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***Batu Caves (Gua-gua Batu):  
Hindu Pilgrimage Centre in Malaysia***

*Abstract:* The article presents the complex of Batu Caves which is on the one hand, one of the most recognizable religious centres of Hinduism in the area of Muslim Malaysia, annually visited by thousands of pilgrims within Holy Thaipusam festival, and, on the other hand, the complex of caves popular with tourist and willingly visited. The author presents both the character and specific custom elements of this popular festival and discusses the advantages of caves as formation of inanimate nature available to tourism.

*Keywords:* Malaysia, Batu Caves, religious tourism, Hindu pilgrimage, *thaipusam*, *kavadi*

## **1. Introduction**

Religion, as an important element of man's spirituality constitutes one of the most important factors, generating migration processes of their inhabitants in many countries of the world (Jackowski et al. 1999: 1; Jackowski 2003: 115). Searching and striving for communing with the sacred exerts strong impact on religious motives of journeys undertaken by man (Jackowski *et al.* 1999: 1). From the viewpoint of tourism development, journeys of this type may currently have a two-fold character, which results from reciprocal overlapping of clearly religious and cognitive motives (Jackowski 2003: 116). On the one hand, the purpose of tourists (in this aspect a pilgrim) is to reach the holy place from their own spiritual (internal) need; on the other hand, the same holy places are visited by tourists who are eager to get to know the new space, see the similar or completely different customs, spectacular ceremonies or observe the behaviour of other people (e.g. throngs of pilgrims in the heart of Mecca, Easter Passion ceremonies in the Philippines) of the same denomination as themselves or – definitely more often – of different ones. Obviously, these two purposes listed above do not exclude each other.

The above mentioned sphere of man's spirituality has, at the same time, influenced the fact that religious (pilgrimage) tourism constitutes one of the oldest forms of tourism, due to the fact that original beliefs or later great religious systems (e.g. Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism) which accompany man, right from the beginning of his existence (Rinschede 1990: 14–20; Shani *et al.* 2007: 40).

Among Hindu followers, pilgrimages (*teertha-yatra*) are one of the most important religious practices, next to meditation, brotherly love, modesty and spiritual or physical cleanliness (Moronis 1984; Fuller 1992: 205; Jackowski *et al.* 1999: 307–312), which guarantee receipt of final salvation (Ptaszycka-Jackowska 2007: 292). The worship of “holy places” present in the religious system, has led, in the course of the last two thousand years, to establishment of 150 important pilgrimage centres for its followers, located primarily in South and South-East Asia. The group of most frequently visited centres includes venues located in India, such as Varanasi – the spiritual capital of the country, Ajothya, Mathura and Kanchipuram – holy Indian cities; Gaya – the city famous for the footprint of Vishnu pressed in a rock and the “eternal fig tree” growing there; Bhubaneswar – considered the central point of the world (Jackowski *et al.* 1999: 318–327). Less popular centres include Kailash in Tibet – the holy mount of three religions of the world, whose slopes are the springs of the Brahmaputra, the Indus, the Sutlej and the Karnali, the Indian Pushkar – known from the worship of Brahma and ritual baths in the waters of the lake, Ceylonese Kataragama – famous for the worship of Lord Vishnu and cleansing bath in the waters of the Menik River or, finally, the Malaysian Batu Caves which are famous for the colourful festival organized to worship Skanda.

The aim of this study is to show the natural and the cultural tourist potential of the Batu Caves in Malaysia, especially as a pilgrimage centre with a unique religious ceremony, which is the annual *thaipusam* festival. The analysis uses the statistical data from the UN World Tourism Organization and Malaysian Statistical Office, studies raised from the Internet source materials and also information coming from own observations and materials collected at the end of January and beginning of February 2010 during a trip to Malaysia when the *thaipusam* festival was taking place.

## **2. Caves as objects of visits of tourists and pilgrims**

From touristic point of view, caves are very specific objects of interest of tourists, combining natural and non-natural aspects (anthropogenic).

