Xe Bangfai River Cave

Exploring the giant Tham Namlot Xe Bangfai

Tham Namlot Xe Bangfai

Tham Namlot Xe Bangfai ‘oozes’ itself for 7 km beneath limestone mountains of Hin Nam No to find itself emerging again in a clear pool near Ban Nong Ping Village. The cave chamber, measuring an average of 76m width and 56m in height, creates one of the largest active river-cave passages in the world. Although there were two 20th-century explorations by the French (1909 & 1995), this cave remarkably remained virtually unknown except to locals until a National Geographic survey brought it to world attention through a feature magazine article in 2006. The cave is navigable by boat for 2km until a section of rapids is encountered. The grandeur of the limestone chamber, the spectacular natural decorations, flowstains and cave crystals provide an eerie beauty rarely experienced. A climb through a branch cavity reveals a chamber and zig-zag-shaped features evoking a dragon’s hatchery. This chamber leads to a balcony about 20m above the river providing a dizzy lift view of the massive cave’s mouth. Outside the cave, the crystal clear resurgence pool is encircled by a beach. This 200m radius pond is considered by villagers as a fish breeding zone, ensuring reliable downstream fishing.

According to village legend, the cave is inhabited by a spirit. One time, a broken klawen (musical instrument) was left at the entrance and was found restored to immaculate condition the next morning. The spirit was also known to lend beautiful clothes to individuals for various ceremonies until one time a beneficiary returned a garment untied. The spirit is still believed to be benevolent though, as villagers who have fallen while gathering swallows nests and bats within the chamber have never lost their lives from the event. Not only that, but no floods entered the cavity during the war. However, villagers are not compliant about this safety record and provide helmets for all visitors entering the cave. An annual sacrificial offering is also made to the cave spirit to ensure its continuing protection. Please don’t challenge this tradition by entering the cave without a village guide.

Hin Nam No National Protected Area

This 82,000ha protected area is a refuge for rare primates, including the black langur and the red-cheeked douc langur. Other significant wildlife to look out for are 4 species of hornbill and 11 species of Parrot. It is currently applying for World Heritage listing. Xe Bangfai river-cave is part of this protected area. Villagers manage this site as a community-based tourism venture to create sustainable livelihoods.

Operating months

The Xe Bangfai River-cave is not recommended to enter between June and October due to dangerously high flows, but the village is still open for other times, or as well as homestay and lodge services. Road access is difficult during the wet season.

Staying in Nongping Village

Homestay. Villagers provide meals, rollsout mattresses; mosquito nets; blankets; toilets with bucket bath.

Village Lodge. Four rooms, bed, work-desk and fan. Meals can be arranged here too.

Village meals. Please be aware that food in this village is not always readily available. Taking a small back-up supply is recommended.

River-cave Exploration. Be silently paddled into the cave by village canoe. Long trips 2 hours (to rapids 2km from cave mouth), and short trips 1 hour. Other cave itineraries. Explore Tham Bing (Big Cave) with village guides (1hr).

Getting there

- Xe Bangfai River Cave is about 150km east-south-east of Thakhek. Motorcyclists be aware that the roads are mainly unpaved and suitable only for experienced riders.
- From Thakhek, travel east along Route 12 to Maha Vay (40km), turn right to Old Maha Vay but continue onward to Passam junction (26km).
- Turn left at Passam to go to Bousalapha (68km).
- From Bousalapha, turn left after the District Administration Office then take 1st turn right (209m) to go to Ban Nong Ping (14km).
- There is also an option to go by boat from Ban Pakphanh to Nong Ping. Do the circuit.
- You may also return to Thakhek on the Ho Chi Minh trail from Bousalapha. Travel back west from Bousalapha 8km and take the right-hand turn to Langhang. Continue north to Ban Pakphanhng river crossing (12km). No bridge there so motorbikes cross in canoes (also get a local to balance the canoe on the boat for extra fee to save you from falling in the river with the bike). Onward to Nham hpo river crossing at Ban Sesanphang village (12km) (a boat may be necessary here too). From Ban Sesanphang continue north to Langhang (11km).