

DISCOVER THAILAND

Remote and rustic

Mukdahan and Savanakhet still remind of the times when they were part of the same kingdom

Story and pictures by Peerawat Jariyasombat

The mighty Mekong meanders through the northeastern provinces of Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan, and Ubon Ratchathani baring a wealth of ancient temples, houses and breathtaking scenery along the course. "I am going to Muk," Thongbian Kotsakhung, a professional guide attached to Ploy Palace Hotel said. "Want to come along?" he asked the kids teasingly as they stood on the bank watching us.

"Muk" is short for Mukdahan, a province by the banks of the Mekong. On the other side of the river is Laos.

The kids were excited and ran closer to the bank to watch our brightly-coloured kayak that was the focus of their attention. They waved, cheering us, like everywhere else in the region as we would find out later. The people of Mukdahan were friendly and had a ready smile for everybody visiting the province.

The river was wide at this point but the current still strong. We were able to steer our dinghy with a minimum of effort. We stayed close to the bank using the cover of trees and thick green foliage to blank out the heat from the sun that beat down relentlessly on us this day.

We sailed past temples, fish farms and makeshift vegetable plantations enjoying the scenery.

On the opposite side of the river, colonial style buildings against a backdrop of dense forest told us it was Savanakhet, now part of Laos. In 1893, after the Mekong became the demarcation line between Laos and Thailand, Mukdahan and Savanakhet were split into two separate provinces. Now more than a century later while politics and the river continue to divide the land, the lifestyle and faith of its peoples, who still see each other as one, hasn't changed.

In 1776 Prince Kinaree of Savanakhet came to Mukdahan and established it as an extension of his kingdom. According to popular legend which gave Mukdahan its name, there was a palm tree whose main stem had bifurcated into a cluster of seven branches forming a prominent canopy on top. Every evening a fireball would rise from the canopy and fly out disappearing over the river before returning to the tree at dawn. Locals called the fireball Kaew Mukda or precious stone. Mukdahan therefore, is the "land of precious stone".

Back then Mukdahan stretched all the way to Savanakhet in Laos and the Vietnamese border.

The peoples of Savanakhet and Mukdahan share similar faith: they believe in the Naga and Phra That Phanom, a big stupa housing Lord Buddha's relic that dates back to 535 BC.



Rain, wind and sun have beaten these rocks into stunning shapes at Phu Pha Therb, Mukdahan National Park.



A fisherman plies the mighty Mekong River in his boat in search of a decent catch.



Statues of Lord Buddha in various postures at Wat Lattikawan in Mukdahan.



Murals at Wat Bo Sri in Mukdahan.

Phra That Phanom is located in Nakhon Phanom province next to Mukdahan, and is the fountain of faith for people in the region.

The white stupa is 57 metres high and decorated with 200 pieces of diamond and 16 golden umbrellas grace its top. Beginning 535 BC, Phra That was built over a period of time by five kings. Initially, it stood just eight metres tall, but subsequent renovations and additions by succeeding monarchs took the stupa to its current height.

Suffice to say Buddhism took roots in the Isan region 2,538 years ago. From Nakhon Ratchasima all the way up to the frontier provinces of Nakhon Phanom and Mukdahan, the towns, districts and villages are dotted with temples big and small, and interspersed with infinite stretches of green rice fields.

The northeastern region of Thailand is the cradle of Buddhism. Follow the Mekong and you will understand how the river has nourished and shaped the lifestyle and culture of Isan people since the earliest times. Like its people, Isan folk art is not delicate and striking but something simple and straightforward, as seen in temple specimen.

Isan people call the ubosoth_ Thai word for chapel _ sim. The sim in the Northeast is smaller compared to those in Thailand's central region. Some measure only 4x4 metres but are still good for prayer and meditation.

The sim of Wat Bo Sri, a temple built in 1916 and located in Wan Yai district, is also small. It has distinct Laotian windows based on Lan Chang architecture and murals depicting the last life of Lord Buddha.

Not far from there is another temple, Wat Mano Bhirom, whose sim is a model of creativity. Strange-looking Nagas that will momentarily throw you off balance guard the main entrance adorned with elaborate pieces of art carved on wood mirroring the people's centuries-old faith in religion.

Beside folk art, people also come to Wat Mano Bhirom to pay their respects to a rare statue of Lord Buddha carved from ivory. The ivory came from a bull elephant in the stable of the King of Vientiane. It was washed to Mukdahan's shores following the flood of 1869. When told about its whereabouts the king decided to donate the ivory to the temple. It was so big that local craftsmen, apart from the main statue, managed to carve out six smaller ones from the royal sample.

"The main statue has been stolen three times, and every time tragedy has struck those who tried to take it away from the temple. The last time it went missing, people found the statue in a pond. The ivory statue made bubbles in the pond, like when water boils," Thongbian said.

