

HIDEAWAYS

Homestay visitors catching on

Located in the middle of nowhere, Gecko Villa offers foreign tourists a chance to live the Thai way of life

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Back to nature: Gecko Villa guarantees peace and privacy.



Relax at the private pool with a view to the rice fields.

Most visitors to Thailand stick to the well-trodden paths leading to major tourist destinations _ Phuket, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, etc _ staying in hotels throughout the course of their visit. However, repeat visitors as well as a growing number of more individually-oriented visitors now seek out unusual places that are off the tourist trail that offer the chance to experience life as it is lived by the Thai people. They are more and more aware that such a stay not only allows them to meet new friends, but also offers greater value for money when the cost of hotel rooms transport and meals is taken into account.

Gecko Villa, set amidst the rice fields of Isaan (northeast region) and cattle farm, is one such place. It is located in Prajak Sinlapakom district of Udon Thani province. Whilst Udon itself is primarily an agricultural trading town, it is surrounded by rice fields and small rural villages where traditions are still strong and the rhythm of village life has remained largely unchanged despite the advent of industrialisation and globalisation.

Khun Bongkot, the owner of Gecko Villa, lives with his wife and two sets of twins in a small village about 30 minutes drive out of Udon. Nearby, in the middle of rice fields surrounded by woodlands, sugar cane plantations and grazing ground, they have built a property to accommodate friends and adventurous tourists who call in occasionally. The property is set on over 60 rai of farmland and has two air-conditioned king-size bedrooms, a large living and dining room, a fully equipped kitchen and balconies, all built around an internal walled garden and a private swimming pool with views to rice fields.

Constructed in the local style with an eye on Thai architectural tradition, the house is built on stilts and is composed of three inter-linked buildings. Certain elements were designed with visitors in mind. Clearly, visitors enjoy the experience but wanted certain creature comforts so the bedrooms and living rooms are air-conditioned, while the private swimming pool made from hand-made tiles allows guests an opportunity to relax and enjoy the hot weather, and the ensuite shower garden in the master bedroom is a welcome change from hermetically sealed hotel bathrooms.

"We do not have a steady stream of guests," said Khun Bongkot, "but those who do come, very often come back. In general, they have been to Thailand before and are looking for a more genuine experience, and I think they like the fact that they are welcomed as friends rather than hotel clients. We do not have menus or price lists. If guests want a certain kind of food, we will prepare it for them. If they want to be driven to Ban Chiang or to Nong Harn lake, we will take them there. If they want to learn Thai cooking, we teach them. If they need laundry, we do it. All free of charge _ as we want them to feel at home.

"Guests have been diverse, including a retired couple from the UK who come back each year, an American studying the cultivation of rice in Asia, to honeymoon couples, merchant bankers, families, and army personnel on leave from Iraq. Some simply want to be left alone to relax by the pool and soak up the sun. Some want to visit local festivals and try out even the most adventurous local specialities such as insects and beef or pork cooked in raw blood or laap.

"All of them like our tom yam kung made from fresh king prawns," Bongkot, a former chef, explained.

Some of the things to do at Gecko include learning to cook Thai or Isaan food or enjoying a barbecue;

relaxing by the pool; exploring the surroundings' numerous temples and villages _ either on foot, by bicycle or by car; visiting the Ban Chiang National Museum and archeological digs nearby; and seeking out local handicraft such as pottery, bamboo products, silk etc.

Some like to try their hand at planting rice and harvesting; riding water buffalo; enjoy the local Mor Lam festival or indigenous rice whisky parties; offer alms to monks living in forests; and visit nearby attractions such as Na Yoong Nam Som Forest Park, Na Kha village (famous for its handwoven khit cloth), Phu Phra Bat Historical Park at the foot of the Khao Phu Phan etc.

Visits to Vientiane, the capital of Laos, can also be arranged from Gecko Villa as Nong Khai and the Mekong River are only about an hour away from there.

Travel tips

Getting there: Thai Airways has three daily flights from Bangkok to Udon Thani, one in the morning, one at midday and one in the evening. Transport from the airport is free of charge.

Rates: Depending on the number of guests, all-inclusive rates start at Baht 3,600 per night for the entire Villa.

Further details and reservations: www.geckovilla.com

Tel. 01-918-0500 (English) or 07-008-8134 (Thai)