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THAILAND 50 GREAT GREEN ESCAPES



THAILAND

50 Great Green Escapes



Become a Green Traveller Today

THAILAND

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**Great
Green
Escapes**



Tourism Authority of Thailand

THAILAND

50

Great
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Escapes

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Seven Greens Concept

Enjoy travel, *Y*care for the environment.





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Foreword

Khun Suraphon Svetasreni
Governor
Tourism Authority of Thailand

A change is taking place in Thailand's tourism, and this book is a testimony of it.

That change, though not yet visible in all parts of the country, is called Green Tourism. And it is the best gift that the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) could offer to foreign visitors as it is commemoration its 50th anniversary.

Read the following pages and you will get to know it: From the farming villages of Isan, Thailand's Northeast, to the pristine beaches of the country's South, the preservation of the environment, and the willingness to accommodate visitors interested in interacting more with local communities has become a significant trend. Homestays are flourishing, national parks are going through a noted revival, and most of the country's top touristic destinations look today beyond the traditional crowd of visitors. Ecotourism excursions are more and more frequently offered. Rafting, kayaking, but also biking or hiking are not anymore an exception. Equipment rental is widely available, as are bicycles. Thailand's abundant nature and acclaimed biodiversity are reminding us of their foremost importance. The time for a green turn has hopefully come.

Green Tourism, nevertheless, is facing and will continue to face difficulties and obstacles. That is why the TAT, conscious of those, is putting out new publications to help support this movement, in line with its dedication to fight global warming. We want this change to happen. Now aged 50, and more conscious than ever of its responsibility to the people of Thailand, TAT is ready to become Thailand's Green gateway. ■



For TAT regional offices please visit www.tourismthailand.org or dial 1672 tourist hotline by TAT available daily from 8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. from anywhere in the country.



THAILAND'S GREEN TURN

As the fight against climate warming is heating up the political debate worldwide, Thailand's tourism operators are opening up on the need to answer foreign visitors' growing ecological concerns.



Richard Werly

Six years after the unforgettable tragedy of the 2004 tsunami in Asia, Thailand's tourism sector is finally showing some willingness to take a badly needed green turn.

I saw it with my own eyes while travelling throughout the country for our latest book "Travel Green Thailand - An ecotourism journey". And I could get a further confirmation these last months, while touring the country again for this book. In many places, especially in the tsunami stricken South, the catastrophic consequences of ecosystem destruction have finally been understood, bringing the national and local authorities to act.

Though nothing is ensured in the present volatile Thai political context, marked by last May's tragic events in Bangkok, my firm impression is that numerous tourism operators and industry executives now realize how dangerous it would be for them to continue turning a blind eye to deforestation, beach pollution, or coral reef destruction. Moreover, as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) just launched its global partnership to make tourism worldwide sustainable (www.unep.org), Thailand is expected to play a major role as one of the world's finest leisure destinations.

The country, luckily, does not start from scratch. After years of ecological abuses, Thailand is facing its inconvenient truths, like widespread deforestation, with courage and determination. Green consciousness in the Kingdom is taking root.

Left: Heo Suwat Waterfall, Khao Yai National Park.

Rigging the changes by example

Public figures, like the defunct ecological hero and park activist Seub Nakasathien, are now very much referred and regularly quoted in speeches by Thai politicians and officials. And those words are backed up by generational changes in behaviour: a green fashion, though very commercial minded, is interestingly taking root among the country youths who, in the thronged huddle of consumer goods displayed in Bangkok, proudly buy T-shirts proclaiming the need to “live green” and “save the planet”.



Nevertheless, this “green” call to arms demands more than words and fashion to be sustainable, especially for business owners or CEOs whose investment strategies need certainty for the future, and clearer political visibility. That is why I am a firm believer in “green standards” adapted to the Thai reality, and to the society’s appropriate level of acceptance and resilience.

Our tour of the country’s 50 great greenescapes, initiated by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) wants precisely to play such a pioneer role. The promotion of Green Tourism shall be an “inclusive” process, where everybody is invited to come aboard if promising to respect and uphold previously agreed upon standards, whose implementation shall definitely be verified and followed up closely.

Following the UNEP initiative on sustainable tourism, a lot of windows are opening up. Courageously, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has grabbed some of those opportunities, setting up the “Green Leaf Foundation” to check on hotels and accommodation. But let us be optimistic: why not, tomorrow, form an advisory body on sustainable tourism made of Thai academics, environmental activists, non governmental organizations delegates and business operators? This panel would issue periodic recommendations or warnings, upon learning of natural destruction damages in some part of the country. Because Green Tourism, after all, is judged by the visitors themselves. So be our guests. And be our judges. Be part, with us all, of this badly needed “Thailand Tourism Green Turn”. ■





Sri Satchanalai Historical Park, Sukhothai



Temperature increases

from climate change are generally estimated at 1.4-5.8°C by 2100 if further action is not taken. The EU intends to limit its greenhouse gases on par with a global rise of 2°C in 2020, but some studies indicate this still might not avoid catastrophe.



Atmospheric Greenhouse Gases (GHG),

most notably CO₂, methane, and NO₂, are the most threatening and avoidable agents of climate change. In 2008, CO₂ levels hit 336 ppm, the highest in at least 650,000 - and possibly 20 million - years.



Ocean Life and Acidity

will result from the increased CO₂ emissions, threatening all hubs of marine biodiversity. Ocean warming is adverse to growth of sea algae, the source of half of all photosynthesised oxygen and the basis of the marine food chain.



Greater Climate Extremes

through drought, floods, and extreme weather will affect global circulations of air and water. The result will be crippling to farmland, habitable land and water infrastructure, while increasing the spread of deadly diseases.

Sources: NASA, UNFCCC, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; J. Houghton, *Global Warming: Complete Briefing*; C. Gauthier, *Oil, Water and Climate*; Kump, Kasting, Crane, *The Earth System*; J. Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*; The Royal Society of London

Biodiversity Loss

has already been seen. Climate change increases the risk of extinction for about 20-30% of all species and puts immense stress on ecological systems, particularly threatening those in tropical forest, alpine, and Arctic regions.



UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE AND RESPONDING TO ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES



Future Generations

are at stake. The needs of the present generation must not compromise the needs of future ones. Agricultural, economic, energy, and social practices that maximise energy efficiency, and organic replacement rates are therefore a priority.



Managing the Cost

of this climate change is crucial. It is estimated that the cost of keeping global warming below 2°C and reducing GHG emissions by 70% by 2020, could be as little as €530 billion, or 1% of the global GDP. Action shall be taken swiftly.



The UN Copenhagen Conference

has failed to decide on a post-2012 framework for climate change. Alas, the 25%-40% reduction in GHGs from 1990 levels by 2020 as urged by the scientific community is still far from being met.



Aerial view, Ko Chang, Trat



Lack of knowledge is Thailand's main challenge.

According to a study by the University of Adelaide's Environmental Institute in Australia, the country ranks among the world's worst ten countries in terms of environmental degradation vs its total resource availability. Fortunately, environmental literacy is therefore a prime goal.



Protecting the sea.

Marine ecosystems are unprecedentedly threatened by rising water temperatures. March 2010 saw the most widespread coral bleaching in almost two decades in both the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea when the sea temperatures hit 30°C. Recovery could take years.



Rethinking waste management.

Each day, Bangkok alone produces about 8,500 tons of solid waste, of which 1,800 tons are plastic bags. The Thai authorities came up with a campaign to create public awareness which, if successful, could save 650 million Baht in waste collection costs and cut about 1 million tons of CO₂ in one year's time.



Defending wildlife.

Several vulnerable or endangered species, elephants, tigers, gibbons, are being harmed intentionally or indirectly, by tourism excesses and lack of respect for existing regulations. Public efforts to curb poaching and illegal wildlife trade are a priority.

Sources: Department of Marine and Coastal Resources, Pollution Control Department, Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Kasikorn Research Centre, World Wildlife Fund, World Health Organization

Air pollution is a concern.

In April 2010, the northernmost district, Mae Sai, experienced the worst air pollution in recent years with 281.1 micrograms of dust per cubic meter. Urban areas also do not fare too well. Bangkok's air standard exceeds WHO safety standards by 2.5 times, with traffic congestion as the main culprit.



THAILAND: ADMITTING INCONVENIENT TRUTHS



Reviving Agriculture.

It is predicted that in 2010, the loss in the agricultural sector could amount to 6 billion Baht. Compared to 2009, the numbers of villages affected by drought has increased by 48 percent. In March 2010, the Mekong River reached its lowest level in 30 years and the water volume in several major dams in Thailand are hitting their record low.



Rice paddies in Mae Hong Son



Green Community:

Preservation of the environment goes hand in hand with respect for the cultural landscape. It is important to support community-based tourism in both urban and rural areas, especially those eager to preserve both the nature and traditional ways of life.



TAT SEVEN GREENS CONCEPT

Seven Greens Concept
Enjoy travel, care for the environment.



Green Heart:

Without the right attitude and awareness, countering environmental threats is impossible. Every party involved - operators, service providers, visitors - has to realize that it is everyone's responsibility to preserve and protect the environment because the damage done can be irreversible.

Green Logistics:

Getting to the destination is important, but so is how to get there. The means of transporting your guests or yourself should be energy-efficient or involve alternative energy so as not to produce excessive greenhouse gases. Green logistics also involves effort to use local products and services.

Green Attraction:

Destinations with natural beauty and possibilities for fun and excitement are desirable, but even more so if they are run with responsibility toward nature and the community. Our book's main goal is precisely to promote such tourism choices. In addition, good practices can have a tremendous impact on tourism sustainability.

Green Activity:

Activities should be designed in a way that is not only fun and pleasureable for guests but should also provides opportunities for visitors to engage in rich and unique cultural experiences or gain knowledge about local ecosystems, without an adverse impact on the environment.

Green Service:

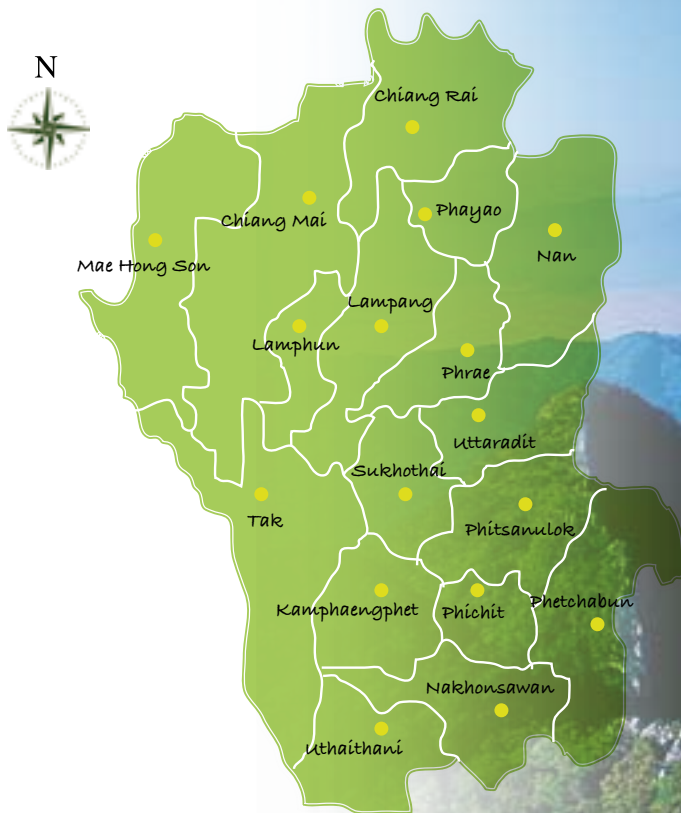
Great service can create a memorable experience for guests, but it must be provided with utmost concern and respect for the environment and community. Determination to preserve nature, wildlife, biodiversity, and culture is essential. Guests can play an important role by demanding sustainable services.

Green Plus:

Support to save the environment and community can come in many forms. Operators can help develop a community in a sustainable fashion. Manufacturers and organisations can promote and develop an environmentally-friendly approach. Individual visitors can participate by travelling responsibly. All parties can add a "plus" to Thailand's green turn.



Colourful Frangipani



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- ◆ DOI INTHANON, CHIANG MAI ◆ DOI CHIANG DAO, CHIANG MAI ◆ DOI PHU KHA, NAN
- ◆ DOI PHA KLONG, PHRAE ◆ THI LO SU, TAK ◆ FLIGHT OF THE GIBBON, CHIANG MAI
- ◆ PHUKLON COUNTRY CLUB, MAE HONG SON ◆ HUAI TUENG THAO, CHIANG MAI
- ◆ KHEK RIVER RAFTING, PHITSANULOK ◆ DOI TUNG, CHIANG RAI ◆ HUAI KHI LEK, CHIANG RAI
- ◆ DOI MAE SALONG, CHIANG RAI ◆ SI SATCHANALAI, SUKHOHAI

NORTH



Phu Hin Rong Kla, Phitsanulok



How To Get There

From Chiang Mai, take a local taxi from the bus pool at Chiang Mai Gate to Chom Thong. From Chom Thong, take the local taxi going to Doi Inthanon or to Mae Chaem, and ask to be dropped at the Headquarters. The best way to get around within the Park is to either charter a local taxi in Chom Thong or at the Park entrance, or hire a car from Chiang Mai. Make sure the car is in good condition and has a skilled driver behind the wheel.

Contact

Doi Inthanon National Park Headquarters
 ☎ 0 5326 8550 or 0 5328 6728
 inthanon_np@hotmail.com
 0 5393 9478 or 0 5326 8547
 daengdoihinthanon@yahoo.com

Top : A remarkable nature trail atop Doi Inthanon, where you can study the ecosystem.
Right: Naphaphon Phumsiri Chedi

Doi Inthanon

The rooftop of Thailand

CHIANG MAI PROVINCE. Here are a few of the many reasons why one should visit Doi Inthanon National Park: the eponymous peak is the highest in Thailand; the Park includes 1,274 plant species, 90 of which are orchids (31 of which are found uniquely there); and the area is home to 466 animal species, 385 of those being birds (including the Green-tailed Sunbird). Besides being rich in floral and faunal life, the Park is dotted with a number of waterfalls of various sizes.

Doi Inthanon has something for everyone, whether day-trippers or those planning to thoroughly explore the Park. The day might be filled with a visit to the highest point in Thailand, which can be reached by car, and is clouded with mist all year round, the temperature never exceeding 17° C. This may be followed with a



Thailand Tourism Awards



Online booking 📞 English spoken ☺ Suitable for family ❖

NORTH NATURE

30-minute walk along the nearby Ang Ka nature trail. The neat, elevated wooden platform with railings leads through the moss covered forest, where mixed plant-societies on single trees can be observed.

Toward the end of the trail, there is a path leading to the shrine of Chao Krom Kiat. The small spirit pavilion is built on a piece of helicopter wreckage as a memorial to Air Chief Marshal Kiat Mangkhlapruet and the late national park director who died on duty in a crash at that spot in May 1971.

The rest of the day might be spent touring the waterfalls. The most enchanting are Wachirathan, Mae Klang, and Mae Ya. These falls are easy to access by car, with trails leading up to different levels. Picnic areas and restaurants are available. The first two falls are on the same road after the first checkpoint; only Mae Ya stands alone south of the main national park area, on the 14 km road that branches off Highway 1009 and meanders through a residential area.

A Whole Day Trekking

Doi Inthanon also offers an array of treks. Most treks run all year round, and only a few routes require a ranger or local guide (contact National Park Headquarters at Km. 31 for information and arrangements). One of the most interesting routes is the Kio Mae Pan trail, which is open only from 1 June to 31 October, as its fragile ecosystem needs more time to recover than most. The distance of this circular trek is only 3 km, but discerning trekkers may take a whole day to complete it.

Bird lovers should not forget to pack binoculars, and should try to visit between October and March. If an English speaking guide is required, just cross the street from the Park Headquarters to the Inthanon Bird Centre. The Centre has been there since 1962; its customer service attested to by walls lined with name cards from satisfied clients. ■



DISCOVER

Doi Inthanon is the highest peak in Thailand and marks the end of the superb Himalaya Range. It is home to a number of endemic plants and animals not found elsewhere.

FEEL

It is unbelievably refreshing and worthwhile to escape the heat of Chiang Mai just for a lungful of cool air on top of Doi Inthanon. Similarly, sipping coffee while enjoying the greenery covered with lingering fog is not to be missed. To prolong the cool retreat, park accommodations can be found within walking-distance of the headquarters.



The view from the Den Ya Khat trail at dawn.

HOW TO GET THERE

There are daily buses from Bangkok direct to Chiang Dao. If departing from Chiang Mai, take a "Tha Ton" bus and inform the driver of your destination. You will get off in front of Chiang Dao Inn and continue by motorbike taxi. The headquarters of the Chiang Dao Wildlife Sanctuary is about 2 km along the main road from Chiang Dao Cave.

CONTACT

Chiang Dao Wildlife Sanctuary
☎ 0 5345 5802
(Staff do not speak English and bookings must be made 15 days in advance)

Centre: Campers are required to ask for permission in advance.
Drawing: The Ueang Si Chiang Dao orchid.

Doi Chiang Dao

The guardian spirits of Chiang

CHIANG MAI PROVINCE. Chiang Dao was in the media limelight during 2003, when the government came up with a plan to build a cable car to the peak to boost tourism. The proposal met with unprecedented and widespread protest from both locals and environmental activists. Fortunately, the plan was not carried out. Doi Chiang Dao (under the Chiang Dao Wildlife Sanctuary's care) is the third highest peak, and the only place where a sub-alpine ecosystem can be found in Thailand. Its height is 2,225 m above sea level, making a dramatic rise on the horizon when viewed on entering the district by Highway 107. The horseshoe-shaped mountain range of which it forms a part is home to more than 340 species of wildlife, of which some 206 are birds, including the near-extinct Hume's Pheasant (*Symaticus humiae*, found only here and in Pai). It is also the only home in the world to the newly discovered orchid *Sirindhornia pulchella*, as well as approximately 110 other orchid species.



NORTH TREKKING

Bird watching 🐦 Camping 🏕️

Doi Chiang Dao also holds spiritual significance for the people of Chiang Mai. The mountain is believed to be the abode of Chao Luang Kham Daeng, the spirit revered by all spirits and ghosts. There are two routes to get to the peak of Doi Luang Chiang Dao - the Pang Wua trail and the Den Ya Khat trail.



The Mountain of the Gods

The starting points of the two trails are about 30 minutes and 1 hour away from the headquarters, respectively. There are camping sites on both trails, but the second one is longer, steeper, and thus more adventurous. The two trails converge mid-hill, and four more hours of walking will lead to Mae Salung, the last camping site before the top. From the Mae Salung camping site, a final 45-minute climb (225 m of rocky,

limestone trail) is required to get to the windy top, where there is no water source but plenty of wildflowers. Trekkers normally spend two nights before following the downward trail back to the headquarters, and must provide their own tents, food, and water for the whole trip. It must be emphasised that Chiang Dao Wildlife Sanctuary is devoted strictly to conservation; tourism is second on the agenda. That is why the Sanctuary is open for trekking only from 1st November to 31st March, and is suitable only for highly-devoted nature enthusiasts. For others still wanting to get a glimpse of its glory, there is a 2-km nature trail, at the foot of the mountain, accessible all year round. No guide is needed, but during the rainy season, the path is often concealed by tall grass. ■



DISCOVER

Ueang Si Chiang Dao (*Sirindhornia pulchella*) is a terrestrial orchid endemic to this limestone terrain and can be found only here. It blooms and flaunts its exquisite pinkish-white flower from April to June.

FEEL ❤️ For those not planning to trek to the peak and are content with admiring the majestic mountain from below, there are several accommodation options in the area. Our favourite is 'Malee's Nature Lover Bungalow', where one can talk to owner Khun Malee about the cable car controversy while munching on fresh, homemade whole wheat toast.



HOW TO GET THERE

The Park is located in Pua district, 60 km from Nan on Highway 1080. On arrival in Pua, continue along Highway 1256 for another 25 km to reach the park headquarters. Visitors can either wait for a Song Thaeo ('Bo Kluea' route, the last one leaves around 2 p.m.) or charter one.

CONTACT

Doi Phu Kha National Park
☎ 0 5470 1000

Top: The fog kisses the hilltops on the way to the National Park.

Right: Brown-breasted Bulbul

Drawing: Chomphu Phu Kha flower

Doi Phu Kha Botanist's paradise

NAN PROVINCE. Doi Phu Kha National Park is a great destination for those wanting to combine laid-back relaxation with moderate exploration of nature. Visitors will notice that the landscape has been groomed and altered to receive guests. That said, it does not mean they will not get a high dose of nature within the Park.

Beginning with the journey up the mountain from Pua district, visitors will see that large patches of forest on the slope of the hills have been turned into fruit orchards, namely for lychee. The sight may not be the best introduction, but on arrival in the Park area, it is a relief to find that most of its forest remains intact.

Take time to view the exhibition in the Visitor Centre. Here, guests will learn that besides the star attraction, Chomphu Phu Kha



NORTH NATURE

flowers, there is also a chance to see a living fossil, *Caryota gigas*. Also known as *Hahn ex Hodel*, or Tao Rang Yak in Thai, this giant palm has a height of 40 m and is endemic to the area. The Park also offers the possibility of spotting a myriad of wild animals, ranging from rare birds (the most remarkable one being *Sitta formosa*) deer, and gibbons to bears, wild elephants, or even tigers.

Something for Everyone



For those content with lovely strolls through the woods, there are two nature trails near the Park headquarters to enjoy. The small trail is 2 km long; the longer one is 4 km, both winding through a forest of Kesiya, or three-needled, pine, whose fallen needles provide a soft brown carpet over the paths as

they lead to Chomphu Phu Kha and Tao Rang Yak groves. The trails are sufficiently well-defined, but the Park recommends visitors be accompanied by a ranger. Trekking should be avoided during the rainy season, as leeches are quite brutal.

Doi Phu Kha offers other activities the whole year round. From August to December, the river Nam Wa, with its 20 rapids, provides good rafting (contact the Visitor Centre to arrange a trip). Bird and butterfly lovers should visit between November and June. During February and March, the forest will be tinted with the pink blossoms of Chomphu Phu Kha. There are also a number of caves and waterfalls that can be explored from October to May.

For more sedentary travellers, the Park provides comfortable and aesthetically pleasing accommodation. The smallest options are made from old carts and bamboo, with thatched roofs. Bigger bungalows perch on a small hill to enjoy a panoramic view of the mountain range. Alternatively, a tent can be pitched in the campground to enjoy stargazing. To wrap up the day, the Park also provides a pavilion to observe the sunset over the hill-lined horizon. ■



DISCOVER

The botanical highlight of this 1,300 m high mountain is *Bretschneidera sinensis* Hemsl, more commonly known as Chomphu Phu Kha. It is a rare species, so rare that the Park is the only place in the world it can be found.

The only time to relish its bunches of sweet, pink blossoms is during February and March.

FEEL This is one of the most pristine national parks in Thailand and fully deserved winning the Best National Park Award of 2008. We were very impressed with the Park authority's creativity and attention to detail; such as, in utilising dead tree trunks by carving them into wash basins.

HOW TO GET THERE

Doi Pha Klong National Park Headquarters is on Highway 1023, about 20 km from Phrae. There are taxis (Phrae-Long route) leaving from Chomphu Ming Market (N18° 08.184' E100° 08.860'). On the way back to town, you will need to wait on the roadside and flag a local taxi down.

CONTACT

Doi Pha Klong National Park
☎ 0 5450 1701



NORTH

TREKKING/RAFTING

Online booking 📱 Kayaks and rafting equipment rental 📞

Doi Pha Klong

A geological feast

PHRAE PROVINCE. Doi Pha Klong National Park may not be the greenest place to visit. Those that do will not be protected from the sun by a lush canopy, and their skin will become sticky from humidity. The geography here is comprised mostly of limestone and dry evergreen forests of thorny trees with small leaves. They combine to create a curiously beautiful landscape, the charm of Doi Pha Klong.

On arrival at the park headquarters, especially in the early morning or late afternoon, visitors will be greeted by a cacophony of bird calls. There is a 1.2-km nature trail along which to explore the flora and fauna of the dry evergreen forest. The beginning of the trail, paved with concrete blocks, boasts oddly, but naturally, sculpted trees with entangling vines. Along the trail as a whole, the most predominant plant species is the firework-shaped *Dracaena* sp.

Although the trail is short, trekkers are mercilessly exposed to the sun. The informative and friendly rangers therefore warn visitors to take lots of water before setting out on the trek. The climb can be tough at some points, with sharp-edged rocks, but the path is well-defined, including intervals of wooden steps. After a good measure of sweating, one finally arrives at Hin Pakarang, a large, wondrously-shaped limestone hill peppered with bright green shrubs.

The Park encompasses an area of 125 km², covering a diverse range of geography and activities. About 60 km from the headquarters lies Kaeng Luang, a series of rapids in the Yom River. These provide a 10-km rafting route, though the river is best experienced in November or December. Visitors can also stop over at Erawan Cave to enjoy the stalagmites and stalactites, including those resembling a mythical three-headed elephant, from which the cave takes its name. Opportunities also exist to rappel down a 70-m cliff. To arrange an adventure trip, contact the Park headquarters. ■



DISCOVER 📖

Our favourite attraction in Doi Pha Klong National Park is Hin Pakarang, literally translated as “coral stone”. The name is misleading since it is actually a huge formation of limestone which forms a peculiar, wonderful landscape.

FEEL ❤️

The facilities, such as park accommodation and canteen, may not be very attractive, but a day-trip is sufficient for a visit. We were very impressed with the hospitality of the rangers, who take good care of visitors.

Left: At the end of the trail, you will reach the platform where you can take in the beauty of Hin Pakarang's limestone rock formations
Top: A well-paved pathway invites visitors onto the nature trail.



NORTH NATURE

Wifi @ Online booking 📶 Rafting gear rental 🛶

Thi Lo Su Waterfall

The hidden giant

TAK PROVINCE. A weekend at Thi Lo Su may make you come home drained of energy, but with piles of spectacular photos and fun memories.

Visitors must steel themselves right from the start. The 'Sky Highway 1090' winds from Mae Sot to Umphang through a mountainous region inhabited by hill tribes. Its 1,219 sharp curves, zigzagging through lush, forested landscapes, have churned many stomachs. After four hours, visitors arrive in Umphang, the biggest district in Thailand, sharing a 180 km border with Myanmar. It used to be inhabited solely by the Karen people, prior to Thais moving in from the North. Now, it is a hub of accommodation and tour operators organizing trips to the majestic Thi Lo Su Waterfall.

Thi Lo Su is beautiful in her many guises. During the rainy season, visitors will be awed by the sight of an endless line of mighty water crashing down 300 m onto the rocks below. In the dry season, the gigantic waterfall spanning 500 m turns into numerous small cascades separated by mossed rocks and trees, making it appear as a patchwork of verdant gardens.

Thi Lo Su is the star of the Wildlife Sanctuary, but its sister waterfall, Thi Lo Cho, should not be missed. To fully explore the area, a three-day tour is recommended. A typical programme will combine rafting on the Mae Klong River; visits to Thi Lo Su and Thi Lo Cho Falls; some trekking; and, upon request, stays in Karen villages, and total forest immersion via elephant back. However, it should be noted that the likelihood of seeing large animals during any of these activities is low. Also, trekkers should bring mosquito repellent and antimalarial medication. ■

Left: The lowest two tiers of the gigantic fall are favourites among travellers. They also provide pools perfect for dipping in.

Right: Thi Lo Su exudes beauty even during the dry season.



