

Adventure into the Wind

NST 14/6/12 MS 2

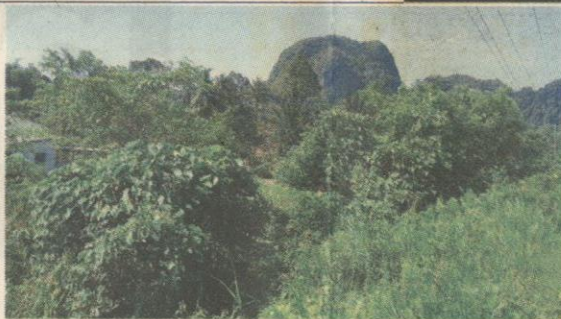
A huge cavern, spirits and dragons, an enchanted river — all provide the perfect getaway for the adventurous, writes **Heidi Munan**

AS tourist attractions go, the Wind Cave on the Sarawak Kanan River has been known for a long time. Sir Hugh Low visited it in 1845 when the area was mostly known for gold-mining. His account of a pleasant trip up the crystal-clear river, overhung by shady trees, still makes delightful reading.

Low noticed the flora and fauna with a professional eye, and left interesting lists of orchids and rhododendrons which he carefully uprooted, and planted in boxes.

A cave, to a botanist, is an interesting bit of landscape, so when the travelling party arrived there in the evening, Low wanted to explore it right away. His guides weren't so keen.

"I was anxious just to look into the cave while my servant was preparing my dinner but, having been told by the Malays, none of whom had ever entered it, that it extended a very long way into the country, that it had no outlet and that it was the habitation of dragons and bad spirits, I had no intention of exploring it till the mor-



Bau lies in rugged limestone country

row," he wrote.

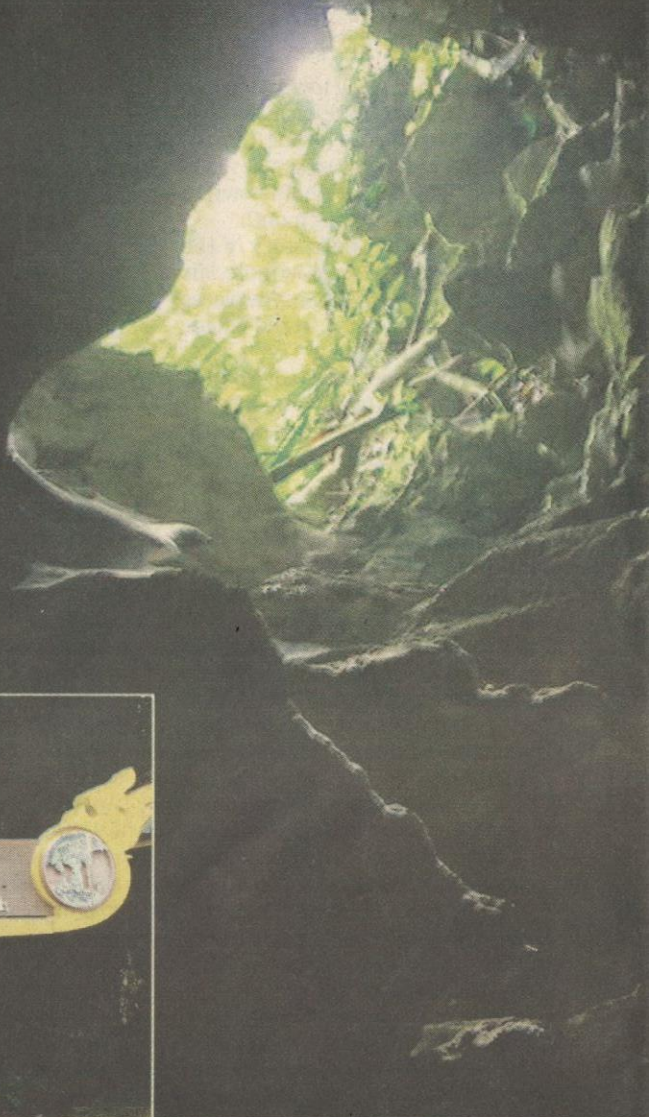
Against the well-meant warnings, Low took a little lamp and went into the darkness, following the little stream that flowed out of the cave.

As he groped along the damp ground and limestone walls, he could feel a strong drought of wind, which convinced him that there must be an outlet somewhere.

