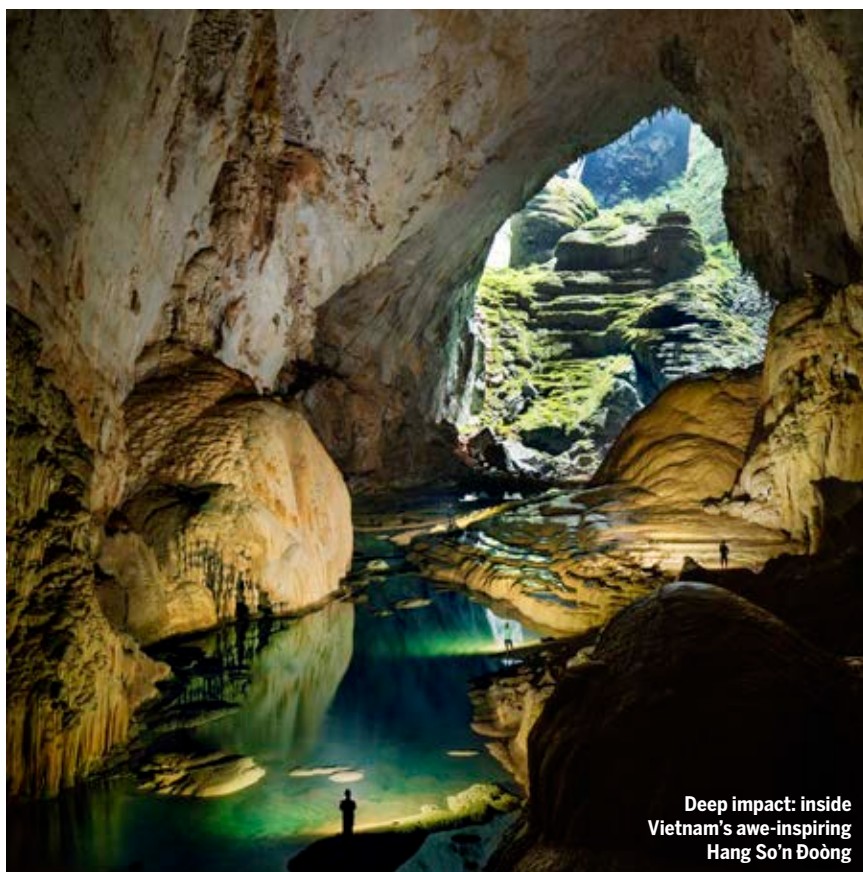
PRICE: \$3,000 (£2,300)

DURATION: Four full days of exploration, with three nights of camping and two nights in a hotel

AVAILABILITY: January to August

GROUP SIZE: Six to 10 people

GETTING THERE: Fly from Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City to Dong Hoi Airport, from where you'll be driven to your hotel in Phong Nha for a briefing. oxalisadventure.com



Deep impact: inside Vietnam's awe-inspiring Hang So'n Đoòng

There are plant species here that went extinct on the surface hundreds of thousands of years ago

Scratch the surface

More than just Hang So'n Đoòng, Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park is a caver's paradise

HANG PYGMY

Hang So'n Đoòng in miniature, although size is a relative concept. The expedition involves a steamy jungle trek, a gigantic cave entrance with an underground garden, and hair-raising, rope-assisted climbs.

HANG VA

Just a few kilometres from Hang So'n Đoòng and possibly connected to it. Photographers descend on Hang Va to snap symmetrical cone-shaped stalagmites emerging from the green-watered rock pools.

THIEN ĐOÒNG

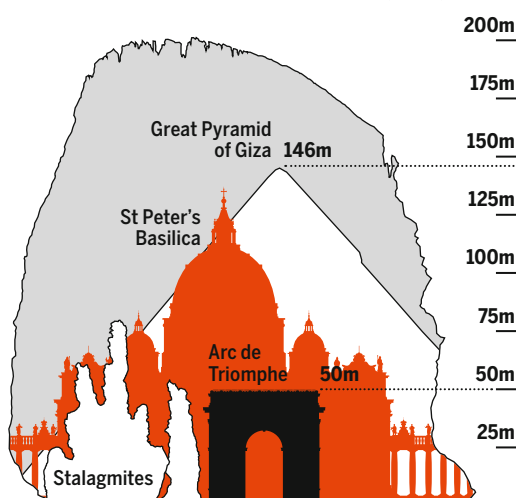
A beginner's introduction to the region's subterranean dominions, 'Paradise Cave' offers a wooden walkway and professional lighting systems, and, incredibly, you can almost drive right up to the entrance.

For now at least, Hang So'n Đoòng remains an unspoiled wonder, reached only by those fit enough to undertake a gruelling hike in extreme humidity, and who are prepared for what awaits at the end: the 90m-high calcite barrier known as the 'Great Wall of Vietnam'. Traversed both by ladder and by rope, it forced back the first survey team in 2009 when they encountered it unprepared.

As an adventure travel writer living in Vietnam, I've cultivated a healthy addiction to caves, and the gargantuan chambers of Hang So'n Đoòng are a great fix. But, for me, it's the giant dolines – there are two – that are most awe-inspiring, even more so at night. At 280m wide – more than twice the length of a professional football pitch – the largest offers a teardrop-shaped window to an inky-black sky with a splattering of twinkling stars. Where else on the planet can you stargaze from a campsite hundreds of metres beneath the surface?

Sizing up Hang So'n Đoòng

The cave's tallest chambers (200m high) would tower over the Great Pyramid of Giza (146m). Some of its stalagmites (80m high) would dwarf Paris' Arc de Triomphe (50m), and the world's biggest church, St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican (220m wide), could pass through the hole in the cave's collapsed ceiling (280m).



Packing list

What to take with you

EAR PLUGS

You may have escaped humanity, but not the crowds. The campsite is home to thousands of chirping swifts. Avoid being woken up at 5am when they exit the cave to hunt.

BUG SPRAY

Never pull off a leech once it has started sucking your blood – its teeth will get stuck in your skin and the wound will bleed like crazy. Apply bug spray and the leech will roll right off.

TALCUM POWDER

The only way to avoid foot rot is to dry out your feet at least once a day. Don't bother with a damp towel – do the sensible thing instead and pack some talc.