

Travel Tales

The Search for the 1000-year-old Buddha Temple Caves of the “Silk King of Thailand”

Part 3:

I Climb a Mountain and Meet Buddha

by

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Previously I told you the tale of Jim Thompson, the “Silk King of Thailand,” how in 1962 he discovered the 1000-year-old temple cave Tha Morat in north central Thailand, near the ruined city of Si Thep, and how he was unable to locate another possible, ancient temple cave nearby.

These two caves are important for several reasons. First, although there are over 3900 caves in Thailand, cave Tha Morat is among the most remarkable artistically. The NY Metropolitan Museum of Art has stated that the cave has “one of the most extensive programs of Buddhas and bodhisattvas in southeast Asia.” In 2014 the Met borrowed a beautiful Buddha head originally from the cave for an exhibition in New York. Jim Thompson says in his unpublished letters that in 1962 Blanchette Rockefeller (noted art collector, wife of John D. Rockefeller 3rd, and President of the Met) purchased a different head from the cave.

Second, cave Tha Morat has never been geo-located, despite its importance. As a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, this irked me.

Third and most important, the purported second cave has never been found or even searched for. That cave might contain previously unknown temple carvings that would be a major archaeological and artistic find.

Hey, I had to go.

Of course, before going, I did all the things a good researcher/explorer does. I reviewed the literature, and actually went to lots of real libraries and read actual BOOKS – I didn't just Google everything!

In some dusty file boxes at the archives of the University of Pennsylvania I found the best stuff: 200 pages of unpublished letters from Jim Thompson to his friend and ex-lover Lisa Lyons, describing his cave explorations in Thailand.

I contacted the top caving expert in Thailand, an Englishman, who was quite helpful. He encouraged me in my quest. I invited him and others to come along on my expedition, but as usual, no-one had the time, money, or inclination. So I jumped on a plane with my trusty team: me, myself and I.

In Bangkok I hired a taxi for \$150 USD to take me the 150 miles to the only hotel in the Si Thep area, which turned out to be friendly but not very popular – I was the only guest. I expected to hire a local cab to take me around, but this region was so unpopulated that there were no cabs or even tuk-tuks (three wheeled cabs), only motorcycles. So on the back of a “motocy” (as they call it in Thai) I went to Si Thep, and was awe-struck by its mile-wide ruins, wall and moat.



The next day my motocy took me toward Khao Amon Rat mountain. There I hooked up with a local guide, whom I shall call Lek. The athletic Lek looked me over, and expressed doubt that I could make it up the steep mountain, in the ninety degree heat and ninety-five percent humidity. I had doubts of my own, but said it was a

sacred quest. So off we went, with some companions (probably along to carry me back), through a tapioca paddy and a corn field, to the base of the mountain. After a short rest, and a long drink of water, we started up the slippery slope. And I mean up. About fifty degrees up – steeper than a staircase, but with no stairs. After two and a half hours of struggle, through a dry jungle of bamboo, shrubs, small trees and large poisonous millipedes, we made it to a shelf below the cave entrance. There the slope became even steeper, and a 20 yard rope was placed there to allow us to heave ourselves up, almost vertically.

Red-faced, sweating and exhausted, I asked Lek what the orange flags were near the cave entrance. “Oh,” he said, “Those are markers for the marathon that is run here every year. Last month the race was won by a local policewoman. She made it up the mountain in twelve minutes.”

Inside the cave, the atmosphere changed. It was dim, quiet and cool. Ahead a nine-foot-tall Buddha stood facing me. He was impressive and calm, even though most of his head had been cruelly cut away. His hand was in the Abhāya mudrā (fearless) pose.



His body and an adjoining body were carved from a huge stalagmite that joined the floor and ceiling of the cave. One of our party began lighting some joss sticks to honor the Buddha, while another put down tarps to discourage the millipedes and make them more visible. Around the back and sides of the stalagmite were other decapitated Buddhas, much smaller.

I estimated the correct position of the cave, to geo-locate it for the first time. The lat/long is 15.495829, 100.987606, and if you put those coordinates into your Google Earth search box, exactly as written (with the comma), you can find the mountain.



Lek was pleased that I had made it up to the cave, and gave me a small Buddha locket as a keepsake of my visit. I still treasure it and carry it with me always as a good luck charm and memento of my visit to Tha Morat, the “Cave of Forgiveness.”

On the way down I enquired about and did some searching for the fabled second cave. I can’t yet reveal my “sources and methods,” but I can say that there is a good chance that a second cave exists, that it is not one of the 3900 “known” caves, and that it is difficult to find, and hard to get into.

Onward to another expedition!

Lew Toulmin was raised in Thailand and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Art.

Words above in story and bio: 946

Photos, captions and credits:

1. Sketch by explorer Quaritch Wales of the Buddha statues in the Tha Morat cave. (Courtesy photo)
2. Buddha head from the Tha Morat cave, that was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. (Courtesy photo)
3. Mount Khao Amon Rat, view from the east (Credit: Lew Toulmin)
4. Interior of the Tha Morat cave, with tarps on the floor to discourage millipedes (Credit: Lew Toulmin)
5. Lew Toulmin (right) in the Tha Morat cave with Buddhist monks and local villagers. (Credit: Lew Toulmin)

#end of Jim Thompson cave series#

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