



### **Deer Cave, Mulu, Sarawak**

In the rain forest wilderness that shrouds the fabled island of Borneo, the Gunung Mulu National Park lies tucked away near the northern tip of the Sarawak sector. Not only does this great park provide protection for the myriad fauna and flora of the forest, but it funds itself with some limited visitor facilities, and also extends across a remarkable range of jagged mountains. These are essentially an escarpment of steeply dipping Palaeogene limestone that is more than 2000 metres thick and is remarkably massive. And they are cavernous on a scale that is matched nowhere else in the world. The caves of Mulu are enormous, and include the world's largest cave chamber and a huge river system with more than 200 kilometres of interconnected passages. They also include Deer Cave, with its giant passage that is now delightfully accessible, with a boardwalk through the rain forest and a concrete path into the cave. The main section is well over 100 metres wide and is 120 metres tall; the camera position for this photograph is half a kilometre in from the entrance, and the person near the far end of the path is dwarfed by the sweeping rock arch. Everything about Deer Cave is on a giant scale. The dark patches on the roof, way above the distant person, are bat roosts, and there are more than two million bats that emerge in a spectacular bat flight every evening, for a night spent hunting insects over the forest. Deer Cave was formed by a major river draining off the sandstone slopes of Gunung Mulu, probably well over a million years ago. But the main river now takes another route, and even the smaller modern river in the cave has found its way through a parallel passage at a lower level. The cave of Hang Son Doong, discovered in Vietnam during 2009, vies with its huge passage size, and is much longer; but the cross-section dimensions of Deer Cave still support its claim as the largest cave passage in the world. It is a hidden gem within the great forests of Borneo.

© *Photograph and text by Tony Waltham Geophotos*