

Oxalis — commercial cave tour operator in Vietnam

STEVE BOURNE, Canberra Speleological Society

Oxalis Adventure Tours operates in Phong Nha National Park, Vietnam and surrounding karst areas. The company was established by a local, Chau A Nguyen, who was born and grew up in the Phong Nha Village. He moved to Ho Chi Min City for education and following a successful business career, returned to his home village, establishing Oxalis in 2011 to fulfil a desire to improve opportunities for local people and showcase the amazing landscape he grew up in. Chau A has been greatly assisted by Howard and Deb Limbert and other members of the British Cave Research Association (BCRA), who provide technical training and assist with the development of cave tours. BCRA also provides an expert for each Hang Son Doong expedition.

Tours are led by guides trained by the BCRA, supported by porters sourced from the local villages. The overnight and multi-day tours include chefs who prepare high quality food for the tour group. All equipment is high quality, with caving lamps powerful enough to light up the enormous cave chambers visited on these tours. Visitor safety is paramount. Tour briefings are provided for each tour and safety assistants work with guides on tour to ensure all participants are comfortable on climbs and traverses. Visitors come from diverse backgrounds with experience levels ranging from decades of caving across many countries to those taking their first-ever cave tour.

This paper describes several of the Oxalis cave trips in the Phong Nha National Park and nearby Tu Lan karst area, and the role of the Oxalis staff in delivering these experiences. These include the Tu Lan and Hang Tien one day experiences, Hang Va two-day tour, and a four-day 'expedition' through the mighty Hang Son Doong — the largest cave in the world.

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Introduction

The descriptions of the cave tours taken with Oxalis are from a trip to Vietnam in March and April of 2018 with group of Brazilians: Augusto Auler, Alexandre de Oliveira Lobo (Lobo), Ezio Luiz Rubbioli and Lília Horta. Our group stayed with different several home stays, which have proliferated in the village following the opening of Paradise Cave and the establishment of Oxalis Adventure Tours. Oxalis was established in 2011 and is now the major employer

in the region, offering jobs for guides skilled in English-speaking, marketing personnel and dozens of porters. This paper describes several cave tours and evaluates the experience as a first time visitor to this region.

Hang Tien one day tour

The Hang Tien Caves are about 70km from the Phong Nha village. Oxalis staff collect you from your accommodation to transport you to the Oxalis centre at the village — the start of the cave tour. Augusto and I were joined by 11 others for the tour. As we were an oversized group, two guides were provided for the tour. The guides, Dong and Thi, made an exceptional effort to learn everyone's name on the drive to the Oxalis centre, seemingly easily remembering a dozen names of multiple nationalities. Dong and Thi were really high energy, which I learnt was typical of Oxalis guides over my tours at Phong Nha. The attention to detail with Oxalis tours is excellent. We were provided a briefing of what we could expect on the tour, footwear for those with unsuitable boots and valuables locked away. Our cave was a 20 minute drive from the centre along a 4WD track, except we were in a mini bus. Half-way into the journey, we had a flat tyre. This was only a minor issue as the flat was quickly removed and the spare ... nowhere to be found!!! An urgent radio call back to base had a spare van to us quickly and we made our way to the drop-off point for the cave.

Then it started raining. A light rain for the entire 6km walk to the cave, up and down very steep and slippery paths through Vietnamese jungle. When the jungle parted to reveal the cave entrance, we were rewarded with an amazing view. An 80m high entrance disappearing into a mountain. A light snack at



Right: Approaching the 80m high entrance to Hang Tien.

Below: The 100m+ high dome in Hang Tien



the cave entrance and some photos, and then we entered the cave. Not far in, the cave roof went up considerably (remember the entrance is 80m high!) with an enormous dome in the roof. At this point I started to slow the group as I started photographing the best scenes, which were plenty! The cave had bats, great cave decoration and some good scrambling to reach the end of the cave. Here we enjoyed lunch and some great daylight views from the cave exit. The longer tours — there are Hang Tien 2,3 and 4 days tours — continue and explore more jungle and caves beyond where we turned around. Then we made our way back along the 6km path to meet the mini bus, fortunately without the rain of the morning walk. Dong and Thi sang most of the way while the rest of us huffed and puffed our way home.

With the delays of the flat tyre, it was about 12 hours from pick up to drop off, and I thought fair value for the \$88US paid for the tour.

Hang Va tour

This is a two-day trip visiting Nuoc Nut and Hang Va Caves, which are located within the Phong Nha National Park. This was just a short 15–20 minute drive from our accommodation but still time for the guides and group to learn each other's names. This time the 10 member group comprised German, South African, Canadian, Brazilian, English, Belgian and of course Australian. The walk to the cave was much easier than the previous trip and we were quickly into the darkness, and wetness. The tour information does warn you that your feet will be wet for most of the time and that good foot hygiene is important. I was well armed with powder and dry socks and didn't have any issues, but did see several examples of foot-rot during my time in Phong Nha. If you tour here, take warnings seriously about looking after your feet.

Nuoc Not Cave was mostly walking passage with some good photographic opportunities. As soon as I extracted my Canon 5DSR from my bag, I was the designated trip photographer. This was great as I had willing models for each shot. Our guide Annetta was brilliant, excellent knowledge of the cave and jungle plus a good eye

Below: As the designated photographer, I took many photos of the group. At scenes like 'James Bond', everyone wanted their picture taken.

Right: Nouc Nut had water most of the trip, which made for some excellent photos.





Left: Stream passage in Hang Va. Right: The extraordinary calcite towers and gour pools in Hang Va.

for where photos could be taken. I enjoyed the tale of the king cobra in the cave and lamented our group was not so lucky. It's difficult to judge the length of the cave we explored that day, but suggest it was more than 2km to the end and then the return trip. Nuoc Not and Hang Va Caves are very close together, but groups would exit one to enter the other. A guide had recently found a connection which Annetta was keen to try, as was our group, so we donned our life jackets and swam through a passage, quite narrow in places, and exited through the Hang Va Cave entrance to our campsite in the cave doline.

On this tour, participants are required to carry all of their clothes, cameras and any other personal items. The great thing is porters carry the tents, water and food, plus a chef is at the camp site to cook your food! We had a great night of food and the local rice 'wine' (= whiskey – a potent brew). The English girl was particularly enthusiastic on the rice wine and spent numerous trips outside of her tent overnight restoring fluid balances to the appropriate levels.

I awoke at about 5am the next morning and explored the jungle near the camp, spying monkeys, pygmy squirrels and other wildlife. By the time the rest of the group crawled from their tents, the best wildlife viewing was over. The chef and porters also woke early and prepared a breakfast feast. Caving trips have never been like this before!

We set off into Hang Va Cave at around 9am, and I was very keen to see the calcite towers that this cave is famous for and which feature on many promotions. We were instantly wet again, so no point in starting with dry clothes. As designated photographer, I was in high demand with some excellent scenes in the stream passage and at a small waterfall.

Partway back along the trip we donned harnesses for the climb to the site I was so keen to see. It was a reasonably easy traverse that many cavers would be more than happy to simply have a hand-line (or not) but Oxalis has set these trips up to cater for all levels of experience. We had some on their first ever caving trip and a couple of us who had seen a few caves before. One of the German girls became quite nauseous and needed to be taken from the cave. This is where the quality of training of Oxalis staff came to the fore again as she was quickly provided some medication to settle the problem and quietly escorted from the cave by one of the assistants. I felt very sorry for her as she still had to do the trek out to the bus meeting point.

The upper level of Hang Va is extraordinary. Massive gour pools that you need a ladder to climb up and down the other side, crossing what are large pools in the wet season, to reach the calcite towers. Annetta, the guide, was slightly deflated when she announced these were the only example of such a cave formation anywhere in the world. I quietly explained that

I had seen the same formation, albeit smaller, in Gastonia Cave on Rodrigues (which few people would have seen), and Augusto spoke of examples in Brazil. We all agreed that what we were looking at was absolutely outstanding and the largest we had seen. I was slightly disappointed that the water level was low and the fabulous colours generated in promotional images could not be replicated. I would love to go back in the wet season and see this cave! We were allowed a good deal of time to take photos but could easily spend a whole day just in this section of the cave.