The basic natural asset of caves is the fact that their occurrence is uncommon; they are created solely within solid rocks, both karsting (e.g. limestone, dolomite, marble, gypsum, rock salt) and non-karsting (e.g. fissure caves in sandstone and quartzite, lava caves in basalt). It also happens that they are formed by man by closing natural rock overhangs with artificial walls or cutting in solid rock (e.g. Buddhist Ajanta Caves in India, Dambulla Caves in Sri Lanka). Moreover, inside, caves have specific environmental conditions (e.g. relatively stable temperature of air, high humidity and limited access of light or complete absence of light) that definitely affect different functioning of the living organisms. This results in the absence of phototrophic organisms or their very limited share, usually only in the area of the lit opening of the cave and presence of quite specific animals. Caves are inhabited by species adjusted, in a certain way, to life in darkness (e.g. reduction of eyes, use of echolocation and loss of body colours). The value of natural tourism assets of the caves may be additionally increased by such features as: rich and/ or original encrustation, occurrence of the relict species of plants and animals, endemic or protected ones, existence of underground rivers or lakes or occurrence of traces of paleo-fauna or its remnants (e.g. bones) in cave deposits.

In this place, it is necessary to mention about the cultural aspect of the tourist values of the caves. These places, which offered shelter for primitive men and their ancestors, such as Neanderthals, often contain traces of their presence, for example burnt remnants of hearths, wall paintings and tools and other utility items (Lascaux caves in France, Skhul and Tabun caves in Israel, Niah Cave in Malaysia, Ciemna Cave in Poland). At that time, they also became places of worship. Caves were inhabited by various objects of belief (e.g. ghosts, dwarfs, mythical gods); ascetics and hermits led a quiet and peaceable life there. Offerings were often made in caves in order to conciliate the gods. Later, consecrated artifacts were placed there (e.g. figures, paintings, other devotional items); finally – at the time of existence of great world religions, such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism – sacral objects, such as churches and monasteries were built on bases solidified throughout centuries.

Therefore, nowadays numerous caves, sometimes strongly modified by man, are places frequently visited by followers of various religions. Examples may be provided by pilgrimage sites such as (Jackowski 2003: 84; Gunn [ed.] 2004: 1329–1334):

- to Christianity – the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Israel, the Ostrog Monastery in Montenegro, the Massabielle Cave in Lourdes (France), Santa Cueva de Covadonga in Spain;
- to Buddhism – Ajanta Caves in India, Pindaya Caves in Burma, Pak Ou in Laos, Tham Khao Luang in Thailand, Ngu Hanh Son (known as the Marble Caves) in Vietnam, Mogao Caves in China;
- to Hinduism – Amaranth Cave in Kashmir (India), the Gupteswar and Gorakhnath Caves in Nepal, Batu Caves in Malaysia;
- to Shinto – caves in the Tai Shan mountain range in China.

The Indian Ellora Caves constitute a specific cave complex; they house the sanctuaries of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Centres of worship of local animist religions are located in karstic caves on the border of Laos, Burma and Thailand, whereas the followers of the gods of fire in some countries of Oceania worship them in numerous lava caves (Gunn [ed.] 2004: 1333).

### **3. Foreign tourist traffic and most important forms of tourism in Malaysia**

Malaysia is a South-East Asian country which constitutes, so to speak, a bridge connecting the mainland of the Malay Peninsula with the islands of the Malay Archipelago. This is additionally emphasized by the fact that Malaysia, on the international arena perceived as a Muslim state, is, in reality, a highly diversified country with respect to nationality and religion (Shuhaimi bin Haji Ishak 2010: 97), all that results from its geographical location along migration routes and historical conditions. The society of 28,3 million (2010) is dominated by Muslims (61,3%), however, apart from them, there are also Buddhists (19,8%), Christians (9,2%), Hindi (6,3%) or representatives of religions typical for Eastern Asia, such as Shinto, Confucianism and Taoism (1,3%) (*Population distribution...* 2011: 82–98). Among tribes which inhabit rainforests of Borneo (e.g. Ibans) or the Malay Peninsula (e.g. Semanga) local animist beliefs are still popular.

In the recent years, Malaysia has been visited by 25 million tourists annually (UNWTO figures), whereas in the last forty years (1972–2012), there has been a clear increase in the number of visitors. Especially in the period of the last fifteen years, the number of foreign tourists grew three times (Fig. 1). However, it is necessary to state that in spite of this progress, the structure of directions of tourist arrivals has remained almost unchanged. The dominant groups are still tourists from neighbouring ASEAN countries (usually 70–75%) (Groch, Kurek 1987: 121–145), where 50–60% of foreign tourists are citizens of Singapore.

