

## Dos and Don'ts When entering caves:

- Village guides essential for entering caves, even if you have a non-local professional guide.
- Strictly no taking souvenirs from caves.
- Village guides have torch service available for you. However, just in case batteries run out, it is recommended to bring your own torch as back-up.
- Wear cave helmets provided by village guides/boatmen
- Wear life jackets provided by village boatmen
- When walking in caves, strictly stay on designated trails to avoid crushing cave crystals under your feet.
- Villagers request no shining of torch in the water as large fish are attracted.

## Staying in Nong Ping Village:

**Homestay.** Villagers provide meals; rollout mattresses; mosquito nets; blankets; toilets with bucket bath.

**Village Lodge.** Four rooms; bed, work-desk and fan. Meals can be arranged for extra fee.

**Village meals.** Please be aware that food in this village is not always readily available. Taking a small back-up supply is recommended.

## Village Guide Service:

Please note that these treks and cave tours are facilitated by village guides, so foreign visitors please be aware that languages will be limited, and non-verbal communication will be paramount. Local knowledge is essential in caves. Those with professional non-local guides will still need to have a local guide when entering the caves.

## Tips for Motorbike Hiring:

- Make sure it is roadworthy (check brakes, lights, oil etc.) before you hire.
- Wear helmet; Speed kills
- Make sure you practice before starting your journey
- Avoid riding with 2 people per bike if possible
- In the case of flat tyre, look for a roadside store displaying old tyre as a sign.
- Unpaved roads very slippery when wet.



## Getting there:

- Xe Bangfai River Cave is about 150km East-south-east of Thakhek. Motorcyclists be aware that the roads are mainly unpaved and suitable only for experienced riders.
- From Thakhek, travel east along Route 12 to Mahaxai (43km), turn right to Panam junction (25km).
- Turn left at Panam to go to Boualapha (68km).
- From Boualapha, turn left after the District Administration Office then take 1st turn right (230m) to go to Ban Nong Ping (14km).
- Note; option to go by boat from Ban Pakphanang to Nong Ping (see directions to Ban Pakphanang below).

## Do the circuit

- You may like to return to Thakhek on the Ho Chi Minh trail from Boualapha. Travel back west from Boualapha 6km and take the right-hand turn to Langkhang. Continue north to Ban Pakphanang river crossing (11km). No bridge there, so motorbikes cross in canoes (also get a local to balance the canoe on the boat for extra fee to save you from falling in the river with the bike). Onward to another river crossing at Ban Senphan village (12km) (a boat may be necessary here too). From Ban Senphan continue north to Langkhang (11km).
- Langkhang is a good place to eat. From there it is paved road for the 128km to Thakhek along Route 12.

