

Unearth a cave kingdom in central Vietnam

- 📍 Ethereal caves, wild camping, natural wonders
- 🕒 March to May

A raging typhoon besieges the land, forcing the waterways into a frenzy.

Seething rivers overwhelm the embankments, flooding the villages and submerging the rice paddies. The jungle-clad karst mountains rise above the chaos, but a deluge erodes their insides. As the cascades rampage towards the sea, some 20 miles (32km) east, they hunt for the path of least resistance – even if that means charging through a mountain. These annual typhoons, which usually take place in October, are why Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park in central Vietnam is home to the biggest caves on the planet. It has taken millions of years for these caves to form. Each time a typhoon hits, they grow a little bigger.

The calm after
Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2003, is a limestone plateau buttressed with thick tropical jungles and speckled with an unknown number of subterranean chambers. After the devastating typhoons, the area remains wet and cold for several months. But by March or April, when the sun emerges from a long hibernation, Phong Nha-Ke Bang is reborn. Flowers bloom, butterflies emerge, the rivers are calm and the caves go back to being sheltered, bucolic sanctuaries.

Diversifica(ve)tion
The national park is known for the size of its caves, but it's the diversity of the experiences that makes Phong Nha-Ke Bang unique. Most caves sit many miles from human civilisation



Right: Camp overnight by the emerald lake inside Hang En

Below: Come early in the day for the quietest time at Paradise Cave (Thien Duong)



Q&A

What was it like here before the discovery of the caves? Phong Nha was a small, deprived village that suffered from natural disasters and extreme weather. Many people did illegal hunting and logging, or extracted unexploded ordnance left from the American War to sell to quarrying contractors.

And now? Very different. Tour companies provide stable jobs as guides, chefs, porters and safety assistants. Some enterprising villagers have also started their own small businesses, like guest houses, cafes and restaurants. People have a higher standard of living. This has led to a huge reduction in hunting and logging.

Crystal ball predictions? Phong Nha will become the adventure capital of Asia and continue to be a model for sustainable tourism.

Ho Trung Hieu, nephew of Ho Khanh (the man who discovered Hang Son Doong in 1990) and adventure tour guide



© CPM PHOTO / Shutterstock, James Kelley / Getty Images, Jethuynh / Getty Images

and are as wild today as they were in prehistoric times. The only way to explore these tranquil underground domains is on a multiday camping adventure.

Hang Son Doong has chamber ceilings higher than the Great Pyramid of Giza, stalagmites taller than the Statue of Liberty (without the base) and ceiling collapses larger than a football pitch. Hang En is home to a drift of swiftlets that nest in delicate stalactites over an underground beach. The rock pools of Hang Va, perhaps the most ethereal of all the caves, hold curious structures sculpted by nature that rise from ghostly green waters. And ensconced within Hang Ba, one of Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park's least-visited caves, are deep pools for underground swimming.

Verified myth

Despite their size, central Vietnam's caves sat largely unnoticed until this century. Ho Khanh, a local villager, stumbled

Right: Sunlight streams into Hang Son Doong

Far right: The entrance to the cathedral-like Tham Luang Nang Non in Thailand

into Hang Son Doong for the first time in 1990, but when he returned to the village, nobody believed him. In 2008 he returned with the British Cave Research Association, who surveyed the chambers. They discovered that one chamber had the biggest cross-section of any known cave in the world. Expedition teams then unearthed more caves, and Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park became a thriving tourism destination, generating employment and spurring conservation efforts in one of Vietnam's poorest provinces.



Other Quiet Caves in Southeast Asia

Gunung Mulu National Park, Malaysia

An extraordinary cave kingdom that rivals Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, Gunung Mulu National Park sits in Sarawak in Malaysian Borneo on the border with Brunei. UNESCO recognises the park for its immense natural beauty, storied geomorphology and scientifically significant flora and fauna.

Don't miss

The serpentine underground rivers of Clearwater Cave, possibly the longest in Asia, and the lofty chambers and bat colonies of Deer Cave.

Tham Luang Nang Non, Thailand

Tham Luang Nang Non made headlines in 2018 during the daring rescue of 12 adolescent football players and their assistant coach, who were trapped inside for 18 days after heavy rainfall. All 13 people survived, thanks to an ambitious international effort, though two Thai rescue divers died.

Don't miss

Visiting the cave, studded with stalactites and stalagmites, in Chiang Rai Province in northern Thailand, which reopened to the public in 2023 with more stringent safety measures.

Don't Miss

- Stargazing beneath a ceiling collapse or cave entrance
- Camping among the jungle sounds and smells
- Breaking bread with good-humoured guides and porters

Find Your Joy

Getting there

Dong Hoi, the closest big city, has a domestic airport, train station and long-distance bus station. From

there, it's 45–60 minutes by public bus or taxi to Phong Nha village, from where all the tours depart.

Accessibility

For reasons of conservation, safety and employment creation, the remote caves must be visited by organised tour. They also require a minimum level of fitness – check with the tour

provider. The caves are not accessible for wheelchairs.

When to go

Visit in March or April when the weather is usually warm (but not too warm), the rock pools are full and butterflies are everywhere.

Further information

• Admission charge for all-inclusive tours. Book

months in advance.

- Caves close October–November for typhoon season.
- Refreshments and meals included on all-inclusive tours.
- Accommodation available in Phong Nha village.
- Recommended tour companies: oxalisadventure.com; junglebosstours.com.

© Vietnam Stock Images / Shutterstock; Yutana Jee / Shutterstock