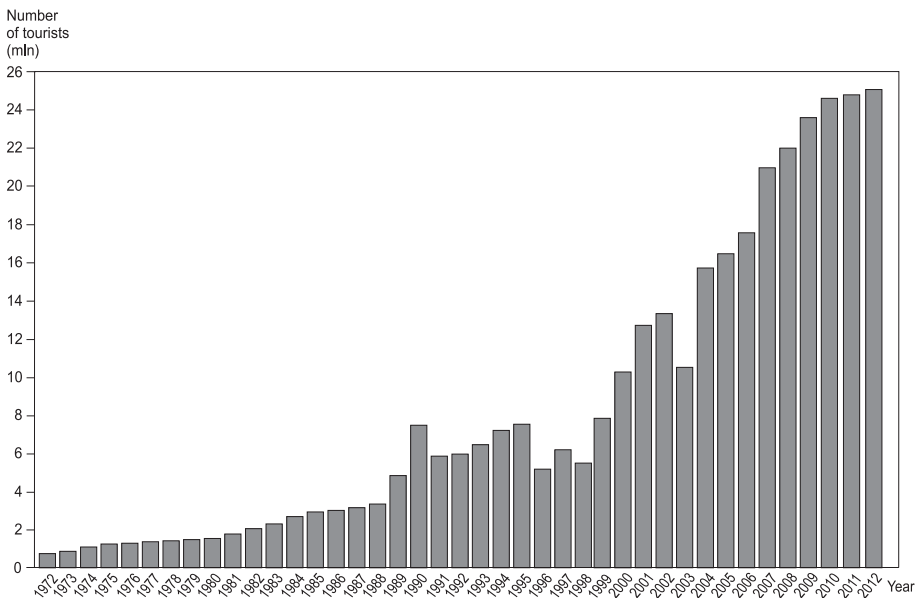


Fig. 1. Tourist trips to Malaysia between 1972 and 2012

Source: own elaboration on the basis of UNWTO figures.

The most important motive for the arrival of foreign tourists in Malaysia is primarily leisure (Faracik 2012: 51). In seaside areas, warm climate and high temperature of water throughout the year are conducive to leisure, along with lengthy and diversified coastline, presence of coral reef which allows for snorkelling and diving. On the other hand, in the mountains of the Malay Peninsula, on vast stretches still covered with rainforest, there are natural climatic spas, such

as Bukit Fraser (Fraser's Hill), Bukit Larut (Maxwell Hill), Cameron Highland, Genting Highlands and Bukit Bendera (Penang Hill) on Penang Island (Kurek 2002: 126; Marzuki 2010: 86). Sightseeing tourism, including nature tourism, relying on a network of protected areas and eco-tourism (for example trips to see tortoises or orangutans) play an important role along with ethnic tourism (visits to see head hunter's in Borneo), business and trade tourism (Groch, Kurek 1987: 121–145; Faracik 2012: 52). Growing tourist traffic is significantly influenced by the Grand Prix Formula I and Moto Grand Prix competitions organized on a track near Kuala Lumpur, shopping tourism and – more and more popular – religious tourism, related to Islam and Hinduism (Laderlah et al. 2011: 184–189). In recent years, especially important role was played by the Islamic tourism concept relying on domestic sacral objects. This is testified by the fact that the national Ministry of Tourism established the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, which has the primary role to promote Islamic tourism on the national market; furthermore, a special Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) has been created to promote Islam in other countries of the world (*Religious Tourism in Asia...* 2011: XXV–XXIX; Laderlah et al. 2011: 184–189). It is worth noting that in Malaysia, there are multiple local traditions, ceremonies and festivals, increasing the rank of religious tourism in this country (Kasim 2011: 441–456). They include for instance: Muslim festivals Aidilfitri and Aidiladha, Chinese festivals: Chinese New Year, Chingay and Chap Goh Mei, well known from street dragon dances, Hindu light festival Diwali/Deepavali and Thaipusam, as well as festivals in Borneo – Tadau Keamatan in the Sabah state and Gawai Dayak in Sarawak (Thanh 2003: 1–116; Shuhaimi bin Haji Ishak 2010: 97–111).