Sure enough, "I had not advanced

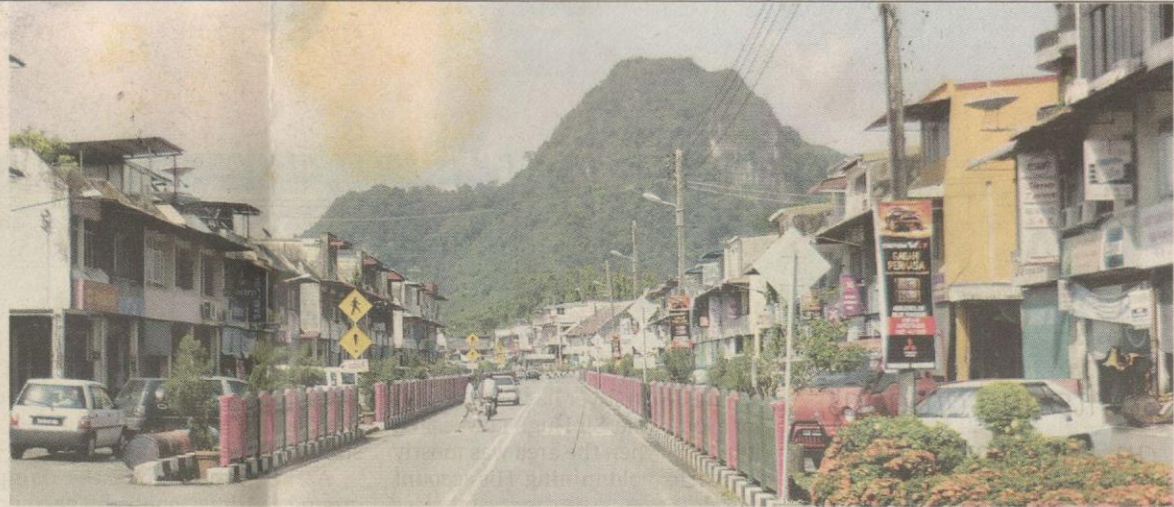


The Wind Cave Nature Reserve sign



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This 'window' is where the gusts of wind blow through



When in **Bau**, stay for the local attractions



Bau Lake was a gold-mining pit until the early 20th Century

an ankle, others can go off and find help.

Not everybody likes diving into the damp darkness of a cave. The nature reserve surrounding this perforated limestone block is a lovely place for shady strolls, general communing with nature, or a family picnic. Shelters and little tables have been built near the river, which in itself is part of the attraction — clear, swift, shaded by a tunnel of overhanging trees.

GETTING THERE

Most people visit the Wind Cave Nature Reserve by road. The route from Kuching to Bau is well signposted (look out for the brown signage boards with white lettering) that has the name, Lobang Angin.

Don't just stop in Bau, by the way, have a look around the pasar (market) and the Bau Lake, a former gold-mine

pit that is also a well-known picnic spot.

Nature enthusiasts and history buffs prefer another way to the cave. They drive to Tondon Pasar, and from there they proceed in a longboat — just like Sir Hugh Low did 150 years ago!

The trip upriver, around fat boulders and over small rapids here and there, all in the deep shade of ancient trees, is an experience that is well worth the extra time spent in transit.

The boat pulls up on a small gravel beach at the base of a white cliff where the small cave river emerges into the Sarawak Kanan.

Entry to the Wind Cave Nature Reserve costs RM5. Details at www.sarawakforestry.com/html/snp-wind.html

50 paces further before I saw a light through an orifice in the rock at a little distance before me, and myriads of large bats fluttering about the roof over my head..."

The spirits and dragons didn't give any further trouble, and Low eventually returned to Kuching with a fine collection of plant specimens.

Those were the days! The area around Wind Cave is a nature reserve today. No picking plants, insects or animals, not even snail shells – or else the dragons, in the form of forest wardens, will pounce!

GOING INTO THE CAVE

Three of the cave passages are safely demarcated and maintained. One really inspired touch is the squares of reflecting tape on all steps, up or down. These catch even the faintest beam of light, so visitors are warned of a sudden rise or drop.

Two of the passages are just over 100m long, the third, 320m. That doesn't seem very long – unless you're in pitch-darkness, gently reeking of bat droppings, with twittering and sighing noises going on, with the occasional 'click' and then a 'clack', a whoosh of wind seemingly from nowhere, the gush of water somewhere below, and a steady drip-drip-drip of water somewhere else.

SO HERE ARE THE RULES

Rule No. 1: Don't forget your torches! There are some available at the guard house, but it's a good idea to bring your own.

Walk carefully in the faint circle of the torchlight beam, and never forget that you are not alone! There are hand-rails along all the plank-walks, but these also serve as highways for



'You are not alone...?' Bats cling to the cave ceiling

all sorts of insects, and in many places, they are damp. Water drips from the ceiling, and if there are bats overhead, other things drip down too.

Rule No. 2: Wear a hat. The plank-walks in Wind Cave are well planned and maintained, some of cement slabs, some of wood. Either way, there are narrow gaps between the boards.

This brings us to Rule No. 3: Wear practical shoes. High heels of the stiletto variety are sure to get stuck between planks – very funny for everybody else, but not for the wearer! In places where bats congregate, the plank walk can be slippery, too, yet another reason for flat, rubber-soled shoes with a good grip.

I have yet to hear of anybody ever getting seriously lost inside Wind Cave, though some people may miss a turning in the darkness and go off on a 'loop'. A solo cave-hiker may lose not only his way but also his 'head' in such a situation and burst into hysterics.

Rule No. 4: Go in a group. It's more fun anyway, and in the unfortunate case that somebody slips and twists