

IN THE SPIRIT SHOES OFF, HANDS ON!

Mike Smith may have improved his good fortune by getting in the right spirit and immersing himself in the culture and activities of North East Thailand



Monk collecting alms





Setting free
Pusat Loy Kroh

Carefully leaning over the side of the boat I released my Pusat Loy Kroh into the water to send away any bad luck and ill health from my life via the Mekong River to the sea. Provided I didn't look backwards at the Pusat, good fortune and health would flow into my body according to local beliefs – oops I turned to take a photo!

We'd travelled along a road that never strayed far from the Mekong River or Laos's border, to Chiang Khan, an old riverside town with traditional wooden houses in North East Thailand. We'd started the day before from Udon Thani where we'd had a great lunch including *foie gras* and ant eggs. On arrival we created our Pusat Loy Kroh from banana tree trunks and leaves and bamboo, in the manner of the superstitious local people, then explored the night walking street with its guest houses and souvenir shops.

Up in Alms

Next morning we were up at dawn in a light drizzle to give alms of sticky rice to the monks at Wat Sri Kun Muang temple then boarded a long boat to release our Pusat Loy Krohs and observe life on the river. All before breakfast!

It was going to be a long day as our bags were already packed and we were moving on after a brief stop for delicious coconut chip snacks. However, after seeing the manufacturing process perhaps it wasn't such a great idea to buy so many chips, but hopefully the

flames cremated the flies!

Continuing to Ban Na Or we saw cottage industry workers making bamboo basketry fans, unlike the weavers they didn't get Sunday off! Lunch was at a small lovingly created private museum with farm implements, old typewriters and photographs.

Flower Tree Procession

As is the custom, it was shoes off to pay respects prior to getting hands on as we joined in the community's Flower Tree Procession at the nearby temple having

learned the basic skills of decorating the tree, carrying the bamboo poles doing rhythmic swaying motion, playing long drums and performing a simple local dance. We'd gone native!

Finally we checked into Chachanat Woodland at Pu Rua, an eco resort with beautiful chalets in a reforested area. Surprised by the drinking habits of journalists and travel agents they had to quickly chill a lot of beer as we watched ducks on the pond and listened to bellowing water buffalo and the chit chat of geckos. Amazingly a firefly landed on the table.

A Secluded Temple

Our routine continued next morning with shoes off at a secluded forest temple where a hermit monk was living before exchanging ideas and meditating with monk Phramaha Buipeng at Wat Pa Neramit Vipassana, which was fascinating for some and an experience for others.

Spirits – but not the drinking kind in Dansai.

Dansai, the town of Ghosts and Spirits is a fun, small town in gorgeous countryside. The residents are totally committed to their festive ghosts and spirits which appear everywhere. Whether it is all a marketing gimmick, a result of their faith in their spiritual leaders and animism or a big con trick I have no idea but it was fabulous and I would love to revisit when the Phi Ta Khon ghost festival is on.

The Phi Ta Khon folk museum was excellent, but we were soon back to activities at the Phunacomé Resort which is set in magnificent grounds. Take note that although it can be hot and humid, the view from the swimming pool is terrific and the place to chill out.

Dancing in Dansai

Those expecting more activities were not disappointed and we were soon hands on, once again. Having collected vegetables from the garden for dinner and having made our own designer shampoo from tamarind, salt, honey and an ammonium lauryl sulphate base we constructed wax flower trees.

The flowers were prepared by dipping the tip of a peeled mango into molten

wax then quickly cooling the wax in cold water and removing it. To conclude we painted ghostly masks. Based on the design and colour a local fortune teller determined our personalities, which sometimes he got right and sometimes, he didn't. Being multi-talented, he also sang with the band during a tasty buffet dinner and Phi Ta Khon Dance in which two of our group surprised us by being secretly recruited and performing incognito in the dance troupe.

Taken For a Ride

Returning to my room I noticed swarms of winged insects were attracted to the lights in the open air, hotel corridors.

Strangely, in the morning the floors were littered with thousands of insect wings. Was it geckos, birds, bats or even the Dansai Ghosts which had been enjoying a midnight feast?

Somewhat scarily, our bike ride ended at the morgue where our minibus waited for us. Perhaps with a 5.30am start the organisers feared the worse, but fortunately the only minor injury was a slight wrist sprain. The "Spirit of Dansai" excursion which included, bizarrely, stopping at the houses of local spiritual gurus for meet and greet sessions, but much more interestingly it involved riding along deserted country lanes.



Chalet at Chachanat Woodland Resort



Fisherman and fish traps on Mekong River

A Tribute Offered

We saw schools, wooden water wheel irrigation systems, distant mountains, buffalos, rivers and a happy “Mae Taeng” an assistant of spiritual leader Chao Mae Nag Tiam of Dansai collecting rice grains from community members as there was to be a merit making event the following day. The rice, carried on her shoulders in two baskets, would be cooked and used in the event.

At the historic Lao style Phra That Si Song Rak pagoda, which was built as a symbol of a mutual friendship between the kings of Ayutthaya and Vientiane in the mid 16th century, our flower tree was offered as a tribute to the pagoda. Back at the resort we only had time for a quick shower and breakfast then transferred to the airport for a rather bumpy flight to Bangkok on friendly Nok Air with its charming cabin crew.

More than One Night in Bangkok

Whatever you think of the politics the military coup has made it much easier to travel around Bangkok. The curfew has ended and life goes on. Tourists are made very welcome and indeed the Thailand Travel Mart 2014 continued



Making a flower tree offering

with hundreds of travel operators and media from 46 countries in attendance.

In addition to the Thailand Travel Mart we enjoyed excellent hospitality at the Sukosol Hotel and still had time to explore some nightlife at Soi Cowboy, drinking beer, listening to country music and observing the eye candy, do a bit of shopping at Terminal 21 and to take in a few sights.

Getting around on the sky train beats the traffic and avoids haggling with tuk tuk drivers. After brief visits to the

Pocket Guide

Hotels in Bangkok

Sukosol
www.thesukosol.com

Hotel de Bangkok
www.hoteldebangkok.com

Hotel in Chiang Khan

Chiang Khan River Mountain Hotel
www.chiangkhanrivermountain.com

Hotel in Pu Rua

Chachanat Woodland
www.chachanatwoodland.com

Hotel in Dansai

Phunacome Resort
www.phunacomeresort.com

Airlines

Thai Airways
www.thairways.com

Thai Smile
www.thaismileair.com

Nok Air
www.nokair.com

Tour Organiser

Thailand Eco Adventure
Tourism Association
www.teata.or.th

Victory Monument and Erawan shrine it was time for some peace and quiet.

Jim's Home

I hadn't been to Jim Thompson's House for many years. The industrial mogul devoted his life to redeveloping the Thai silk industry and introduced it to the world's top fashion houses. He is perhaps equally famous for his sudden disappearance, without trace, in the Malaysian jungle in 1967.

Jim Thompson had a great sense of style. The well maintained gardens and six wooden structures are filled with treasures and a delight to visit. As expected, inside the living area it was shoes off but on this occasion hands off too!!

I've been to Thailand many times, and like most people, was a little unsure about visiting during the coup. I felt perfectly safe and didn't have to change my schedule at all. Thailand is open for business and the North East is ideal for those wanting to get away from it all to experience hands on local culture and activities. 



Cycling in Dansai



Dansai ghost souvenir figurines