

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF BATU CERMIN

The beast scuttles across the roof of the cave with unearthly, silent speed. Like a minion of Hades, it darts and lurches, doing whatever it can to evade the splash of my flashlight as I try to trace its progress above my head. Eventually, it finds a small crevice into which—incredibly—it manages to fold each of its six-inch-long jet-black legs.

It's a cave-dwelling storm spider—and it's massive—a frightening creature at any location, let alone here, underground in the pitch dark and damp folded stone of the caves of Batu Cermin, on Flores Island, Indonesia.

They're not alone down here either; another unnerving presence makes a home of these spooky hollows.

I round another tight corner, contorting and squeezing my body through the cramped, rough passage that leads to the next cavern.

There's room in this one to stand, but I wouldn't want to. Pointing my light up to the roof reveals hundreds of horseshoe bats. They hang in silent, inverted repose only feet above me while others flutter about haphazardly—flapping and whooshing around like giant, hairy moths. Some fly so close, their wings moving so near, that I can feel the push of cold air on my face. There's a terrible smell in the chamber too. I point my light at the floor, illuminating thick smatterings of bat feces.

The bats and the spiders are the largest full-time residents of the caves these days, but there were times when larger guests shared these lightless, pungent cavities.

Since the 1500s they have provided secret shelter for generations of Flores Island's indigenous peoples during their long history of colonization and conflict.

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A massive storm spider pauses, pincers ready, on the wall of Batu Cermin.

At first there was the oppressive rule of the Dutch to hide from. Later, it was that of the Portuguese and most recently the bayonets and bullets of Japanese soldiers during their brutal occupation of the Second World War.

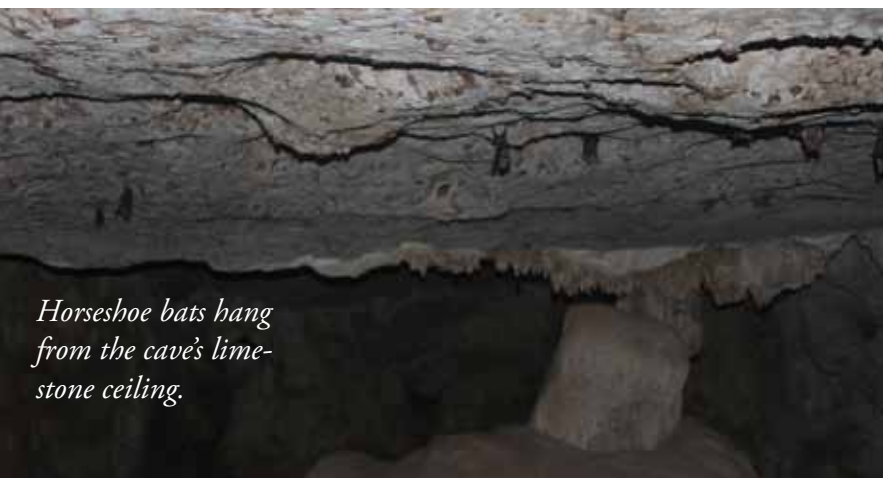
Through troubled times over the past four centuries, people hid down here in the dank darkness, scraping and clambering past the same cold rough walls and squeezing into the same claustrophobic alcoves in which I now find myself. They stayed for as long as was necessary to conceal themselves from whatever episode of invasion and oppression presided above.

I crouch against a wet rock, its rugged protrusions digging into my leg and ribs, and wonder how long I would last.

Doubled over, I make my way back out along the awkward turns of the twisting tunnels. I've been in these close confines for only a few hours, but they've been long and tiring. So as I see the first hazy hints of daylight leaking into the cave, my progress towards them begins to quicken. Pausing briefly to rest, I can feel the beat of my heart and the sweat on my skin.

The light grows, and as I emerge through a curtain of vines veiling the cave entrance and into the full brightness of day, I inhale deeply and stretch widely.

It's good to be free, and all that I've escaped are the bats and the spiders.



Horseshoe bats hang from the cave's limestone ceiling.