#### **4. Batu Caves (Gua-gua Batu) as a pilgrimage centre**

The complex of Batu Caves (*Malaysian* Gua-gua Batu) is located in Malaysia, in the western part of Malay Peninsula (Fig. 2), in the Selangor state, at a distance of 13 km from the centre of the capital of the country – Kuala Lumpur, *de facto* located on its northern peripheral regions.

The caves were created within the area of a large monadnock rock massif, Bukit Batu, which rises to the maximum height of 329 metres above sea level, as well as 200 m above the alluvial plain surrounding it, formed by the Klang River (Moseley et al. 2012: 77–92). It is built of old-Palaeozoic limestone of



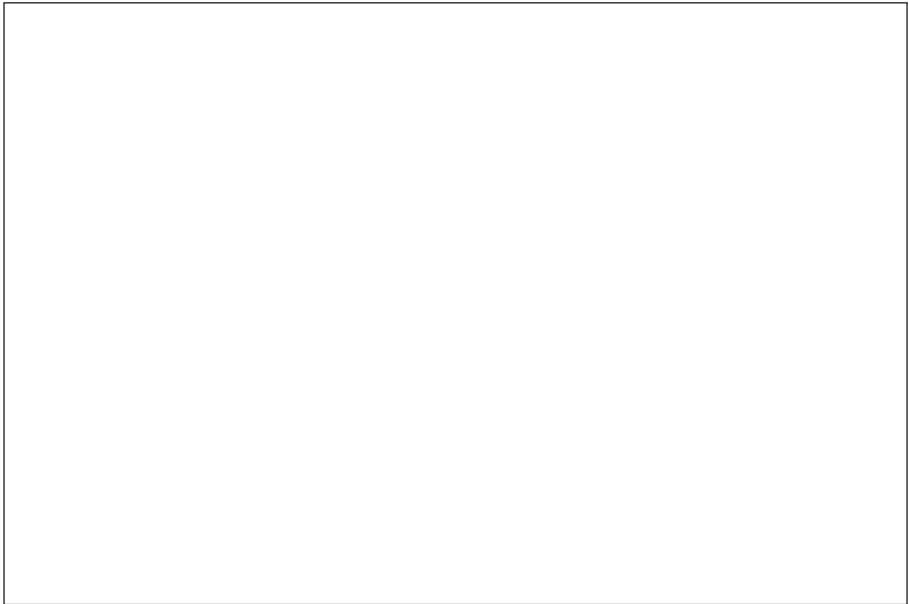


Photo 1. Vertical limestone rocks of Batu massif are used by amateurs of adventure tourism  
(photo by: W. Maciejowski)

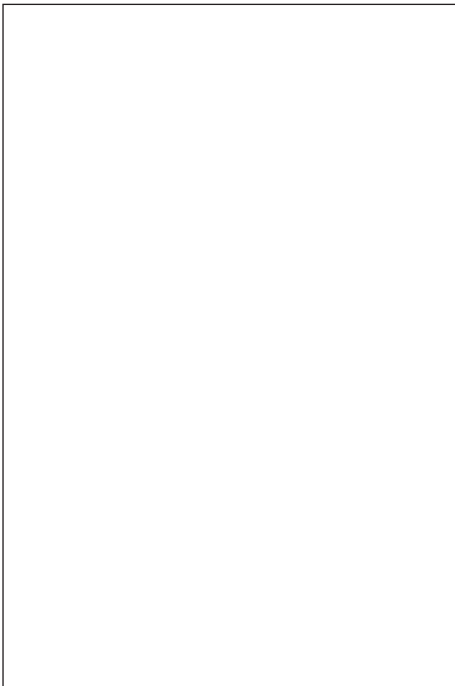


Photo 2. The world's tallest statue of Lord Skanda and steps for pilgrims leading to Temple Cave (Gua Kuil) and Dark Cave (Gua Gelap)  
(photo by: W. Maciejowski)





Photo 3. Small souvenir shop with devotional items inside the great cavern in Temple Cave (Gua Kulil) (photo by: W. Maciejowski)



Photo 5. *Sadhu* – Hindu sage/ascetic blesses pilgrims, sprinkling their heads and foreheads with white ash (photo by: W. Maciejowski)



Photo 4. *Kavadi* may have various shapes, colours and sizes, which greatly depend on the sex and the age of a pilgrim (photo by: W. Maciejowski)

Middle and Upper Silurian period, belonging to the carbonate rock complex, called Kuala Lumpur Limestone Formation (KLLF) (Gobbett 1964: 67–79; Yin 1976; Zabidi, de Freitas 2006: 1–7). This complex is revealed on the surface primarily in the Bukit Batu massif, as its remaining part is hidden under the cover of younger rocks and reveals only in quarries and exposures at construction sites of tall houses (Tan 2006: 1–7). Therefore, the monadnock forms a single mogot, strongly degraded by karstic processes, which is the last relict of the extremely mature landscape of tower karst, which existed here in the past (Waltham, Fookes 2003: 101–118; Bakhshipouri *et al.* 2009: 1–15). This is currently also reflected in the local use, as the entire massif of Bukit Batu is for the most part overgrown with a rainforest (Photo 1), whereas its flat surroundings are covered by strongly urbanized areas.

From the viewpoint of tourism development, Batu Caves are a very interesting object, which attracts the lovers of adventure tourism (speleology and rock climbing tourism), sightseeing tourism (nature tourism, geotourism, cultural tourism), as well as religious tourism (pilgrimages).

In the entire rock massif, so far twenty caves have been examined (Moseley *et al.* 2012: 77–92). The two largest caves are: the main cave, i.e. **Temple Cave (Gua Kuil)**, also sometimes called the Cathedral Cave) and the adjoining **Dark Cave (Gua Gelap)**. These caves, located at the height of approx. 100 m, can be accessed via stairs (Photo 2) at the foot of which there is the world's tallest (42,7 m) gilded statue of Lord Skanda (*Selangor...* 2009). There are 272 steps to Temple Cave, whereas on the 204<sup>th</sup> step, a path starts in the western direction leading to Dark Cave.

**Temple Cave** is composed of a cavern several dozen metres high, almost 100 long and 40 m wide, which leads to a circular, tall karstic shaft providing a significant amount of light to the cave, apart from the main entrance. At the north-eastern wall of the karstic shaft (Fig. 2.3) and under the north-western wall of the chamber (Fig. 2.4), there are temples devoted to Skanda. Moreover, in the hollows of the limestone walls of the cave or on small pedestals, individual figures have been placed along, as also numerous devotional items. This very cave constitutes the main destination of pilgrims who arrive here in large numbers. Right next to the entrance, on the right hand side, there are souvenir shops with devotional articles (Photo 3).

Among all caves in the Batu massif, **Dark Cave** has the most extensive system of corridors (over 2,000 m, Fig. 2) (Price 2002a: 38–39; Lim *et al.* 2010: 335–348);

it is also open for tourists, yet the number of people visiting this place is smaller, therefore the encrustation has been left undamaged (McClure 1961: 55). The cave consists of several linked parts (caverns A–H), making up a system of corridors and caverns developed on the basis of the route of original fissures running in NW–SE direction and perpendicularly to it. The largest are high corridors, several metres wide (caverns A, B and C, Fig. 2.1), sometimes illuminated by tall rock shafts (Fig. 2.2), in many places enriched with encrustation (white, grey, red, pink, brown and black stalactites and stalagmites), sometimes making up interesting forms (e.g. Onyx Tower), as well as the largest cavern of the entire system, so called the Great Room. The above listed cave fragments constitute the basic route of tourist visits made with experienced guides. Dark Cave is famous for very rich cave flora, which has been examined since the 1920's (Dover *et al.* 1929: 325–387; Price 2002b: 233–247). By the end of 2010, 310 species of invertebrate and 59 of vertebrates species have been ascertained here (Moseley *et al.* 2012: 77–92); a significant number of these (for example frogs, snakes, bats) also inhabits the dark interior of the cave (McClure 1961: 55; McClure 1965: 65–74). A curiosity of nature is the fact of occurrence of endemic species, such as the troglomorphic spider *Liphistius batuensis*, described in 1923 (McClure 1965: 65–74; McClure *et al.* 1967: 399–428; Price 2004: 311–317; Gunn [ed.] 2004: 148).