Infrastructure in the form of individual steel platforms just over foot size are placed on the floor for protection with ladders in place to scale the gour pool walls — yes, you need a ladder to get over them!! All of this infrastructure is removed from the cave at the end of the season as it floods. This must be quite a logistical and physical challenge but ensures the cave is well protected. Price for this tour was US\$353 so certainly not cheap, but fair value for the experience and caves that were visited.

Tu Lan one day

Augusto's friends Lobo, Ezio and Lilia joined us after we had completed the Hang Va trip. We joined a Tu Lan one day tour, back to the same area where we had taken the Hang Tien tour. Tu Lan is offered as one, two, three and and four-day experiences, exploring more caves and more of the jungle in this area. Our guide was once again Dong, who had led our first trip. The promotion of Tu Lan uses the movie *Kong — Skull Island*, as many scenes from the movie were shot here. We got to walk in the footsteps of Kong but he did not make an appearance! When I got home, I watched the film and could make out the location of some scenes and compared them to my photos. Kong's home in the movie was a cave with a rather uninspiring name — Rat Cave. It was a fairly gentle walk to the cave, most of it on the concrete road constructed by Hollywood moviemakers with a couple of small river crossings just near the cave entrance. Rat Cave is modest by Vietnam standards but with some nice decoration and a few hundred metres of passage to the exit point. We checked this out and retraced our steps. Of the Oxalis tours we did, this one had the least restrictions within the cave and the cave is showing signs of wear and tear. This could also be from locals as much as paying tourists too.



Left: Preparing to cross the river to Rat Cave, visible in the background.

Below: After the swim through Toon Cave.



We then walked to Toon Cave where the trip become a lot more interesting. Everyone was provided with a life jacket and we swam 150m into the cave to reach a dry point. The water is very pleasant and very clean so it was great fun floating through the cave. A green viper was spotted on the cave wall, but unfortunately no decent holds to stop and get a photo. I then realised that the only way the viper could have got there was also by swimming, so that gave us something to focus on.

Lunch was provided at the most exquisite camp site imaginable. A small waterfall as the cave exit falls into a crystal clear blue lake, with jungle 100m across the other side. Another swim and we reached our food. Yet another delicious spread of local delicacies, with plenty of pork again. The return trip through the dry section of the cave required the scaling of a 15m ladder. Once again, safety was a priority and everyone had a climb on a safety line.

On the return walk to the village, locals were feeding their water buffalo. I found it interesting that the people living within the Tu Lan Valley speak a language so different that our guides could not converse with them. An interesting custom is burying their dead in unmarked graves, although the grave site is carefully maintained. After around 15 years, the bones are excavated and placed in a small box with a concrete memorial and headstone.

Of the tours I did with Oxalis, this was the easiest and somewhat lacked the wow factor generated by the other trips. It probably would have been fine if I had done this trip first, but after Hang Va and Hang Tien, it was a second tier experience. Dong, our guide though, said the four day Tu Lan tour is his favourite and has lots to offer.

Hang Son Doong

After the show caves and three warm up trips with Oxalis, it was at last the date for the Son Doong expedition. There is no doubt Son Doong has an aura about it in the local village and among visitors to Phong Nha. Several visitors I spoke to were excited to meet someone visiting the cave and I exchanged emails with them to provide some pictures from my trip. It is very widely promoted as 'the largest cave in the world'.

Augusto, Lobo, Ezio, Lilia and I attended the compulsory briefing the afternoon prior to the tour commencement. Oxalis has a strict rule that if you fail to attend the briefing, you are not allowed on the tour. The briefing was delivered by Josh, a young member of the British Cave Research Association (BCRA). One condition of the permit for Oxalis to operate tours in Son Doong, is that they must have a BCRA representative on the tour. Other members who join

Below: Lobo, Steve, Ho Khanh and Augusto at the Home Stay.

