The Lair of the Bats

Posted on



The dark, looming cave, one of the largest in Sri Lanka

We discover the limestone grottoes of Vavulpane, where day is night and night is day.

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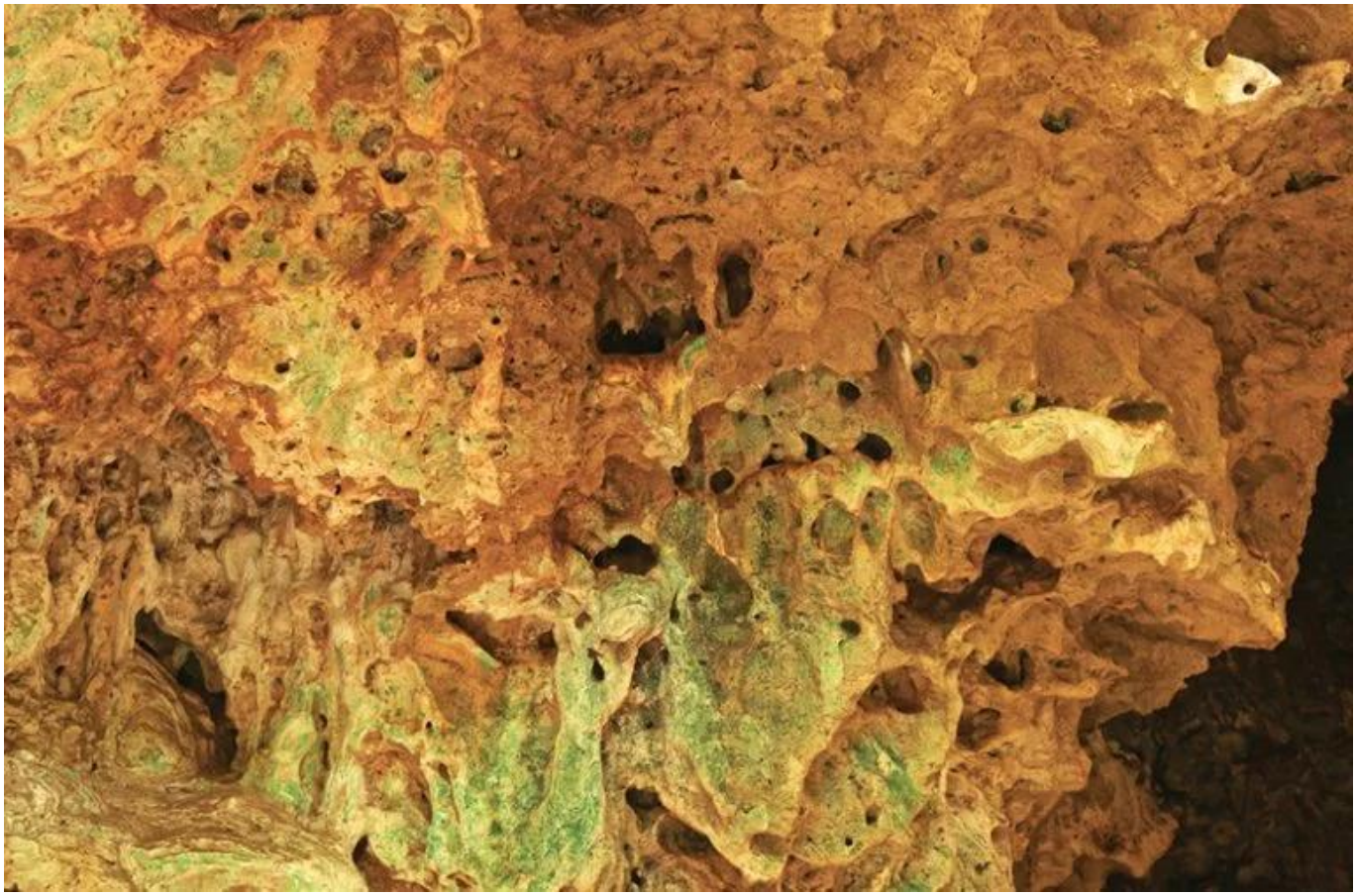
Vavulpane is quite a remote village nestled amidst the thick green growth in lush Pallebedde. We ambled down the sinuous roads in search of a legend; a prehistoric thing still alive; still vibrating with life even though 500 million years old. We were on the trail of the Vavulpane limestone grottoes.

The road there led through a dark jungle path. We trod a spongy carpet padded

with the leaves of millennia. All over was the cloying smell of over-ripe jackfruit, which lay around in mushy messes. They had been the night spoils of bats, the animals who guard the grottoes of Vavulpane in their millions.

The jungle path diverted and dropped down a flight of green, mossy, slippery stairs. We were climbing down, and at one point casually looked down – only to pull short at the magic sight that greeted us. Below us was the biggest cave I had ever seen. Its location was magical, especially given the green, liquid, almost semi darkness of the deep forest. Separating the very bottom of our stairway from the grotto was a gushing white stream. Above the grotto, which was very tall though crouching, was the forest floor. Roots of giant trees tapered down to meet the roof of the cave.

However, the most uncanny, mystical phenomenon was how the limestone formation above the grotto had contorted into various shapes similar to gargoyles. They seem to fly towards us to intimidate us from entering the dark realm of the bats. Disregarding this very imaginative defense put up by the environ, we decided to explore the enigmas of the Vavulpane caves.



Limestone has taken fanciful shapes

Our sure-footed guide, a villager, helped us ford the stream and enter the dry doorstep of the cave. From where we stood right in front of the abysmal dark cave mouth, we were overpowered by the high, unending screech of the bats, hanging like a curtain. The cave breathed a musty smell. Occasionally a small, delicate bat would dash out as if scared out of wits and then go in again as fast, chittering madly.

These grottoes are actually made up of 12 caves which, as was stated, had been here for more than 500 million years; though not, of course, in this same shape. Their contours have been changed constantly by the waters coursing across them as well as other natural conditions.

The millions of bats hanging upside down here, though united in their shrill screech, are actually of 25 different species, ranging from the butterfly-sized and elfin ones to bats almost the size of monkeys; bats with horseshoe shaped faces to fox-like

heads.

As we moved deeper in to the caves, going in for 800 metres, the very climax of our trip sprang on us. It was difficult to make out exactly what we were seeing at first, but slowly our eyes were able to discern it: a long internal waterfall that gushed down 45 metres from the wall. It shone with a smoky, phosphorescent, bluish-white in the darkness.

Though Vavulpane is strongly suggestive of the unexplained, it did not come in the physical sense. But, as we turned our backs to the lost spirits in limestone, I realised that this place had rekindled something I thought had been lost in me long ago: a belief in the magical, or the supernatural and the other-worldly. As night pressed around the cave, and the bat choir went a note higher, I felt my spine tingling with great excitement, and felt something whisper: “such things are.”

