Kanlaya's Guide to Visiting Thum Lod Cave.

Our village, Thum Lod, is famous for its Cave. Outstanding geologically, anthropologically and ecologically, in the first rank worldwide. So, a visit is a must. And don't just turn up anytime, to enjoy the richest experience its worth a little planning.

The Cave is managed as a model ecotourist project by the Village itself. Every man and woman who has lived here for three years as of right may be a Guide (the ladies) or a raft man. It has enriched the village over the 25 years since the cave was opened by late King Rama IX and it's a key destination for every traveller doing the famous Mae Hong Son Loop.

There is a good reception area, with plenty of parking, food, drink and fruit stalls, a very informative new Cultural Center and the ticket office. Current entry price for one, two or three visitors is 700 Bahts. A guide accompanies you through fine forestry about 400 meters to the cave entrance. There she commandeers the next bamboo raft, and the raft-man takes you and your guide into the Cave. The River Lang, our boundary, flows straight through just two Kms downstream, 5 minutes by car.

There are three adjoining cathedral-like giant chasms, the first 26 stories high inside. Look out for:

- Geological formations. All the classics, stalactites, stalagmites, pillars, flowstone, curtains, Helictites, cave popcorn. Good stairways and safe galleries allow you to climb right to the roof of the cave
- Anthropology. For more than 5000 years the cave has been inhabited and also been used as a mortuary. Immense prehistoric teakwood coffins can be seen in the exit chasm, and faint cave paintings as well. In the Cultural Center you can see a reconstruction of the face of a young woman buried 5000 years ago.
- Ecology. What will strike you first is the massed shoals of river carp and blue dace that surge around the raft for pellets, and from deep down giant catfish float lazily up to the surface. Roosting upside down in the roof throughout are hundreds of bats, numerous species, insectivorous and fruit eating, their green eyes glinting. But outstanding is the huge colony, the world's largest, of cave adapted swifts which roost and nest in the third, exit, chasm. The breeding population numbers about 250,000 and they hatch two broods of chicks annually. Each bird's daily consumption target is around 75% of its body weight, or about 30 gms, so total daily consumption is approaching ten tonnes. And that equates to a staggering 2 billion small insects daily. Which explains the remarkable absence of midges and gnats. It's a very major factor in the balance of nature over a vast region. Who needs insecticides with these nature's marvels on hand. At dusk the Swifts return en masse over 20 minutes around sunset, forming a huge counterclockwise vortex as they descend from hundreds of meters vertically above. It's one of Thailand's outstanding biological spectacles, not to be missed. But if you do, tune in to David Attenborough's last wildlife series, Wild Asia, episode 2, the first twelve minutes were filmed in the cave

When to go to the cave, worth getting this right

- Consider visiting the Cultural Center first. Funded by the US Embassy cultural department, luckily before the Trump USAID guillotine fell. It showcases the world-class life-long research of Professor Rasmi, Chair of Bangkok University Department of Anthropological Archaeology. Her focus has been the prehistoric teakwood coffin cave mortuaries used over a period of some 800 years, from 600 BC onwards. In an intact cave she collected DNA from skeletons spanning 600 years and remarkably found lineal family descent throughout that time frame. Meaning an extended family over 25 or more generations used the same sacred and revered sites to bury their dead. The Center puts this remarkable practice into context, historical, worldwide geographic, coincidental milestones in human history and especially in of the local community, proud successors of these ancient peoples. It's a visit which elevates the Cave experience far above a typical sight-seeing jaunt. We are proud that with some distinguished and generous guests we

sponsored the very informative bilingual Guide you will find in your room at Kanlaya's. Allow an extra 30 minutes or more for the Center.

- Set off with your guide from Reception about 90 minutes before sunset, between 5.45 and mid-winter to 6.45 mid-summer.
- Why? Because by then the hordes of day trippers from Pai have come and gone and you can enjoy the majestic spaces almost alone without being caught in the Instagram frenzy.
- And that's perfect timing to linger on the riverbank at the cave exit to witness the Swifts return. If you go with an experienced guide they will know the drill, or we can brief them for you. Timing is essential, so many miss this incredible spectacle that impresses all who witness it. If you go just with the village guide, ring us once you are with your guide and we will ask her to stay with you at the exit, otherwise the raft turns around, and you miss the show. A small tip is appropriate for this extra service please.
- Tips:
    1. Even in winter there may be mosquitos present because the temperature within the cave is a steady low 20's C year-round. So long sleeves and trousers and some spray on exposed skin.
    2. Wear a hat, 1000's of birds above you.
    3. Use Slow-Mo on your camera to see the flight of individual birds, it's like a swarm of bees at normal speed
    4. Take a head torch for best viewing in the cave, we can provide.
    5. For guests with a deep interest in the anthropology, with notice, we can arrange a visit to Long Long Rak Cave, closed to the public, where the research, still ongoing, has been focused. Curated by a senior post-doc research member of Prof Rasmi's team. There is no fee for this but a donation to Prof Rasmi's ongoing research and Center management is warmly appreciated.