DISCOVER 📖

Thi Lo Su is the biggest waterfall in Thailand, hidden in the lush forest bordering Myanmar. During the rainy season, the Mae Klong River is a good location for white water rafting.

FEEL 📖

Umphang town is the transit lounge for Thi Lo Su visitors. Here you will find various types of accommodation, from camping sites to bungalows. Although most of them are simple, reflecting the adventurous spirit of the area, you will find all the basic facilities. The town is pleasant to explore on foot.

HOW TO GET THERE

There is no direct bus or plane service from Bangkok to Umphang. You need to travel to the border town of Mae Sot first (by daily bus from Bangkok), then take a Mae Sot-Umphang Song Thaeo from the bus terminal. It is a tough 169 km, 4-hour ride almost guaranteed to cause motion sickness, so be prepared.

CONTACT

TAT Tak Office
0 5551 4341-3



Nanthaburi National Park, Nan

"EMPOWERING VILLAGERS

IN A SUSTAINABLE WAY"

Alberto, alias "Khun Bert" came from the Philippines and has been working with the PDA (Population and Community Development Association) for almost 20 years. He speaks Thai fluently and intensely cares for the welfare of people with lesser opportunity in this country. His work has always been in the developmental field, and now he is still continuing his mission with tourism as a useful tool.

Chiang Rai is rich with hill tribal cultures and we are specialized in ethnic tourism," he explains. It is true that we offer trekking and visits to villages not dissimilar to other tour operators in Chiang Rai, but our choices of routes and destinations are unique. Another thing that makes us different is the principle behind the tour.

"Tour operators need to prepare their clients with basic information"

We aim to spread income to the villages along our trek by involving the villagers via activities; such as, giving a musical performances, cooking, and hosting guests. We try our best to distribute the income equally; for example, on the first of a 4-day-tour, we hire porters from the first village, and on the second day we hire from the next village, so everyone will get an equal chance to work.

"However, income generating through tourism is actually our secondary objective. Our main goal is to help empower villagers



in a sustainable way by setting up structures; such as, a community bank with shared ownership. Then tourism can help by bringing money into the system.

What I see as problems with ethnic tourism in general are these: first, some operators do not use local guides who have a better understanding of the local traditions and way of life. Sometimes guides from the outside misinform guests, or even worse, show a lack of respect.

Also, some tours have become industrialized; namely, the long-neck Karen villages. The first group fled the Burmese junta and arrived in Mae Hong Son. Investors saw an opportunity and started to 'import' and scatter them around for tourism. Exploitation then ensued. They are maltreated, for example, not even paid minimum wages and exhibited as if in a zoo. We strictly refuse to take anyone to these so-called villages.



Sometimes travellers ask me if there is any village they can visit that still wear traditional costumes. My reply would be nowhere because those costumes are kept for special occasions and these days villagers have easier access to modern clothing (the idea is similar to tuxedos in the West). But such modernization turns out to be beneficial for their tradition.

That way, they make their costumes even more beautiful because the occasions to wear them are rare instead of making plain clothes for daily usage. This is a positive change. I'm optimistic and still believe that a balance between tradition and modernization can be struck. ■

To meet him

Contact

You can meet Khun Bert and get adequate information at the Hilltribe Museum & Education Centre, 3rd floor, PDA Building, 620/25 Thanalai Road, Chiang Rai (N19° 54.530' E99° 50.148')
Tel: 0 5374 0088. Open daily from 10:00 a.m.-6:30 p.m.



NORTH ADVENTURE

Online booking 📞 English spoken ☺ Suitable for family ❖

on safety procedures. A sample first flight follows, on a short zip line, to acquaint customers with the equipment and motion. Of course, an adrenaline surge is the main aim of zip-lining, but equally wonderful is the sight of the diverse shades of green and mountain-lined horizon seen while waiting to whizz from station to station. The deeper one goes inside the forest, the more impressive the size and formation of the trees. The flight concludes with a drop from a gigantic tree, in which one can choose to fall head or feet first.

Fun with Benefits

What is greatly appreciated about this adventure is how the company is conscious about community and environmental issues. Before



signing the disclaimer form, the staff make sure that visitors go through the recommendations for good environmental practices. In the area around the office, signs give information about the vital roles of the tropical rainforest ecosystem. The company also claims that 10% of its profits go to conservation projects.

Before being driven back to the city, visitors are served lunch, with a stroll at the Mae Kampong Waterfall as dessert. The Waterfall is medium-sized with seven tiers, and it takes about 15 minutes to climb to the top. At the entrance to the waterfall, a number of trees with saffron-coloured strips of cloth tied around the trunks may be seen. These trees are 'ordained' and become sacred, so that no poacher would have the heart or dare to cut them down - a perfect example of utilizing folk wisdom as a conservation strategy. ■

DISCOVER 📖

The zipline of the Flight of the Gibbon hovers over the rainforest of the Mae Kampong area, allowing one to observe the vegetation from a bird's-eye view, accompanied by thrilled screams from fellow visitors.

FEEL ❤️

The Flight of the Gibbon Centre is located high in a lush, mountainous area which provides a lovely setting for the activity. The staff is hospitable, although their command of English may be a little shaky.

SHARE ❖

The company collaborates with FORRU (Forest Restoration and Research Unit) at Chiang Mai University in reforestation projects and has organized activities for volunteers in 2008 and 2009.

How To Get There

The site is in Ban Mae Kampong, Mae On district, about 50 minutes east of Chiang Mai by car. However, the package includes a free pickup service from your accommodation in a communal van, which is more convenient and wastes less fuel.

CONTACT

www.treetopasia.com
☎ 08 9970 5511
info@treetopasia.com

Top: Adventurers can get a close look at the rainforest flora while waiting on the tree-hugging platform. **Center:** You can also enjoy the canopy in a slower pace and greater detail here.

Flight of the Gibbon Swaying over the treetops

CHIANG MAI PROVINCE. Despite the name, visitors do not exactly brachiate from tree to tree like real gibbons. Nonetheless, gliding down 2-km long zip lines hanging some 30-m over the canopy of a tropical forest must produce a similar feeling to that enjoyed by a swinging primate.

The trip begins with a 50-minute ride from Chiang Mai, with the last leg up the serpentine road of the Mae Kampong hills. There is a choice between going early in the morning, at noon, or during the late afternoon. The whole excursion takes about three hours. The temperature suddenly drops on entering the densely vegetated area, and the fun begins there.

After gearing up with straps and helmet, visitors are taken to the first of 15 stations--wooden platforms built on the tree top, and briefed



NORTH HEALTH

English spoken ☺ Suitable for family ❖

The greenery surrounding the spa is also quite soothing. The field, dotted with farmers' sheds, stretches from the wooden platform next to the body treatment rooms and makes a great waiting spot while the mud paste applied to the skin dries (the process takes about 20 minutes). The open-air mineral swimming pool and jacuzzi is shaded with abundant trees and coloured with flowers. The buildings are camouflaged well in the garden, with their thatched roofs and partial wooden structures. Phuklon is the place where nature pampers both body and spirit.

Fun with Benefits



DISCOVER

The boiling mud at Phuklon has been certified by a French laboratory as containing minerals suitable for cosmetic use. The quality of the mud here is claimed to rival that of the Dead Sea.

FEEL This is not a typical glittering luxury spa. Instead, the establishment is located in the middle of a field, with many of the facilities in the open air. The no-frills décor, combined with friendly local staff, creates a very laid-back atmosphere.

HOW TO GET THERE

From Mae Hong Son, take Highway 1095. After 10 km, look for a diverging road to Ban Kung Mai Sak and a sign saying 'Mud Spa' on the left. Follow that road for 7 km. The entrance to the spa is on the right.

CONTACT
www.phuklon.co.th
☎ 0 5328 2579

Phuklon Country Club

Pamper yourself with mud

MAE HONG SON PROVINCE. After a grueling ride from Pai, with thousands of curves along Highway 1095, what could be a better way to relax than to treat yourself to a spa experience before arriving in Mae Hong Son.

Phuklon is not an ordinary spa. It offers up to visitors subterranean wealth of a very special kind—a variety of mineral mud with only three known sources worldwide. The boiling mud, with a temperature ranging from 60° -140° C, emerges from the underground mineral water well visible upon entering the spa area. Signs will inform the visitor that the mud here is rich in calcium, bromine, magnesium, and many more elements. The dark oozing liquid is purified and then mixed with Thai herbs such as lemon grass and curcumin. Once cooled, it is ready to be applied. Treatments vary from a facial mud mask to full-body scrub, at surprisingly affordable prices. Those considering the full-body scrub and treatment should be warned they may feel a little over-indulgent, since staff will assist in every step, even with rinsing off the mud and bathing.



No health and beauty refuge is complete without a traditional Thai massage. Professional, therapeutic touch on a back stiff after four hours in a bus seat is nothing short of bliss. Foot massage is also popular among clients who want to pass the time while waiting for their facial mud mask to dry. After this reinvigoration of skin and muscle, mud-based cosmetic products, such as mud cleansing bars and mud mask powder, can be purchased for further pampering at home. Phuklon Country Club also provides a golf driving range nearby. There is no accommodation in Phuklon, but fortunately it is less than half an hour from Mae Hong Son.

On the way back to town, one may want to stop for a cup of freshly brewed coffee and shop for OTOP products at the newly-opened Mae Hong Son Rajabhat University OTOP Centre (N19° 20.132', E97° 57.965, look for the sign on the left if coming from Phuklon). Here will be found goods produced by villages of the region; such as, snacks made from sesame and local herbs and nuts, wine distilled from local fruits, and intricate and colourful accessories made from hand-woven tribal fabric. ■



Top: This beauty potion is concocted from purified mineral-enriched mud and a mixture of local herbs.

Center: The staff perfects the recipe before applying the cold mud on clients.

Top right: Rejuvenating facial mud mask.

Bottom right: The pool of unprocessed mud.



How To Get There

Getting there is very easy from Chiang Mai city center. Just drive up Canal Road, past the 700-Year Stadium, drive another 2 km. and follow the signs. The lake is in a lovely area with mountain views.



Floating bungalows over Tueng Tao Lake



NORTH BIKING

Bike for rent. 🚲 Rafting. Fishing. 🎣 Windsurfing 🌊

Huai Tueng Thao Riding around mountains

CHIANG MAI PROVINCE. Navigating the city's morass of gentle lanes on cool summer nights can make this one of urban Thailand's most enjoyable riding experiences. The route has been chosen from an interminable range of others for its flexibility to both novices and experts and its extremely convenient location just outside of Chiang Mai, at the crack between Huai Tueng Thao and Doi Suthep National Park. The route itself makes for a gloriously amiable shotgun-wedding between the area's mountainous forests and lychee fields, and a number of more urbane amenities and activities with which to fill itinerary and stomach.

A bit further down the road

Starting from one of the bike rental shops on Sam Lan Road which runs past Wat Phra Sing, leave the city walls from the west, following the northbound quadrant of the moat up until the intersection at its corner before turning left down Huai Kaeo Road. Pass Chiang Mai's oldest shopping mall and keep going until the second large intersection, there, take a northward rightturn. 1 km in, you can get off the main road and follow the dirt path running along the parallel canal, following the signs for the 700-Year Stadium, where you turn left at after 5 km. Huai Tueng Thao, actually a reservoir, is just a bit further down the road.

But instead of heading straight there, make for the trails and go behind the Stadium, crossing the dam wall into the forest. Follow the lovely, blue and red-marked mixed terrain routes that leave you at Huai Tueng Thao after 10 km. Otherwise, circling the lake is fulfilling in itself and either way you can reward yourself at one of the many cheap and breezy lakeside restaurants before returning to Chiang Mai. ■

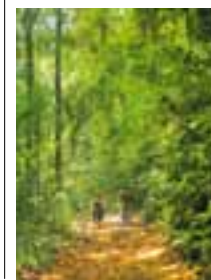
DISCOVER

Sometimes it's nice to get a little break from our busy lives and take a little breather to recharge our batteries. Here is Chiang Mai local's getaway favorite spot.

FEEL

For the romantics, Huai Tueng Thao Lake is an ideal place where you can enjoy stunning sunsets over Chiang Mai's mountains. On a weekday evening, the place is almost deserted.

SHARE There are a range of inoffensive activities here, from fishing to windsurfing and rafting. A nearby military training camp offers a perfect setting for fitness exercise.



Right : Bikers enjoy a Zero CO₂ ride around Huai Tueng Thao



NORTH RAFTING

Equipment rental ♦ Suitable for families ❖ English spoken ☺

HOW TO GET THERE

The best rafting spot on the Khek River is in Wang Thong district, about 40 km from Phitsanulok city. There are frequent buses (Phitsanulok-Nakhon Thai) leaving from the bus terminal in the city centre.

CONTACT

Most resorts in Wang Thong offer rafting and accommodation packages. Otherwise, look for operators along Highway 12 (from Km 33 on).

Khek River Rafting

Get carried away

PHITSANULOK PROVINCE. At first glance, the Khek River appears like an ordinary river. It is of a modest width, snaking peacefully from its origin on a mountaintop in Phetchabun Province. Then, without warning, the smooth surface of the river becomes agitated like a boiling cauldron. That is when the fun begins.

Khek River is one of the best sites for rafting in Thailand. The waterway is blessed with a number of rapids ranging from levels 1 to 5. A typical rafting trip will take you through 8 km of river peppered with 13 rapids. Before you board the rubber dinghy, which can carry about 10 passengers, the crew will brief you on the technique of rowing and what to do when you fall off the craft. Most of the crew members do not speak English, but the tutorial is easily understood through body language.

The first hundred metres are for getting familiar with your oars. You will then start from a very mild rapid to warm up both your rowing and vocal cords. The following six rapids range between level 2 and 3. Between each rapid you will have time to savour the beautiful scenery. The banks are lined with hog plum trees and bamboos and lushly vegetated mountains. Normally the water is green and clear, but in the rainy season it turns brown due to the sediment and mud that comes with strong currents.

The texture of the water at each rapid is also something to behold. The rock formation at some rapids makes the water appear like a giant fluttering piece of cloth glinting with sunlight. At others, the water

bubbles fiercely and, despite its boiling look, is refreshingly cool.

The real adventure lies in the last five rapids. The highlight is “Kaeng Yao” (“long rapid”), 100 metres of bumpy level 5 rapids that will keep you clinging to your dinghy rope. People do fall off sometimes so you should be extra careful here (the crew told us that some people find falling overboard great fun but not at this particular spot.)

Different resorts and rafting operators might offer slightly different routes or include a different number of rapids, but the experience should be similarly thrilling. The best season for the adventure starts from June and ends in October (this year, we are told, it started late due to the drought.) Children should be older than 12 years old to participate, though some operators might overlook this rule. ■



DISCOVER

Enjoy one of the best rafting sites in Thailand. This is an almost zero-carbon activity that allows you to enjoy both an adrenalin rush and the beautiful landscape of Wang Thong district.

FEEL

A lot of the accommodation (some regrettably sitting right above the river) in the area combine this adventurous outdoor activity with spa and massage. Get yourself pampered while listening to the constant murmur of the river.

SHARE

Rafting is a sport and adventure that cannot go without solidarity and team spirit. Bring your friends along, but also be open to new encounters and mutual challenges. Once on this very unpredictable river, we are all in the same boat.

Top: Teamwork is key
Right: The rapids you will encounter along the way



HOW TO GET THERE

From Chiang Rai, head to Mae Sai on Route 110. Numerous buses or vans are available. After Mae Chan, take the west turn-off for Doi Tung. Then, follow Route 1149 to reach the park and the Royal villa.

CONTACT
<http://www.doitung.org>

Top: Smell the aroma of coffee and flowers at Café Doi Tung
Drawing: Opium flower

Doi Tung

From opium to coffee

These days, you don't have to come up to northernmost Chiang Rai province to run into the Doi Tung Foundation. Launched in 1969 under the auspices of the late Princess Mother, this recognizable Royal Project's logo is very visible nowadays in most of the country's cities, thanks to the well-established reputation of its coffee brand.

Doi Tung coffee shops can be seen in Bangkok's busy Silom Road. Handicrafts and clothes bearing this very name are also increasingly popular among the crowd of international visitors, as they symbolize both quality and a sustainable mode of production. With the help of the United Nations, Doi Tung's agricultural project for introducing crop substitution to curb the cultivation of opium is now being exported to neighbouring Myanmar, as well as Afghanistan.



Handicraft and arboretum 🌿 English spoken ☺ Package tours 🌍

NORTH

COMMUNITY

Nevertheless, don't miss the opportunity to spend one or two days walking on these northernmost hills of Thailand, where hill tribes have been taught to grow nuts or coffee trees rather than poppies. Like many other Royal projects, the Doi Tung - Mae Fah Luang complex encompasses all fields of rural development, including legal, medical, and educational access, agricultural research, forest management, and a sustainable chain of production for coffee. Its



giant arboretum makes a perfect day-walk. Accommodation is available in a nice guesthouse located below the Swiss style Royal Villa, with an adjacent badminton court for those who want to get some exercise. Thai employees enjoy playing there after 6 p.m. and will be delighted to share their racquets and shuttlecocks.

On a more serious note, Doi Tung is a unique mix of an agricultural, political, and human experience. Although some villagers sometimes miss their ancient way of life within hill tribe communities accustomed to crossing borders to smuggle goods or dope, the Foundation has brought education, expertise, and real development to this impoverished area. It is for this reason that Doi Tung gained the recognition of the UN Drug Control Programme, based in Vienna, and several tourism awards including one from the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA).

As for the mythology of the Golden Triangle, formerly the leading worldwide source of heroin, a visit to the "Hall of Opium", 10 km north to the border town of Chiang Saen is highly recommended. Focused on history, the museum houses a collection of documents, photos, and drug related memorabilia, making it a necessary stop-in for those seeking to understand the troublesome period this region came across after World War II. ■



DISCOVER 👁 Become a coffee expert while listening to the plantation's learned staff. Learn all about aroma, body and flavour. Produced on these northernmost hills, Doi Tung coffee is on its way to becoming an international trademark.

FEEL ❤ The whole place bears the mark of the late Princess Mother, Somdet Phra Srinagarindra, whose Royal villa replicates an alpine chalet from her beloved Switzerland. To know more about her, log on <http://www.thailink.com/mom.htm>

SHARE 💎 Doi Tung and Mae Fah Luang being royal projects, donations are accepted. Volunteering is also possible, like teaching English to the local staff.



Harvesting tea leaves, Mae Salong, Chiang Rai



NORTH COMMUNITY / CULTURE

Swing festival 🌸 Tour guide 📌 Cultural exchange 🗨️

management of tourism, thus preserving their cultural identity while at the same time profiting from the additional funds such activities bring into the community coffers. A very positive point: both the Community-based tourism network (CBT) and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) have praised the work of this small village, distinctively Akha in nature and appearance, nestled above a valley defined by verdant rice terraces and mixed Thai and Lahu villages.

The history of Huai Khi Lek also bears testimony to the recent destiny of Thailand's hill tribes. The Thai authorities established the village in 1965, in a spot selected by community elders. Somsak Malee says, "The government has moved many of the hill tribes, around 80% of them, down to the lowlands in what they thought was an effort to draw them into Thai society and give them access to healthcare and basic education, while stemming the supposed cause of much mountain deforestation. This was a well-meaning but misguided move, as people entered into illicit and menial labor to supplement their income".

Rooted Animism and Rich Mythology

As would be expected, traditions here are thriving, and today a visit to Huai Khi Lek is a perfect opportunity to discover the numerous agents of environmental protection invoked by this Akha community. "Spirit eyes forbidding tree cutting, sacred rivers and spirits where all human activity is banned by a deeply rooted animism, and rich mythology; huge areas of community-owned forest....", details Travel Green Thailand (Asieinfo publishing, 2010). We must also remember the other side of recent Akha history in Thailand and the Golden Triangle, where this community has been equally associated with another activity: the most lucrative drug trade across the Chinese and Burmese borders. A must-read on this story is Alfred W. Mc Coy's "Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia" (Lawrence Hill Books). ■



DISCOVER 📺 Tourism here is a community managed project and profits are used to sponsor both Akha cultural activities and local forest conservation.

FEEL 📖 Spirituality is at the heart of the Akha lifestyle in Huai Khi Lek, where villagers of different beliefs coexist. Old religious customs are vibrant here, along the lines of both Buddhism and Christianity.

SHARE 📢 All year round, various festivals draw crowds of visitors. Among them: the Chon Khai Daeng (April) and the Lo Chingcha or Akha Swing ceremony (mid-August-September) when women are treated to a fun time as a reward for rice planting.

How To Get There

Huai Khi Lek stands on a peak above the Huai Masang River, some 30 km north of Mae Suai (not to be confused with Mae Sai) in Thailand's Chiang Rai province. Bus and vans are available also from Chiang Mai.

CONTACT
www.hilltribeguide.com and
Somsak Malee on
08 1765 5352

Huai Khi Lek

The strength of the forest

CHIANG RAI PROVINCE. Here is a village with a tale, so be prepared: enjoying the Akha hilltribe's lifestyle in Huai Khi Lek means being able to listen, and keeping a close eye on religious beliefs and practices, as explained by our guide Somsak Malee. "In a way, he told Travel Green Thailand's reporter Simon Bowring, protecting the environment comes here from a long history of living directly off it. Our people are at the forefront of climate change because they live with first-hand experience of nature and have begun to notice extremes in weather and water availability".

Without a doubt, the village of Huai Khi Lek and its surroundings offer much more than conversation and study of local customs. The villagers of Huai Khi Lek are themselves involved in the

Top: Akha hilltribe
swing ceremony

Right: Akha woman



NORTH NATURE / RELAXATION

Suitable for Family ❖ English spoken ☺ Sightseeing ★

will find an array of teashops, from which aroma fuses with cool fresh air. Almost all teashops will happily let you sample their tea. To maximize the fun, you can also visit a tea plantation on horseback.

Food Here is a Remnant of History



When Division 93 settled here, they brought with them not only ammunition but also the cuisine from their former base in Yunnan, the southwest region of China. Yunnanese food is rather spicy and especially greasy compared to other strands of

Chinese food and the star ingredient is mushroom. Restaurants in Santikhiri invariably serve Yunnanese dishes, the notable ones being "Khamoo Man Tow" (marinated pig leg served with bun) and steamed shitake mushroom. The abundant tea is also featured in the kitchen: try "Yum Bai Cha" (spicy tea leaf salad).

One relic of the war-ridden past remains. The tomb of General Tuan was built in 1980 on a hilltop (about 300 metres high) that overlooks the village he helped establish. The whole structure was built with white marble, and is a great spot to enjoy panoramic views of the landscape. Four km from the village, at the end of a serpentine climb to the highest point of the hill, you will find a temple dedicated to H.M. the King's Mother, Princess Srinagarindra. From there you can see the Burmese border, another excellent viewpoint, especially at sunset.

The best time to visit Santikhiri Village is between December and February, when the road up hill is dazzlingly lined with Himalayan Wild Cherry trees (*Prunus cerasoides* D. Don) and the weather is especially cool. ■



DISCOVER 👁 Santikhiri Village holds a place in Thai military history as a buffer zone to fight communist insurgents. The village was thus christened "Mountain of Peace" to remind and at the same time mitigate the memory of violence.

FEEL ♥ The village is compact but well structured for visitors and you will find accommodations on most main streets. At the same time, nature is still within arm's reach and thanks to the altitude, the place still retains its tranquility.

SHARE ❖ Volunteer opportunities such as teaching English or building schools in the mountains of Chiang Rai are available. Check out www.mirrorartgroup.org

HOW TO GET THERE

Chiang Rai city is accessible by buses. From there, take Highway 10 to Mae Chan District. Turn left at Km stone 856. Follow Highway 1089 until you reach Km stone 55, and turn right. Santikhiri Village is 15 Km away

CONTACT

TAT Chiang Rai office
0 5371 7433,
0 5374 4674-5

Top: The view of fog-veiled Santikhiri village.

Right: Traditional thai house in Mae Salong

Top Right: The panoramic view of Doi Mae Salong

Doi Mae Salong Sipping tea in Santikhiri

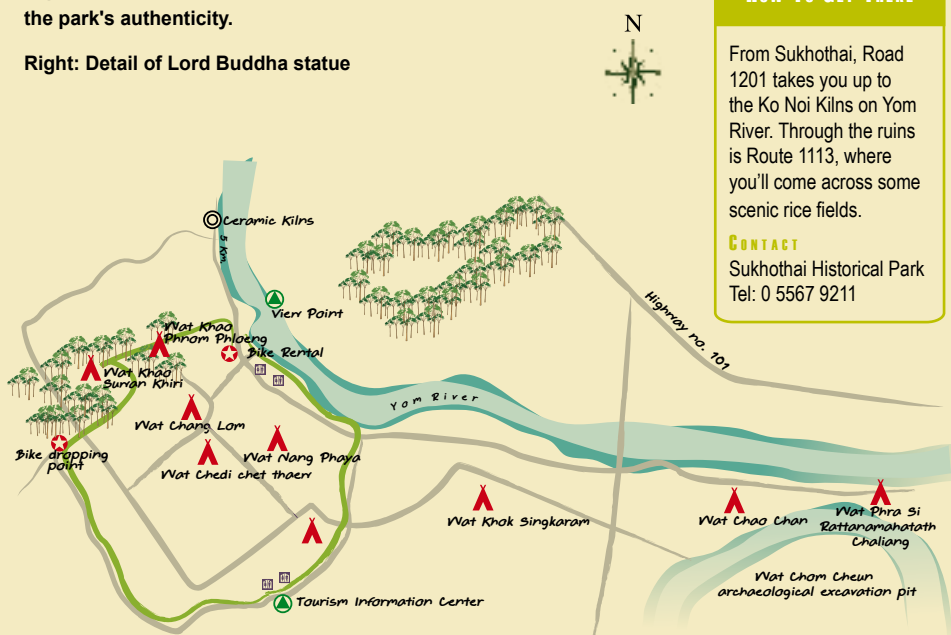
CHIANG RAI PROVINCE. Santikhiri Village on top of Doi Mae Salong has come a long way: the mountainous terrain used to be heavily deforested and a highly militarized zone. When Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek fled to Taiwan from China in 1949 along with his Guomintang armies, two regiments of Division 93 refused defeat, kept on fighting, and eventually settled in the north of Thailand. Then in 1961, 4,000 soldiers led by General Tuan Shi-Wen arrived in Mae Salong and were allowed to stay by the Thai government on the condition that they help the Thai army fight minority and communist insurgents. Bloody episodes involving battles and opium trade ensued here and in the nearby area.

Today, what used to be a restricted area has become a lovely holiday hideout, especially for tea aficionados. Opium plantations were substituted with tea, which is the trademark of this area. Here you



Top: A serene Lord Buddha lends to the park's authenticity.

Right: Detail of Lord Buddha statue



HOW TO GET THERE

From Sukhothai, Road 1201 takes you up to the Ko Noi Kilns on Yom River. Through the ruins is Route 1113, where you'll come across some scenic rice fields.

CONTACT

Sukhothai Historical Park
Tel: 0 5567 9211



Thailand Tourism Awards

NORTH BIKING / CULTURE

Bike for rent 🚲 Pottery museum 🏺 Tour guides 🗺️



Biking through Si Satchanalai

SUKHOTHAI PROVINCE. The well-known Sukhothai Historical Park is an ideal starting point for the 60 km (1 hr) northward bus ride to Si Satchanalai, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, although often neglected by visitors for its paucity of nearby air or rail connections.