Wat Lattikawan in tambon Chanote not far from Mano Bhirom temple is another temple with a lovely collection of folk art. The temple has replicas of important dates and places in the life of Lord Buddha. Touring the compound you can learn about his life in minutes visiting a replica of his place of birth and where he achieved enlightenment.

Frankly speaking, folk arts on display at the temples were by no means as intricate as those found in some other parts of the country, but they were certainly not lacking in intensity. And the most important part was that they gave an insight into the history, faith and psychology of the people of Isan.



Sang Chan Waterfall in Ubon Ratchathani.



The ubosoth of Wat Mano Bhirom in Mukdahan is a model of creativity.



Built over a period by five kings, Phra That Phanom dates back 535 BC.

Thongbian led me to a pond surrounded by figures of animals, angels, and the Naga or serpent.

"Over there is Anodard, the great lake in heaven. The Naga enjoys bathing in it. Every time it does so, it creates a big splash sending water overflowing the lake resulting in rain on Earth. And mind you, rain is good for rice crop," Thongbian as he tried to explain how religion and the life of Isan people were intertwined.

"Thanks to the Naga in the heaven the whole of Isan including Mukdahan becomes one vast rice plantation during rainy season," he added.

The vast stretches of greens were refreshing to the soul. We enjoyed the rural life and the sight of local people and their ready smiles, children frolicking in the fields and buffaloes tilling the land, all against the backdrop of the mighty Mekong in full flow.

Less than 20 kilometres from Mukdahan, on Highway 2034, we stopped to admire the rugged rocks of Phu Pha Therb.

As part of Mukdahan National Park, Phu Pha Therb is essentially a random grouping of rocks of various forms beaten into shape over centuries by the natural elements of rain, wind, and sun. You can see huge rocks anchored on small foundations when the water has receded. Some look like giant mushroom, others are in shape of huts, lions, etc, etc. We set out to explore the stone park. It was like walking in natural play ground

"That is the crocodile rock. It looks like a crocodile but it's not dangerous. Climb up here, and you will see a huge footprint. It's probably a dinosaur's," Thongbian said.

Since the tide had receded, we saw huge rocks anchored to the ground through tiny finger-like extensions around their base, giving a false impression that they collapse under their weight any moment.

These were sandstone rocks that had absorbed of moisture and in due time they would prove a suitable breeding ground for some form of plant life, like wild flowers, that are seen here at the end of rainy season _ from October to November.

"This is sundew. It's a sticky gel like dew drops. Insects are attracted to it and in the end pay it with their dear life.

"I have never understood why sundew preys on insects," Thongbian said.

Five kilometres from the park is Mujjaln, where you can see flowers in bloom at this time of the year, go trekking to waterfalls.

If you travel to Ubon Ratchathani where the Mekong enters Laos, there are many impressive attractions along the way. The Pha Taem National Park is a valley of flowers and less than a kilometre from Soy Sawan Waterfall, a nice place to picnic on weekends.

Steep cliffs and sandstone valley reveal another side of Isan. Clear streams from dense forest cut through a vast plateau before going into a free fall fifty metres below. Some tourists prefer the smaller Sang Chan Waterfall also in the same park. It's less than ten metres high but its water comes out of a huge hole in the rock wall. On full moon nights it draws throngs of revellers.



Soy Sawan Waterfall in Ubon Ratchathani.



Wild flowers in Phu Pha Therb rock park.



Travel tips

Mukdahan is 642 kilometres from Bangkok. You can drive through Nakhon Ratchasima-Maha Sarakham-Roi Et to Mukdahan or take the Khon Kaen-Kalasin-Mukdahan route.

Coaches leave the Northeast Bus Terminal every evening. Check the schedule/fare at 02-537-8055.

Phra That Phanom is located in That Phanom district of Nakhon Phanom straddling Wan Yai district of Mukdahan. From Muang district of Mukdahan, Phra That is about an hour's drive.

For people living by the Mekong, fish is the staple dish but once you get to Kabao Rapids in Mukdahan roasted pork tops the menu. From Kaew Mukdahan Tower downtown you can see a full sweep of the River and Savanakhet in Laos. The tower exhibits antiques, photos of different ethnic groups in the province, local tools and historical artefacts. The admission fee is 20 baht per person.

The Indochinese Market located by Mekong River is a good place for shopping. On sale are products from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam at very attractive prices. The market opens 7 a.m. until sunset.

Phu Pha Therb is located in Mukdahan National Park, about 15 kilometres from Muang district on Highway 2034. It's about 1.5 kilometres off the highway.

Soy Sawan Waterfall is located in Pha Taem National Park of Ubon Ratchathani. You can reach the waterfall by Highway 2112. The waterfall is 500 metres from the parking area.

Sang Chan Waterfall can be reached by car. It's located at the intersection between Highways 2112 and 2135. A small road leads to the waterfall.

For more information call TAT's Region 4 office; tel: 042-513-490 to 1.