Among other caves, tourists and pilgrims also visit caves located at the foot of the entire massif. These are:

- **Ramayana Cave (Gua Ramayana)** with the entrance opening located in the vicinity of Hanuman's statue (15 m high) and the temple consecrated in 2001, dedicated to Hanuman and Rama, several dozen metres north-west of the stairs; Ramayana Cave is famous for its well-preserved cave paintings with suggestive scenes from Hindu mythology (Selangor... 2009);
- **Art Gallery Cave (Gua Galeri Seni)**, located close to the stairs leading to the top and containing holy statues, rock paintings presenting scenes from Hindu mythology; this cave is also famous for its picturesque underground lake (www 1);
- **Museum Cave (Gua Musium)**, located right by the stairs with rock frescoes and Hindu statues.

The last two listed caves have been recently renewed and after opening in 2008, they create a common complex known as **Cave Villa (Gua Villa)**.

## 5. Hindu pilgrimage and *thaipusam* festival

Hindu pilgrimages and *thaipusam* religious festival are well known holidays especially among worshippers of this religion, whose origin goes back to the Tamil Nadu state in India. However, it is nowadays celebrated in various regions of entire South Asia and South-East Asia, and even among Asian immigrants living in Africa, Australasia and Europe. It is celebrated in particular way festively in Tamil's diasporas in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, in Sri Lanka and Mauritius; moreover, it is also encountered in New Zealand, Fiji and in the Republic of South Africa (Rajathurai 2007: 10; www 2). In Malaysia – apart from Batu Caves – hundreds of thousands of pilgrims celebrate mainly in Georgetown (Biskup 2013: 40–44; www 3), this is the capital city of Penang Island (18 kilometres of pilgrimage from the Little India district to the Nattukkottai Chettiar and Balathanda-yuthapani temples), Ipoh (Maha Mariamman temple), Johor Bahru, Masai, Malacca, Tawau in Sabah state (Thirumurugan temple) or in Kedah state centres. Actually, Malaysian *thaipusam* gathers a total number of 2 million pilgrims and tourists annually; it is worthwhile emphasising the fact that also the Chinese, Senegalese and the Sikh participate in the pilgrimage, apart from Tamil people (Kasim 2011: 441–456).

*Thaipusam* is celebrated annually between the second half of January and the beginning of February, which results from the Hindu lunar calendar. This holiday falls on the full moon of month *thai*, whereas *Pusam* is the name of the star which at this time towers at the top of the sky. The festival usually lasts three days and it is dedicated to Skanda – the Hindu god of victory and war who is also known under other names, such as Muruhan (Murugan), Subrahmanya, Kumaran, Ceyon, Palani, Karthikeyan and Pillaiyar (Belle 2004; *Religie świata* 2006: 742–743). According to Hindu mythology, Skanda is the youngest son of Shiva and Parvati<sup>1</sup>, who has six faces and eighteen eyes. His image is usually presented as a multi-armed deity of golden colour, dressed in red robes (Clothey 1978: 49–51) or as a six-headed figure sitting on a peacock.

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<sup>1</sup> The origin of Skanda is not apparent in the Hindu mythology. Other old myths present Skanda as the first-born son of Agni, created by the combining of six brothers and also that he was begotten of the Shiva God, but without any participation of a woman; see *Religie świata* (2006) and Clothey (1978).

The beginnings of *thaipusam* in the Batu Caves are related to the influx of Tamil immigrants from India to the Malay Peninsula in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A temple devoted to Parvati, Sri Maha Mariamman Dhevasthanam, was established in 1873 in Kuala Lumpur for the growing community. In the 1880's, under the supervision of contemporary leaders of the Tamil's diaspora, Kayaroganam Pillay, and subsequently his son, Thambusamy Pillay, the temple was greatly extended, especially in 1887, when the wooden walls of the building were replaced with brick ones (Ramanathan 1995: 142; Belle 2004: 46; www 2). A year later, in 1888, the first transfer of *murthi* (consecrated figure of Skanda) took place to Temple Cave. This event initiated the construction of the temple devoted to him, Sri Subramaniyar Swami (Kasim 2011: 445). The first official *thaipusam* festival is dated at the year 1892 (Moronis 1984: 226; Belle 2004: 46). From that moment, the number of pilgrims which in later years were joined by tourists, started systematically to grow. The increase in the number of tourists was an effect

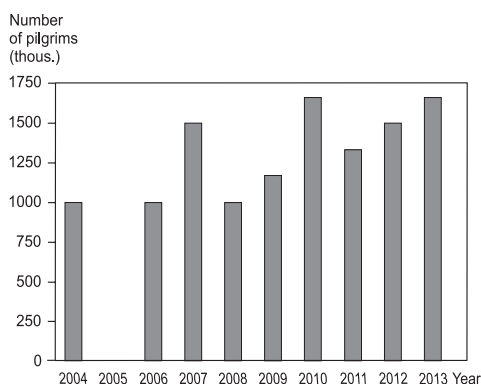


Fig. 3. Estimation of the numbers of pilgrims and tourists visiting Batu caves between 2004 and 2013

Source: own elaboration on the basis of Shuhaimi bin Haji Ishak 2010, [www.thestar.com.my](http://www.thestar.com.my), [therighteye.wordpress.com](http://therighteye.wordpress.com), [www.thechoice.my](http://www.thechoice.my).

of British promotion of the caves in the 1920's. Estimated statistical data shows that in the course of the last 15 years, the number of penitents and tourists participating in *thaipusam* has increased twice, from over 800,000 at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to over 1,6 million in 2013 (Gunn [ed.] 2004: 1332; www 4). The number of visitors at Batu Caves in the recent years is presented in Fig. 3.

Three-day *thaipusam* begins early in the morning in the centre of Kuala Lumpur, in front of a building of a very colourful temple, Sri Maha Mariamman Dhevasthanam. Here, from about 4.00 a.m. massive crowds are gathering for 48 days, people have been leading an ascetic life – fasting, eating a maximum of one vegetarian meal a day, drinking no alcohol; there is a ban on using any stimulants and a requirement to observe sexual abstinence. Moreover, they devote themselves to day-long prayers; they usually sleep on the ground; men are forbidden to shave; they

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wash only in cold water (Styś 2010: 38–39). Later, they start their walking to Batu Caves, 13 km away. Usually whole families with children and distant relatives participate in the pilgrimage. Each pilgrim takes his/her *kavadi*, that is the burden for the way. It is adjusted to age and sex of believers. Children usually carry small vessels filled with coconut milk (Photo 4a) or offering of flowers and fruits. Women sometimes carry backpack frames decorated with fabric, peacock feathers, flowers and fruit (Photo 4b), which frequently contain devotional items bearing the image of Hindu gods (e.g. Ganesh, Skanda and Parvati). The largest and heaviest *kavadi* are carried by men (Photos 4c–d). They constitute structures made of metal or wood, 2–3 m height, which are carried on shoulders and head. The pilgrims are often “connected” with their *kavadi* through a network of wires and hooks piercing through their chests and backs. Such massive burden, additionally decorated with colourful fabric, feathers, fruit or devotional items, may even weigh up to 30–40 kg. Others drag *chariot kavadi*, that is a small cart filled with offering, which is attached to the back with metal hooks and ropes. Sometimes, the ends of ropes are held by another man, holding the pilgrim back. In general, in the group of believers, piercing is very popular; it consists of piercing the body with a huge number of bent hooks, to which small bells are attached, informing about the penance with every step taken by the pilgrim. Many pilgrims – in a gesture of silence – pierce their cheeks and/ or tongues with thick nails, and sometimes with long daggers for the time of journey (Fuller Collins 1997; Styś 2010: 38–39). The wounds in the skin hardly ever bleed, as the place is previously sprinkled with white ash, which also has antiseptic properties. Small boys usually have completely shaved heads which are also sprinkled with ash for the time of pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage is started with moving the holy figure of Skanda (*murthi*) from the building of the Sri Maha Mariamman Dhevasthanam temple; the figure is symbolically armed with *vel*, that is a long spear with a broad head in the shape of a tear, gold-coloured. Then, *murthi* is installed in a silver chariot and then is transported to the complex of Batu Caves (Belle 2004: 57–58). The journey from the city centre lasts about eight hours. Believers walk in over 40-degree heat and high humidity which results in many of them fainting, as they are additionally weakened by fasting. After coming around, they continue walking. The pilgrims support one another and motivate one another to walk further. The younger and the stronger help the older. During the way, pilgrims perform the traditional *kavadi attam* dance, where the soft constant musical accompaniment