After mounting a bike (which can be rented at the Park entrance), the best thing to do is to wind through the imposing 13th century ruins that are scattered willy-nilly, keeping one eye or ear out for the cacophony of birds that inhabit the forested surroundings. Although the constant tree-borne warbling is impressive, it is best to leave your bike and stroll up towards Wat Chedi Chet Yot and Wat Suwan Khiri, where, if you take a seat, you become audience to the flailing circus of birds and monkeys above as they juggle for space on and between the tree branches.

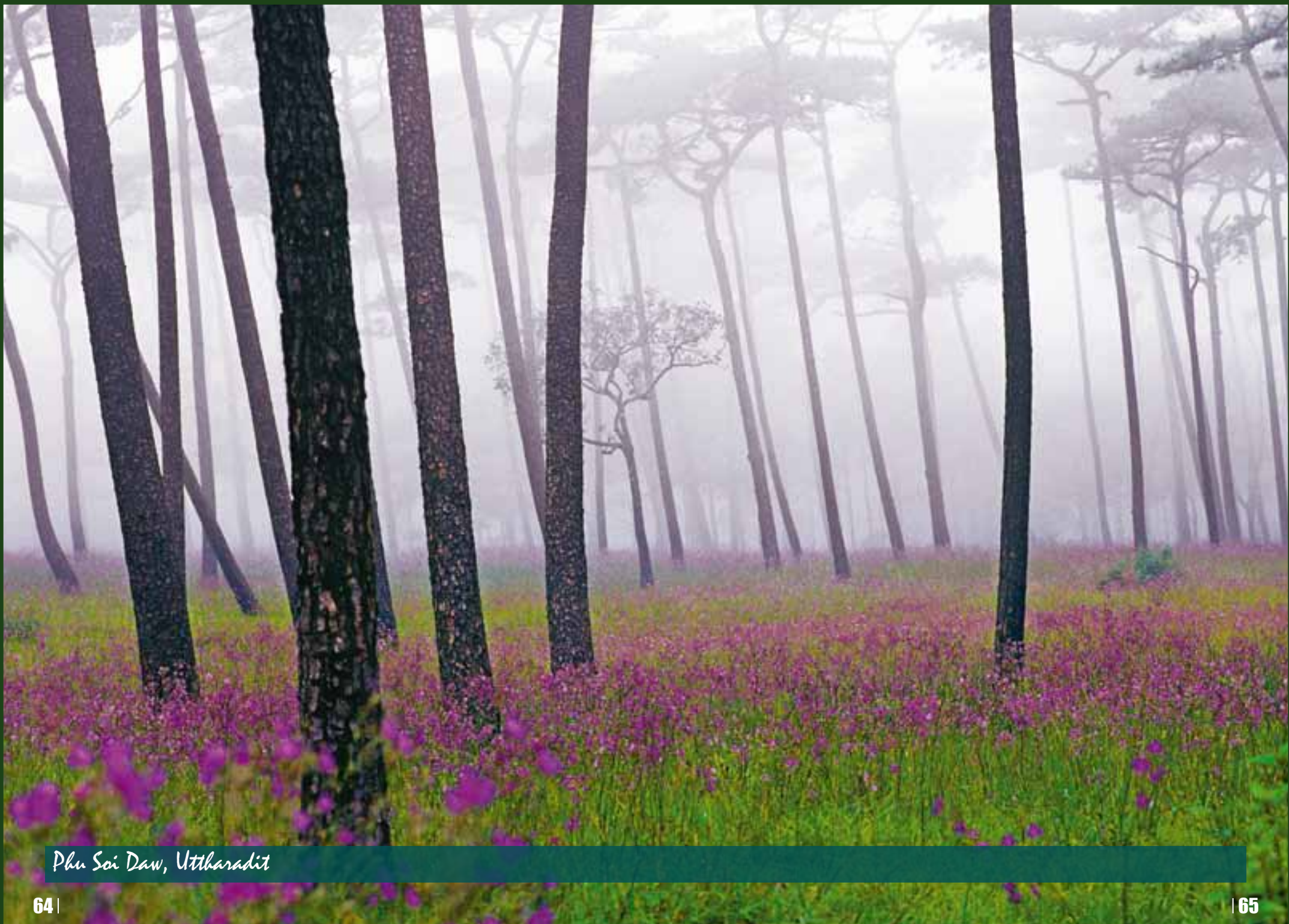
Push a little harder on your pedals to get to Ko Noi's open-air pottery museum for the late afternoon, as the sun setting on the old kilns there gives life to a spectrum of colours. This area was once a ceramics-manufacturing hub where King Ramkhamhaeng the Great originally commissioned Chinese pottery masters to do their work.

As many as 150 kilns once laid along the banks of the Yom River, producing the distinctive blue or off-white Sangkhalok porcelain that earned itself considerable fame. It reminds the visitor of the fact that Sukhothai's rise as a cultural and trading hub was due largely to its geographically advantageous location over the old trade routes. ■

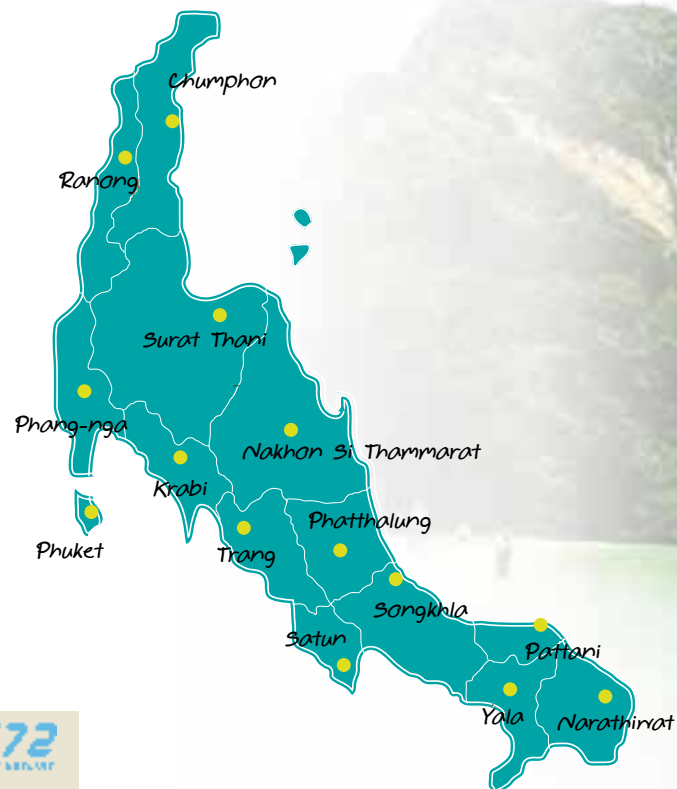
DISCOVER 🌿 Natural beauty here interacts with the finest cultural heritage. Si Satchanalai has been registered by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site since 1981.

FEEL ❤️ Ignore the tour operators who will suggest a fast-track itinerary here. Si Satchanalai deserves much more than a few hours spent behind van windows.

SHARE 🔄 UNESCO needs your help to continue preserving World Heritage Sites, where mass tourism can have a negative impact. Log on to: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/67>



Phu Soi Daw, Uttaradit



For TAT regional office, please visit
www.tourismthailand.org or dial
the TAT tourist hotline 1672
from 8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. from
anywhere in the country.

- ♦ EMERALD POOL, KRAEI ♦ KO YAO NOI, PHANG-NGA ♦ KO PHAYAM, RANONG
- ♦ SIMILAN AND SURIN ARCHIPELAGOS, PHANG-NGA ♦ TARUTAO ISLAND, SATUN
- ♦ KO LIBONG, TRANG ♦ KO NGAI, TRANG ♦ RAKSAWARIN HOT SPRINGS, RANONG
- ♦ THALE NOI, PHATTALUNG ♦ BAN LI LET, SURAT THANI
- ♦ KO PRA THONG, PHANG-NGA ♦ WAT SUAN MOKH, SURAT THANI
- ♦ BAN KIRI WONG, NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

SOUTH



Ka Similan, Phang-nga



Mixture of calcium carbonate, magnesium and minerals results in sparkling green water.

How To Get There

From Krabi town, take Highway 4 southeast toward Khlong Thom District. Turn left onto Highway 4038. Turn right at the junction and follow the signs to the Emerald Pool.

Contact

TAT Krabi Office
☎ 0 7621 1036, 0 7621 2213

Drawing :
Gurney's Pitta

Right : When the shade of trees reflect in the pool mirror...

Emerald Pool

Immerse yourself in the green

KRABI PROVINCE. Very often, natural attractions are named in a hyperbolic way. Words such as golden, heaven, or an array of precious stones are there to pepper the imagination. However, in the case of the Emerald Pool, it is as descriptive as you can get. The water you will find inside the naturally sunken pools varies from sapphire blue to emerald green, due to its chemical compositions.

When you arrive at the parking lot at the entrance, don't get discouraged by the amount of food stalls and people, especially on weekends and festivals. Once you pay the entrance fee (200 Baht



GPS Location
N7° 55.287'
E99° 15.574'

SOUTH

SIGHTSEEING/RELAXATION

Bird watching 🦋 Suitable for family ❖

for an adult, half price for a child), the 800 m path through the forest will lead you to the first and the most popular pool--the eponymous Emerald Pool. Please note that food and tissue paper are not allowed inside the compound. A wise management decision, since this attraction is relatively clean and well-kept compared to most.

After working up a sweat from the 800 m walk, dipping into the Emerald Pool (25 m in diameter and 2 m deep) suddenly seems like a good idea. Since the water in this terrain comes seeping from under the ground and is heated by magma, the temperature of the water is about 30-50°C. You can follow the 500 m elevated wooden trail cutting through the tropical rain forest and primary forest to the Blue Pool, the spot where the crystal clear water originates from.

Birdwatchers' Dream

The Emerald Pool compound is under the supervision of the Khao Pra-Bang Kham Wildlife Sanctuary. What is extremely special about this Sanctuary is that it is the only area in Thailand that you might be able to spot, if you are phenomenally lucky, Gurney's Pitta (*Pitta gurneyi*). This species of bird is endemic to Thailand and Myanmar and was thought to be extinct until its rediscovery in 1986. One of the rarest birds on the planet, it is estimated that only 10-12 pairs exist in Thailand. Keep your eyes open for other species as well, since there are a number of bird spots scattered on the nature trails. You can get a copy of the map at the Information Centre at the entrance.

To exit the compound, we recommend that you embark on another longer trail which passes through Sa Kaeo, another pool with teal-coloured water. After the mild hustle and bustle at the Emerald Pool, a walk on the trail is a lovely antidote where you can bask in a meditative atmosphere before leaving the compound. ■



DISCOVER 📖 The small natural sunken basins filled with emerald green water are the main attraction. There are also short, easy nature trails cutting through the tropical rain forest. Here is the only place in Thailand the near-extinct birds Gurney's Pitta are found.

FEEL ❤️ The calm after getting out of busy Krabi. Since you disengage yourself from the crowd and follow the nature trails, the experience can be peaceful and even meditative.





How To Get There

Just after entering Phuket, head for Bang Rong Pier, not far from the international airport. Lots of local buses and taxis can take you there. Then get into a boat for Tha Len, Ko Yao Noi's harbour. The boat ride will take about 20 minutes. From there, you can also head for the bigger sister island: Ko Yao Yai.

CONTACT

Khun Praparn. Tha Kao Bay View.
☎08 3395 5885

Top : Viewing the bay from your hidden island's retreat.

Right : Khun Thanaphat is Ko Yao Noi's most famous birdwatcher.

Ko Yao Noi

A bastion of preservation

Phang-nga Province. Tired of Phuket's crowded beaches? Eager to refresh yourself and relax in a jungle environment? Ko Yao Noi, the smaller of a pair of islands in Phang-nga province, a twenty-minute boat ride from Phuket's Bang Rong Pier, is one of the best options in that part of Southern Thailand to get yourself reconciled with nature, wildlife, and the charm of a pretty unspoiled island community.

Not surprisingly, Ko Yao Noi holds the reputation for being a fierce bastion of environmentalism in the Phuket gulf. Though numerous of its youths, men, and women alike, migrate to work in hotels and resorts located in surrounding islets or coastlines, this green island has kept the charm of a Muslim fishermen community, held together by a strong will to remain different and, nevertheless, open to foreign visitors.



Thailand Tourism Awards

Suitable for family ❖ Bicycle rental. 🚲. Bird watching. 🌐 Internet access @

SOUTH NATURE

Our two-day stay there started with a long ride on Khun Praparn's motorcycle, starting from Tha Len Pier. Like many of his relatives, as most of the island's families are connected, Khun Praparn owns a jungle lodge located right by the beach, hidden in flush green trees, and he happens to be the chief of Ban Tha Khao village.

Sure, his understanding of English is limited, and one cannot expect to have a long conversation with him or his wife, whose delicious cooking by their beach canteen will fill your stomach with a smile, as you dip your feet in the sand or seawater. But be patient: long-term foreign friends residing in Ko Yao Noi are always waiting to be found.

Venturing in the Island's Forests and Rubber Plantations.

There are two options when deciding to board a fishing boat for Ko Yao Noi: the relaxing one, or the adventurous one.

For those eager to relax, I would suggest choosing one of the many forest bungalows, where monkeys will watch you eating, laughing, chatting, or sharing more intimacy. There, you'll be watching the emerald sea and the constant moves of local boats heading day and night for Ko Phi Phi or Krabi. Swimming will make your day, though Ko Yao Noi does not offer stunning beaches able to compete with those of the most luxury resorts nearby.

Your life in Ko Yao Noi will be very different if you choose the more adventurous option, consisting of hiring either a mountainbike or a motorcycle to venture in the island's forests and rubber plantations. A good idea would be to venture around with Khun Thanapat and convince him to lend you binoculars, spending the day to observe birds and local wildlife. Thanks to the local community efforts, nature has been well preserved on the island. So don't hesitate to bring one or two good books on the country's Southern history, as people here are Muslim of Malay descent. Ko Yao Noi, wild and quiet in the meantime, is simply an ideal retreat. ■



DISCOVER

Close to Phuket, a Robinson Crusoe experience! No wonder Scandinavian tourists, used to nature in their own countries, have made Ko Yao Noi a favorite destination. Clearly, a wonderful hideaway.

FEEL

The local community, unspoiled by mass tourism, is very welcoming and eager to take you on fishing trips or birdwatching. You'll feel at home in Ko Yao Noi.

SHARE

Sit and share a drink with Khun Thanaphat (photo above), one of Thailand's most experienced birdwatchers, who has gone from Chiang Mai to Satun to make foreigners' experience his passion.



Dusk on Ao Khao Khwai "Buffalo Bay" can exude a sense of other worldliness.

How To Get There

From Ranong town, follow the signs "Ko Phayam Pier" on Highway 4080. The Pier is located about 9 km from the town centre in a small alley so keep your eye on the signs. There are daily buses leaving from Bangkok to Ranong. The closest airport and train station is in Surat Thani, about 2 hours drive from Ranong Province.

Right (Top to bottom):
Cashew nut (Drawing)
is one of the island's
major income sources.

Beaches of Ko Phayam
are endowed with fine,
densely packed sand.

Ko Phayam

The rough diamond of the Andaman

RANONG PROVINCE. The sight of this great bird never fails to make us overjoyed. While we were going about sightseeing (done only on bike or motorbike as the roads on this island were not built for anything bigger than those), a pair of Hornbills nonchalantly glided by in front of us. You cannot get any closer to nature than that.

Ko Phayam is the second largest island of Ranong, inhabited by approximately 160 families of fishermen and farmers. The latter have put Phayam on the Thai agricultural map, producing arguably the best cashew nuts in the country. The sight of red and yellow cashew fruits hanging heavy on the trees all over the island is best witnessed during January and February, when their fruity aroma intersperses among the air.



SOUTH RELAXATION

WiFi @ Equipment rental 📶 English spoken ☺

There are no electrical grids on this island and almost every house is powered by generator and solar panel. Most resorts will have electricity available only at certain hours, but we sheepishly admit that the absence of the electric posts somehow enhances the landscape of the island. We recommend that you rent a bicycle (available at shops by the main pier or at resorts) and pedal your way around the island. The orchards are to be relished at a slow pace, and you might be able to stop by and talk to the villagers who are cracking cashew nuts. The better part of the roads are cemented and lined with cashew and rubber trees.



DISCOVER

Ko Phayam used to be renowned for the finest cashew nuts it produced. Today it is known as one of few islands that still remain unswept-over by mass tourism on the Andaman Sea. Some hidden corners welcome those seeking ultimate hideaways.

FEEL ❤️ The sense of adventure and remoteness when opting for thatched-roof, bamboo bungalows in the middle of nowhere.



Biking to the Most Beautiful Beach

If your stamina allows, we suggest you ride up to Ao Kwang-Pip at the northern tip of the island. The route is still made up of dirt roads, but cuts into a less-trodden area. Once arriving, you will find the most beautiful and least visited beach on island. The beach is spotless, with soft white sand, and the tide is pretty stable so you can swim all day long. Unfortunately, this haven is inaccessible by road during the rainy season. Another two beaches that visitors love are Ao Khao Khwai (Buffalo Beach) and Ao Yai. These two stretches of fine beach are perfect for relaxation, with an array of accommodation so well-hidden among the trees that you have to look hard to spot them from the beach. Another asset Ko Phayam is blessed with is its coral reef. It may be overshadowed by the wealth of the nearby Surin Archipelago, but Ko Phayam has something to offer, too. There are many spots on the island where you can snorkel and see a myriad of hard corals. Surprisingly, there is a considerable amount of sea anemones as well. The best time to snorkel is in November when the visibility is the highest. If you want to explore further, there are boat trips to nearby islets and you will find dive shops here offering day-trips to Mu Ko Surin National Park. ■



Surin and Similan Archipelagos are blessed with numerous rocks and pinnacles that are home and feeding grounds to the gargantuan Whale Shark.

How To Get There

The most convenient base for exploring Mu Ko Similan and Mu Ko Surin National Parks is Khao Lak, the hub of dive centres which also offers a wide range of accommodation. There are buses leaving from Bangkok for Khao Lak daily. The journey takes about 12 hours. The nearest airport is in Phuket, about 2 hours bus ride away.

Right: Spotting a Manta Ray is every diver's dream souvenir here.

Similan & Surin Archipelagos

A wealth of marine life

PHANG-NGA PROVINCE. One of the most entertaining activities after you finish your sessions of diving in these archipelagos is when you open your tropical reef and fish guides. Chances are, you will have seen at least a fish on any given page. Sometimes you have seen so many that recording them in your log book becomes an effort.

And not just the tiny ones swimming in a dazzling huge school, those solitary giants also grace the Archipelagos with their frequent presence. Dive masters can almost guarantee that, if you come in the right season, you will see Manta Rays flying by in Ko Bon (Surin); or at Richelieu Rock, the Whale Shark will glide feeding itself with plankton. Here you will see quite a number of sea turtles because Huyong Beach in Similan (conserved area, not open to diving) is where the shelled creatures lay their eggs, or look on the sandy bottom here if you want to see leopard sharks.



SOUTH DIVING

WiFi @ Scuba and snorkel gears rental ♦ English spoken ☺

You will find a lot of fellow divers who will tell you this is not their first dive here. Similan and Surin are capable of surprising the most experienced divers and their wealth of marine life is almost inexhaustible (that is, if properly taken care of). The diversity of creatures are world-renowned and more than 75% of the coral reefs of Thai seas can be found here. This is why we recommend a 'liveaboard' trip where you will stay on a boat for three or more days and do nothing but dive instead of a day trip. It is less tiring, wastes less fuel, and you will get to experience the marine treasure to the fullest. It is true that all the dive shops in Khao Lak can put you on a boat, but we recommend you support the ones that adhere strictly to good environmental policy. You can look them up at the Green Fins Thailand website: www.greenfins-thailand.org.

Beautiful at All Levels

Non-divers can also relish these underwater treasure troves. The large shallow water area combined with crystalline water at Mu Ko Surin National Park makes it the best spot in Thailand to snorkel. There are dive shops in Khao Lak and Khura Buri that organise a day-trip snorkel tour. But you can also spend a night in Mu Ko Surin National Park accommodation and use the daily snorkel trip service offered by the Park.

Most trips around Similan will stop on Ko Miang (The eighth island of the archipelago) where the Park headquarters is located. Here you will see the Sail Rock, the logo of the Archipelago. It is a small climb to get to the base of this fantastically shaped boulder where you can enjoy an unhindered panoramic view of sunset. A nice spot to recollect what wonderful sights you have seen under the ocean lying in front of you.

Please note that the Archipelagos are closed yearly from mid-May to mid-November due to the monsoon and to allow the marine ecosystem to rejuvenate itself. ■



DISCOVER 📖 Whenever you look at the list of the world's best dive sites, Similan and Surin Archipelagos invariably appear among the top ten. Here you have a very fat chance of spotting creatures dreamt of by every diver, the majestic Manta Ray, the gentle giant Whale Shark, and the curious sea turtles.

FEEL ❤️ Both Marine National Parks are well managed in terms of visitor reception, with reasonably comfortable accommodation and well-stocked canteens. Mu Ko Surin NP is well-known for its environmental practices. **SHARE** 💎 Many dive centres in Khao Lak organise volunteer reef check or garbage picking dives. Ask around for more information.



SOUTH NATURE/HISTORY

Internet booking Mountain bike rental Suitable for family

forested hills. The hill behind the Park Headquarters, To Bu Cliff, is the best spot to watch the sunset. The trail to the box seat takes about 20 minutes with well-made steps and chances to spot Dusky Langurs.

Phante Malaka is just one among many beaches the island has to offer. The sand is so fine and densely packed that you hardly leave footprints on it. Most of the accommodation are here, so if you wish for a more secluded spot, try staying at Molae Gulf.

Tarutao may not rival other islands in the Park in terms of snorkeling and diving since it is closer to the mainland and the sea is not as clear. However, there are other diverse activities that more than make up for the lack.

Never a Minute of Dullness

There are a number of nature trails and waterfalls you can visit. You can also rent a mountain bike from the Visitor Centre and pedal your way to the Talo Wao Gulf on the other side of the island where the remnants of buildings from the penitentiary days still stand testimonial on the 500 m historical trail. The biking route, can be quite demanding at some points with a steep climb. The distance is 12 km from the Park Headquarters, and along the way you will see mostly local vegetation and a lot of monkeys. This might sound monotonous but the scenery makes you forget that you are on an island, so when you see the sea again, it is really a pleasant surprise.

You can also kayak and explore the Crocodile Cave on Ruesi Gulf. You need to charter a boat to the cave's entrance and the ride itself is already worth it. The waterway is lined with abundant mangroves, their bright green leaves reflecting on the water. The Cave itself is not very impressive, with its modest 200 m passage covered in complete darkness. Inside the cave you will see bats and some stalactites and stalagmites. The mildly claustrophobic atmosphere only makes it difficult to shake off the story that this is where the last crocodiles of Tarutao were found. ■



DISCOVER Tarutao has an interesting history. It was a penal colony both for common and political prisoners during the 30's and 40's. It was also the den of pirates who once plagued the Malacca Strait.

FEEL The island is a rustic but pleasant destination. It is reasonably comfortable, with electricity available from 6 pm. to midnight. But who needs a fan when you can get a constant sea breeze.

SHARE Spend some moments with the Park Rangers. They are doing a good job on keeping the accommodation clean and love to tell of their latest adventures with poachers.

HOW TO GET THERE

Boats to Tarutao leave from Pak Bara Pier. Take Highway 4052 from La-ngu, the nearest town to the Pier. You can also take local orange taxis (Song Thaeo) which leave from the town centre frequently.

CONTACT

Tarutao National Park
☎ 0 7478 3485,
0 7478 3597

Top: Ao Talo-Wao is the historic site testimonial to the gruesome episode of Tarutao's penal days.

Right: The mangrove of Crocodile Cave is best experienced by kayak.

Tarutao Island

A perfect combination of sea and forest

SATUN PROVINCE. There is something ironic about Ko Tarutao. This insular refuge where people want to escape to was once the place people wanted to escape from.

Tarutao is the fifth largest island of Thailand and was chosen as a penal colony because of the raging storms during the monsoon season, and its saltwater crocodiles, and shark-infested sea. Nowadays, the fearsome creatures have dwindled and the only part of the crocodile you will see is its skull in the Information Centre. However, the monsoon still operates and that is why the Tarutao National Park is closed during 15 May to 15 November annually.

The island is a perfect combination of sea and forest. Once you set foot inside the Park area, on your right is the long stretch of fine, white sandy Phante Malaka Beach and on your left is the lush



"HOMESTAY MAKES US PROUD

Less than 5 km before the hustle and bustle of Ao Nang Beach, Ban Na Tin community is waiting to welcome visitors who are curious and eager to experience the lifestyle of local Thai Muslims. The leader of the community homestay, Khun Bancha, told us how this active community-based tourism group came to be.

"Our homestay group was founded in 2001. The whole thing began because we wanted to solve the social problems in our village. We live near a very touristic area. Inevitably, we could not avoid being exposed to external culture that might disrupt our traditional way of life. Since mass tourism had arrived in this area in 1994, villagers started to abandon their village and looked for jobs outside for better income. Those who used to tend became kitchen-children. We wanted business so they the community.



to their rubber plantation
maids in resorts and
waited in restaurants.
to create an alternative
wouldn't have to leave

Tourism as a solution

The problems started to be even more discernible in 1998. The divorce rate had increased among the families whose members worked in Ao Nang. Some teenagers became drug addicts. A lot of female teens became pregnant and single mothers.

Eventually eight of the then community leaders sat together and discussed the problems. We figured that, as a solution, we should try to draw tourists from Ao Nang here, so villagers wouldn't have to go out and expose themselves to those problems. Setting up a homestay seemed to be a good option.

But the path wasn't smooth. None of us had any idea what a homestay was.

To meet him

Contact

Bancha Kwaenglee
Head of Ban Na Tin Homestay
08 1968 8532 0 7563 7390
krabihomestay@hotmail.com

OF OUR WAY OF LIFE."