Right: My Brazilian friends posing at one of Son Doong's iconic photo spots.



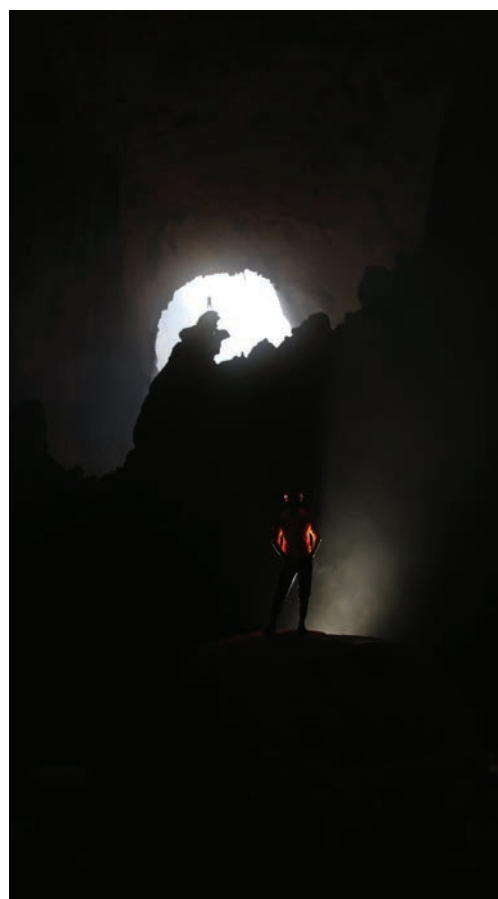
Exit to Hang En. Note the person for scale on the stream bed.



Cave pearls.



A river crossing in the cave.



'Hand of Dog'. The guide on the back formation is several hundred metres from the camera.

the expeditions include Howard Limber and his wife Deb, and other cavers who were part of the initial exploration and mapping. Josh was good company on the tour, but the skill level of staff which are BCRA trained seemed to make the position redundant. Maybe a case of doing a job too well and not being required anymore?

Our accommodation for the evening prior to the tour (included in the expedition fee) was at Ho Khan's Homestay. Ho Khan has legendary status in the village as the discoverer of Son Doong in 1990. Over 15 years elapsed before he found the cave again with Howard Limbert. The expedition porters packed all of the equipment and supplies at Ho Khan's from early in the morning. The support crew was astounding — one guide, one BCRA guide, five safety assistants, 25 porters and two chefs. An additional two safety assistants joined us for the cave exit. Our group comprised my four Brazilian friends, four Vietnamese and another Australian, Peter Bayliss, who is originally from Western Australia but now living and



Above: Hard to believe this is actually inside a cave!



Right: Classic Son Doong sunbeam.

working in Laos. As with other trips, we had a range of caving experience. Two of the Vietnamese were on their *first ever* caving trip. They had plenty of jungle hiking experience which is how they were allowed to pass the entrance criteria, and did a good job through the cave.

Day one is nearly all above ground. It is a relatively easy 10km or so trek to the first camp site. Along the way, we stopped for lunch at Son Doong village. The village has just nine families and 45 persons, with a huge imbalance of young girls who will leave the village looking for partners. The village would seem to have reached a point where it will not function for much longer. Despite being quite remote, the village was equipped with solar panels and good battery storage, generating far more electricity than they can ever use.

The trek features many river crossings so feet become wet early in the trip. They remain wet for the next two days, with some respite of day three but wet again on the fourth day. Excitement rose when we set eyes on the entrance of Hang En from maybe a kilometre away. As we trekked closer, it grew bigger and bigger. Instead of climbing through the larger entrance, we accessed a smaller entrance to the right, and then climbed the rockpile for views of our campsite. This was a serious wow factor. Access to the campsite was gained via a raft across the river, although it was flowing so slowly it was virtually a lake.

