

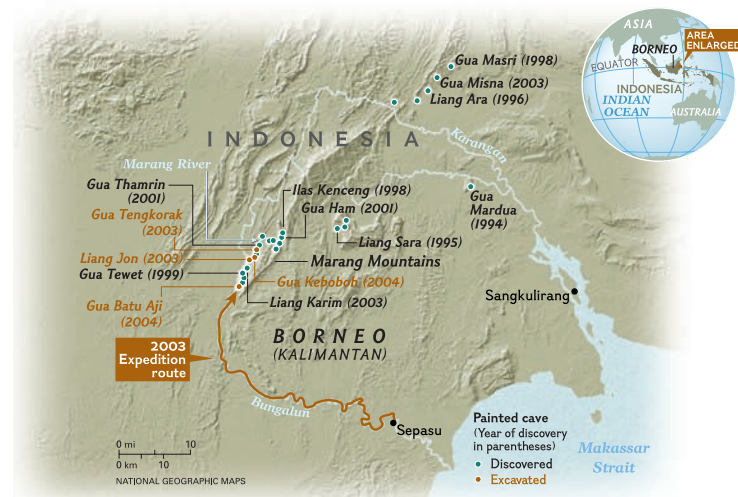
Hands Across Time

They're known as *cavers*—people whose idea of a good time is exploring dark and sometimes dangerous caves. And that was exactly what first drew Luc-Henri Fage to the Island of Borneo in 1988. His goal at the time was an adventurous **trek** across the island along with other cavers.

On that first trip to Borneo, Luc-Henri saw ancient charcoal drawings on the ceiling of a large rock overhang. When he returned to France, he couldn't find any information about rock art in the region, so he returned to Borneo. Over the years he kept returning and was joined by a French archaeologist and an Indonesian anthropologist. They found numerous caves with not only drawings, but also mysterious and obviously very old paintings. Then in 1999, they saw the hands for the first time.

Exploring the region of Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo, is not an easy task. There are no roads to the Marang Mountains, so Fage and the others made their way up the Bungulun River in canoes, camping along the way, at times **facing** storms and fire ants that tried to join the campers to get out of the rain. The Marang Mountains rise out of the hot, humid jungle below, and their steep sides hold the caves that first brought Fage here. The rock art is found in the highest of these caves, often painted on a very high ceiling. As Fage points out, "If something goes wrong, you die."

One large cave contains drawings of humans and animals, and around 350 images of **handprints**, some of them covered in patterns that look something like tattoos or body painting.



Fage has counted 57 types of symbols depicted on the hands and is working hard to decode their meaning. Since the caves don't contain evidence of people living in them, it's likely that they were used for ceremonial or spiritual purposes. "We're dealing with **shamanistic** practices here . . . but I'm not sure what kind," says archaeologist Jean-Michel Chazine. The team thinks that the people who created these works of art more than 10,000 years ago may have been related to the aboriginal people of Australia.

Like cave paintings everywhere, the ones in Borneo are very **fragile**, and many of them may have already disappeared due to weather and time. The scientific community has learned about them only recently and is working to provide information that could lead to the protection of the rock art. Currently, Fage and Chazine display photos of the rock art and give information in French and English on their Web site, www.kalimanthrope.com. It's a place in cyberspace where anyone in the world can learn more about the mysterious caves of Kalimantan.