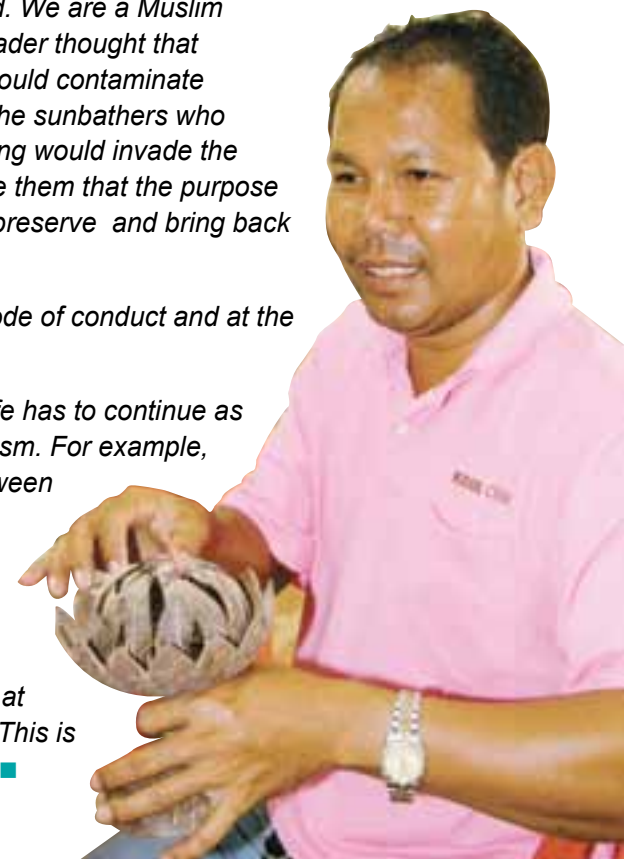


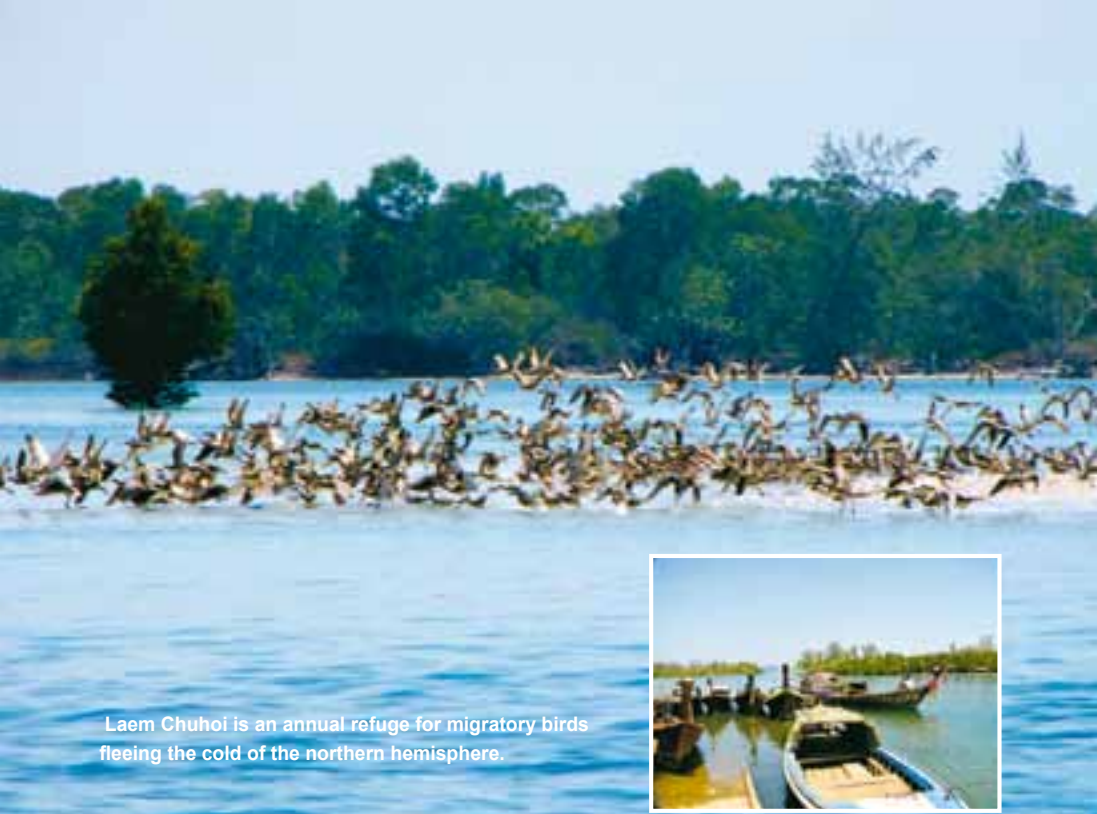
We only knew that it meant letting guests stay with villagers. So we went to model homestay communities in other provinces to learn about the management.

Then another problem occurred. We are a Muslim community and our religious leader thought that inviting outsiders to stay here could contaminate religious life. They feared that the sunbathers who were scantily dressed in Ao Nang would invade the community. We had to convince them that the purpose of the homestay was in fact to preserve and bring back our tradition and lifestyle.

We would get to set our own code of conduct and at the same time screen visitors.

We are really careful that our life has to continue as normal and unchanged by tourism. For example, we have an understanding between members that we will receive guests only three days a week; otherwise, we will have to focus too much on hosting instead of following our own routine. If you have to wake up at three to tap rubber trees, do it. This is what the visitors come to see." ■





Laem Chuhoi is an annual refuge for migratory birds fleeing the cold of the northern hemisphere.

HOW TO GET THERE

Take a van to Hat Yao Pier from Tha Klang Road in Trang Town (N07° 33.536', E099° 36.174'), leaving from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Inform the ticket seller of your destination. The boats at the pier run until about 4 p.m.

Inner Top: The main pier of Libong receives both visitors and Libong dwellers who travel from mainland Trang.

Drawing: Dugong haven is an evidence of the island's ecological richness.

Ko Libong Swimming with the Dugongs

TRANG PROVINCE. Everywhere you cast your glance in Trang town, you are likely to see a depiction of a dugong. This gentle marine mammal, also known endearingly as a seacow and mistaken as a mermaid, is the symbol of the province. To spot a living one, you need to cross to Ko Libong, one of the very few islands still endowed with sea grass, the staple diet of dugongs.

Not that there are a lot left. The latest survey gave a 129 head count. Dugong flesh is considered a delicacy to many seamen, its teeth are believed to bring good luck, and its 'tear' is sought after as a love potion. Sightings depend much on luck, but fortunately for dugong enthusiasts and researchers, the animals tend to cluster around the area, between Ao Pan Yang and Na Ban, where sea grass is most abundant. Every resort on Libong offers a dugong spotting boat rides. The vessel stops the engine, anchors



GPS Location
Hat Yao Pier
N7° 18.666'
E99° 24.091'

Kayak and diving equipment rental ♦ English spoken ☺ Suitable for family ❖

SOUTH NATURE/CULTURE

in the aforementioned area, and hopeful passengers sweep their glance over the water for the creatures to surface for air. Sometimes sea turtles and dolphins make surprise appearances, too. Another more environmentally-friendly way to observe dugongs is by climbing the 150 m Batu Pute Hill.

Ko Libong is also renowned as a hub for migratory birds from Siberia. The non-hunting area of Laem Chuhoi is where the birds socialise. A boat trip there often makes a short stopover at Hin Tok, a small compound of half-submerged trees where you may see branches covered with perching birds.

A Glimpse of Local Colour

The island is home to a vibrant Muslim community, which makes Libong a special holiday destination. While you are on your 9 km ride from the main pier to the resorts

on the west side of the island, you will see a lively community centred around mosques and a school alternating with orderly rows of rubber trees. The best way to explore the community and also get deep into the nature is by bike. Libong Nature Beach Resort offers a variety of eco-friendly activities and is the only place where a biking tour is organized. You can also mingle with the locals and see where that marvellously fresh squid you had for lunch came from at Libong Homestay.

If you are not content with just sunbathing peacefully on the beach (the only shortcoming is that you might have seen cleaner beaches), you can always join a snorkelling trip to nearby Ko Lao Liang, and Ko Takiang, islands where swallow nests are unfortunately collected in their caves and hard coral reefs are found underwater. Scuba diving trips can also be arranged at Libong Beach Resort. The resorts are closed during the monsoon season starting mid-May. ■



DISCOVER ☞ This is the only place in Thailand where you will have a chance to spot the endangered dugong (Dugong dugon), the mammal that has become the mascot of Trang Province. Here is also a good spot to observe migratory birds from Siberia.

FEEL ♥ What is refreshing about Ko Libong is that its dwellers do not live on tourism. There is a big Muslim community whose main revenue comes from fishery and rubber plantations. Don't hesitate to opt for a local homestay.



The crystal clear water of Ko Rok, one of islets in Ko Ngai archipelago.

HOW TO GET THERE

From Trang town, take Highway 4046 and then 4162 for 38 km. At the beachfront junction, turn right. The pier is about 1 km away.

You can also take a van from Tha Klang Road in Trang town (N07° 33.536', E099° 36.174'). It leaves from 7 a.m. Early ride advised as boats usually stop running around 10 a.m.

Right (Top to Bottom): Swallows build their nest on the cliff of Ko Ma.

Snorkelling is popular among visitors besides lazing on the pristine beaches.

Ko Ngai Like a natural bathtub

TRANG PROVINCE. The island is more easily accessible from Trang and perfect for island-hoppers who enjoy taking things at leisurely pace and for those who enjoy lazing on the white powdery sand. The sea of this archipelago contains various shades of blue and dipping in its clear, calm water feels like being in a giant bathtub.

Timing is the key, though. The depiction above is only available when you plan your holiday correctly. The lure of these islands is so great that it draws tourists by the thousands on a bad day. Avoid weekends and Thai public holidays at all costs, and we strongly recommend against buying a hectic one-day trip tour.

Ko Ngai (sometimes pronounced Ko Hai), is the best base for island hopping due to its greater number of accommodation.



SOUTH NATURE/RELAXATION

Wifi @ Snorkel, scuba gear, kayak rental ♣ English spoken ☺

On its pristine beach, you will face Ko Chueak and Ko Ma, the nearest snorkelling sites. And on a clear day, the sharp contrast between the immaculately white sand and the blue ocean is simply breathtaking.

Every resort here offers snorkelling trips to the two aforementioned islands. However, the underwater landscape might not be as impressive as the view above the water. You will see extensive patches of Staghorn coral and a bit of soft corals at Ko Ma. Fish are aplenty although with little diversity. The boat trip will invariably take you to Emerald Cave which gains its name from the emerald green water at the entrance (look beneath the surface and you might spot a large school of fish swimming by). After swimming through a 80 m dark passage, you will find yourself on a tiny beach enclosed in a forested limestone cliff and an open sky overhead.

You May Kiss the Bride Underwater.

You can also choose to go an extra mile to Ko Kradan, arguably the most beautiful island of the Trang sea. It is the site where underwater weddings organized by TAT take place on Valentine's Day every year. The island is blessed with a stretch of fine white sand on the east side and coral reef in the northeastern waters.

If suddenly you miss your share of green while on Ko Ngai, there is a 30-minute trail cutting through rubber tree and coconut groves. The entrance of the trail is hidden behind Thanya Resort. The trail will take you to the west of the island which is quite isolated with only one resort. Be warned that the trail can be steep at some points and it is advisable to bring along mosquito repellent. Our final recommendation: during sunset when there is still light, bring your beach book and lay down next to the trees on the beach. Chances are you will see hornbills flying by and perching in pairs. A blissful way to end the day. ■



DISCOVER 📖 Ko Ngai is a great base for hopping among the islets of Trang Sea. Enjoy swimming and sunbathing. You may also have a very good chance of spotting hornbills.

FEEL ❤️ Invest and choose a relatively 'fancier' accommodation, since it can alter your experience considerably. Some resorts are very aesthetically pleasing and wisely adopt local resources as building materials.





SOUTH ADVENTURE

Spa 🌿 Hiking 🏞️ Bird watching 🦋

When you've had enough of the heat, cross the wooden bridge to the edge of the forest, where you can cool off in a crystal clear mineral pool while taking in the vibrant surroundings. Here, under the canopy of colossal trees, you can enjoy the shade as you marvel at the flowers, mosses and mushrooms that thrive in the damp environment. The rich greens and browns of the trees also provide a perfect backdrop for viewing the fluttering birds and butterflies that call these branches home. Or, veer to the right and climb the stairs to a huge golden Buddha statue that contrasts spectacularly with the velvety green background. From this vantage point, you have a perfect view of the hot springs and the gushing milky stream below.

DISCOVER 🔍

Tucked away in lush green mountains, Ranong's mineral-rich hot springs offer relaxation and health benefits. But frequent rains here also mean that the surrounding forests are bursting with life and color.

FEEL ❤️

Relaxation is only the first step. Then come the rejuvenation and the pleasure of Thai Wellness. Remember that Earth, Water, Wind and Fire are the four basic elements of our body...And that for the Thais, the soul and spirits reside within us.

SHARE 📢

Ranong's Hot Springs are not a destination to visit solo. Bathing here is far more fun with friends or family. And whether you're a hiker, biker or spa enthusiast, you'll find without difficulty a green way to spend your days.

Those more curious and discerning are advised to board a local bus and to make the most of pristine pools hidden in the nearby rainforests. Bathing there, like in Bo Nam Ron of Pak Phu village - 12 km from Khao Sok National Park - takes place often after 5p.m., in the company of locals who have, craftily, arranged sandbags to filter out scum from the water flowing in.

Back in Ranong, if all that relaxation has whetted your appetite, stop into



one of the area's restaurants to enjoy the local specialties - soft shell and blue crab fresh from the Andaman Sea. ■

HOW TO GET THERE

From Ranong town, take a taxi or motorbike 2 kilometres east to Raksawarin Park.

CONTACT

www.tourismthailand.org or dial 1672

Raksawarin Hot Springs Bathing in healthful minerals

RANONG PROVINCE. On a rainy day in Ranong town, the mountaintops disappear into clouds of ethereal mist. It may seem like your typical rural Thai town, but just 2 km to the east is a natural haven. Here, in Raksawarin Park, hot springs gush 65°C mineral water to the surface year round.

There are three separate pools in which to enjoy the healthful minerals contained in the spring water- the Mother Pool, the Father Pool, and the Child Pool. As you submerge yourself, note the lushness of the emerald green mountains, which is greatly amplified by the cool misty rains that are present 8 months of the year. Wat Tapo tharam, a small temple dedicated to the spirit of the hot spring, also offers hot and cold mineral showers for a small donation. For those in search of a spa experience, visit the Raksawarin Park Arboretum, a private health club that offers a variety of treatments.

Top: Mineral deposits at the base of a spring.

Center: Guests enjoy a relaxing dip in the Mother and Father pools.

"WE WANTED A SOUVENIR TO

SYMBOLISE OUR PROVINCE."

Khru Suphap (khru means teacher and is often used to show reverence for an elderly artisan) greeted us while we were browsing souvenirs which emitted a soothing faint tangy scent in the shop front. He invited us behind the outdoor wood shed where he could show us how to carve a dugong from a block of Theptharo wood and told us the story behind the popular memorabilia from Trang.

I founded the woodcarving group here in Huai Yot district in 1999. The idea was that since we lived so near well-known Khao Kop Cave, souvenirs should be a good source of extra income for the locals. In the North, they carve elephants, similarly we decided to carve dugong which can be found only in Trang. Theptharo wood has a long-lasting soothing scent and is found mostly in this district and in Krabi province. It is also believed to be an auspicious wood where wood guardian angels live. If you put this wood inside your house, no evil will dare enter.

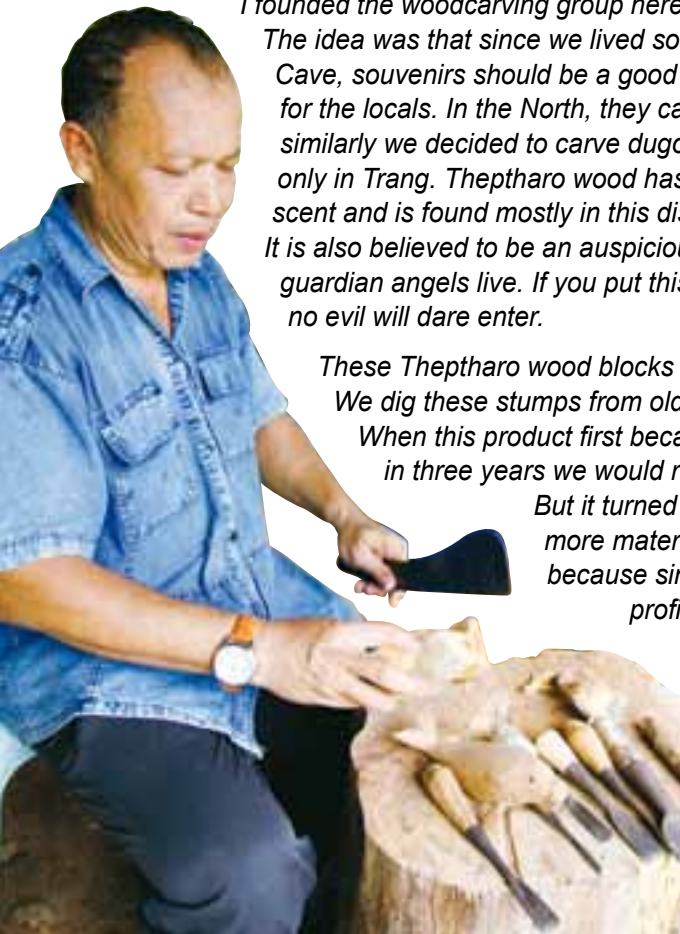
These Theptharo wood blocks here are from dead trees.

We dig these stumps from old rubber plantations.

When this product first became popular, I thought that in three years we would run out of the raw materials.

But it turned out that now we're getting more material, even more than before, because since our group has become profitable, villagers got the

idea to look for Theptharo wood in their orchard to supply us and make extra cash.



Not every member works with woodcarving.

When wood blocks are obtained, we select and decide which part will become dugongs, which will be carved into vases and other souvenirs. The most popular model is the dugong. We also carve 'Nok Khum', the bird believed to keep you from harm. (Note: Khum in Thai means to protect)

We don't throw away wood shavings and wood chips. They can be bagged, put inside the wardrobe or boiled with water to help heal diarrhea. Oil extracted from the wood is good for curing itchiness and insect stings.

This group helps its members earn extra income when they are not tending to their rubber plantations. Some of them help with marketing the products or tending to the booth at trade fairs, so they learn about the business. Also, a lot of members are youths and this helps them spend their time constructively.

I myself teach woodcarving and often invite craftsmen from the North to teach us more of their beloved techniques. I am a teacher, and teach local art and craft at the nearby school." ■



To meet them

Contact

Khru Suphap Phollakham
The Head of Theptharo Wooden Craft Group
www.thaitambon.com/TR/teptaro.htm
0 7523 3082
You can watch Theptharo woodcarving demonstrations at their shop in Khao Kop, Huai Yot District (N07° 48.057', E99° 34.382')





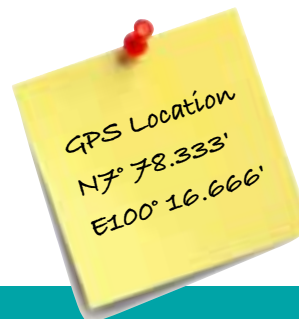
Moo ko Angthong, Surat Thani

How To Get There

It's best to catch a train or bus from Bangkok (Southbound) or Hat Yai (Northbound) and stop at Phatthalung. From there, hop in a local bus or a collective taxi to Khuan Khanun district and Thale Noi lagoon. Distance from Phatthalung is 32 km.

CONTACT

Royal Forestry Department
0 7468 5230 (in Thai)



SOUTH WILDLIFE

Handicrafts 🌿 Local guides 📍

Thale Noi

Bird watcher's paradise

PHATTHALUNG PROVINCE: The Waterfowl Reserve at Thale Noi is the largest of its kind in Thailand, covering 450 km² of wetland territory in southern Phatthalung province. The Reserve is a designated IUCN Ramsar wetland site and has become an important national wildlife study centre, where more than 187 species of birds can be found.

Some live here throughout the year and some migrate only in winter from October to March when the population density is at its highest. The low season is June-September, which is the nesting period. Species that are prevalent here are those of the heron and stork family, rails, such as, white-browed crane, white-breasted waterhen or the bronze-winged jacana. Guide services by the forestry rangers or volunteers from the Thale Noi community are available (200 Baht per person). Kayaking through the water lily covered lagoon in long tail boats, you would be signing up for a truly unique "green" experience.

After having been named one of the best-preserved wetland sites prone to ecotourism development, the lagoon is slowly coming into the loop as a secondary excursion for visitors to Khao Sok National Park or Phang-nga Bay. Thale Noi belongs to the four freshwater to brackish lakes - "Thale Sap" in Thai - located along the coast of the southeastern part of the peninsula, north of Songkhla city.

Another bird refuge is the Khu Khut Sanctuary located 35 km northwest of the Prince of Songkhla University, whose department for the study of forestry and wildlife is quite active and vibrant. All the inner lakes of Thailand's deep South are also high on the list for fishing amateurs, the advantage being the availability of rather cheap and comfortable accommodation in the form of nearby bungalows or guesthouses. ■



DISCOVER 🔍

Bird watching could not take place here if nature had not been so generous. This area of the sea looks like a giant pond, covered with assorted flora such as, water lily. A delight for nature photographers.

FEEL ❤️ The joy of kayaking on the lagoon may be short-lived if you experience - like we did - painful sunstroke. So be careful.

SHARE 💎 Experience the pleasure of mixing with local nature lovers, most of them being avid readers of wildlife magazines such as "Sarakadee". An occasion to befriend local activists.

Top: Great Hornbill.
Many of Thale Noi's birds are featured in "Thailand's Traveller Wildlife Guide" (www.arisbooks.com)

Covered with water lily and bulrush, Thale Noi lagoon is a unique bird shelter.



How To Get There

Ban Li Let is close to Surat Thani. Liaison by bus, plane and train available from Bangkok. Once in Surat, head for Phunphin district. The community is now quite well known, although a bit difficult to find if you drive on your own.

Contact

Community leader is Prasert Chunjukorn. He can be contacted through www.teata.or.th.
Khun Ae: 08 5880 9912



Thailand Tourism Awards

SOUTH COMMUNITY

Homestay 🏠 English spoken ☺ Fishing 🎣

Ban Li Let An ecotourism model

SURAT THANI PROVINCE. Ban Li Let is now much more than a village name, on the outskirts of Surat Thani. Thanks to the efforts of the locals, the CBT network, and Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA), has become a model for ecotourism development and homestay management in southern Thailand.

One of the most well known “green destinations” in this part of the country, alongside Ko Yao Noi or Ban Khiriwong, Ban Li Let has won several awards and a recognition as a “nature learning centre” from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Their website offers a thorough story on this community at: www.tatnews.org/emagazine/4671.asp.

We reached Ban Li Let in the evening, close to sunset, and were welcomed by several young villagers volunteering to guide tourists around. They spoke reasonably good English, which made a great difference.

Stay at one of the homestays along the river where, for around 100 Baht, you'll be given a room and most probably accommodated for dinner. The real experience will start early the next day when, after boarding a boat, you'll be taken inside the mangrove forest where plants and aquatic life seem undisturbed. Villagers here are involved in clearing areas and re-planting, and while on the boat, you'll see groves of trees that have grown to several metres in only four years. The current state of the mangrove forest stands in stark contrast with year 2000 when, realizing that “the water had turned black and we had no place to bathe”, Khun Prasert led a successful community rebellion against pollution and the destructive path of local enterprises, like industrially managed shrimp farms. ■

Right: Ban Li Let has become a model for sustainable tourism.

Left: From fruit growing to fishing, experience this community's life.



DISCOVER 📺 Spending a day or two in Ban Li Let means you will learn a lot about Thailand's mangrove forests.

Classes are also available in kapi (shrimp paste) production, tree planting, crafting nipa roofing, or working on a fishing boat, day or night.

FEEL ❤️ Sit down for a while and listen to Khun Prasert, Ban Li Let's community leader. If you are lucky enough to meet him, remember what he told us: “As more foreign visitors come to enjoy homestays in our mangrove forest, our villagers will better understand the need to clean and protect this crucial natural resource”.



SOUTH COMMUNITY / TRADITIONS

Homestay 🏠 Swimming 🏊 Fishing 🎣

Ko Phra Thong Surviving the giant wave

PHANG NGA PROVINCE. "On the horizon we see them, their flotilla of small hand-built boats, called kabang, like a mirage beneath the setting sun", started the article published in National Geographic in April 2005. "They are wary of strangers: At our approach they split up and scatter. We close in on one boat, and I call out reassuring words in their language. The boat slows and finally stops, rolling on the swell in heavy silence. I jump aboard, a privileged trespasser and rare witness to another world."

That world belongs to the Moken, a nomadic sea culture of Austronesian people who likely migrated from southern China some 4,000 years ago, and, moving through Malaysia, eventually split off from other migrant groups in the late 17th century. Their home is the Mergui Archipelago, some 800 islands scattered along 250 miles (400 km) of the Andaman Sea, off Myanmar (formerly Burma).

"The Moken are born, live, and die on their boats, and the umbilical cords of their children plunge into the sea", goes an epic of the Moken. Indeed: As divers and beachcombers the Moken take what they need each day fish, mollusks, and sandworms to eat; shells, sea snails, and oysters for barter with the mostly Malay and Chinese traders they encounter. They accumulate little and live on land only during the monsoons.

Much more could be written about the Mokens who inhabit Ko Phra Thong But the best option, before boarding a long tail boat in Khura Buri, is to open one of Jacques Ivanoff's books on those nomadic people often called Sea Gypsies. Now based in Bangkok, Ivanoff is one of the foremost experts on the Mokens and after the 2004 tsunami he was hired by the Swiss development aid agency to advise them on rehabilitating the devastated island. The results can be seen there, and are told in a book written afterwards. ■

Left: Aid has been pouring in to rebuild Ko Phra Thong's traditional villages.

Right: The area is largely flat, with expanses of inland savannah.



DISCOVER 🔍

A very good example of a community that was rebuilt after the Tsunami, notably thanks to Swiss assistance and the involvement of French ethnologist Jacques Ivanoff, one of the foremost specialists of the Mokens.

FEEL ❤️ As symbols of Southern Thailand's biological human diversity, the Moken's culture is a legacy of their old survivalist wisdom that foreign tourists can support. Don't go there if you are not ready to listen, watch, and be patient. Just try to make yourself as discreet as possible.

How To Get There

Best way to embark for a day or two in Ko Phrathong is to ask the locals at Kuraburi or Takua Pa main pier, about 100 km from Phuket along national road 4. The boat ride will take around one hour and will end on a pristine beach, where you'll have the chance to feel like a modern Robinson.

CONTACT

For diving amateurs:
www.kohphrathong.com



Foreign practitioners visiting the temple.

How To Get There

Wat Suan Mokkh is about 53 km north of Surat Thani city on Highway 41 linking the province to Bangkok. It is a 30 minute ride from Surat Thani airport. You can either travel by bus from Bangkok (bound for Surat Thani, Nakhon Si Thammarat, or Hat Yai) and ask to be dropped in front of the temple, or you can take the train to Chaiya Station and catch a local taxi for the last 6 km of your journey. The Hermitage is 1.5 km away from Suan Mokkh and on the opposite side of the road.

Contact

0 7743 1597
www.suanmokkh-idh.org
Khun.Reinhard@gmail.com

Right:
Suan Mokkh's garden

Wat Suan Mokkh Make an Inner Journey

SURAT THANI PROVINCE. For Thais, the late Buddhadasa Bikkhu is an icon of spiritual enlightenment. He is revered not only by devout Buddhists, but also by secularists and skeptics since his approach to Buddhism is purged of (regrettably rife) superstition, and is a rediscovery of the original essence of Buddhism.

He left behind a large body of Buddhist literature as a legacy, which is widely read and has been translated into many foreign languages.

Ajarn Buddhadasa founded the Suan Mokkh temple and retreat in 1932 to share his insight with people regardless of their cultural or religious backgrounds. His teaching focuses on detachment from self and mindfulness as a means of peaceful living, and the temple was designed to reflect these ideas. Once you leave the noisy highway behind and step inside the temple area, you will feel



SOUTH MEDITATION

English spoken ☺ Museum 🏛️ Guided tours 🗺️

the abrupt change as you are transported into a serene, peaceful world. The area is densely vegetated, almost like a forest, and the architecture is modest. Show respect by dressing politely and refrain from making noises (i.e. talking on your mobile phone).

Ten Days of Practice and Meditation

If you're seriously interested in making a deeper exploration into meditation, we suggest you enroll in the 10-day silence retreat at the International Dhamma Hermitage. The Hermitage was founded in 1989 as an extension of Suan Mokkh Temple. During the ten days, English-speaking instructors will teach you the theory and practice of meditation. You will also be taught basic yoga to help relieve the physical tension caused by sitting in a meditation position the whole day.