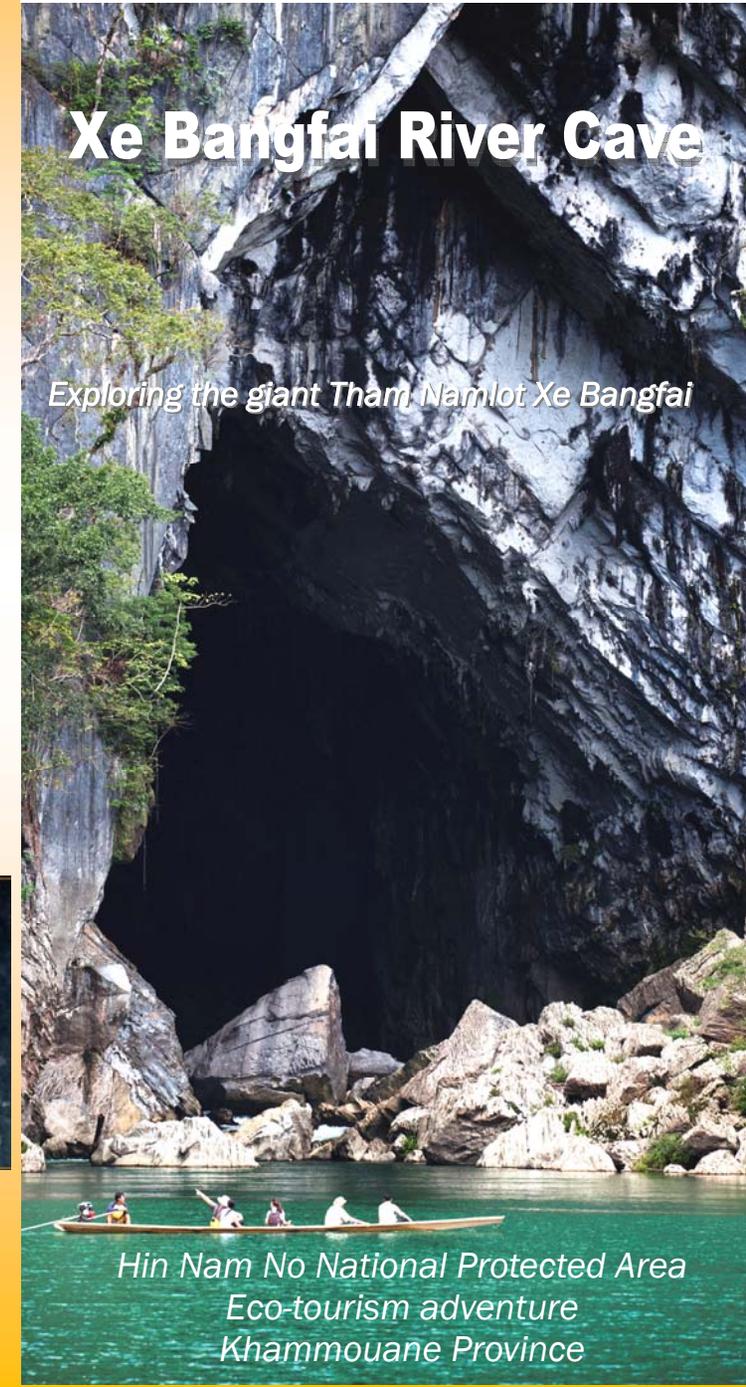


- Thakhek to Ban Nong Ping village is almost a day journey.
- The road from Mahaxai-Panam-Boualapha is unpaved (therefore slippery when wet) and has some rocky sections, but is a shorter distance than going via Langkhang.
- Thakhek to Langkhang is good road but Langkhang to Boualapha is unsealed and there are 2 river crossings.



# Xe Bangfai River Cave

Exploring the giant Tham Namlot Xe Bangfai



Hin Nam No National Protected Area  
Eco-tourism adventure  
Khammouane Province

## Tham Namlot Xe Bangfai:

The Xe Bangfai River, whose source is in the Annamite range between Laos and Vietnam “loses” itself for 7 km through a giant tunnel beneath limestone karst mountains of Hin Nam No to find itself emerging again in a clear pool near Ban Nong Ping Village. The cave chamber, measuring an average of 76m width and 56m in height, creates one of the largest active river cave passages in the world. Although there were two 20<sup>th</sup> century explorations by the French (1905 & 1995), this cave remarkably remained virtually unknown except to locals until a National Geographic survey brought it to world attention through an expedition in 2008.

The cave is navigable by boat for 2km until a section of rapids is encountered. The grandeur of the limestone chamber, the spectacular natural decorations, flowstones and cave crystals provide an eerie beauty rarely experienced. A climb through a branch cavity reveals a chamber evocative of a Dragon Hatchery. This chamber leads to an elevated balcony providing a dimly lit view of the massive opening .



Outside the cave a resurgence pool glitters in the light encircled by a beach. This 200m radius pond is conserved by villagers as a fish breeding zone, ensuring reliable downstream fishing.

Traditionally, villagers thought this to be the source of the Xe Bangfai river and knew it as *Tham Khoun Xe*, meaning “the cave at the source of the river”. According to village legend, the cave is inhabited by a spirit. One time a broken *khaen* (musical instrument) was left at the entrance and was found restored to immaculate condition the next morning. The spirit was also known to lend beautiful clothes to individuals for various ceremonies until one time a beneficiary returned a garment unwashed. The spirit is still believed to be benevolent though, as villagers who have fallen while gathering swallows nests and bats within the chamber have never lost their lives from the event. Not only that, but no bombs entered the cavity during the war. However, villagers are not complacent about this safety record and provide helmets for all visitors entering the cave. An annual sacrificial offering is also made to the cave spirit to ensure its continuing protection. Please don’t challenge this tradition by entering the cave without a village guide.

## Hin Nam No National Protected Area:

This 82,000ha protected area is a refuge for rare primates, including the black langur and the red-shanked douc langur. Other significant wildlife to lookout for are 4 species of horn-bill bird. Hin Nam No NPA is currently vying for World Heritage listing. Xe Bangfai river-cave is part of this protected area. Villagers manage this site as a community-based eco-tourism venture to create sustainable livelihoods.

## Boating Itineraries:

Boats are located at the mouth of the cave. Rather than using motorized boats, village boatmen paddle in the cave in order to conserve the cave environment and the bat population. The village boating group provide the following tour options;



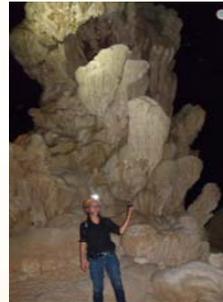
1. **Short trip** Paddle 300m into the cave, climb up to a branch passage and view the cavern from Dragon’s Balcony. This is for sure-footed adventurers who are prepared to muddy their feet and climb a fairly steep incline. **(1 hour boat and climb; moderately difficult).**



2. **Long Trip** Ride 2km into the cave to the rapids, return via the Dragon’s Balcony branch-cave to view the final river bend before it exits the cave. This is for adventurers only, who want to experience the eerie atmosphere deep within the cave; hear the pound of rapids in the darkness, and then climb up a steep limestone slope before finally re-emerging into the daylight. **(2 hour boat and climb; moderately difficult).**

## Other Itineraries:

**Tham Bing Cave** This cave is entered from an entrance high on the cliff to the north of the river-cave mouth. The passage, although much smaller than the river-cave, passes through spectacular flowstone and columnar formations for about 700m before breaking into the river-cave at a high cliff inside the giant river-cave passage. Return by backtracking. **(1 hour trek/climb from the resurgence pool; moderately difficult)**



**Tham Long (Coffin Cave)** A rock-ledge cave located only 300m from Nong Ping village. It has two cavities; prior to the war, one was known to have contained a number of hardwood coffins from another era. During the war, villagers sheltered from bombing raids in one side of the cavity (although many sheltered in trenches), and North Vietnamese soldiers traveling the Ho Chi Minh trail sheltered in the other side. Thousands stayed here. **(30 min from village; easy walking)**

## Operating months:

The Xe Bangfai River-cave is not recommended to enter between June and October due to dangerously high flows, but the village is still open for other itineraries, as well as home-stay and lodge services. Road access is difficult during the wet season, however there is boat access from Ban Pak-phanang to gain year-round access.

