

Visit to the Sink Caves near Comesee, Clarendon on October 28, 2007

The weekend of my 40th birthday I sat relaxing in a small country bar just outside Kellits, Clarendon. I overheard a fellow speaking of having visited some local caves nearby. I expressed an interest and learned the caves were located in the hills behind Comesee and evidently part of a very extensive cavern. Obviously this information intrigued my adventurous spirit and the next day I began making additional inquiries among friends. I quickly learn that the majority of people in the area had never even heard of these caves. I spoke with Jamaicans who were born in the Kellits and Comesee areas and had lived here most of their lives. I did discover a few who had heard of them, but couldn't be bothered to hike up the hills and through the bush simply to view some hole in the ground which was rumored to be quite full of bat excrement.

Certainly these caves are like anything else in the world and interest and beauty are different in the eyes of each individual. The lack of interest and knowledge I found among friends led me to return to the fellow whose conversation I had overheard in the bar. After pestering him with my strong desire to visit he promised to assist in connecting me with people I could count on to guide me. The locals referred to the area of the caves as "The Woodlands." Our trip was scheduled for the morning of Sunday October 28th 2007.

With a tropical depression bearing down on Jamaica, the night before our trip was punctuated with heavy rains and high winds. This disappointed me as I expected the trip to be cancelled. Nevertheless I was up early and was happy to see that the Sun was shining and the sky was only slightly overcast. I had hope that things would work out even though the rough trail was sure to be wet and messy. A few people backed out for reasons related to the weather (while others were unable to recover from their Saturday night activities), but I only had a couple days left before my visit would end so I stubbornly persisted in planning the trip.



I arrived at the designated meet up site at 9:55 AM for the 10:00 AM start of the expedition. I was the first to arrive. Ten minutes later the fellow at whose house we were meeting exited with a bucket of laundry. He was obviously not in a hurry, but then there were several members missing so I figured he could at least set his laundry to soak. A third adventurer showed up at about 11:15 AM. Small rain showers came on and off so I felt the delay was hurting our chance of making the trip. Between the lousy weather and the local habit of very late Saturday night activities my hopes of seeing the caves were waning.

Finally, at about 12:25 PM, the three of us caught a ride in a van to the starting point only about a mile or so away. There we waited for another 10-15 minutes until a second car arrived with five more people. The group of eight milled around for unspecified reasons another ten minutes or so before finally hitting the trail at approximately 12:45 PM; almost three hours behind our planned start time. While I was a bit frustrated with the unexplained delays the seven Jamaicans accompanying me acted as if everything was going just as expected.

After the previous nights torrential rains (brought about by tropical depression sixteen, which eventually became Hurricane Noel killing over 100 in the Caribbean) the path was quite muddy. The rutted cattle trails that we followed through the weeds and hills were well worn by goats, cows and donkeys. This meant that the muddy soil mixed with animal feces was both mushy and slippery. As wide as cattle are it is amazing that they wear such a thin path. Some of the ruts were so deep and narrow that it was awkward maneuvering through them. The thick, gushy rust-orange colored mud and the many slippery wet stones made for a difficult hike. The locals whizzed along the slippery uphill path in their sandals, dress shoes and well-worn sneakers, while I wheezed along much slower in my brand new waterproof hiking boots all the while dropping further behind my more acclimatized companions. I was happy that the walk was only a little over a half hour from where we started. I'm sure in drier conditions it would have been both quicker and easier.





The walk offered beautiful scenery and crossed two streams. Along the trail we collected sugar cane, guava and oranges from fields and trees on the route. As we approached the peak where the entrance was located the fellow who stayed behind with me pointed upward and identified the entrance. I could not detect it but snapped a photograph anyway. It was a very steep climb up a muddy hill with little to utilize for hand or foot holds.

The entrance hole was about the size needed to squeeze a large sedan through. Once we entered I found the interior to be much more spacious. The inside of the cave was moist and damp. Drops of water and sediment slowly dripped down from the ceilings stalactites and met the points of the floor's stalagmites in this living cave.

This cave was not only alive, but the home of other creatures as well. Bats squeaked from hidden corners and dark crevices in the walls and ceiling. Some swooped around, sometimes coming curiously close to our heads. The shells of large snails littered the floor, but I never saw a single live one. I don't know if this meant the living snails were better hidden or if some other animals had discarded the shells after feeding. Under one large dark hole in the ceiling we observed a deep pile of small bones. These appeared to be bat skeletons. Positioned underneath this huge dark hole in the ceiling one of the members of the group speculated that this spot was where dead bats fell or where bats too small to fly fell from their nests. It seemed a good guess, although I was curious about the only remains being dry, scattered bones and no full skeletons or partially decomposed carcasses. Maybe rodents were quick to find and clean the bones.



Once inside the large cave I removed my back pack to retrieve access my water bottle. I noticed the back of my pack was soaked and I felt the back of my shirt and found the same. I guessed that the pack had caused my back to sweat more. It wasn't until after the trip when I viewed the photographs that I realized my entire shirt was soaking wet with sweat.

We climbed over and around large boulders and rocks shaped by thousands of years of dripping water to explore two large rooms. Both were fairly well lit by exterior light; the front room by the hole we entered and the second room from a large hole in the ceiling. We took our time exploring the caves as we were in no hurry plus the rocks we climbed on and over were quite slippery.

A ninth hiker who joined us at the cave, and was treated by our group as the main guide, told us that there were passages leading to other rooms, some even larger than the two we had seen, but accessing them required a lot of climbing and crawling, would require artificial lighting and were considerably more dangerous. He even told us that the tunnels could be followed as far as Saint Ann's Parish. We didn't come with the equipment, clothing, supplies or intent to undertake such a trip.



Before retreating down the mountain we paused to share water, bag-juice and bulla that some of us had brought. It was at this time that I took several more photographs included the group shot of my companions. Unfortunately this little break ensured that we were caught in much heavier showers on the way back down the trail. Some members of the group cut large leaves to use as umbrellas. I remained stubborn and walked uncovered.

The existence of the caves is not secret, but it is far from common knowledge even among locals who have lived in the immediate vicinity their entire lives. Proof that the caves have not endured frequent visitors was quickly noticeable by the absence of trash. Yes, there were some cigarette butts, food wrappers, bottle caps and a single pink flip flop, but this was very little compared to what you would find on the side of any of the local roadways.

I have no doubt that this site could be exploited for tourism. My initial instinct is that it would be a positive thing; bringing more visitors to the nearby guest houses, stores and restaurants; ultimately generating a greater economic prosperity to the region. Hopefully it would also provide the encouragement required to get the government to better maintain the local roads.

After the hike I expressed my intent to return to the caves on my next visit and maybe even sleep there overnight. Everyone looked at me like I was crazy and one person broke the silence and responded very seriously "Only a white man would ever say such a thing." The rest of the group shook their heads in agreement as we all enjoyed a good laugh.

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