Registration takes place on the last day of each month (before 3 p.m.) and the course starts the next day. You have to be there in person to enroll, and it is not possible to book in advance. The retreat aims to strip you of unnecessary frills; therefore, you will live in the simplest conditions possible so you can concentrate on what is essential to life. Vegetarian meals are served twice a day and only before noon; reading and talking is prohibited; you will sleep on a straw mat without any mattress. The course costs 2,000 Baht, all included. It is important to check on the website given above for packing and code of conduct guidelines so you can decide whether you are ready for this eye-opening experience. ■

DISCOVER 📖

The personality and teachings of Ajarn Buddhadasa Bikkhu, one of Thailand's most revered monks and spiritual leaders, who passed away in 1993. His writings have been widely translated and can be found at Suan Mokkh Library, as well as on the Internet.

FEEL 💖

The Hermitage takes the retreat very seriously and expects the participants to do the same. Check with the website under the topic "Preparation", and be prepared to live and meditate for a few days in the forest, cutting yourself off from the noise and pressures of the outside world.

SHARE ✨

Buddhadasa Bikkhu's teachings emphasized very much the necessity of bringing people out of misery and social poverty. His "Handbook for Mankind" is available on www.buddhanet.net/budasa.htm.



How To Get There

First reach Nakhon Si Thammarat town, then take Highway 4016. Turn left into Highway 4015. At the Km 9, turn right and Ban Khiri Wong will be about 9 km away. There are daily local taxis leaving from town centre from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Contact

Ban Khiri Wong Homestay
0 7530 9010
Khun Keeta 08 6788 8718
www.kiriwonggroup.com



Thailand Tourism Awards



SOUTH CULTURE/ NATURE

Handicrafts ✿ Family ❖ English spoken ☺

Ban Khiri Wong

A community against deforestation

NAKHON SI THAMMARAT PROVINCE. On 22 November, 1988, the area around Khao Luang National Park was devastated by one of the worst natural disasters in recent Thai history. After weeks of torrential rains, mudslides claimed 700 lives and wiped out villages. This catastrophe prompted the logging ban act in the following year.

In Ban Khiri Wong, evidence of the disaster reminds us of what deforestation could bring. The damaged Khiri Wong Temple stands as a local memorial, and is one of the highlights of your visit to the village.

Today, Ban Khiri Wong is better known for its exemplary, award-winning management of community-based tourism. The secret of their success lies in the serene atmosphere amid the backdrop of the majestic Khao Luang (1,835 m), as well as the variety of activities that allow you to understand the local way of life.

Here, villagers make a living selling produce from their fruit orchards. Khiri Wong people have passed on from generation to generation the technique of 'Suan Somrom'—the practice of organically growing several kinds of fruits in the same plot: durian, mangosteen, coconut or banana trees.

As a part of the programme, guests can take a stroll among the aromatic fruit trees, swim in the cooling stream and waterfall, and will be taken to see demonstrations at several handicraft cooperatives. You will get see the making of batik and tie-dye cloths, herbal cosmetic products, and the weaving of jewellery from cords and natural materials; such as, dried fruit shells and river stones.

For the travellers interested in a botanical quest, try climbing to the top of Khao Luang mount, the highest peak of the South of Thailand. The trek to the top will take you three days. Contact the Homestay group for guide services. ■

Left top: The colorful produce grown here in Ban Khiri Wong
Left bottom: Kiriwong hand-woven products are dyed with organic natural colors

DISCOVER

The village is hailed as one of the pilots of community-based tourism and is committed to providing a culturally enriching experience for guests. The location at the base of Mount Khao Luang is also ideal for nature lovers.

FEEL

Ban Khiri Wong's recent history as a community devastated by floods that managed to rise again from the ashes. Their commitment to the protection of the natural environment is telling of Thailand's turn towards green tourism.

SHARE

If you plan to go with their homestay package, call in advance to check availability (you may have to join other guests). There is accommodation in the village, as well as around and inside Khao Luang National Park.



Mangrove forest, Krabi



For TAT regional office, please visit www.tourismthailand.org or dial the TAT tourist hotline 1672 from 8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. from anywhere in the country.

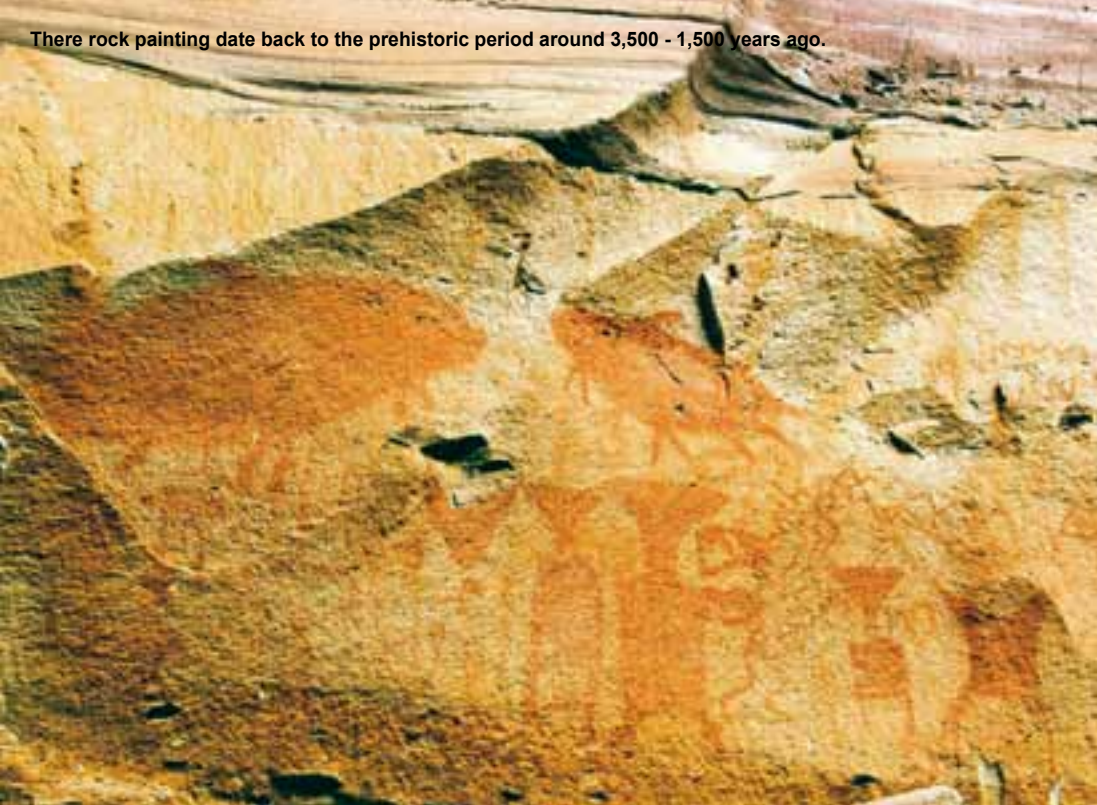
- ♦ PHA TAEM, UBON RATCHATHANI ♦ MO HIN KHAO, CHAIYAPHUM
- ♦ KHAO PHAENG MA, NAKHON RATCHASIMA ♦ SUAN PA HIMAWAN, LOEI
- ♦ CHIANG KHAN, LOEI ♦ KHMER TEMPLE TRAIL, BURI RAM
- ♦ GRAN MONTE VINEYARD, NAKHON RATCHASIMA ♦ BAN THA SAWANG, SURIN
- ♦ BAN DAN KWIAN, NAKHON RATCHASIMA ♦ WALAI RUKHAVEJ, MAHA SARAKHAM

NORTHEAST



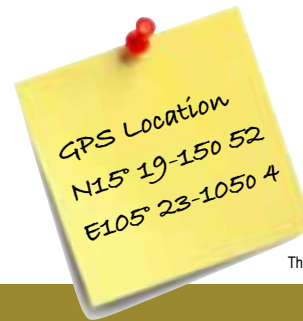
Prasat Hin Phimai, Nakhon Ratchasima

There rock painting date back to the prehistoric period around 3,500 - 1,500 years ago.



How To Get There

Head east from Ubon Ratchathani along Route 217 and 2222 to Khong Chiam district. Pha Taem National Park is located 80 kilometres from the provincial town. Then continue on the Route 2134 and turn right to 2112, for about 15 km.



Thailand Tourism Awards



NORTHEAST HISTORICAL SITE

Trekking. 走 Drinks and snacks 酒 Guide services ☺

Pha Taem Thailand's ancient footprints

UBON RATCHATHANI PROVINCE. This historical site in the easternmost part of the country is both a cultural attraction and a pleasant escape, especially for those enjoying a breathtaking views over the Mekong River's banks.

The three kilometers hike following the sandstone path that crisscross Pha Taem Mountain is fairly exhaustive in its odyssey of Thai cultural heritage. From the marked trail beneath the cliff, you'll have to get used to the tropical humidity, which will inevitably take its toll on your ascent. But don't give up when encountering the first group of foreign visitors sweating and taking a break: look at the Thai students ahead, who often visit the site in group tours. You'll find their smile and good humour revitalizing.

Up the trail, the focus of attention is rightly on the cliff face, whose ancient soil pigment paintings vividly depict the life led by the Mekong Basin's inhabitants some 3,000-4,000 years ago. These are divided into four categories: man and hands, objects, geometric patterns, and animals, the latter of which features looming representations of the behemoth Pla Buek, or Mekong giant catfish, as well as elephants, dogs, and deer.

Pha Taem National Park can also be a good starting point for a bicycle ride around the area. Located along Route 2112, you may experience wild adventures cycling up to Dong Na Tham and from there to Ban Pak La in the North. ■

Center: Pha Taem tourist center attracts numerous foreigners and Thai visitors.

Right: A glimpse of the mountain track leading to the paintings.



DISCOVER 📖 A glimpse of Southeast Asia's prehistoric past. Look above when hiking along Pha Taem cliff, and imagine being part of those ancient tribes living in caverns.

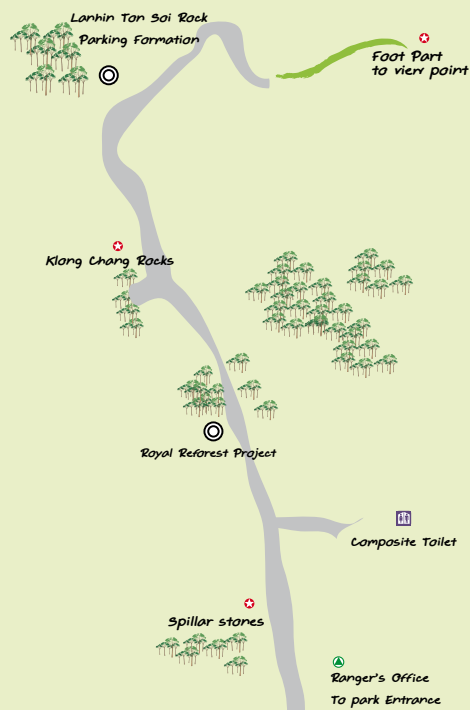
FEEL ♥ On the opposite side of the Mekong River lie the mountains of Lao PDR. Below lie the forest and the riverbanks, flushed with vegetation. Experience remoteness in your heart and soul.

SHARE 💎 Hopefully, you may be touring Pha Taem along with a group of tourists accommodated by an experienced guide. Catch the opportunity to follow them closely and listen to his presentation. Local volunteers will also be eager to help, but their English is pretty bad, unfortunately.





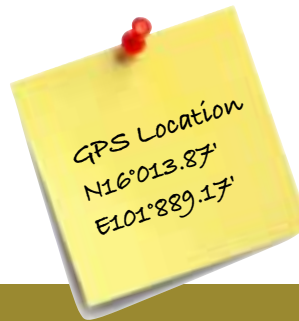
The five standing pillar stones peer over the surrounding landscape.



Right (Top to Bottom) :
From higher up,
another set of
rounded stones.
The view from the top
looking down upon
Chaiyaphum province.

HOW TO GET THERE

Mo Hin Kao stands in Chaiyaphum province, 360 km Northeast of Bangkok. Buses leave daily from Mo Chit terminal. From Chaiyaphum town, take Route 2051 Northeast approximately 6 km. Turn left at Route 2159 and continue on for 30 km to reach the Phu Laen Kha National Park entrance. From here, follow the signs to Mor Hin Khao, another 21 km.



NORTHEAST NATURE

Hiking 五 Camping 一 Suitable for family ❖

Mo Hin Khao A garden of rocks

CHAIYAPHUM PROVINCE. High in the mountains, looking down upon Chaiyaphum's sprawling farmlands and scattered towns, sits Mo Hin Khao, hidden away inside Phu Laen Kha National Park.

Once you begin your descent up the mountainside, the road becomes a treacherous one, made of red dirt and deeply riveted by heavy rains. On the way you'll pass through several small farming communities. These villages have been around since long before the area was declared a national park. If you want to try out the local products, stop at one of the many roadside stands.

As the trees become sparse, the first rocks begin to jut awkwardly from the ground. The first site at Mo Hin Khao is the five Standing Pillar Stones. These naturally formed megaliths rise nearly 10 m tall, and sit neatly in a semi-circle. According to local legend, paying respect to the stones will help you attain your life goals. Those stones represent greatness, honour, professional success, victory, and health.

Just past the Standing Pillar Stones sits the Mo Hin Khao campground, nestled between two rock sites. Those wishing to camp here are advised to bring their own tent and equipment. The campground is located just next to a ranger's station where you can view topographic maps of the national park.

Higher up the mountain are the Khlong Chang rocks, many of which feature interesting textures. While these formations may not be as tall as the Standing Pillars, their size is just as baffling. Continuing on, you'll see the Lan Hin Ton Sai formations, where giant trees have miraculously grown up through the rock, their roots winding intricately through tiny cracks. The road continues on towards the highest point of Mo Hin Khao, the perfect place to sit and take in the staggering views of the land below. ■



DISCOVER 二

The "Stonehenge of Thailand", a garden of rocks that rise inexplicably from the ground, is a natural wonder said to be over 175 million years old.

FEEL 一

A great place to get lost in Mo Hin Khao's giant rock formations and the panoramic views of Chaiyaphum province. In this remote location, no sounds can be heard but the chirping of birds and the gentle rustling of grass in the breeze.





A herd of gaur wandering in the forest



NORTHEAST NATURE

Wifi @ Family welcomed ❖ Equipment rental (binoculars) ⇄

contact the Khao Phaeng Ma Conservation Group (see our green voice on page 116-117) who will take you up with a guide and binoculars on a 4WD. You can also ask your resort to contact them for you. That way, you can enjoy the scenery while contributing to the conservation project. The trip costs 900 Baht and the car can carry about 10 passengers.

Be Equipped with Your Binoculars

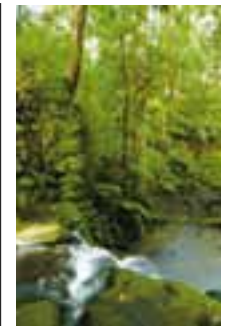
On top of the hill a life-size statue of a gaur stands in front of the Visitor Centre to welcome you. A 300-metre passage will then lead you to the observation post, where you will see two salt licks in the valley far below. Binoculars are a must, so make sure your guide brings some. Patience is the key. You may have to wait for a couple of hours to get a glimpse of the beasts, but it is undeniably worth the wait. Elephants can be spotted as well, if luck favours you.



Another way of getting closer to the animals is through trekking. You can combine that with the volunteer trip to add salt to the salt licks, which is organized every 3 months by the aforementioned Conservation Group. They

also offer other volunteer activities; such as, building weirs and tree-planting trips. However, you need to bring your own guide since they do not speak English. Drop by their office at the entrance to Khao Phaeng Ma to shop for T-shirts or hand-woven cotton clothes from local people to support the project.

Wang Nam Khiao district is also well known for its fresh agricultural produce. Along the Thai Samakkhi Road you will also find 'farmstay' accommodation where you can visit or stay amidst flower gardens and fruit plantations. ■



DISCOVER

This is the spot where gaurs are most abundant in Thailand. "Those bulls are often solitary. They stay during the day in open forests and venture into open grasslands areas during the night" (cf: Thailand Traveller's Wildlife Guide)

FEEL

Fresh and clean air is the selling point of this attraction, which is why it is getting more popular among city dwellers. In addition, you can join the Khao Phaeng Ma Conservation Group for their volunteer activities (see p.124).

HOW TO GET THERE

Nakhon Ratchasima province is located in the Northeast of Thailand. From Bangkok, buses are available from Mo Chit Bus Terminal. Trains leave from Hua Lamphong. Khao Phaeng Ma is 200 km from Bangkok off Highway 304. At the intersection between Prachin Buri and Korat, turn left at the shrine (before the market which will be on your right). Follow the road for another 6 km.

CONTACT

Khun Nok 08 7870 7788
(No English spoken)

Centre: In Thai, Gaurs are known as "Krating"

Right: Wang Nam Keow district

Khao Phaeng Ma Into the world of the wild Gaur

NAKHON RATCHASIMA PROVINCE. Wang Nam Khiao district is blessed with two major national parks and consequently a wonderfully fresh and cool climate. It is also home to the majestic bovine, the gaur.

The beast is on the list of the largest mammals in the world and is marked as "vulnerable" by wildlife preservation organizations. In Thailand, it is estimated that about 950 gaurs exist in the wild, about 90 of which roam here in the reforestation area of Khao Phaeng Ma. With luck, you can spot a herd nibbling the salted soil at the salt licks to replenish their needed minerals.

The best time to spot gaurs is either in the morning or around 4-6 in the afternoon. The way up to the observation post is a 4-km dirt road. You can risk driving your sedan up there but we recommend you

"WE TRY TO EDUCATE KIDS ABOUT

OUR LOCAL ECOSYSTEM"

We were waiting for the gaurs to dine at the salt lick when a man good-naturedly discouraged us, "I don't think you will see any today. Elephants were near the salt lick earlier. Their scent will keep the gaurs away." We were somewhat dismayed and challenged his certainty. "Oh I just went down to add more salt to the salt lick. It turns out that this direct, outspoken man is a member of the Khao Phaeng Ma Conservation Group and has been working on how to protect the fabulous beast for more than a decade. His name, Dindon, means "soil of the highland"- an apt name for someone who is so attached and dedicated to the forest of his home.

Very often, gaurs venture out and eat corn

I was born here and I had seen when the forest of Khao Phaeng Ma was destroyed by forest fire caused by corn farmers. The mountain you see here used to be bare. Then in 1994, there was a national reforestation campaign and the Group (formerly a part of the Wildlife Fund Thailand) participated. One year after that, gaurs started to return.

Three years ago, we did a head count and found that there were 96 gaurs in this forest. Unfortunately, even though this is a protected area, poachers still shoot them down. On the other hand, last week a villager was gored to death by an injured gaur while he was gathering banana leaves.

Another problem is that very often gaurs venture out and eat the corn in the plantations. We are trying to lessen this by re-nourishing the forest; for example, to build more weirs to moisturize the forest and add more salt to the salt lick so the animals will not have to find food from outside. Some resorts are not helping. They made open fields to lure the gaurs to graze so their guests can see. That makes it easier for the animals to go over to the nearby corn plantations.



We also work a lot with children. We try to educate them about the local ecosystem by taking them out to trek in the forest and set up a youth group that disseminates knowledge to their peers. Our group here maybe small, but we have a network of like-minded friends all over the country. That is a big community of people who care about their homes. ■



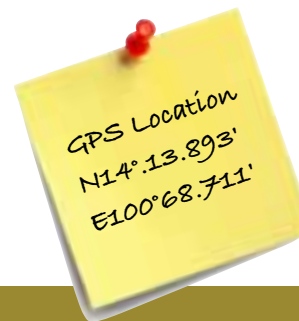
To meet Them

Contact

For volunteer activities and guides, call Nok at 08 7870 7788. Please note that no English is spoken so you need to go with a Thai-speaking guide or friend.

HOW TO GET THERE

Since only registered guests are allowed on the Suan Pa Himawan premises, participants will meet at the Middle Way Bangkok office. From Bangkok's Mo Chit BTS Station, take Phahonyothin Rd approximately 30 km to Khlong Luang Rd, or tell a cab driver to go to "Wat Phra Dhammakaya".



NORTHEAST MEDITATION

Nature walk ✨ English spoken ☺ Meditation course ♿

Suan Pa Himawan Finding peace of mind

LOEI PROVINCE. Far off the beaten path and away from the sound of cars, down a narrow dirt road and through a small village close to the Phu Ruea mountain range in Loei, lies the Suan Pa Himawan Retreat Centre.

An oasis, tailor-made for those in need of a break from the everyday perils of our modern existence, the centre offers Dhammakaya meditation courses in Thai, English, Japanese, and Chinese. The Dhammakaya headquarters are in Bangkok, near the old Don Mueang Airport. The temple draws tens of thousands of visitors. The sect, led by Phadet Dattajeevo, has been put in the spotlight from time to time, and criticized by Buddhist academics for its huge budget and taste for modern architecture in constructing its temples. Nevertheless, the worldwide success of its meditation courses deserves a place in this book.

What truly makes Suan Pa Himawan unique is that it has been created to accommodate people from a large range of backgrounds, and its relaxed atmosphere is comfortable even for those who have never set foot inside a Buddhist temple. Set in a remote location, it is open only to registered guests, ensuring that retreat participants get the peace and quiet they need to calm the waters of the mind.

The Middle Way, based in Pathum Thani, is responsible for organizing the English-speaking retreats held nearly every month at Suan Pa Himawan. Before the retreat, participants meet at the Middle Way and travel together to the centre in Loei. Courses are offered at both beginner and intermediate levels, so whether you have years of meditation experience or are just curious about this ancient Buddhist practice, you have a place at Suan Pa Himawan. To reserve a spot in a retreat, visit www.meditationthai.org ■

Left: The meditation hall shows the style typical in Dhammakaya temples.
Right (Top to Bottom): The view of Phu Ruea. Guest accommodations.



DISCOVER

The Middle Way practiced here is a form of Buddhism known as Dhammakaya. The main temple of that Buddhist sect is in Bangkok, drawing crowds of faithfuls. Dhammakaya is a Pali word meaning Enlightenment, coming from Dhamma (truth) and Kaya (body).

SHARE

Taking "time-out" from your daily life to focus inward can be done in many temples offering meditation courses in Thailand. Specific to Dhammakaya is a "seven-day spiritual rehab" course, tailor-made for foreigners.





How To Get There

Daily buses to Loei run from the Mo Chit Bus Terminal in Bangkok and the Arcade Station in Chiang Mai. Once you arrive in Loei Town, head north on Route 201 for approximately 50 kilometres.

Chiang Khan residents bearing food donations for local monks.



NORTHEAST WALKING / CULTURE

Guides Seminar 🌐 English spoken ☺ Handicraft 🌀

Chiang Khan Pearl of the Mekong



LOEI PROVINCE. Willing to escape the Bangkok heat in December or January to experience the pleasure of wearing a jacket while walking by the Mekong River? Chiang Khan, on the Northern tip of Loei province, is one of the few regions in Thailand to experience near-freezing temperatures at night during winter. However, it's just as beautiful year-round, surrounded by luscious vermillion rice paddies and rolling tree-covered hills. The town centre is abundant with guesthouses and homestays rather than large brand-name hotels, which is part of what gives the area its charm. Visitors have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the local culture by staying in one of these accommodations, where they can taste homemade Thai food and experience life in a wooden home. Many of the guesthouses are located right on the Mekong, allowing you to take full advantage of the scenery.

Early risers can help support the local economy by visiting the daily morning market, featuring fresh farm-grown produce, local specialty snacks, and crafts made by Chiang Khan artisans. For the best goodies, locals advise arriving before 7 a.m. Or get up even earlier to view the sun rising over the Mekong, well worth missing a couple hours of sleep.

To get up close and personal with the river, visit Kaeng Khutkhu, a site at the northeast corner of town. Here, you can take advantage of one of the best viewpoints in town, or take a ferry tour to see Chiang Khan from a new perspective. The sunset tour is highly recommended, as it allows you to see the brilliant colours cast over the water as the sun sinks behind the mountains. ■

Right: Traditional wooden homes set the stage for a lovely stroll.

Bottom : Bicycles for rent at most guesthouses along Sri Chiang Khan Rd.

DISCOVER 📖

The flavor of neighboring Lao PDR is all over Chiang Khan. Standing on the bank, you'll have the perfect vantage point to view the quite empty rural villages on the other side of the river.

FEEL 📖

The charm of Chiang Khan's homestays or guesthouses. Popular with urban Thais in search of peace and green, this river town offers an occasion to sip on your drink while listening to local songs.

SHARE 📖

Stunning sunrise and sunset views make Chiang Khan a typical romantic getaway. Watch lovers walking by the river when the afternoon comes to an end.



Sunset near Kong Chiam, Ubon Ratchathani



"HELPING THE TAI DAM PEOPLE



For over half a century, the Tai Dam people have been without a land to call their own. Originating in Vietnam, many fled to Laos during the French-Indochina war of the 1950's. Then, twenty years later, the Laotian civil war forced many Tai Dam to again seek refuge elsewhere.

Now, the Tai Dam Cultural Village in Loei province is where many of them call home.

It is there that Chiang Mai native turned Chiang Khan guesthouse and shop owner Jodok Bhongrabhebhuvanadh is working in coalition with Tai Dam craftsmen to preserve a culture that is desperately close to extinction.

Preserving local cultural identity

"I worked in Bangkok for some years, but soon became fed-up with the fast-paced lifestyle, traffic, and stifling pollution, he explains, showing the various Tai Dam handicrafts and textiles in his shop. With this in mind, I moved to Chiang Khan with the dream of opening my own guesthouse. But I was equally interested in finding some way to help further the development of that community while still preserving its cultural identity.



MAINTAIN THEIR LIFESTYLE"

When I first came into contact with the Tai Dam village people, I noticed that they had a very unique style of dress made from hand-woven cloth with intricate patterns. Since I always had an interest in textiles and design, it was an easy decision to begin buying these cloths to resell in my handicrafts shop. Many of the traditional patterns are passed down from generation to generation, not written or drawn, but from memory.

Sadly, some of the more difficult and detailed patterns are becoming very rare, since much of the younger generation is leaving the village to find other work.

As I developed a relationship with them, I began selling the traditional headscarves cloths as well as scarves and shawls, which are now very popular in the shop.



On weekends, an expert weaver comes in

Soon, I had finally earned the trust of the Tai Dam villagers, and began working alongside the craftsmen to create unique products that are still made in a traditional, sustainable fashion, but are more marketable to the people who visit Chiang Khan. My hope is that I can help the Tai Dam people maintain their traditional lifestyle while at the same time helping them bring in an income to make it economically viable".

On weekends, an expert weaver comes in to work at the large loom in the centre of the store, giving visitors a rare opportunity to see traditional Tai Dam cloth as it is being made." ■

To meet him

Contact

Visit the Husband and Wife guesthouse in Chiang Khan (<http://www.husbandandwifechiangkhan.com>). Or call 08 5464 8008 (Basic English spoken).

You can also visit the Tai Dam Cultural Village in Loei province. For details, call the Tai Dam Cultural Conservation Society at 081 048 2000



Sam Pan Bok, Ubon Ratchathani



How To Get There

Several itineraries will bring you to Isan's hidden Khmer sanctuaries. A good starting point is the well-known Prasat Phanom Rung in Buri Ram province. Other localities are Ku Santarat in Maha Sarakham, Ku Ka Sing in southern Roi Et province, or Prasat Ban Phluang, in southern Surin.

CONTACT

Khun Pong at Ku Ka Sing:
087 237 22 98



GPS Location
(Prasat Phanom
Rung)
N14°53.198'
E102°94.086'

NORTHEAST HISTORICAL SITE

Bike for rent 🚲 Guide services ☺.

