

## My quest to understand the appeal of bird's nest soup

Since at least the 14th century swiftlets' nests have been popular in China and are usually boiled in a broth to make soup. Chinese emperors seem to have had a particular weakness for nest-eating and today the dish retains the aura of an imperial delicacy.

No one knows for certain how or why the fashion caught on. Some claim that Zheng He, who led China's great explorations overseas in the 15th century, brought bird's nests back from his voyages in Southeast Asia.

Such tales have helped maintain the value and status of bird's nests as a luxury. Today Dr Tan Boon Siong, a Chinese-Malaysian businessman who ships his nests across the Straits of Johor to wealthy **ethnic** Chinese Singaporeans, offers 30g of nests for around £130 (\$170), enough for about three servings of soup.

ethnic 种族的

elixir 灵丹妙药

Nests are also treated as an **elixir**. Claims of their health benefits go back centuries. Many people in China believe that bird's nests are an **antidote** to various conditions ranging from the common cold to skin disorders. Studies outside China have not been able to confirm their **curative** properties.

antidote 解毒药

curative 治病的; 药品

I decided to trace the nests back to their origin. I travelled to one of the largest caves in Southeast Asia, the Great Cave in Niah, Sarawak in Malaysian Borneo. After months in caves and bird houses, I was no closer to understanding the attraction of these objects. Yet perhaps, in an increasingly globalised world, it is to be celebrated that a nest can still be mysterious.