Now we came to seriously appreciate the support staff. The porters had reached the site ahead of us and set up our tents, mattresses and sleeping bags, with names of expedition members on each tent. Toilet facilities were set up, with all waste collected in plastic bag lined buckets, with rice husks added. All waste is removed from the cave. The chefs had established their kitchen and 'dining room' and had begun preparing the evening meal. We had some free time before dinner so I spent about 30 minutes swimming in the lake/river. So much for caving for days without a wash — I was super clean!

Our chefs provided an excellent meal, and as we were to discover, it improved every night. After dinner, we spent some time taking photos, placing lights inside tents to give colour. I really appreciated Lobo's knowledge on photographing large cave chambers plus the large number of flash bulbs he had brought with him. We took some trial shots to get camera settings correct for the tent light and dining table lights, and then arranged porters and other cavers to set off multiple flashes. We managed a very nice result.

Early morning at doline 1 with porters preparing for the day.



The 'James Bond' hole.



A downside. Porters smoke at the camp sites and butts are left by tents. Most are collected in the clean-up but I did find butts from previous trips.



An amazing site descending to our night 3 campsite.

On day two I awoke early to a muted light coming through the enormous entrance to Hang En. What a way to start a day. The chefs were busy preparing breakfast, more of a morning banquet. As an early riser, this was frustrating for me as breakfast was at 8 with the caving to start at 9. I was ready by about 6.30! Hang En is the third largest cave in the world according to our Vietnamese guide (they have Deer Cave in Mulu at number 2). The exit to the cave is simply jaw-dropping, an enormous cave entrance with a sandy floor with the jungle creeping in on all sides and the cave walls. We were through the cave in quick time and then following the river, which was at a very low level, onwards towards Son Doong. Along the way we learnt why Son Doong remained 'lost' for so many years after Ho Khan discovered it. A limestone wall adjacent to the river had fallen and blocked the river and the original path he took to the entrance. We left the river and climbed a steep path towards our lunch site, conveniently close to the Son Doong entrance. It took a few minutes to realise the strong breeze shaking the vegetation was actually coming from the cave. I took some video later when we descended into the entrance and it looks like footage of a minor hurricane, such was the strength of the wind blowing through the trees and associated noise.

We were kitted with harnesses for the climb in by the safety assistants and checked by Josh. Then one at a time, we climbed the 80m of knotted ropes to the safety of the cave floor. The ropes are cleverly placed and you clip on to each section as you make your way down. The first part of the cave is a blur — I was in the largest cave in the world!

Dzung and Josh were brilliant at showing us good photo opportunities, but Lobo and I (and maybe others) were a little frustrated at not being able to look around to find our own shots. The group is kept to a strict path and there is little deviation from this, which is a good thing. We crossed the river in the cave and spent some time photographing this and not long after, we saw the first glimpse of light from accurately named doline 1. It was quite some time before we reached there though. At a point we could line up a safety assistant on a nearby formation, and another hundreds of metres in the distance on a formation called Hand of Dog, along an enormous passage. As we walked towards the entrance, another wow moment as the campsite came into view. We took a side passage to look at fossils in the rocks and take a swim — a fantastic way to finish off a day's caving.

Another gourmet dining experience and lots of storytelling. Most were off to bed early and I spent some time speaking with Peter, the other Aussie in the group. With the early night, I woke up at a ridiculously early hour which gave me a chance to photograph the first rays of light through the doline.

Day three was a dry day, so for those who had carried (or had the porters carry) an extra pair of shoes, a day of dry feet. I soldiered on with the same footwear, knowing I would be wet again the following day. In a trip of highlights, this was a special day. We split into two groups to photograph the 'James Bond' hole and another scene. We then had the opportunity to photograph one of the truly iconic Son Doong images, that of people on a very large stalagmite within the daylight zone of doline 2. When I look at the collection of images from this site, I noted that the promotional shots are taken with a very wide angle lens making the cave appear larger than what it is, which is really big!!