On the Khmer temple trail

BURI RAM PROVINCE. The Northeastern area of Thailand is probably its most conducive for Green travelling opportunities, cultural discovery, and historical excursions. Still very much a backwater for foreign visitors, this impoverished part of the Kingdom retains the influence of the once great Angkor Empire, with trails of hospitals, temples, and fortresses made of stone in the midst of those vast rural rice plains.

For those familiar with Khmer and Thai history, the utter warmth of the Northeastern villages will add to the pleasure of a ride among localities, linked by excellent roads, but unfortunately not that easy to reach by bus. The best option, definitely, is to rent a car for your group, starting from Buri Ram or Surin, two Southern Isan cities. A good idea is to visit the Surin Provincial Museum, completely reconstructed, which offers nice exhibitions in a modern architectural building. With the well-known Phanom Rung temple, it will serve as an introduction to a foray of smaller locations in more remote villages.

Spreads of prasat (Thai for castle) are littered along the roadside, and locals will be more than willing to guide you to temples built here by the Khmer for their divine monarchy in the 6th-14th century, at the time of Angkor greatness.

Another wonder of Isan, though very remote and at the time of this writing difficult to reach is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Khao Phra Wihan. Located in Cambodia, it is surrounded by a national park and can be reached only through Thailand as it is overlooking a cliff. Let us try here to defend the visitor's point of view over the controversy opposing Thailand and Cambodia about this magnificent complex of carved stones and sanctuaries. A cliff-top splendour, surrounded by mountains covered with forests, it deserves a tour and our prayers for a common understanding between the two neighbouring countries. ■

Left: Phanom Rung Temple in Buriram is an archeologist dream

Right: Ku Santarat, Maha Sarakham



DISCOVER 🗨

Equally a cultural trail and a green excursion, crossing into villages and rural communities. Some excursions to typical spots along the Thai-Cambodian border can be provided by local Khmer speaking farmers.

FEEL 💖

The finest Thai archaeologists have been working hard to help preserve this historical heritage. In Ku Santarat and Ku Ka Sing, the location of Khmer temples in nice gardened sanctuaries also offer nice places to sit and relax.

SHARE 💎

Bring along with you a copy of French writer Andre Malraux's "La Voie Royale" and experience the feeling of being a very special visitor, torn between history and nature.



Rows of Shiraz grow in the shadow of nearby mountains.

HOW TO GET THERE

The GranMonte Vineyard is situated in the Asoke Valley, Pak Chong, Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat), approximately 155 kilometres from Bangkok. Buses from Mo Chit Bus Terminal are available. But renting a car/van if you travel with your family or within a group is a suitable alternative.

CONTACT

<http://www.granmonte.com>
0 2653 1522 (Bangkok Head Office) or
08 1923 2007 (Winery)

Center: Grapes fresh off the vine during harvest.

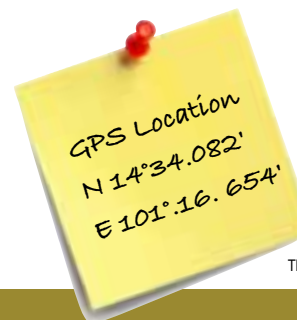
Right: The tasting station in GranMonte's wine shop.

GranMonte Vineyard

An array of white and red

NAKHON RATCHASIMA PROVINCE. GranMonte Vineyard first opened its doors in 2000, just 6 years after the release of the first-ever grape wine produced in Thailand. Owners Visooth and Sakuna Lohitnavy officially founded GranMonte in 1999 with a vision for a small, boutique family vineyard in the mountains of Khao Yai. Now, the winery produces an both white and red wines, and the establishment also features a guesthouse, European-style restaurant, and a large shop filled with an array of delicacies. Nevertheless, they have done a splendid job of maintaining a cozy, welcoming atmosphere. In the wine shop, guests are welcome to sample each of GranMonte's signature wines.

Part of this welcoming atmosphere is a result of efforts deployed by the winery founders' daughter Nikki (or Visootha), managing director. As the first female wine-maker in Thailand, she is often described by wine specialists as "a young vintner on a mission". GranMonte's knowledgeable staff is also on hand to detail the steps of the winemaking process and to highlight each wine's other intricacies.



Thailand Tourism Awards

NORTHEAST

CULTURE / TRADITION

Wine tasting 𠂉 English spoken 𠂉 Biking 𠂉

Vineyard tours are available, as well as tours of the actual winery building, where you can learn even more about the delicate process by which GranMonte's homegrown Shiraz grapes are transformed into the holiest of spirits. This Khao Yai valley vineyard replicates, with more success, what was done previously in Loei province's "Château de Loei", where the founder of ItalThai group went on with growing red Syrah and white Chenin, helped by French oenologists. Unfortunately, production there has gone down and it is no more a tourist attraction.



DISCOVER 𠂉 The taste of "2009 Chenin Blanc", which won a silver medal at the Vienna Wine Challenge 2009. A very fresh wine with a beautiful bouquet and a clean finish. Thai food tasting with Thai wines is a must-do here.

FEEL 𠂉 Visiting a vineyard in Thailand is not as wine-oriented as in Europe. Locals come for the view and spend a good moment, not only to buy some fine bottles. Do it alike: Thai wine is also part of a new kind of "Thainess".

SHARE 𠂉 The best time to visit is the annual grape harvest in January-February when GranMonte organizes special harvest packages for wine enthusiasts, including an early morning grape-picking contest!



For a truly unique experience, visit GranMonte in February or March, when guests can take part in the harvesting of the grapes, which are all painstakingly handpicked to reduce the risk of damaging the precious fruit.

After enjoying a hearty meal at VinCotto restaurant, you can leisurely stroll through the grounds, all the while taking in views of the surrounding mountains. Colourful flower gardens house throngs of butterflies, and bird-watchers

can get their fix at the specially designated birdwatching pavilion located behind the guesthouse.

While wine may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Thailand, GranMonte is worth visiting. Those ready for more physical exercise should venture further into Khao Yai National Park for hiking or biking. But a good part of the crowd will surely stay here and spend the day. Life is sweet when you're relaxing on the bank of GranMonte's lotus pond with a glass of wine in your hand. ■



How To Get There

Tha Sawang Village is approximately 8 km from Surin. Buses are available from Bangkok. Tourists can go there by crossing the railway, opposite to Surin Plaza, then turn left at the intersection along Ko Loi Mueang Ling Road.

Contact

For accommodation, ask for Khun Wen or Khun Niramont at Ban Tha Sawang Homestay. For the silk production, ask Prof. Wiratham. Tel: 08 1726 0397

Top: An Isan Woman spinning the raw silk

Inner Top: Spools of silk thread

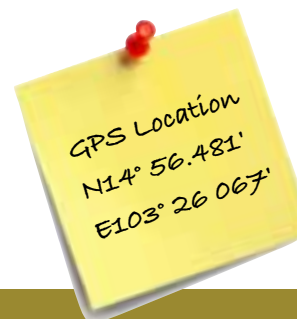
Center: Silk cocoons

Ban Tha Sawang

Isan's finest silk brocade

SURIN PROVINCE. This Northeastern village became famous for its silk and for the quality of its weaving when it was commissioned to produce the silk outfits worn by APEC leaders for the final day of their Bangkok summit in 2003. Inspired by the Thai national dress, these Tha Sawng made silk brocades were produced by four workers in unison producing barely an inch of cloth each day, as explained by Australian expert Morrison Polkinghome.

Touring the village is a pleasant thing to do alone, or with a companion. Don't hesitate then to ask to visit the weavers' open-air workshop, by the road side, before heading for the beautiful Thai style house owned by Achan (professor) Wiratham. There, under a canopy of bamboo and tropical trees, you will be able to view ancient fabrics collected by this renowned silk specialist. He will most probably explain to you that, although Surin is known for Khmer-style fabric designs (typically stripes, checks, and small patterned mudmee in uniquely dark



NORTHEAST CULTURE

Homestay 🏠 Handicrafts 🧶 English spoken ☺

hues), the locals here use a technique similar to weaving damasks from a French-style jacquard loom. This is done manually with a process that requires not just four people to operate, but a three-meter high loom. Each loom fits for one design only. Take time, if you have brought a Thai interpreter along, to talk with the local women, especially the eldest one, who spent their lives producing Phrae Wa silk. Traditional Isan textiles are still woven by villagers. Weaving fills the spare time between rice plantings and harvests, providing both supplementary income and a pastime. Ask them to bring you to their neighbors raising yellow silk cocoons. It takes 28 days for a cocoon to develop.

Enjoying a night at Thasawang homestay



Then, you may watch in a nearby house the extraction of the silk fibre from those mature cocoons, boiled in hot water. With a bit of luck and time, enjoying a night at Tha Sawang homestay, you'll learn enough to entertain

a conversation when you return in Bangkok on these Thai traditional treasures named mudmee, Phrae Wa and khit silk.

Don't hesitate, when you return to Surin town, to complete your Ban Tha Sawang experience with a stop at Surin Museum. Located in a brand new building, its collections of traditional handicrafts tell it all of the Northeastern lifestyle. Luckily, a museum booklet in English is available, therefore, making it possible to wander around without a translator. Another interesting spot, in the outskirts of Surin city, is the Queen Sirikit Sericulture center (Surin). The centre is situated at 380 Mu 4, Ban Saeng Tawan, and covers around 20 hectares. And the whole chain of silk production is explained there by local experts. ■

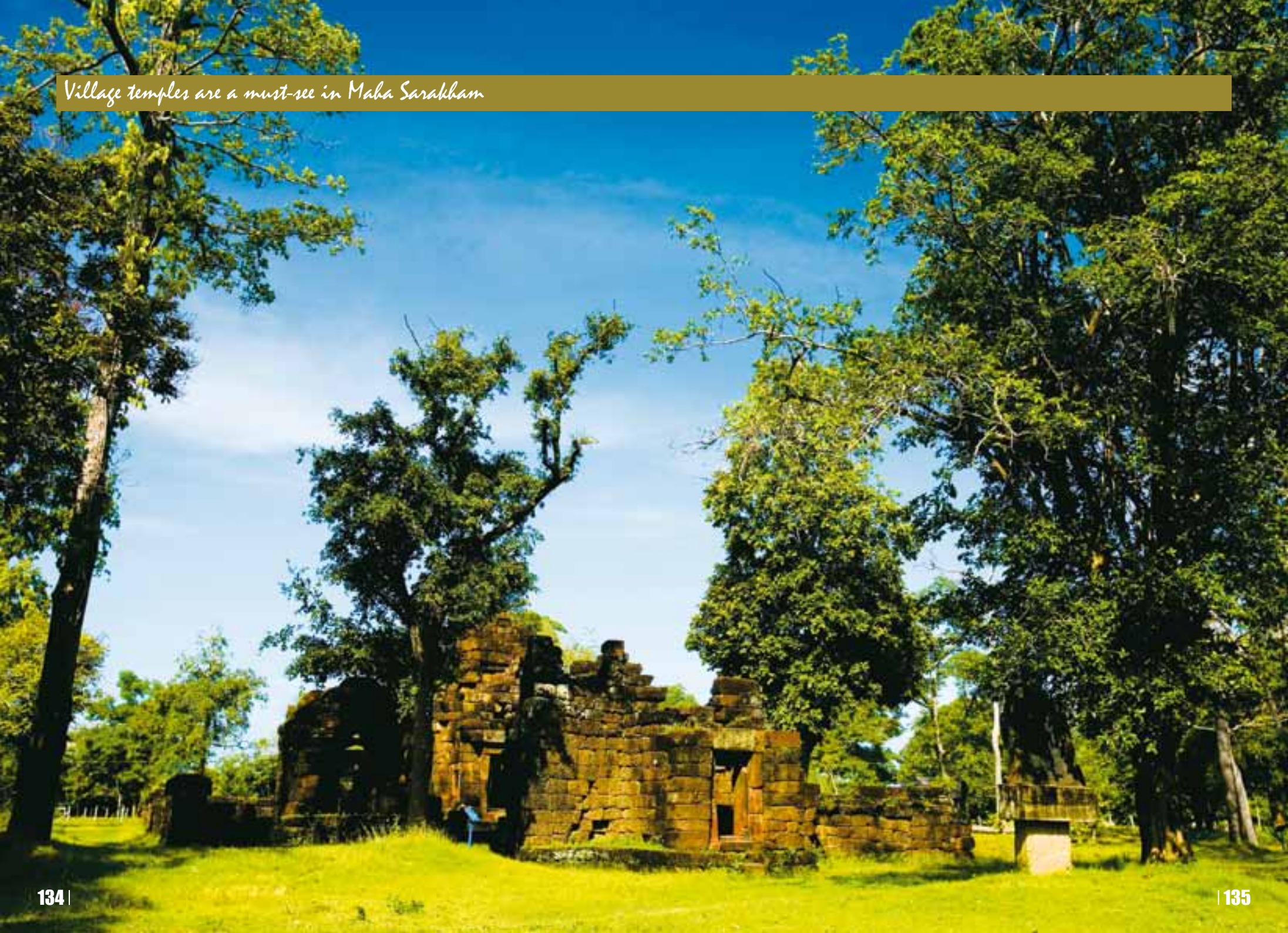
DISCOVER 📖 Isan women still weave fine silk fabrics to be worn at the temple or for formal and festive ceremonies, such as, weddings. Explanations are available on www.tatnews.org/ given by Australian textile expert Morrison Polkinghome.

FEEL 📖 Each fabric is set for a specific occasion. By talking with the weavers, you'll learn a lot about the Thai traditional way of life. Ask first about the "pha khao ma", the traditional long cloth featuring a chequered pattern inspired by rice fields.

SHARE 📖 Along with Ban Chonnabot in Khon Kaen and Pak Thong Chai in Korat, Ban Tha Sawang is an award winning village where you can see looms operated by the locals. Ask to buy the fabrics there. You'll contribute to the village's income.



Village temples are a must-see in Maha Sarakham



"COOPERATIVES IN EUROPE AND



Rather than a "mere" homestay, Khun Kanya's house in Ban Thap Thai (about 20 km south of Surin), is above all a farm - and one with a mission. Here, the aim is to promote all things organic in agriculture, which involves production of organic rice and vegetables and feed for their free-range pigs and chickens.

Luckily for the rare foreign visitors, Khun Kanya speaks English to a reasonable level, after several trips abroad at the invitation of international organizations or associations of peasants, most notably the Via Campesina network. "Cooperatives in Europe and America are our farmers' best allies", she says, proudly displaying photographs of her appearances in several US cities defending the virtue of organic rice versus the industrialized and genetically modified seeds.

The pride and frustrations of Isan's farmers

Even more stunning for this Thai woman living in such a remote northeastern village is her ability to intuitively explain her work as she gives you a tour around the rice fields (particularly during the July/August harvest season). Her smile defies the need for a dictionary. The advantage of spending a day in rustic Ban Pan Mo is that you will be able to catch a

glimpse of the entire production process, accompanied by farmers who double as some of the finest earthenware craftsmen in the country. Ask Khun Kanya to introduce you to her friends producing pottery and traditional scarves in the neighbouring villages. "Green"

To meet her

Contact

Once you reach the city of Surin, contact the always-helpful Khun Kannika at Surin Rice Research Center. Tel: 08 7255 1447. Information available also on www.surinfarmerssupport.org. Tel: 083 81 99 60

AMERICA ARE OUR ALLIES"

wisdom is an evident asset in nearby localities such as Ban Khwao Sinarin or Ban Tha Sawang, as well as in Surin province.

A seasoned traveller and organic spokesperson for Thailand, Khun Kanya relies on expertise and support from the Surin Rice Research Centre at the outskirts of Surin city. At the Centre, Khun Kannikka or Khun Ronachai will always greet you with a smile and try their best to accommodate your demands despite their limited English. Conveniently enough, wireless Internet was available at the reception of the Centre when we visited it at the end of 2009. A conference room, right behind the outdoor welcome desk, is also equipped with a computer where you can log on the web to search for more information.

A tale of the Isan's farmers frustrations

Located outside Surin on Route 214, the local Rice Research Centre welcomes you with the slogan "Responsibility, Integrity, Credibility and Excellence" and boasts a large quantity of seeds like the world-renowned "hommali", "red jasmine" or "tamarind" rice. The advantage of meeting Khun Kannika is that, as an agricultural expert who has worked here for 30 years, she can give you an informative tour of Tambon Thamo, the sub-district and where the Centre is located cultivates some fields. Life in the breadbasket of Thailand tells a tale of the Isan farmers' pride and frustrations, as they are too often forced to flock to the Kingdom's metropolis, hoping to find a job and an income their native land can no longer provide. ■





NORTHEAST CULTURE

Homestay Suitable for families

Having said that, Ban Dan Kwian pottery villages offer a good introduction to the Northeastern lifestyle, roving around the cultivation and harvesting of rice. Located about 10 km south of Nakhon Ratchasima on Route 24, this series of villages is particularly interesting for two reasons: its unique pottery heritage, formed of the clay found at the nearby Mun River, and its historic role as a transit point along the trade route between the Isan plateau and Cambodia, where Ayutthaya merchants would rest and load up on ceramics for sale at ancient Khmer cities.



Potteries Trading Dates Back to the Angkor Period

Dan Kwian potteries, very tough and dark brown, were during those ancient times produced on the very same type of wooden potter's wheel you can see still standing in the backyard of local houses. Exchanged against other goods, notably the excellent fish from the Tonle Sap Lake in today's Cambodia, those potteries, mostly jars to preserve dry fish, were sent down to the magnificent Angkor complex, then capital of the Khmer Empire which, from the 8th to the 12th centuries, included the Thai sanctuaries of Phnom Rung (Buri Ram) and Phimai (near Korat).

Visiting Ban Dan Kwian requires a taste for rustic lifestyle. Old oxcarts greet you at the village entrance. There, locals - very often women, as their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons look after the cattle or sit at a nearby table playing cards - will be pleased to show you their expertise. First, the clay extracted from the riverbanks is kept wet at least for a night under some cover. The next day, the clay mixture is kneaded for 2 hours until it develops a good texture. The well-mixed clay then is formed manually on potter's wheels.

The product is later left to dry under a plastic cover. After that, it is baked in an earthen oven. You may see piles of pottery (as pictured here), in a field outside the village, mixing bowls, and jars for preserved fish (Plara), grinding bowls for local salad (Somtam), and containers for local fermented liquor. ■

DISCOVER

Pottery is an art and a lifestyle in the Northeast. Farmers here are working with clay off their rice-planting season. Don't hesitate to wander around the village and look into houses' backyards. Nice photographs to be taken.

FEEL

Step outside the village along the Mun River, and experience the Isan farming lifestyle when men, at sunset, bring the cows and buffaloes back to their compounds.

SHARE

Not that easy to share views here, due to the lack of locals being able to speak English. If possible, bring along a Thai friend or a good dictionary.

How To Get There

You must first reach Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat), either by train or bus from Bangkok (4 hours bus ride from Mo Chit bus terminal). Then, Dan Kwian designates a series of pottery villages, starting 14 km south, on route 24 to Chok Chai. Head preferably for the smaller "muban"

Top: When local craftswoman welcomes the visitors...

Inner top: A farmer bringing potteries back home

Right: On the pottery wheel..

Ban Dan Kwian The pottery getaway

NAKHON RATCHASIMA PROVINCE. Leaving the bustling town of Korat and its newly opened shopping malls, you will soon find yourself in the middle of Thailand's northeast countryside, where farmers moonlight as pottery makers off rice planting season. Ban Tha Sawang provides this rural atmosphere where "Thainess" is not only a marketing word but a realistic description of local communities' unique lifestyle and agricultural related traditions.

The main obstacle to travelling in Isan (and surely a primary cause of its touristic dearth), nevertheless, is the relatively minimal possibility of any foreign language use. In some words: despite the utter warmth of the Northeastern villages, access to them can be particularly difficult.

How To Get There

Maha Sarakham is 470 kilometres Northeast from Bangkok, connected by bus. To reach Walai Rukhavej, take Highway No. 2040 and drive about 56 kilometres.

CONTACT

Walai Rukhavej Botanical Research Institute
Tel/Fax: (+66) 4375 4340
Information can also be obtained at Maha Sarakham University's Faculty of Science.



NORTHEAST CULTURE

Museum Biking Accommodation

Walai Rukhavej Discover the pulse of Isan

MAHA SARAKHAM PROVINCE. Not many places in the Northeast of Thailand offer such a variety of attractions. One of the defaults here is that bikes are not available for rent, but with a bit of luck – and some basic knowledge of Thai – you may manage to convince the local workers at Walai Rukhavej homestay, or at the adjacent Phrathat Na Dun Sanctuary, to lend you their bikes so you can tour the area at sunset. Otherwise, jogging is a good experience in this natural, unspoiled environment.

Officially, Walai Rukhavej Botanical Research Institute is engaged in doing fundamental and applied research in science and technology “in integration with the local wisdom with the ultimate goals of conserving biological resources and improving the quality of life of rural communities”. Main responsibilities of the institute, according to their researchers, include conserving, promoting, and documenting natural ecosystems and biodiversity within the Greater Mekong Sub-region. The general public will surely prefer to take a stroll around Phrathat Na Dun and pay a visit to the small but interesting Buddhism museum located nearby. The big advantage of this place is that everything is available on foot, even with kids. Still, the best option is to come here with a car, so you can connect later to other touristic spots like the Khmer sanctuaries of Ku Santarat.

We strongly recommend spending a night at the local guesthouse. For 200 Baht a night, you'll have the choice between small modern pavilions, equipped with running water and mosquito-protected windows. But our heart goes out to the traditional Isan houses where - we have learned - H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn came and slept once. Located in the middle of a green oasis, among flowers and tropical plants, those houses are rural palaces, both romantic and historical. ■



DISCOVER

A peaceful retreat in the middle of rural Northeastern Thailand.

In the very same compound, you'll find a botanical research station, a Buddhism museum, a huge temple (Phrathat Na Dun), and an original Isan house museum.

FEEL

For once, the local museum on Isan lifestyle deserves a visit. Old oxcarts and photographs of farming life bring you into a different world. Per the accommodation, nothing can be more rewarding than spending the night in an open, traditional Thai house under a mosquito net.

Left: Phrathat Na Dun Temple

Top: Traditional homestay





For TAT regional office, please visit www.tourismthailand.org or dial the TAT tourist hotline 1672 from 8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. from anywhere in the country.

- ◆ BUDDHAMONTHON, NAKHON PATHOM ◆ BO RAI, TRAT
- ◆ CHAOPHRAYA APAIPHUBET HOSPITAL, PRACHINBURI ◆ SANGKHLABURI, KANCHANABURI
- ◆ KHAO CHAMAO, RAYONG ◆ BAN HUAY RAENG, TRAT ◆ BANG KRACHAO, SAMUT PRAKAN
- ◆ PHRAYA NAKHON CAVE, PRACHUAP KHIRI KHAN ◆ ABAC CAMPUS, SAMUT PRAKAN
- ◆ ELEPHANT KRAAL, AYUTTHAYA ◆ SAM CHUK MARKET, SUPHANBURI ◆ AMPHAWA, SAMUT SONGKHAM
- ◆ TREE TOP PARK, KO CHANG ◆ KAENG KRACHAN, PHETCHABURI

CENTRAL PLAINS

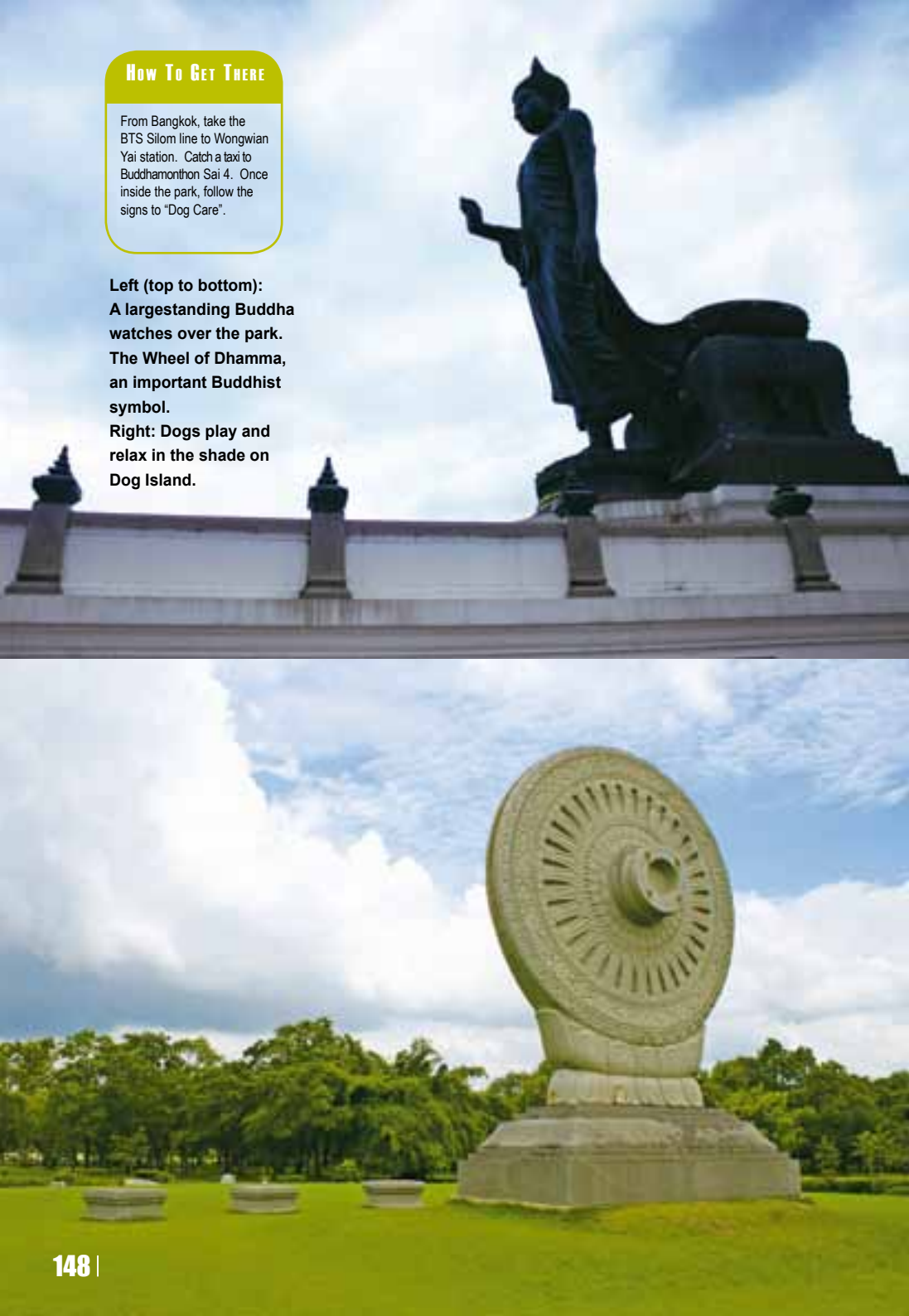


Thai style floating house, Uthai Thani

How To Get There

From Bangkok, take the BTS Silom line to Wongwian Yai station. Catch a taxi to Buddhamonthon Sai 4. Once inside the park, follow the signs to "Dog Care".

Left (top to bottom):
A large standing Buddha watches over the park. The Wheel of Dhamma, an important Buddhist symbol. **Right:** Dogs play and relax in the shade on Dog Island.



