

Secret cave joins Myanmar tours

Newly discovered cave draw-card joins Southern Myanmar Itineraries.



EXCLUSIVE access to a newly discovered cave in Southern Myanmar will encourage more adventurous travellers to explore the less-visited south, according to Southeast Asian travel pioneer Bjorn Burchard.

The secret cave can be added to itineraries for southern Myanmar, which take in the Buddhist pilgrimage site Golden Rock, the karst landscape around Hpa-An, Mawlamyine's Ogre Island and the world's longest reclining Buddha, and the Death Railway museum and Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery on the route towards the southern tropical beach gateway town of Dawei.

Burchard of Moby Dick, who has lived in Myanmar for more than two decades, was among the first foreigners to visit the cave system recently.

He says while it lacks the infrastructure, facilities and pilgrim-pull of other caves in the region such as Hpa-An's Sadan with its Buddha statues, or Kawgun cave with its clay tablets and carvings, the unadorned natural cave will appeal to foreigners wanting to experience something off-the-beaten-track.

"Unlike the pilgrimage and tourist caves in Myanmar which have concrete steps, lighting and souvenir sellers, this seldom visited cave has nothing except a labyrinth of limestone hidden in the jungle. Access isn't easy, but for travellers with a sense of adventure, the trip will be rewarding, partly because no other tourists will ever be seen."

Visiting the unnamed cave system, which takes at least a half a day to explore, involves two boat trips, some hiking and climbing, with participants requiring a good level of fitness and agility, as well as sturdy shoes.

Burchard says with the recent downturn in tourist arrivals to Myanmar, and projections for a reduction in visitors from Europe and North America into 2019, it is important that travel agencies offer a wide range of options and itineraries.

The offer must go beyond the big Four destinations of Yangon, Inle Lake, Bagan and Mandalay.

“The challenge is to work with local communities to develop sustainable tourism and to adapt to changes in visitor demographics, which see more expats living in Asia visiting Myanmar as well as more tourists coming across land and sea borders from Thailand, such as from Ranong to Kawthaung in the far south.”

He says more foreigners are venturing south to the formerly off-limits Mergui Archipelago, which has opened up to Myanmar-based liveaboard cruises stay such as Island Safari www.islandsafarimergui.com.

“Instead of finishing a classic tour of Myanmar with a beach resort stay in Rakhine state’s over-developed Ngapali Beach, savvy travellers are winding down among the 800 uninhabited islands of the archipelago, Myanmar’s new soft adventure destination.

“The secret cave adventure can be incorporated into itineraries heading south from Yangon or beginning in Kawthaung or Dawei, after island safaris.”