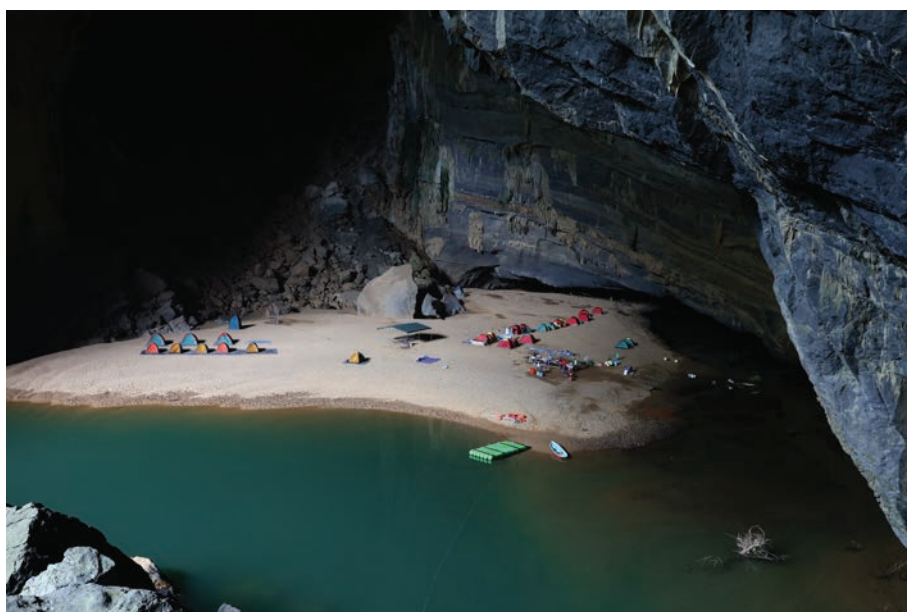
Progressing further, we could view back up into the doline as the sunbeams made an appearance. I had been in Vietnam for nine days and had not seen the sun, however at the appropriate time, the clouds parted and the doline was lit with an incredible shaft of light. I took dozens of photos at the point as did everyone else in the group. Amongst many nice

images, my favourite was a reflection of the doline in a shallow pool of water. Once the sunbeam show finished, we ventured back into the darkness and some cave formations of unbelievable size, stalagmites up to 80m in height. The



Left: The fixed-ladder at the Great Wall of Vietnam.

Below: The view of the camp site in Hang En.



passage was enormous, but the feeling when we approached the next doline, filled with jungle, was certainly one of awe and amazement. Our guide Dzung made it very clear before we entered the doline that we were not to walk on the vegetation and that we were to strictly stick to the defined path. This appears to have been well adhered to, as beyond the defined path the vegetation appeared pristine. I learnt a new term here, when Josh informed us the vegetation exhibits *phenotypic plasticity*. This term describes where vegetation (in this case) exhibits different growth patterns inside the cave to the same vegetation external to the cave. Inside the cave, the plants are deciduous, a response to the reduced sunlight and nutrient levels, compared to their evergreen forms in the jungle above.

One of the Brazilians, Ezio, had brought a laser range finder with him to check the measurements of the cave. Dzung would explain a passage was 150m high so Ezio would check. After a few cases of overstatement of passage dimensions, Dzung would ask Ezio to measure for him. The floor of the doline to the edge of the cave was about 200m, the limit of Ezio's equipment. That's a really big hole!!!

We were allowed a generous amount of time to photograph the jungle doline before descending to the camp site. After a brief rest, we went towards the cave exit to enable us to view the cave and take our photos so we could move more quickly through this section on our way out on day 4. We found the centipede endemic to the cave and a few other invertebrates. The fields of cave pearls were amazing. I had run out of battery so photographed the pearls the following day. An important lesson in Son Doong — take plenty of batteries and cards for your camera.

