

Treasures unearthed

A mossy hollow sheds light on an amazing cultural sight, writes ANGELA SAURINE

There are places like the Grand Canyon, famous natural wonders, on every traveller's "to do" list. Then there are equally impressive places you come across by chance. That's how I feel about the Phu Kham cave, near Vang Vieng in Laos.

It had been a tough task to get there — a 3km bike ride along a rocky dirt road in the scorching heat, followed by a 100m climb up a rocky cliff to get to the entrance to the limestone cave.

But I'm shocked by what I find inside, as a magnificent reclining Buddha statue lies at the bottom of a huge chamber, streams of sunlight filtering in from a higher opening.

Similar caves can be found throughout the country, and were popular hiding places for villagers when under attack from French and American forces in the 1960s.

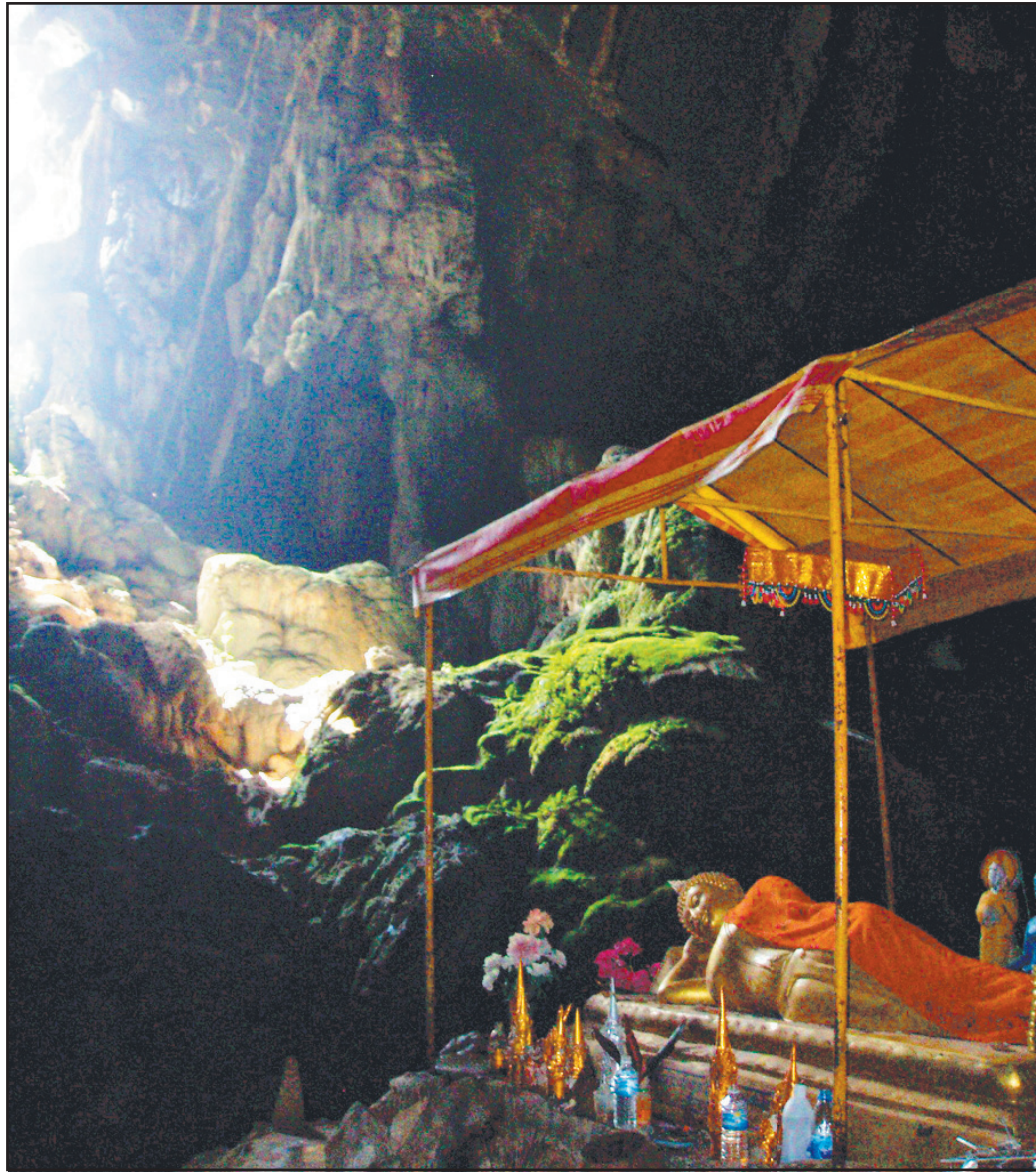
Spurred to go further by the sheer beauty of what we see, we climb over thousands of rocks to discover two more chambers.

Although there is more to explore, we decide to quit with all our bones still intact. Peering back towards where we had come from is a breathtaking sight, as light flows into the cave from a mossy opening. Although it can't be captured on my cheap digital camera, it is one that will stay in my memory forever.

There can be few places in the world where it is possible to explore such a dangerous place unaccompanied, but that is one of the attractions of Laos and I hope the public indemnity lawyers are still a few years away.

After a tough morning we are treated to a refreshing dip in the lagoon outside, which is a tropical oasis with the kind of turquoise blue water you usually only see in postcards.

It had been a six-hour bus ride from the tourist town of Luang Prabang to the backpacker mecca of Vang Vieng, and we were forced to crawl over giant sacks of rice and sugar, which cover the entire aisle to board.



By chance . . . the Buddha statue inside Phu Kham cave near Vang Vieng, Laos. Picture: ANGELA SAURINE

Along the way we passed villagers who were cheering on cockfights and saw children sword-fighting with sticks and bathing in waterfalls that flow between their homes.

The driver would toot his horn every time we went around a bend — to alert oncoming cars. That was virtually the whole way.

The government only permitted guesthouses in Vang Vieng five years ago.

Since then it has become an adventure hotspot with tubing, kayaking and caving popular

pursuits. Nearly every restaurant in town is filled with young travellers reclining on cushions watching DVDs of *Friends* or *Family Guy*.

But Vang Vieng is not the only place that has been transformed for tourists.

Guesthouses across the country are in the process of being revamped in the lead-up to the 2009 Asian Games in Vientiane, the capital.

We can only hope the country manages to maintain its charm in the midst of the tourist invasion.

NEED TO KNOW

Getting there: Singapore Airlines to Bangkok. Bus, train and boat to Laos

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More: visit-laos.com or geckosadventures.com

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with Mike Smith

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