CENTRAL PLAINS CULTURE

Animal shelter 🐾 Nature walk 🌿 Meditation 🧘

Buddhamonthon A park for good deeds

NAKHON PATHOM PROVINCE. Built in 1957 to commemorate 2,500 years since the birth of Buddhism, Buddhamonthon Park is a quiet, peaceful place where one can enjoy a meditative walk through lush green trees. Its grounds house the residence of the Supreme Patriarch, a large standing Buddha statue, meditation halls, gardens, and temples. But this park does more than just commemorate- it has given a home to a large community of stray dogs. Since the spirit of helping others is so central to the Buddhist faith, it's no big surprise to see such compassion towards animals that are unable to advocate for themselves. Located at the back of the park, the Dog Island shelter, or Ko Ma, is easily accessible on foot, by bicycle, or by car. Just follow the park signs that read "Dog Care".

Operating almost entirely on cash and food donations, the shelter provides these lucky canines with a dry place to sleep, regular meals, and a caretaker with a true passion for animals. "I do this because I love the dogs and I worry for them", says Auntie Ruen as she bathes one of the puppies at the shelter in a large metal bowl. Ruen has been here since the shelter was constructed after a park patron suffered a dog bite that called attention to the large community of strays in the area. Many of the dogs at Buddhamonthon were simply abandoned by their owners. Luckily, the shelter receives just enough donations to make sure every mouth is fed. And recently, they were able to build a roof to keep the animals dry during the rainy season. Still, with a growing population on the island and an ambition to ensure that each dog is sterilized and receives its shots, donations are much needed.

Let the touching work of the shelter's dedicated volunteers inspire you as you make your way back to the front of the park. You'll surely notice that the dogs aren't the only animals that call Buddhamonthon home. Monitor lizards, squirrels, fish, and a variety of beautiful birds are just some of the critters that can be spotted here. ■

DISCOVER 📖 One of the closest places from central Bangkok where you can truly enjoy calm and find inspiration in the good deeds of others. More than a park, Buddhamonthon is a personal – family pilgrimage.

FEEL 🍃 Buddhism is at the heart of this huge park. The modern architecture of the temple gives a special flavour in this religious green setting. Check out the meditation hall for a glimpse of serenity.

SHARE 🐶 The dog's island is one of the many good deeds you can perform in Buddhamonthon. You can also feed the fish, or help the local gardeners by doing a bit of park cleaning after the weekend. A truly green, animal friendly experience.





CENTRAL PLAINS

NATURE

Historical site 🏰 Waterfalls 🌊 National park 🌳

by venturing into the history-laden mountains. When we met with a local farmer who was willing to help, he said that most of the mining sites had already been filled in and were now being used to grow crops - bad news for those searching for relics of the past, but good news for the future of this community. Plans are underway to repurpose the minefields in the hopes of revitalizing both the local economy and the environment.

And so, there is hope for Bo Rai as they work towards building a new identity as a green destination where history meets the wild beauty of the Soi Dao Mountains. At the time we visited, locals strongly advised against hiking deeper into this region. The relatively uncharted area bleeds over into Cambodia's Cardamom Rainforest, and is largely considered to be the last true wilderness of Southeast Asia.



DISCOVER 📖

The history of Bo Rai, both as a former ruby mining hub and an entry point for Cambodian refugees that escaped the Khmer Rouge through the Soi Dao Mountains (known as the Cardamom Mountains on the Cambodian side).

FEEL 📖 A new hope for the area, which is currently undergoing a rehabilitation project to turn old mining lands into crop fields. The town has been economically troubled since the ruby mines dried up in the early 1990's.

SHARE 📖 Bo Rai's gemstone museum, due to open in late 2010, will provide plenty of information about the history of gemstone mining in Trat province.

HOW TO GET THERE

Due to the lack of accommodation options in Amphoe Bo Rai, we recommend travelling first to Trat Town. Buses leave daily from Bangkok's Ekamai Bus Terminal (250 Bahts each way). From Trat's main square, you can take a "song theao", or converted pickup truck, to Bo Rai, a 50 km commute.

Top : The Soi Dao Mountains as seen from Amphoe Bo Rai.

Center : A tier of the Khlong Kaeo Falls.

Right : Abandoned mining equipment litters a field.

Bo Rai

When mining belongs to the past

TRAT PROVINCE. This region, backed by the Soi Dao Mountains, is perhaps best known for its role in the Thai ruby-mining boom that lasted from the early 1960's well into the late 1980's. When the area was declared devoid of gemstones in the early 1990's, Bo Rai was faced with the loss of an economic identity their town had relied on for decades. This news, coming on the back of political tumult of the Khmer Rouge crisis in the late 1970's that forced many Cambodian refugees into the area, left Bo Rai in a state of near ruin. Even now, the streets of the town are lined with dozens of abandoned gem trading posts and jewelry shops.

While Amphoe Bo Rai holds much significance by the way of natural and political history, tourists rarely visit the area. As such, you won't get very far here without the help of a Thai-speaking guide. When we visited, our hope was to track down an abandoned mining site



Rediscovering the wilderness of the Soi Dao mountains

It is home to a rich variety of plant and animal life, including endangered species like the pileated gibbon, tiger, and Asian elephant, as well as over 450 species of birds. In addition to the risk of disrupting animal and plant life, undetonated landmines left behind by Thai-Cambodian border conflicts are still present higher in the hills. Therefore, we do not advocate amateur hiking here.

However, visitors can still explore a bit at the Nam Tok Khlong Kaeo National Park, about 7 km west of town. For now, the park is the most accessible place in Trat to get a feel for the rainforest. Unfortunately, the concrete paths, numerous picnic areas, and brightly colored trash bins detract slightly from the natural beauty of the place. Still, the waterfalls are worth seeing, and the 800 meters trek up through the rocky streams to the fourth tier is good fun. The park is open daily until 4:30 PM ■



Thailand Tourism Awards

CENTRAL PLAINS HEALTH

Massage 🙏 Museum 🏛️

disturbing, we have to admit.) Unfortunately, the information is only in Thai but the interior of the building is beguiling, especially the exquisitely patterned floor tiles.

The highlight of the visit is to actually experience traditional therapeutic methods. It is true that you can get a massage basically anywhere in Thailand, but the traditional healing unit here enhances the wisdom of old with systematic scientific methodology. The masseurs are graduates from the College of Thai Traditional Medicines (who worked with major hospitals of Thailand) and you will need to undergo some checkup from the resident doctor before actually getting kneaded.



DISCOVER 📖

The Traditional Thai medicine department of this hospital is one of the best known institutes dedicated to alternative healing in the country. They are also famous for their herbal cosmetic products.

FEEL ❤️

While waiting for your turn at the clinic, you can pass the time in the front lawn where you can get close to a throng of living and sculpted roosters, the founder's favourite animal.



HOW TO GET THERE

The Hospital is 2.5 km east from Prachin Buri city centre and is located on Highway 3069 by the river.

CONTACT

0 3721 1088 ext 3166
(No English spoken)
www.abhaibhubejhr.org,
www.abhaiherb.com

Top: Chaophraya Abhaibhubejhr manor, now serving as a museum of Thai herbal healing.

Centre: A tray full of goodies: herbal ingredients and scented wax candle.

Right: Flowers and bag at the pharmacy.

Chaophraya Abhaibhubejhr Hospital

Heal yourself the Thai way

PRACHIN BURI PROVINCE. You might wonder why we recommend a hospital as a holiday destination. To be honest, Chaophraya Abhaibhubejhr Hospital looks like any other hospital from the outside, if not a bit unsightly. But once you are inside the gate, you will notice a stately bright yellow Baroque manor fronted by a statue among well-groomed shrubs.

The manor was built by Chaophraya Abhaibhubejhr, a courtier during the reign of King Rama V and Rama VI to receive royal visits. In the 1930's, his heir decided to donate this building for public use. Prachin Buri Province Hospital was established and the building was converted into the unit for admitted patients. Today, it is the Museum of Traditional Thai Medicines where you can see the antique equipment and ingredients used to concoct medicinal potions (some of them are rather



Treatment is the Priority, not Relaxation

The programmes offered include traditional massage, herbal massage and sauna, reflexology and acupuncture which promises to cure you from aches, insomnia, allergy and many more (these require revisits.) You will not get a spa-like atmosphere but rather a serious, professional treatment since they are more therapy-oriented than for relaxation. The clinic is next to the Museum building, and opened daily from 8:30 AM-3:45 PM (until 7:00 PM on Tuesday and Thursday). The acupuncture clinic is in the same complex and opened only on Tuesday and Thursday from 9:00 -11:00 AM

Massage is an international language but it is better if you go with someone who can speak Thai so you can get your symptoms clearly explained.

After the rejuvenation, you can visit Abhaibhubejhr shop (in the main hospital building, opposite the 7-11 outlet) where you can buy herbal cosmetic and medicinal products such as chili balm, lotion made from curcumin extract, and cucumber soap which make great souvenirs. ■

How To Get There

There are buses leaving from Bangkok's Mo Chit Bus Terminal to Sangkhlaburi daily. You can also take a van from the Victory Monument to Kanchanaburi and then catch another van to Sangkhlaburi. The ride takes about 6-7 hours.

Contact

TAT Kanchanaburi office
0 3451 1200
0 3462 3 691



CENTRAL PLAINS

CULTURE

Kayak and bicycles 🚣 🚲 WiFi @ English spoken 🗣️

Sangkhlaburi

A bridge between cultures

KANCHANABURI PROVINCE. Sangkhlaburi is a little town that has much to offer in terms of culture, landscape, and activity. It is located less than 20 km away from the Thai-Burmese border and many of its local attractions result from the Vajiralongkorn Dam's construction in 1979. Its reservoir submerged the whole Mon village and, ironically, created the famous "sunken temple" that has become a renowned attraction. Most of the accommodation stand by the reservoir. There are a couple of hip, bohemian cafes, which makes it comparable to Pai but in a more measured manner. All in all, the town is a perfect place to relax on a misty day.

The Thai and Mon sides of the village are joined by the celebrated "Uttamanusorn" Bridge. This is the longest wooden bridge of Thailand, an assemblage of unpolished wooden boards and planks spanning over 800 metres. The rickety feel and rawness of the material somehow makes it beautiful and picture perfect. Cross it and reach Wang Wiwekaram Temple of "Luangpho Uttama", a famous and highly revered monk who fled from the 1990's civil war in Myanmar and became the spiritual leader of the community.

At 6:30 a.m. every morning, monks make their daily procession. You can participate in this rite at the entrance of the bridge on the Mon side. It is a good way to get a glimpse of the local culture.

A visit to the sunken temple is almost compulsory. Depending on the season, you might see only the top of its bell tower. The relics of Buddha heads, the artfully eroded edifice with green hills and water as a background can be quite inspiring. You can either visit this holy place on a kayak by yourself or join an organized tour package with elephant riding and bamboo rafting (which can turn adventurous during the rainy season).

When we were there, the water level in the reservoir hit its lowest in 20 years. ■

Left: The Mon wooden bridge, the longest in Thailand.

Right: The main hall of Wang Wiwekaram Temple.



DISCOVER 🗨️ Get a glimpse of the culture of the Mon people - an ethnic group originally from Myanmar. Three wonderfullandmarks here bear their footprint: the longest wooden bridge in Thailand, the submerged Wang Wiwekaram temple, and the Bodh Gaya pagoda.

FEEL 🍷 Popular among travellers, this town still maintains its pleasant simplicity and tranquility. A great place for outdoor adventurers.

SHARE 📢 Many humanitarian workers are based in the surrounding Burmese refugees camps. Shops sell products (mostly handwoven Karen fabric) whose profit helps support the volunteer work. Look for Ban Unruk shop. For more info www.baanunrak.org.



How To Get There

From Bangkok, take the Motorway (Highway 7) and continue on Highway 344 until you reach Klaeng district, Rayong province. Then take Highway 3 at the junction called "Talat Khao Din". Continue for 16 km, you will see the sign pointing to the national park on your right.

Contact person:
Khao Chamao National Park
0 3802 0510
0 3889 4378



GPS Location
N12°54.758'
E101°43.342'

CENTRAL PLAINS NATURE

WiFi @ Online booking 📶 Rafting gear rental 🛶

Khao Chamao Kingdom of the carps

RAYONG PROVINCE. Although Khao Chamao can be roughly translated as "the Get-drunk mountain", it is not about any drunkard who fell into the waterfall. That name actually derives from the second of the seven tiers of this waterfall known as "Wang Matcha", or the Palace of the Fish.

Reach it, and you will see a huge patch of black in the clear green water: they are a big school of Soro Brook Carp swimming and nuzzling each other. These fish diet on the fallen fruits from the trees by the pool, which is toxic to humans but seems to be fine for the fish. The toxin stays in the fish's system and once you eat them, you get a light-headed sensation akin to being drunk.

The trail up the seven tiers of the waterfall cuts through a tropical broad-leaved evergreen forest and mixes exercise with relaxation. The total distance is about 1.6 km, which is moderately physically demanding. The initial part is paved with concrete but the rest you will need to follow a sufficiently well-defined trail and hop from rock to rock (especially in the rainy season.) Along the way you will see colourful butterflies and big dipterocarp trees more than a hundred years old. The name of each tier is descriptive to its characteristic. For example, the third tier is called "Wang Morakot", or emerald palace, where you can swim in the deep green pool.

Khao Chamao Waterfall belongs to the national park of the same name and it also includes other attractions. Situated about 40 km to the east of Khao Chamao Waterfall is a complex of 80 limestone caves in the mountain of Khao Wong (only 16 caves are open to visitors). There you can explore the stalactites and stalagmites and small streams inside the caves. ■

Left: The cool, clear water from the Chamao mountain top.

Right: "Wang Matcha", the palace of fish.



DISCOVER 🔍

Don't miss the second tier of Khao Chamao Waterfall, a medium-sized basin, densely inhabited with an impressive school of Soro Brook Carp (*Neolissoschilus soroides*).

FEEL ❤️ Popular among locals, this destination is a must if you manage to get there during weekdays. It is much less crowded and the trek can be quite a meditative experience.

SHARE 💎 In increasingly popular fish spas, Soro carp babies are put in a tank, where clients dip their feet in and let the tiny nibblers eat away the dead skin and make your feet softer.



The Sunken Wang Wiwekaram Temple, Sangkhlaburi

"OUR CANAL, OUR LIFE, HAVE BEEN

LIKE THIS SINCE I WAS YOUNG"

“I was born here”, repeats Khun Chusak to his guests at Ban Huai Raeng homestay. “The canal, the life, have been like this since I was young. Nothing has changed here. And since I have lived all my life here, it was hard for me to imagine what was so special about it for visiting foreigners. But when I saw how excited our guests were, I began to understand and appreciate what we had. We just had a Japanese guest who liked our home so much he returned to stay here for another week!

The canal is central to our lives

Also head of the community's boat group, he adds: “The canal is central to our lives, so we have to take good care of it. We try to design our tourism activities to have the least effect on the canal. For example, we pack our guests' lunch in soft betel bark, not only because it demonstrates the local lifestyle, but also because it is biodegradable.



During the cruise, we also encourage our guests to pick up garbage from the canal. My friend lives on a different part of the canal and it is hopelessly garbage-strewn. I think this is an advantage of tourism. Since we set up the homestay, the amount of garbage has decreased. We have been running a campaign to keep the canal clean and pleasant, and it seems to be working.

To meet him

Contact

The “Boat group” of Ban Huai Raeng Homestay
08 7148 2881 (He speaks Thai only.)



Last, but not least, Khun Chusak's pride lays with the array of trophies visible in his traditional wooden house. The community won all of these trophies at boat races that took place during the Loi Krathong Festival each year in November. “We build the boats ourselves and have three competitions during the year. Sometimes we organize it at the temple, and we donate prize money and profit from the race to the community temple.”

Inspired by the Sirindhorn Royal Trophy

The races are similar to the more famous fluvial fitness competitions taking place at the same time of the year in Nakhon Nayok and Prachin Buri provinces, where the prestigious Sirindhorn Royal Trophy features a grand parade of decorated long-tail boats. ■





How To Get There

The community centre is located inside Khlong Khut Temple on Sub-highway 4001 (branching out from 3157), about 10 km northeast from the city centre. There are only a couple of local taxis going that direction daily. The best way is to go by your own transportation.

CONTACT

Khun Noi (Secretary of Ban Huai Raeng Homestay Community)
Mobile: 08 9247 9648

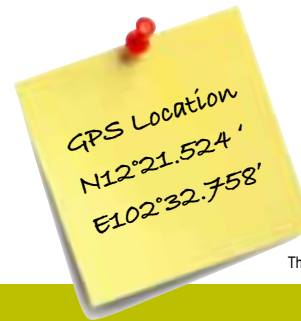
Top: Here, visitors get to experience the serenity of the local life by Thailand's waterways.

Right: Dok Krut flower

Ban Huai Raeng Life along the canal

TRAT PROVINCE. It all began when the members of Huai Raeng community went on a trip to Kanchanaburi. There they saw a community by a canal and, with a sense of pride, decided that their hometown was way more impressive. Then a researcher from the neighbouring village came by and planted the seeds of an idea: to flaunt their treasure to visitors in the form of organized tourism. The researcher got a PhD using this project as a case study, and the community gained both renown and extra income.

In Huai Raeng, visitors will experience the serenity of local life by the water, reminiscent of traditional Thai lifestyles in the era of Ayutthaya. There are nine homestays available, two of which are traditional elevated wooden houses. They are surrounded by orchards where fruit trees growing mangosteens, rambutans, and



Thailand Tourism Awards



CENTRAL PLAINS CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

Handicrafts workshop • Suitable for family • Swimming

durians stand mingling. At the edge of the orchards sits the wide canal, lined at its banks by Nipa Palms.

A Cruise for All Tastes

Typically, tourists arrive at the community around noon and are welcomed with lunch. If you are here during summer, you will then be taken for a seven-kilometre cruise to a group of small rapids where you can take a swim and defy the warm temperatures while enjoying the gentle current. If you visit in March, you can also enjoy blooming "Dok Khut" (*Elaeocarpus grandiflorus* Sm.), the rare signature flower of this community.

Not to be missed are the treasures of art, handicrafts, and delicacies made by the locals from the Nipa Palm harvested here. The famous woven hats are the most common sights. At night, upon request, your host can take you on the evening cruise to enjoy the fireflies spectacle - a lovely way to wrap up the night before you crawl onto your mattress under the mosquito net. (Be warned, mosquitos can be vicious, be equipped with repellent.)

There is also a small workshop where the villagers produce cosmetic products (e.g. soap, shampoo, lotion, etc) from mangosteen peel. You can watch the manufacturing process and also shop for mangosteen soap fresh out of their bamboo molds.

At the moment, Huai Raeng is popular predominately among Thai visitors and although the community is very happy to welcome foreigners, they cannot communicate in English. So don't hesitate, if time permits, to teach them some casual expressions and vocabulary, or immerse yourself in the local language, not forgetting to end your sentences with the ritual "khrup" for men and "kha" for women. It is best, though, if you bring your own Thai-speaking guide for better appreciation of the local culture and nature. ■



DISCOVER

Don't miss the bell-shaped flower "Dok Khut". The best time to witness it is during March. This kind of flower can be found in many provinces, but is known in different names.

FEEL The pristinely kept wooden houses, the gleaming green of the fruit orchards, the quiet canal around which Ban Huai Raeng is centred will bring you into the past peaceful rural life, similar to the one described in the country's school textbooks. Some advice: bring a good book on Thai rural history like Pira Sudham's "Monsoon Country" (Shire Publishing).



CENTRAL PLAINS BIKING

Bike and boat for rent 🚲 Weekend market 🏠 Bird Watching 🦅

Bang Krachao Exploring Bangkok's “Green Lung”

SAMUT PRAKAN PROVINCE. Stepping off the boat into Bang Krachao, the luscious green surroundings, faint rustling of leaves and chirping birds stand in stark contrast to the whirl of traffic and clouds of exhaust that hang in the air just across the river. To get around the area's 11,810 rai of protected mangroves and orchards, rent a bike from the rental shop located right at the pier. The cost is about 100 Baht an hour. The route is marked by a series of arrows and bicycle icons painted on the raised concrete pathways and narrow roads that take you through the area. The pathways sit about 2 metres. above the mangrove swamp, and there's no guardrail, so be prepared to take your time on the turns.

Rent a Paddleboat to Get a Closer Look

The first stop on the route is Wat Bang Nam Phueng Nai. Weekends from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. visitors can peruse the temple's floating market, with its locally grown produce and homemade products. Next, the trail leads you to Wat Bang Nam Phueng Nok, a 19th century temple that boasts its original ordination hall. Not to be missed is the third stop on the trail, the Si Nakhon Khuean Khan Park. Known as Bang Krachao's Central Park, this final stop is the perfect place to rest on neatly manicured lawns under the shade of coconut trees. The large pond at the centre of the park is home to an array of fish, which you can view (and feed) from the shore. Or, rent a paddleboat to get a closer look.

For those wishing to stray from the beaten path, be warned: the narrow raised pathways comprise a labyrinth of tight turns, making it easy to get disoriented beneath the heavy tree cover. Even if you get lost, you'll probably run into a helpful local along the way. Bang Krachao's less than 40,000 residents live life at a slower pace, leisurely strolling the swampy corridors of the village, stopping occasionally to chat with neighbours. ■



DISCOVER 📖

This green oasis is just perfect to get out of Bangkok's bustle. Refresh your mind and body in a natural setting while exploring a little-known community.

FEEL 💚

Since car traffic is virtually nonexistent on the island, it is an ideal place to enjoy a relaxing bike ride. A family walk in its park is a perfect Sunday outing.

SHARE 📸

Don't miss the temples and the local markets. Bang Krachao, so close to the capital's business district, gives you a glimpse of the countryside.



HOW TO GET THERE

Catch a long-tail or shuttle boat to Samut Prakan from the Wat Khlong Toei Nok pier in central Bangkok. A short ride takes you across the Chao Phraya River.

Top: Pier at Bang Krachao, with the city skyline in the background.

Right: The concrete path leading through the villages.





CENTRAL PLAINS

SIGHTSEEING / NATURE

Hiking 三 Wildlife 三 English spoken 三

From Laem Sala Beach, you can reach Phraya Nakhon Cave by walking directly back into the forest to the rocky trail up the mountainside. It's quite a treacherous hike, so come prepared with appropriate shoes. The way up is lined with interesting sights, including small streams, beautiful plants, birds, and steep bluff faces. If you're lucky, you might even run into a Dusky Langur, a rare species of monkey that inhabits Khao Sam Roi Yot's forests. As you begin your descent into Phraya Nakhon's first chamber, a welcoming drop in temperature draws you in.

Walls Adorned by Stalactites and Stalagmites

While we call Phraya Nakhon a cave, strictly speaking it isn't. The collapse of a sinkhole just above the hollow ground has left a large hole in the cavern ceiling. In technical terms, Phraya Nakhon is known as a doline. The naturally formed skylight lets in fresh air, rainwater, and sunlight, allowing for the thriving plant life inside. Perhaps one of the most striking features of the cave is the presence of gargantuan trees that have taken root in its floor. Some of their branches just barely graze the ceiling - very impressive at a height of nearly 65 metres.

Nearly as wide as it is tall, the interior chamber of Phraya Nakhon is simply massive. Its limestone walls are adorned with stalactites and stalagmites that range in size from miniscule to gargantuan. You'll also note a great stone resembling a certain toothy, scaled amphibian, aptly named "Crocodile Rock".

Don't forget also that the cave lies in Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park, one of the country's prime bird-watching locales. The Park's amazingly diversified vegetation and relatively inaccessible terrain make it home to more than 300 bird species. It is also the dwelling place of some peculiar creatures; such as the Mainland Serow and Irrawaddy Dolphin. A fine spot to enjoy the seashore is Laem Sala Beach, blanketed with soft white sand and surrounded by limestone bluffs. ■



DISCOVER 三 A glimpse of Thai Royal history : since its discovery over two centuries ago, this enormous cave has merited visits from several Kings. From King Chulalongkorn in 1890, to King Vajiravudh and, more recently, H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

FEEL 三 Not your typical dark dingy cave, Phraya Nakhon's collapsed ceiling lets in streams of sunlight, lending to the mystical ambiance of the place.



How To Get There

The cave is located in Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park, 63 km south of Hua Hin, along the Southbound railway line from Bangkok. Buses and vans leave from Sai Tai Terminal. When driving from Bangkok, move on Highway No. 4 to Pran Buri, and then, further 37 km to the headquarters.

CONTACT
Call 1672 (8 a.m.-8 p.m.)
and visit <http://www.tourismthailand.org>

Phraya Nakhon Cave

A buried treasure with a noble past

PRACHUAP KHIRI KHAN PROVINCE. A cave of not-so-humble beginnings, Phraya Nakhon was first discovered in 1800 when a ship carrying the ruler of Nakhon Si Thammarat province was forced ashore by a storm on the beaches of what we now call Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park.

Seeking shelter from the deluge, Phraya Nakhon (the cave's namesake) moved further inland, and happened upon this massive underground room. News of the natural wonder spread throughout the Kingdom, and in 1890, construction of a royal pavilion inside the cave's walls began in anticipation of King Rama V's 1896 visit to the site. The pavilion still stands, marked by signatures of the kings and statesmen who have visited here.

Top: The royal pavilion of King Rama V
Drawing: Dusky Langur
Right: Stalactites on the cave ceiling



Kanchanaburi



HOW TO GET THERE

Located alongside the Bang Na-Trat highway, the ABAC Campus is an easy ride from Bangkok, or from Suvarnabhumi Airport. When heading South from Bangkok, keep left and look for Caterpillar. Then look for the signboard and turn left soon after.
Address: 88 Mu 8 Bang Na-Trat Km. 26 Bang Sao Thong, Samut Prakan.



CENTRAL PLAINS

NATURE

Biking 🚲 Swimming 🏊 Sport facilities 🏹

ABAC Campus

Green oasis of studies

SAMUT PRAKAN PROVINCE. Inviting foreign visitors and tourists to stop by the Assumption University's modern campus near Bangkok may seem pretty audacious. But we think it can offer Bangkok's residents and travellers a very fine one-day escape from the capital city's urban nightmare.

Our experience of this university campus, located 26 km South of Bangkok, alongside the Bang Na-Trat Highway, is admittedly very personal. Our editor, Richard Werly, discovered the place while visiting his son who studied business administration there for a year as an international exchange student.

It Matches the Serenity of Buddhamonthon

Where, so close to Bangkok, can you find such an oasis of peace where young people are mostly preoccupied with reading or completing their student homework? Where, so close to Bangkok, can you enjoy a lake surrounded by flushing green, without stumbling into a golf cart? ABAC Campus is, simply, a perfect Sunday hideaway for those in search of calm and green. The only place that matches its serenity is Buddhamonthon Park, widely described in this book.

Moreover, walking or biking in the campus is only the tip of a green day there. Those armed with a bit of courage can ask (as we did) the permission to enjoy the Olympic size swimming pool, or the often-deserted tennis court. Though ABAC normally reserves those facilities for its students, guests are sometime welcome and we would advise you to take your chance, even for a small fee. Or if you prefer, read a good book while sipping a cold beverage bought in the only convenience store open 24 hours in this huge international campus. ■

Left: The ABAC campus includes plenty of green spaces.

Right: Here, students and visitors can enjoy the lake view



DISCOVER 📖

Campus life is quite a new thing in Thailand. Bangkok's best universities - Chulalongkorn, Thammasat - are still headquartered in the capital city centre. The Catholic Assumption University was one of the first to opt for a huge green campus in rice fields, 30 minutes from Bangkok by road. Stop in while heading for the Eastern provinces.

FEEL ❤️ Assumption University campus does not need more publicity.

In addition to the numerous students, from Thailand and overseas, their modern and green campus is well known among TV crews and newlyweds. A perfect setting for glamorous video clips or honeymoon style photographs.



