

Going deeper underground

This month we feature South Africa's most impressive caves (p 92), but all of them pale in comparison with the limestone caverns of northern Vietnam, which are among the biggest in the world. Nick Dall went spelunking.

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Before you can get to Paradise Cave you need to catch a train. Vietnam is a long, thin country and the railway that runs from north to south is a lifeline for peasants and produce. It hasn't always been that way – between 1954 and 1976 the railway, like the country itself, was cut in half – but now it's a symbol of reunification.

My wife Shelly and I are English teachers in Danang, a coastal town roughly in the middle of the country. Her brother is coming to visit, so we decide to travel north to Dong Hoi, where I've heard there are some spectacular inland caves.

The waiting room at Danang station is filthy and crammed with travellers and their plastic-bag luggage. I am strangely envious of the lone eel that occupies the spotless fish tank at the front of the room.

An announcement informs us our train will be late, soon after it arrives – 20 minutes early. We traipse through a door that bears the sign "THE GATE FOR PASSENGER TO BOARD" and across the tracks to our carriage, followed by an army of vendors selling water, snacks, tissues and playing cards.

Sitting in my allocated seat is a man who looks like no Vietnamese I've ever seen: He's more than six feet tall, lean, with sunken eyes and a shoulder-length mane, wearing fake crocodile-skin boots, stove-pipe pants and a leather jacket. A talisman hangs on his chest.

My first impression is that he could be Sioux or Cherokee, but then I realise he's just strange. I don't offer any resistance when he suggests in a garlicky growl that I move seats.

The limestone mountains west of Dong Hoi are a spelunker's delight. Covering an area of more than 4 000 km², stretching all the way into neighbouring Laos, the national parks in the two countries contain at least 300 significant caves, of which only 17 have been adequately explored.

The Son Doong cave – the biggest known cave in the world – was discovered by a local poacher in 1991, but it was only surveyed by British scientists in 2011. The main chamber is so enormous a jumbo jet could take off without scraping a wingtip. This cave, a seven-hour hike and 120m abseil from the nearest road, is still off-limits to the general public.

In fact, the whole area remains largely untouched. Apart from the Phong Nha cave, which has been a domestic tourist attraction for some time, there is very little infrastructure or interest.

That's all about to change, though. The discovery of Son Doong and the opening of

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Paradise Cave to the public have seen the tourist industry move in. Fortunately this hasn't happened in a brash way ... yet.

After an uncomfortable six-hour train ride, we disembark at Dong Hoi and hire motorbikes from a bygone era, with sagging suspension that bottoms out every time we swerve for a pothole or an ox in the road.

Our base for the holiday is Phong Nha Farmstay, the first place in the area geared for international tourists. "Farmstay" is a bit of generous term: It's a typical backpacker hostel that happens to be plonked in the middle of an endless paddy.

Ben and Bich, the Australian-Vietnamese couple who owns it, make an unlikely pair. He would fill a doorframe, she a cat flap. He wears a chunky zip-up sweater, she a glittery belt and tight jeans. They're both – inexplicably – in Ugg boots.

Their son Michael takes after his dad. His Vietnamese grandmother can barely lift him, even though he's only 18 months old. She makes do with rocking him in a hammock.

"Is he your first?" I ask.

"He's *our* first," Ben says. "I've got two others ... one Irish, one English."

"Where are they?"

"Back in Oz – I've had a busy life."

The food at Farmstay is spicy and pricey, but the restaurant is a fun place to hang out. It's a melting pot of fashion hippies from all corners of the Western world and rural Vietnamese people. The pool table is its nexus.

Our first opponents are Bich's nephews. Both under 10, they whizz around the table, shooting without thinking. Before Shelly and I know it, we've lost and we return to the sidelines. A while later we play a game against Axel, a moon-faced Dane with a man bag, who plays by very strange rules that he calls "ball in hand". Unsurprisingly, he beats us and continues to accept challenges for the next hour or so. Later I hear him trying to explain "ball in hand" to a bemused Kiwi couple.

Even at their worst, rice paddies are an inspiring, luminous green, but here their contrast with the mineral-rich turquoise rivers creates a landscape that looks like it has been rendered in EGA graphics.

We kick-start our bikes and decide to visit Phong Nha first, a flooded cave considered to be Paradise Cave's ugly sister. We ride in convoy with four British kids, who are about a week into a North-South Vietnamese motorbike odyssey. Ben tells us to look for another three bikers at the ticket office: if the 10 of us share a boat it'll be cheaper. They are there as promised...

Soon enough we are on the boat, motoring towards the cave. We pass cows on the banks tethered to fishing-rod-like gadgets that allow them to graze only in neat circles. The pilot turns up a tributary and cuts the engine as the darkness of the cave swallows us. From here on we paddle. I am amazed at how far into the mountain we go: a few kilometres at least.

And now for the main attraction – the reason we braved the train and Axel's pool rules: Paradise Cave.

On the way there, we pass the Nuoc Mooc spring, where millions of litres of cobalt-blue water spout from the ground, in a 30-metre-wide torrent. The water comes all the way from Laos through what might be an even larger cave system than Son Doong. I stop to take pictures, but I'm waved away by a woman who seems to want us to pay for the privilege.

The bikes just about manage to get us to the Paradise Cave ticket office – there are a few spots where Shelly has to get off and walk – and we are immediately impressed with the set-up: clean bathrooms, no litter, discreet buildings and a restaurant that inspires confidence. After two years in Vietnam it's a bit of a culture shock – it feels like another country.

We walk up 600 steps and then descend a wooden staircase into a small hole in the rock face. There it is: a giant cathedral of opaque white light and cool silence. The staircase goes down and down and before we know it we are on the cave floor. A path takes us nearly 2 km into the cavern, past organ pipes and weird formations that look like enormous heads of broccoli. The cave is so immense that, if anything, the air is actually cleaner and more oxygenated than it is on the outside. We spend hours at the bottom, exploring, barely speaking.

As we hike back up, I catch myself smiling in the gloom. I know that I'll need to find an excuse to come back to this part of the world when Son Doong is opened to the public.

That will have to be seen to be believed.