The third night banquet exceeded the previous two nights as the chefs strove to outdo each other. Two additional safety staff joined us to assist with the climb out and kindly brought some cans of beer for us. Just when I thought the catering couldn't get any better, it did!

I awoke on day four to the sounds of birds flying around the doline. Lying in bed looking up out of the cave from around 400m, what an experience! While we were packing up, I took a close look around the camp site to see how much waste was being left and impact on the cave. I picked up a cigarette butt, some small pieces of paper and plastic. When the porters saw what I was doing, they became quite agitated and Josh suggested not to worry about it as the porters would clean up. I photographed butts on the floor outside their tents and later recommended that each porter should carry a suitable container to place their butts in rather than put them out on the cave floor. It is easy to suggest they shouldn't smoke on the trip, but smoking is so much a part of their culture, I doubt you would get any porters. They only smoked at the camp sites which are near the cave entrances and dolines. The only person I saw smoking in the cave's dark zone was the park ranger who came along to make sure protocols were being followed.

After everyone was packed, we set off the cave exit. When the passage has water, the group uses rafts to reach the Great Wall of Vietnam, an imposing wall of flowstone. It was dry so our group trudged around 500m along a narrow



View of the Hang En camp site at night.

muddy trench to reach the climb out. The wall was fully rigged when we arrived with the safety assistants in place. One at a time we climbed the 30m fixed ladder, before switching to knotted ropes and climbing the near-vertical wall. The flowstone has plenty of footholds, and you are safely harnessed and expertly guided by the assistants across each section of wall. While we enjoyed our lunch, the porters climbed the wall, each carrying large and heavy loads. I am sure all of us admired their strength and agility throughout the trip. It is a short and easy walk from the top of the Great Wall to the relatively small cave exit. From there it was a few kilometres walking back to the waiting bus. Partway along the walk out we joined a familiar path, the exit path from the Hang Va cave trip from a week earlier. I have searched and can't find a map showing the relative locations of the caves, which I imagine is deliberate to avoid having people trying to find their way to Son Doong themselves. Apparently this has happened a couple of times but with so many people at camp sites at the cave entrance and groups moving through daily, the chances of someone finding the cave and sneaking in would seem unlikely.

Each group is treated to a final banquet dinner to celebrate the trip at the Farm Stay. We had a great meal and celebratory drinks and were presented with medals for 'conquering' Son Doong Cave. After dinner, Peter and I did the Australian thing and stayed at the bar by the pool until staff decided it was time for them to go to bed and the Australians could please themselves what they did.

One aspect I did not like was that we were constantly reminded and encouraged to provide tips for the staff and porters. Each visitor was given an envelope to facilitate tipping and you feel very obliged to do so, which I did. We were told that the visitor season lasts only 8-9 months and guides and porters need additional funds for the offseason. In my feedback form, I suggested that the wages paid should allow for the seasonality and not rely on guests tipping for staff to have offseason money to get by. A little extra on the \$4000 tour price would not make much difference.

\$4000 is a lot of money to pay for a cave tour, but when you consider what is provided for this, it actually feels like value for money. The tour fee covers accommodation and meals the evening before and after the tour, absolutely everything during the tour, high end equipment, plus 30 support staff for the trip. How much would a cave tour in Australia or New Zealand cost with 30 support staff for four days?

Conclusion

I was most impressed with the Oxalis enterprise. The guides were well-trained, spoke good English and provided a balance of adventure and interpretation on each tour. I would have liked to have had a little more information at times, but it is very challenging on any cave to tour to find the right balance of interpretation to satisfy the group. On each tour we had experienced geologists (my Brazilian friends) and speleologists who have caved around the world, mixed with local and international visitors on their first-ever cave tour. That is challenging.

There is a focus on protecting the cave resource, and their attention to safety, without being in-your-face about it, was excellent. They employ large numbers of locals and have established the Oxalis Foundation to support local villagers. I enjoyed the experiences offered by Oxalis and their efforts to protect the caves they use, while providing employment for local people. The contrast between the caves Oxalis are using and the general show caves in the area is quite stark.