

## Cave Man

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Only on the return was the crowding of the *koc*, coach noticed. This was a narrow gauge line. The Ottomans had done the same for the silver and other mines in the Balkans, the English through India, no doubt.

The women's compartments had been noticed going out. Among the rest of the prohibitions displayed in pictorial form, kissing was disallowed. (Evidently the shorter distance trains had lesser risk of molestation & amorousness—there had been none of those notices.)

Tourists to Batu Caves would think to themselves, — Oh! Full marks for urban planning, bringing a major train line from the city centre directly to the temple complex.

As the return train slowly filled, a young mid-teen Indian-Malay boy left the seat by his mother and came into the next compartment to assume a place beside a chap on his phone. At the previous stop a pair of girls couple of years older than himself had entered and looked for a seat. Nothing to their liking; men dotted throughout and no two seats together. Unbidden, up and into the adjoining carriage the lad went, leaving the lasses nice and snug beside mum.

Fine grace-note, young fellow. Bully for you!

As expected, the rock forms inside the caverns produced fine curves and textures, marvelous shaping from untold ages of rain and wind on stone. Luckily, without any prior photographs—only images of the giant statues and the stair—all the impressions arrived immediate and direct.

Perfectly understandable how the place could have initially been adopted by the toilers in the mines and on the rail-lines; as time went on slowly becoming consecrated as a holy site.

Indentured labour, they would be called by Imperial historians.

There was cool within the walls. And the ghosts of the past not difficult to imagine.

Fresh water seeping from a mostly cloudless sky made the rock gleam.

In other circumstances twenty millennia past, finest paintings of tigers & songbirds from the forest would have adorned such walls, rendered by the sure hands of hunters.

In the Tropics the abundance of foods of all kinds gave rise instead to *lepak*—lazing & ease. Instead of earnest hunting and trapping, the energies here were directed to catching the melodies flitting through the canopy overhead. (The Malays loved their karaoke.)

At the small Murugan temple at the top of the tiered platforms a four or five year-old was attempting to seize the smoke from the incense burning in a corner. With his lack of success the lad began fighting and swimming through the veils, the reverberating music of bell and drum accompanying.

With the monkeys cavorting throughout the ceremony, how was the boy supposed to sit tight. None of the adults minded and the ceremony proceeded.

The Hindu observances were always something to behold

The bell-ringer here pulled his cord lazily, one hand behind his back in a jerk-off motion.

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Priests might have been housed near-by; low-level multi-storey housing stood on all sides in the contemporary sprawl of Kuala Lumpur.

The old Sri Lankan Tamil met at *Mehran* a few days before—a man opposed to the Gujarati Modi—suggested for Thaipusam one million people gathered at Batu Caves. It seemed an impossible number, but then the grounds were large and the tourism could not be underestimated.

A Japanese or perhaps Chinaman from the Mainland had stopped on the 227 steps to ask a woman what she was carrying in the pail on her shoulder. As in a comic opera, much tongue-twisting and ear-bending involved.

*M-I-L-G?* the man repeated her spelling.

A steep climb even with a small 2-3 litre pail, slopping a few drops as she went.

Like other temples in the region, the depth of treads on the stairs was scaled to dwarf-size. The Tamil labourers were short-statured, like their descendants. (The civic-minded technocrats in Singapore had planted an escalator on the grassy side of a hillock in the city for the convenience of elderly & infirm nature-lovers.)

Some of the devotees climbed barefoot and prostrated themselves full-length at the landings, arms out-stretched in front like divers, foreheads to the ground.

An identical pair of roosters in lustrous copper & ebony circled up on the rocky ledge to the right of Muguran, monkeys screeched & scampered beneath Mug's skirts, various birds coming & going through the opening above. There was nothing untoward; all the elements here added to the spiritual possibility.

Inside the caves some of the striking gestures among the statuary was lost now to the living realm. It was retained only in ghostly form in the histrionics of the stage, the screen and places of worship in far distant corners.

Ardency, compassion and the greeting of wonder in the generations past were notable. Impressive acrobatics and poise were shown by the gal against the wall at the back of Mug's entrance, one of his chosen consorts kicking her left leg out wide across her body and swanning bird-hands either side. Bollywood musical sequences took their cues from the statuary.

Some of the sinuous movement in the forms could be seen occasionally among the diaspora in Little India, Singapore, among the women particularly.

Our smaller, more modest cave near Nikšić in Montenegro, where the preserved body of the local Saint Vasil was housed in a small niche in the rock, gave out to a dizzying prospect over the valley that held the town below. In the 1930s Grandma Rose had walked one or two days barefoot from Boka, in order to visit the shrine.

Closer by Village Uble, within one of the peaks, stood *Boškova Pecina*—Boško's Cave—where young, handsome Boško had met a foul and violent end. A generation or two later the child shepherds scared each other in the shadows of the place with Boško's terrifying agonies. Mother had been among the number.

The damnable, jealous Vukovići had murdered innocent Boško. (Beauty was all on our side of the family.) That was the reason Grandad Rade had been outraged when his famous cousin, incomparable Elena Blagojeva, from the house of his mother, choose to marry one of the clan.

Pop Rade's nephew Stevo had been mad for Elena too. Once, following some understandable confusion, Blagoje and Stevo found themselves waiting together at the same place for Elena's promised arrival. In umbrage the pair pledged to throw the hussy over once and for all; nothing more to do with her.

Eventually, half-mad Stevo had gone to consult the monks at Nikšić beneath Saint Vasil's cave, where he received the bad news on second cousin unions. The kill-joy monk's prohibition



was to ruin Stevo for life. (How the Arabs would scoff at such delicacy over consanguinity, and even for second cousins.)

There were few selfies 8:30am on a Saturday morning at Batu Caves. The majority of visitors were pilgrims from near and far in the Hindu world.

The wise old monkeys in the cave had provided a reminder of the greater creation. Even cats had no place in contemporary churches (therefore the mice).

Limestone forms here on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, instead of Balkan karst. The rocks were not dissimilar. Croatia further North was well-known among speleologists. Within the hollows of his native Lika in Croatia young Nikola Tesla had made his first discoveries of electrical current.

Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur