

**DISCOVER THAILAND**

## Kayaking on city's fringes

### ***Forget the seafood and temples of Samut Prakan for a while and fancy paddling all the way down to the Gulf of Thailand***

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A fleet of brightly-coloured kayaks stands out in brown canal waters that pour into the sea in Samut Prakan.



In order to reach a temple you have to walk a narrow wooden bridge that zigzags through the entire length of a prawn farm.



The red side wall of a building that houses a shrine dedicated to local fishermen shines in the glare of the afternoon sun.



Visitors look for colourful crabs in mangrove forest while walking over a wooden bridge.

Want to try something different, like going kayaking some place near Bangkok? Well, it may sound far-fetched but that is exactly what a tour operator is offering: a chance to paddle in the brackish waters of Samut Prakan, a province bordering Bangkok, more famous for its factories, seafood, temples and mangrove forest.

The company is offering day-long paddling excursions in entirely natural settings in an estuary of the Chao Phraya River that to subscribers can be both challenging and educational given its scope and the attractions that lie along the route.

Laem Fa Pha, or Cape of Thunder, in Phra Samut Chedi district is a green strip hidden behind jak \_ nipa palm trees and mangrove forest that offer adventure lovers an opportunity to escape the monotony of city life and try their hand at something different.

The name may sound threatening but Laem Fa Pha, quite to contrary, is very quiet and peaceful. The coastal village of Ban Khun Samut is off-limits by road, accessible only by boat. The only noise you hear here is made by motor boats ferrying commuters along the canal. It's hard to believe there could exist next to Bangkok a community that couldn't accessed by road.

Last Saturday I was panting with fatigue on a light craft after having fought against the tide for two hours with the sun beating down fiercely on my uncovered limbs. A novice paddler, I was fortunate to have somebody more experienced as my companion who helped me push the craft to an isolated section of the waterway. Sailing with us were five other crafts of different colours that had drawn the attention of boat commuters and canalside residents.

"It's a good time to paddle here now," my partner Chaowarit said before we got into the act. "At other times of the year it can be more exhausting because the currents tend to be volatile depending on the tide.

I stopped paddling briefly trying to concentrate on a mud goby that caught my attention as we pushed our craft into the muddy water. It was trying to flee but somehow got itself trapped in the craft. It had big protruding eyes and clumsy brown figure. Momentarily I was scared because I thought it was a baby croc or a snake.

For almost three hours we pushed forward and still there was no sign of the sea. Then the canal disappeared behind a blind curve and since we were the lead craft Chaowarit signalled me to head for the nearest pier.



**Before a wooden bridge was built, monks had to walk on huge vats when the tide was high.**

As I tried to tie the craft to the pier I was asked to haul it and carry it over for the next leg of the trip which was kayaking in a prawn farm. We hauled the craft over our shoulders and headed to another pier which also happened to be the house of the village headman.

I was excited as this was going to be my first time kayaking in a prawn farm. Chaowarit filled me in about prawn farming. He said villagers filled up their farms by channelling in natural sea water and along with that came baby shrimp, clams and crabs.

The village headman's house stood out from the rest as it was painted in bright green and yellow. The colours were attenuated by the presence of a red building next to it that housed a Chinese shrine. Further up were a cluster of houses in a mangrove forest linked by a dirt track.

After a copious seafood lunch we enjoyed a moment of rest in the shade. The red building is shrine of Noom Noi Loi Chai built and dedicated to a young boy who is revered by villagers, and it's his image that it houses. According to local folklore, every time fishermen cast their nets they came up with the image and each time they threw the image back into water. After some time the fishermen, most of whom were of Chinese ancestry, decided to build a shrine and dedicate it to the boy.

The village head was a woman by the name of Samorn. She came to meet us and proceeded to tell that she and her village were facing an uncertain future because the sea was slowly but definitely driving them to extinction.

"It's a losing battle that we are waging," she lamented.

"Five years ago I came to work here," said a doctor. "The sea was one kilometre away from here. Now it has come much closer. Some houses and a former public health centre are gone forever."

Phuyai Samorn, as locals call her, said the encroaching sea has driven several families away and is now threatening Phra Samut Chedi itself. The government must take immediate action by building dykes to protect this shrinking Chinese-Thai community.

We walked on boards that zigzag through bushes that lead to a temple. The sea opened before us. Silt-laden water marked the beginning of the Gulf of Thailand. A fellow pointed to an island on the horizon. "That could be Si Chang island," he said.

It was evening, the tide was rising and soon the temple would be submerged in water. It was time for us to leave