and strong drumming is accompanied at all times. People pray along the way and ask gods for intercession for themselves and their families; they often shout *Murugan'ku arogara!* and intone the song “*vel vel shakti vel*”, announcing the victory of Skanda over the army of demons (*asuras*), led by Surapadman (Belle 2004; Shuhaimi bin Haji Ishak 2010: 104). Some people go into a trance and walk on burning coals to strengthen their dedication and devotion to Skanda. Everything takes place in the various smells of burning incense filling the air. In the gathering crowd one can see see holy sages, *sadhu* (Photo 5) who, sprinkling the pilgrims' heads with ashes, support them with blessings.

Finally, the pilgrims, exhausted with heat, hit the foot of the Bukit Batu massif. Here, *murthi* is installed on a specially prepared pedestal at the bottom of the steps leading to the caves where gathered prayers worship. The priest conducting the ceremony, known as *pantaram*, takes out the golden *vel* from Skanda's hand and takes it to the mountain, to the Sri Subramaniyar Swami temple (Belle 2004: 62–63). Symbolically, this act carries the power of the spear to the cave, where Skanda is now waiting to meet the believers arriving to see him. The pilgrims have to deal with the last but the most difficult stage of the journey: a strenuous climbing up through the 272 steps to the Temple Cave (Gua Kuil). Steps are divided by barristers into three parallel, separate “passages”; the middle one is theoretically used by pilgrims carrying *kavadi*. Order is kept by guards standing along the steps.

After reaching the Sri Subramaniyar Swami temple, inside the cave the believers take off their *kavadi*, place the fruit and flowers brought with them at the side of the altar and take off all needles, daggers and hooks off their bodies. They also sprinkle their heads once again with white ashes as a sign of fulfillment of their sacrifice. Some of them immediately lie down in cool shadow and rest, while the others – those who have a bit more strength – dance to the rhythm of the music. After some time, they offer Skanda the last prayers and slowly walk down to the foot of Bukit Batu, where they can finally eat a warm meal in the local restaurants.

The pilgrims spend the entire second day of *thaipusam* on prayers and acts of devotion; their attention is also focused on watching subsequent pilgrims arriving in the cave and fulfilling the offering for Skanda.

The last, third day of the festival is intended for the return journey of the figure of Skanda to Kuala Lumpur. Between 8.00 and 9.00 a.m. the golden *vel* is brought from the cave and given back to *murthi*. Once again the statue of Skanda is put into the silver cart and slowly, mainly due to restrictions in city traffic,



is travelling to the city centre, ending its journey in the Sri Maha Mariamman Dhevasthanam temple about 6:30 p.m. It is accompanied by not more than several thousand people.

## 6. Recapitulation

Pilgrimages constitute the basic practices among the communities of various religious denominations (Jackowski 1987: 147–166; Jackowski *et al.* 1999: 3). The complex of Batu Caves, near Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, is an exceptional pilgrimage centre and unique in the world. It is a very well known and frequently visited centre of Hinduism, strongly forming as part of the culture of the country, considered *de facto* as mainly Muslim. The unusual worship of Hindu god Skanda, manifested annually in the form of the colourful religious festival, makes *thaipusam* in Batu Caves definitely the largest and the most recognizable religious event in Malaysia (Kasim 2011: 445–446), which is, at the same time, one of the oldest, as it is dated at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is also the exceptional charm of this place, all the karstic caves which offer conditions conducive to practicing other forms of tourism. The caves have attracted speleologists and naturalists for years and over the last 10 years they are considered as a climbing centre, where at the present there are more than 160 climbing paths, especially in the north-eastern part of the Bukit Batu massif, known as Damai Wall.

For the last couple of years, Batu Caves have been awaiting a decision to be granted the status of a place entered in the UNESCO World Heritage List. If the UNESCO act is signed, it is going to increase the rank of the place and the *thaipusam* festival as well.

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