

For residents of [Your Community]

COFFEE AND A TOPIC · HOST GUIDE · WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

Caves You Can Walk Into

No expertise needed. Read the prompts aloud word for word if you like.

Before you start. Put a resident sheet on each seat. If a screen is available, show a photo of a painted Mogao cave; the Asian Civilisations Museum website has good ones. Set out coffee before people arrive.

AT A GLANCE: 45 MINUTES

0–5 min	Welcome and opening question	Read the welcome script. Then ask: “Has anyone here traveled somewhere mainly to see art or a historic site? What made it worth the trip?”	Guide p. 1–2
5–25 min	Guided discussion	Read “The story in brief” from the resident sheet aloud. Then work through the prompts below, as many as time allows.	Resident sheet
25–38 min	Perspectives	Ask: “Museums now copy fragile places so more people can see them. What would you want a copy to get exactly right, and what could it leave out?” Then invite two or three residents to add a memory or experience of their own.	Guide p. 2
38–45 min	Close	Read the closing script. Ask each person for one word about the caves. Thank everyone and announce next week’s topic.	Guide p. 2

SET THE TABLE

Any green or jasmine tea in ordinary cups is fine; put dried apricots and raisins out in small bowls. Have coffee, decaf and water too, and follow your community’s usual food and allergy arrangements.

WELCOME SCRIPT (READ ALOUD)

SAY

“Welcome to Coffee and a Topic. Today we’ll use a story about cave art to ask what makes a place or an experience feel real. You don’t need to know anything about the subject or have read anything beforehand.” “Different experiences and opinions are welcome. Let’s make room for one another and question ideas rather than people. Feel free to pass or simply listen.”

For residents of [Your Community]

0-5 MIN Welcome and opening question

ASK

“Has anyone here traveled somewhere mainly to see art or a historic site? What made it worth the trip?”

Read the welcome script on page 1 first, then ask the opening question.

5-25 MIN · RESIDENT SHEET Guided discussion

Read “*The story in brief*” from the resident sheet aloud. Then work through the prompts below, as many as time allows.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS (USE AS MANY AS TIME ALLOWS)

1. The real caves are closed to protect them. Is it right to limit who can see a world treasure? Who should get a ticket?
Follow-up: Would you wait years on a list to see the original?
2. Would you rather see a perfect copy up close, or the real thing from behind a rope?
Follow-up: France did the same with the Lascaux cave paintings. Has anyone seen them?
3. The Silk Road carried religions and ideas as well as goods. What travels between countries today the way Buddhism once did?
4. These caves were paid for by merchants and local rulers. Who pays for art and culture in our time, and does it matter who pays?

25-38 MIN Perspectives

ASK

“Museums now copy fragile places so more people can see them. What would you want a copy to get exactly right, and what could it leave out?”

38-45 MIN Close

SAY

“What is one thing you are taking away today, or one question you are leaving with? Has someone offered a perspective you had not considered?”

Thank residents for taking part, including those who listened. Invite a future topic; announce another date only if it has been confirmed.

Keep the pace flexible. Plan for the full 45 minutes. If the talk runs short, invite another perspective or one more prompt rather than adding a lecture. If one part runs long, trim the prompts, not the close, so you still finish on time.

For residents of [Your Community]

FOR THE HOST · NOT A LECTURE

Background for the host

For you, not a lecture. Use a fact only if the conversation calls for it.

The site. The Mogao Caves sit in a cliff near Dunhuang in western China, on the edge of the Gobi Desert. Hundreds of caves survive, many painted floor to ceiling. They have been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987.

The exhibition. *Sacred Caves: Dunhuang, Buddhism, and the Silk Road* runs September 25, 2026 to March 7, 2027 at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. It was made with China's Dunhuang Academy, which cares for the caves.

The entrance. In the museum foyer stands a copy of Cave 158, from the Tang dynasty (A.D. 781–847). It holds the largest reclining Buddha at Mogao, shown at the moment of his death, calm and at rest.

The gallery. Three more cave copies, Caves 249, 45 and 3, span roughly 800 years of styles. Cave 45 is one of the best-preserved at Mogao.

Look for. A brick showing a Sogdian trader leading a camel. The Sogdians, from today's Uzbekistan, were the Silk Road's great merchants. Also a painting of three hares chasing each other in a circle, sharing only three ears. The same symbol appears in churches in England.

The famous find. In 1900 a monk opened a sealed room at Mogao, now called the Library Cave. It held tens of thousands of manuscripts, including the Diamond Sutra, printed in A.D. 868, the oldest dated printed book. It is now in the British Library in London.

The museum's view. Its director, Clement Onn, presents the show as a reminder that cultures have always grown through contact with one another.

ACCURACY NOTES FOR THE HOST

- Only Cave 249 is reproduced entirely by hand; the museum's other cave models use digital scanning and printing. Don't describe all four copies as hand-painted, and don't claim the replicas are "perfect."
- Use "reproduction" or "replica" for a copy identified as such. Whether a copy offers a meaningful experience is the group's question, not a settled fact.
- Don't improvise reasons for individual cave closures. If asked, say the originals are restricted to protect the murals.

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KEEP THE ROOM WELCOMING Useful host phrases

ONE PERSON DOMINATES

"Thank you. Let's make room for another perspective, if someone would like to offer one."

DISAGREEMENT GETS PERSONAL

"We can value different things. What matters most to you here?"

A CLAIM NEEDS CHECKING

"That is worth checking. Let's note it rather than treat it as settled."

THE SUBJECT DRIFTS

"Let's bring this back to the story. What would you want to see, feel, or understand?"

IF THE ROOM GOES QUIET

Ask: "Is there a place from your own life you would want preserved exactly as it is?" It works almost every time.

LISTENERS WELCOME

Some residents come only to listen. Don't call on anyone by name unless they have signaled they want to speak.

NEXT WEEK

A new topic arrives Tuesday morning with next week's resident sheet.

TELL US HOW IT WENT

After the session, email one line to briefing@theworlddesk.news: how many came, and which prompt worked best.

Date: _____

Approximate attendance: _____

Actual length: _____

Prompt that worked best: _____

Anything hard to hear or read: _____

Topic residents would enjoy next: _____

Share brief program feedback with the lifestyle team. Do not record personal resident profiles. Get separate permission before using anyone's words in promotional materials.

Sources: 1. Asian Civilisations Museum, Sacred Caves exhibition · acm.nhb.gov.sg/whats-on/exhibitions/sacred-caves-dunhuang-buddhism-and-the-silk-road 2. CNA Lifestyle, exhibition preview, Sept. 24, 2026 · cnalifestyle.channelnewsasia.com 3. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Mogao Caves · whc.unesco.org/en/list/440 4. TTG Asia; Bakchormeeboy 5. British Library (Diamond Sutra)
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