From Ayutthaya to Sukhothai, enter the realm of Buddhism



CENTRAL PLAINS COMMUNITY / CULTURE

Bike rental 🚲 Volunteering 🌱 English spoken. ☺

infamous for killing six people during logging operations in the southern province of Trang, had found shelter here when we paid a visit. Natalie, cared for by the Phra Kochaban Foundation, could be seen in the Kraal looking after others' offspring.

Don't miss stopping by the Kraal and, if you're willing to volunteer a bit or learn more about the Asian elephants, don't hesitate to ask questions to our friend Michelle and her partner, or exchange with the locals employed by the Phra Kochaban Foundation. Their "Mahout", often coming from the northeastern villages of the country, ride elephants during the day along the Phar Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Historical Park for the joy of the tourists. But for once, let us point this out, those animals are neither exploited nor taken against their will. Many were found wandering among cars and pollution to beg for food or money, as is too often the case in Bangkok's central districts.

Elephants in the Wild

Talking about the Elephant Kraal is a good opportunity to learn more about the largest terrestrial mammal in Thailand. Asian elephants seen here were once a diverse group that roamed much of the world. Herds can still be seen in the Western jungle of the Kingdom, led by an old female who knows all the best sites to find food, water and salt. Though it is not the case in touristic Ayutthaya, elephants usually avoid open sunny areas and spend much of the day in cool shady areas sleeping while standing up, explained in the excellent "Thailand Traveller's Wildlife Guide" (www.arrisbooks.com). The animals, revered in all of Southeast Asia, feed on leaves, bamboo, and other vegetation, and each adult needs 200 kg of food each day. Their legendary strength, not as visible in Ayutthaya, is attested in Thailand's deep forest where they are still used for clearing logging areas, taking huge stocks of tropical timber out of the jungle to the adjacent rivers. ■



DISCOVER 🐘 Elephants occupy a major place in Thailand's history. In the past, white Elephants (actually those with light skin) were considered sacred. The Kraal was the place for the King to select the best animals.

SHARE ✨ Elephantstay and the Phra Kochaban Foundation rely on volunteers. Don't hesitate to ask for more information. You can help out by feeding, caring for, and riding the King of Thai wildlife.



How To Get There

Ayutthaya is an easy bus or van ride from Bangkok. Once there, bikes are easy to rent. The Kraal is about 2 km north from Ayutthaya. Just follow the signs or ask the mahout on their elephants in the historical park.

CONTACT
mailto:info@elephantstay.com. Ask for Michelle at
08 0668 7727 or
08 7116 3307

Ayutthaya's Elephant Kraal

A sacred pilgrimage

PHRA NAKHON SI AYUTTHAYA PROVINCE. A little further North in Ayutthaya, take in an "elephant park" whose historical weight is nationally unsurpassed. This is the Kraal at Suan Phrik's Elephant Palace and Royal Kraal where in times past, elephants captured from the forests were brought before and selected by the King: partly in the hope of seeking out a sacred white elephant, partly to beef up the military arsenal.

Although highly tourist-oriented, the Kraal is more than a Kodak-moment destination. Mistreated animals are rehabilitated at the "elephant homestay" opened here a few years ago by Australian Michelle Reedy (see portrait). Natalie, an elephant

Top: Old elephants are fed here.

Right (Top to Bottom): Michelle Reedy, Ganesh



CENTRAL PLAINS CULTURE/CUISINE

Families welcomed ❖ Food tasting ❖ Traditional massage 🌿

decorating the facades is not to be missed. On weekends, groups of students perform Thai classical music to enliven the place. The community knows its charm lies in its nostalgia-inducing atmosphere and thus makes the best use out of it (unfortunately the result can appear artificial in some cases). You can purchase long lost toys from decades ago, antique clocks, furniture, kitchen utensils, and even lovably obsolete technology like cassette tapes.

It's Best to Come with an Empty Stomach.



HOW TO GET THERE

From Bangkok, head north toward Highway 340. You will arrive at Suphan Buri city centre after a 107 km ride. Then continue on the same highway (toward Chai Nat province). After about 30 km, you will arrive at the junction with a Tesco Lotus outlet. Turn left to enter the market parking area.

Sam Chuk Market Shopping into the past

SUPHAN BURI PROVINCE. Sam Chuk Market has become popular among Thais in recent years. Families drive from Bangkok to enjoy a small trip back in time. However, the history of the market dates back over a hundred years. The area was once a junction where people of Thai, Chinese, and Mon descent gathered to barter and sell goods. Then, in 1894, a group of travelling merchants that frequented the region settled down and a community was born. Forty-four years later, that same community moved to its present location and became a vibrant commercial hub near the Tha Chin River.

Sam Chuk Market is comprised of old wooden row houses, most of which are well preserved and look as they did a century ago. For those who have an eye for detail, the intricate wooden openwork



A visit to Sam Chuk is indeed a gastronomic spree. You can find regular dishes that you would find anywhere; such as, rice with roasted duck, noodles with marinated pork, and so on. But what is special about this place, besides its overwhelming choices, is the availability of

various traditional Thai sweets and snacks, rich with coconut milk and chewy toddy palm fruit. If the heat is getting unbearable, along the way you will find fresh coconut ice cream to cool you down. One of the most popular restaurants is a noodle shop that claims to serve the world's biggest pork balls the size of a fist. This is one of the many tasty quirks you can find at the market. In order to make the most of your visit, it's best to come here with an empty stomach. Foreign visitors will not have any problem enjoying the food, but a Thai companion will help in understanding the interesting cultural tidbits better. ■

DISCOVER

Also known as the '100-year-old market', Sam Chuk has tried its best to conserve the old architecture, and some shops still sell products that were popular decades ago. This is a paradise for retro lovers.

FEEL

The market is liveliest on weekends where all the shop fronts flaunt their colourful wares. A plethora of delicious foods are at the ready for those interested in a Thai culinary adventure. However, that also means that the place can be overcrowded. Visit early to avoid the heat.

Top: A wide variety of local snacks.

Centre: The entrance to Sam Chuk Market.

Right: A local vendor serves up traditional Thai desserts.



Top: Vendors at the floating market

Center: Wat Phra Haruethai

Right: Traditional building facade

How To Get There

Opt for the minivan service leaving from Victory Monument in Bangkok. They are stationed by the department store linked to the BTS station. It will take you straight to Samut Songkhram Market bus station, where you should change for the short ride to Amphawa (1 ½ hrs, 100 Bahts).

CONTACT
www.amphawafloatingmarket.com



CENTRAL PLAINS

BIKING / NATURE

English spoken ☺ Bike rental 🚲 Floating market ↩

Amphawa

Canals, orchards and farms

Accessible from Highway 4, Amphawa has of late become a favourite for Bangkokians, who flock here on weekends to enjoy the authentic charm of its beautiful, huddled floating markets and abundant seafood. Despite this, the town remains relatively unknown to foreigners and is a welcome backtrack to the canal-eddied life of early 20th century Bangkok. Luckily, it is not yet as crowded as the nearby floating market of Damnoen Saduak in Ratchaburi province.

While strolling in the city along the Mae Klong River, stop first at King Rama II Memorial Park, notable for the number of Phaya So coconut palms whose moniker - "King's Fiddle" - derives from its use in the crafting of classical instruments. A cluster of traditional wooden houses serves as home to the King Rama II Museum. From here, it's an easy walk to the adjacent Wat Amphawan Chetiyaram, whose walls are wreathed with murals depicting everyday life on the waterways.

From the park, you can embark on a boat trip to explore the numerous canals and observe the traditional way of life along Thailand's waterways. Stops will be made to visit Wat Bang Kung, built during the Ayutthaya period and completely intertwined with a huge Banyan Tree. Another stop will be made at Wat Phumarin, which exhibits a beautifully painted wooden Kudi.

Back on the surface, Route 3088 will delight those fond of biking due to the paucity of traffic running its surface, allowing you to halt at whim's leisure at the charming temples, coconut plantations, and crisscross of bridges that line the Mae Klong River. Then there is Wat Phleng (or Wat Phra Haruethai - the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church), the Catholic Church built here by French missionaries. ■

DISCOVER ☞ The local history of Ratchaburi province crosses paths with Thai national history at Wat Phleng Catholic Church, built by French missionaries. It is now one of the most sacred sites for Thailand's Christian faithfuls.

FEEL ♥ Many places in Thailand's Central region still offer vibrant scenes of life along the canals. But Amphawa, despite becoming increasingly popular with Bangkokians, retains a special flavour.

SHARE ♦ Bike rental is available in all tourist resorts or guesthouses. Roads are quite empty, and protected from the sun by the shade of coconut trees. A perfect setting for a weekend on two wheels.





How To Get There

The park is located on Ao Balian beach, next to Dusit Princess Hotel. You can take a local taxi or pay an extra price for the pickup service (within White Sand beach).

Contact

08 4310 7600
www.treetopadventurepark.com

Left and top right: Various actions from aerial stations.

Bottom right: The pristine Balian Beach.



Thailand Tourism Awards



CENTRAL PLAINS ADVENTURE

Online booking 📅 Suitable for family 💎 English spoken ☺

Tree Top Park Aerial adventure in Ko Chang

TRAT PROVINCE. Ko Chang is no more a green traveller's paradise. Upon your arrival, you'll notice the maelstrom of signs and billboards advertising resorts and fast - food chains. Still, it maintains its lush mountainous landscape and it seems that a desire to protect the area's culture and environment is making progress after years of developments.

If you need a break from the resort-peppered beaches, Tree Top Adventure Park can be a good refuge. In this patch of the forest, 30 tree-top platforms make it possible for you to be airborne among the trees in a variety of ways.



Hidden from the main road, the Park blends so well with the forests you can barely see it from afar. When you arrive, you'll climb some stairs as an overture to your adventure. The reception lounge is an elevated wooden platform with a thatched roof. There you will sign a disclaimer, which asks you to be mindful with the trees and offers insurance. The staff will then get you geared up and take you on a short trial run to familiarize you with the equipment.

The games awaiting you include rope bridges, zip lines, Tarzan swings, the 'flying skateboard' and many more, which can be quite physically demanding at some stages--at one station, you need to climb up a narrow ladder that is almost perpendicular to the tree.

This rejuvenating activity will leave you with a bit of muscle ache as a souvenir. To participate, you must be taller than 140 cm and fit enough to enjoy up to 2 hours of constant movement among the treetops. And be warned: people with vertigo should not take part. ■

DISCOVER

The location of this zero-carbon activity gratifies both sea--and forest--lovers. It allows you to observe the tropical vegetation and the sea from an unusual vantage point.

FEEL

The park's attempt to minimize their impact on the landscape is impressive. And the recreation activity itself made us feel like we were kids again.

SHARE

Very often, local and international companies based in Bangkok bring their employees here for team building activities. An idea to have in mind if you are a human resources manager or a community leader.





Thailand Tourism Awards



CENTRAL PLAINS NATURE / WILDLIFE

Hiking 3 Sightseeing 3 Wildlife 3

Kaeng Krachan The backbone of biodiversity

PHETCHABURI PROVINCE. As per Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in Kanchanaburi and Northern Tak Provinces, visiting Kaeng Krachan National Park brings you to discover the trials and tribulations of the environmental conservation movement in Thailand, which is in many ways best summed up by the life story of Seub Nakhasathien. A green activist and academic, he dedicated his life to the protection of natural habitats in this region.

Kaeng Krachan, Thailand's largest national park, is therefore essential for any traveller half-serious about taking in the region's immense diversity of wild fauna which here include elephants, deer, bears, tigers, and leopards, as well as an equally impressive troupe of birdlife. Knowledgeable and friendly local guides or park rangers are, a requisite accompaniment in the park and will navigate you through the 45 square kilometres of vine-tendriled labyrinth bursting with hanging liana and orchid, in the hope of tracking and spotting species unique to the region, particularly the elusive Indo-Chinese tiger.

Rustic bungalows and camping areas are available within the Park, and more luxurious accommodation can be found in the vicinity. Best to discover the Park is a day or two of hiking, eventually walking up to the top of Kaeng Krachan peak, at an altitude of 1200 m, where you'll have a superb view of Kaeng Krachan that is located on the eastern slope of the Tenasserim Mountain Range constituting the border with Myanmar. As the Park is composed of two major watersheds and a large evergreen forest, humidity remains high throughout the year, with heavy rain during the rainy season and cool weather. We recommend visiting during the dry season Birdwatching, rafting, hiking and camping are a must-do in this well preserved natural environment. ■



DISCOVER 3

Many large mammals, rumored to include surviving specimen of the Sumatran Rhino, can be found in the Park. Adjacent to the wild forests of Myanmar, Kaeng Krachan is one of Thailand's best preserved natural sanctuaries.

FEEL 3

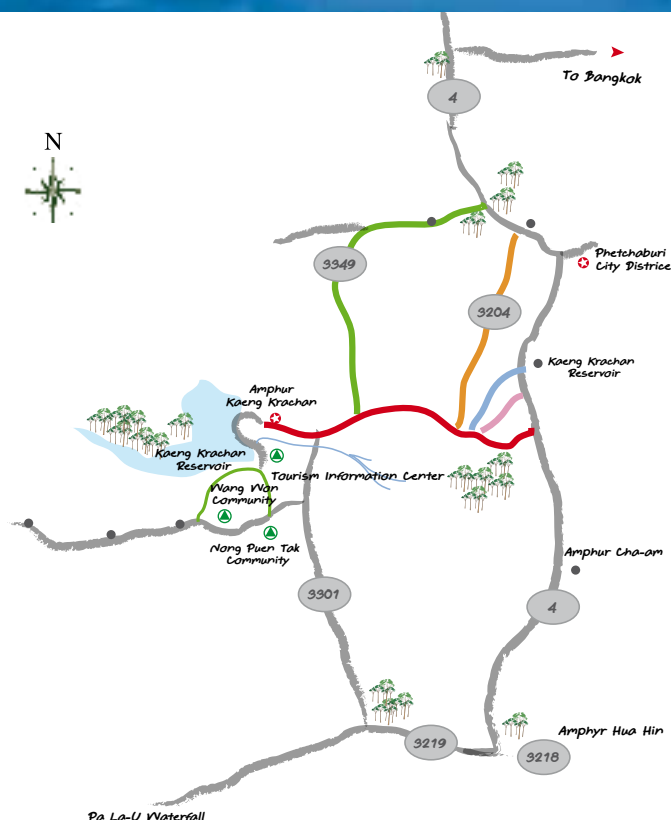
Thai ecologists' struggle to protect and preserve the wildlife. If Kaeng Krachan is as it is today, the late Seub Nakhasathien and his fellow activists played a tremendous role.

SHARE 3

Seub Nakhasathien Foundation, created after his death is, obviously a right choice to give a donation. Otherwise, log on to the website of Freeland Foundation (www.freeland.org).

How To Get There

Kaeng Krachan National Park is located in Phetchaburi province, 115 kilometres from Bangkok. For those who will drive down south, or want to catch a bus, follow on the highway no.4. There is a turn-off road to the right at 6 km north of Phetchaburi. Follow this route till it meets the route no. 3499. Turn right (to the west) into the route no. 3499 to get to the park headquarters. Numerous hotels and accommodations



Top: Birds' eye view of Kaeng Krachan.

Right: The late Seub Nakasathien

"KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ARE

How to promote Green Tourism? And moreover, how to make the Thai tourism sector aware of both the opportunities and constraints of such a niche market? For years, Khun Duangkamol Chansuriwong, Chairwoman of TEATA (The Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association), has addressed these two questions. Herself a travel agent, fluent in English, and well experienced in tourism management, Khun Duangkamol is becoming a regular guest speaker at TAT sponsored events regarding the organization's "Seven Greens Concept". Give tour operators knowledge and skills for engaging in more friendly ecotourism", she argues, explaining in detail

TEATA's ongoing project with the European Union to promote more community-based attractions and destinations.

Spreading the Word about the Latest "Green" Innovations

Experts and foreign visitors with a Green mind can find a precious resource center on ecotourism and sustainability-related projects at TEATA. Our volunteers also stand ready to inform about the sector's latest innovations. Founded in 1997, the

Association has been one of the pioneers in defending Green travel, and pinpointing the need for better "Green" marketing among the foreign public. "By offering better quality Green products to EU tour operators, Thai suppliers will be able to reap the financial benefits of tourism while safeguarding the precious environment on which its future depends", explains Khun Duangkamol over a cup of coffee at the Ministry of Tourism and Sports,



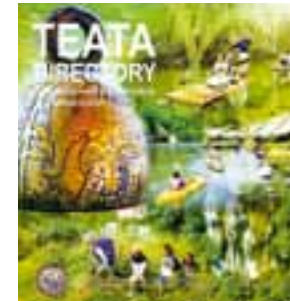
NEEDED FOR ECOTOURISM"

ministry's open-air cafeteria, near MBK Centre in Bangkok.

The TEATA project supported by the EU Delegation in

Bangkok targets suppliers in the Thai tourism industry that offer sustainable tourism products, as well as local Thai communities.

The ongoing project will run for 18 months, with 75% of its budget provided by the EU. The 236,000 Euros involved are primarily used for training and helping establish a sustainable tourism supply chain in Thailand.



To meet them

Contact

Information on TEATA is available on their website www.teata.or.th. Headquarters of the Association are at 133/14 Ratchaprarop Road, Ratchathewi, Bangkok 10400. Hotline Tel: 08 9794 1748. The best way is to contact Khun Duangkamol directly, as she speaks fluent English. Mobile: 08 1666 1798.



Preserving the Social, Cultural and Green Heritage

Thanks to TEATA's efficient lobbying and Khun Duangkamol's ability to convince the tourism sector of regional opportunities, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is also seeking to multilaterally raise tourism standards by making countries like Thailand reference points for the convergence of high-volume tourism and the preservation of social, cultural, and environmental heritage. ■

"AS AN INFORMED TRAVELLER,

BE PART OF THE SOLUTION"

Three books to help you understand the challenges of Green travel and the specific situation in Thailand. Three guidebooks to help you become an actor for change in the Kingdom: as we relied a lot on their pages and expertise for our own "50 Great Green Escapes", we found it normal to pay tribute to our three print companions: "Thailand, the Natural Guide"; "Thailand Traveler Wildlife Guide", and "Travel Green Thailand".

Those three books, whose covers are shown here, do cover nearly all issues we have touched upon in this travel guide, from Thailand's nature and wildlife description, to long articles on the social changes happening in the country under the influence (positive or negative) of foreign tourism.

Let us start with the "Thailand Traveller Wildlife Guide" (www.arrisbooks.com).

Ecotravel Manual

Written by David L. Pearson and Les Beletsky, you'll find in 450 pages all you need to learn about the species, the jungle, and the fruits of Thailand. Its preface, we easily admit, says it all:

"The purpose of ecotravel

is actually twofold", the authors explain. "Yes, people want to undertake exciting, challenging, educational trips to exotic locales – wet tropical forests, wind blown deserts, high mountain passes, mid-ocean coral reefs – to enjoy the scenery, the animals, the nearby local cultures. But the second major goal of ecotourism is often as important: travellers want to help conserve the very places – habitats and wildlife – that they visit". We could not have said it better. Here is the manual you need to feel in tune with Thailand's nature and environment wherever you go in the Kingdom. So don't hesitate, and accept to pay the physical price, as this guide is the heaviest of all...



Our second "Bravo!" goes to "Thailand, The Natural Guide" (www.naturalguide.org), who enrolled among its contributors our journalist and researcher Thanutvorn Jaturongkavanich. She, alongside French researcher Eleonore Devillers, has travelled throughout the Kingdom depicting its traditions, lifestyle, threats to environments, and green escapes. The fact that this guidebook is at the moment only available in French is a handicap, as it is not distributed in Bangkok.

Those Three Books are a Must Read

But let us here quote one of their articles on Thai forests: "Always", write the authors, "the forest has been at the heart of Thai history and Thai traditions. The very first inhabitants of the Kingdom settled near waterfalls and found in forests their necessary resources: wood, plants, food. Forests are Thailand's national treasure". Agreed. And thanks again for taking us, through the 520 pages of this guidebook, to all the remote corners of the country.

Our final note will go to "Travel Green Thailand" (www.asiabooks.com), from which this book is derived. As publishers of this very first ecotourism guidebook on Thailand, we won't dare comment on our own work. But our readers shall feel free to comment, suggest, and criticize. Bring "Travel Green Thailand" along and keep in mind, while on the road, this sentence from Thai novelist Sila Khomchai: "We, human beings, have destroyed nature outside and within us and now we find ourselves trapped and stifled in cities living in pollution, in strangling traffic..." ■

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Third World Network, <http://www.twinside.org.sg>

● Tourism investigation and monitoring team (Tim-Team)

They produce the monthly Southeastasia Tourism Monitor.

Contact: P.O.Box 51 Chorakheubua, Bangkok 10230, Thailand



Along the Chaopraya river, Bangkok

ENGAGING LOCAL PEOPLE

Travelling Green is the only way to preserve the heaven-like reputation of Thailand

Professor Surachet Chettamart,
Dean, Faculty of Tourism,
Maha Sarakham University.



We shall definitely opt for more nature-based tourism, relying on protected areas and forest parks, as well as local villages and communities that show our authentic way of life. We should aim, in the meantime, for a tourism that generates a low impact for the affected regions, people and environment. I definitely believe that we have to engage local people in this respect. They shall pocket the benefits from an alternative, sustainable type of tourism, to begin with more educational input.

The time is ripe for such a mobilization. Thailand's tourism turn shall take place now. Climate warming, we all know, is destroying our most precious resources, like clean water. And its impact is huge on coastal destinations that are threatened by tsunamis and coastal erosion. European tourists know well that travelling Green is the only way to keep the heaven-like reputation of the Kingdom.

What we Need is an Integrated Approach

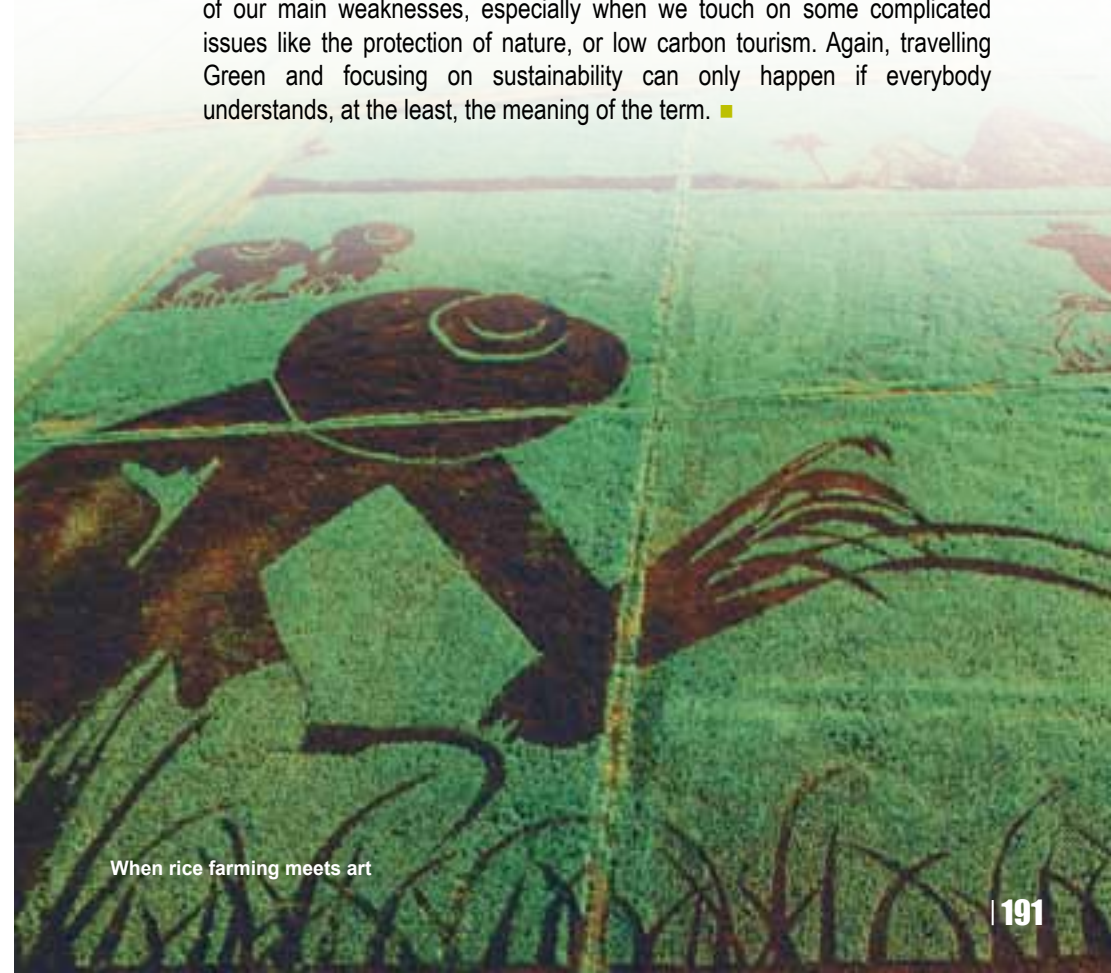
The European Union, with its tradition of homestay and tourism standards, can help us a lot. My own belief is that "Green" is not a concept that can stand alone when it comes to tourism and the travel industry. It is a societal change that we need.

On the visitors' side, we shall encourage them to rediscover the value and virtue of the local culture. Take the example of Northeast Thailand: it has an immense potential in terms of cultural diversity, folk art, traditions, and

agro-tourism. Things differ from one village to another, which makes those Isan provinces perfect hideaway destinations after some days of lying on the beach. We need an integrated approach. Our central government should come up with appropriate standards; our logistics industry should make tremendous efforts to change. How can we pretend to be Green when we rely mainly on car transportation?

Our Cultural Diversity is an Enormous Potential

Let us face the social and economic reality. Green tourism means more trains, more bicycle availability, and more eco-friendly buses. A low carbon tourism can only prosper with a low carbon economy. But this is an enormous challenge. Understanding Green tourism is the key of making it possible. Outside of the main touristic areas, all of them congested and seriously impacting the environment, the level of basic English among the Thai population is too low for foreign visitors to travel alone. It is clearly one of our main weaknesses, especially when we touch on some complicated issues like the protection of nature, or low carbon tourism. Again, travelling Green and focusing on sustainability can only happen if everybody understands, at the least, the meaning of the term. ■



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European Green Cities Network: www.europeangreencities.com

European Environment Agency: www.eea.europa.eu

Asean Centre for Biodiversity: www.aseanbiodiversity.org



Sea Lake, Songkhla

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www.keeptheworldbeautiful.com

Phi Phi Island, Krabi, Thailand

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER



Thai Tourism Going Green

TAT's Seven Greens programme provides a conceptual framework and establishes practical guidelines for carefully balancing tourism promotion and a healthy, sustainable environment in the following seven areas.

Green Heart: to urge tourists to be socially responsible and environmentally aware

Green Logistics: to encourage more environmentally-friendly tourism-related modes of transport

Green Attraction: to promote responsibly managed tourist sites that respect the environment

Green Community: to support community-based tourism in both urban and rural areas that promote conservation of the environment, local traditions and ways of life

Green Activity: to promote tourism activities that are well-suited to local communities.

Green Service: to urge all tourism-related service providers to win hearts and minds by demonstrating respect, care and concern for the environment

Green Plus: to encourage Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) among operators. For example: refraining from causing environmental damage, promoting energy-saving initiatives and renewable energy sources or highlighting environmentally-friendly products



Seven Greens Concept

Enjoy travel, care for the environment.



