

Adventure on the rapids

White-water rafting on Pai and Kong rivers is exciting but it requires nerves of steel

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I asked myself why the wind had swept me back to Mae Hong Son, a misty town lying in the foothills of mountains straddling the Thai-Burmese border in the northwest of Thailand. I had travelled some 245 kilometres from Chiang Mai negotiating 1,865 curves on mountain roads and there must be a good reason for doing it. It must be the characteristics of northern Thai culture and atmosphere combined with the countless attractions of nature that prompted me to return to Mae Hong Son.

Not only a hundred unspoiled caves scattered around in the jungle clad-hills were awaiting to be explored, but also white-water rafting expedition on rivers that can be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for adventure travellers.

If you are not already aware, Mae Hong Son was once voted by globetrotters and overseas travel magazines as one of the most challenging destinations in Southeast Asia. White-water rafting expeditions on Pai River offer visitors exciting tours in a natural environment. No matter how old you are or what your gender, the bottom line is you need nerves of steel to do it. The excitement, the remoteness of the location, the skills involved and cordial guides, all combine to create a magical experience.

In the late afternoon after arrival, I met Khun Mesa Chaipanittarkoon or Kai, the tour manager of A-Adventure who invited me to join a two-day-trip down the Kong and Pai rivers with a group of overseas travel representatives.

That evening we had dinner and were briefed by rafting guides, who told us what to expect and how to pack our belongings. We used the rest of the time to get acquainted with each other.

I found out that while the favourite was a two-day/one night package with stops at specific places, including cave visits and hiking, a day-long trip could also be organised on request.

It was over ten years ago when the first inflatable rubber rafts were brought into Thailand by US marines seeking a bit of adventure on the rivers of the North.

Kai said: "90 percent of the tourists come from Europe and America, they like white-water rafting on the Pai River and camping in virgin forests of Mae Hong Son. Rafting during the rainy season carries class-3 risk."

An early call woke me up for breakfast, and soon we're in the back of the pick up truck with our rafting guide and his helpers for the 65-kilometre drive up north to Ban Mae La Na, a Lahu village close to the border. Ban Mae La Na is famous for its long white-water rafting excursions. It is the meeting point of two rivers. You can also trek to Tham Mae La Na, a large limestone cave eight kilometres long.



Tents are provided if you don't want to sleep in bamboo huts.



After a long and eventful day on the river tourists gather for dinner.



A villager walks the jungle trail leading to Ban Mae La Na.



Breaking journey at Zoo Zaa waterfall deep in the forest for a cold dip.



Negotiating the rapids in the midst of gorges was both a challenge and adventure that was thoroughly exciting.

A narrow track led us to the Kong River. As we approached the river the scenery turned spectacular. I heard the sound of water hitting against the rocks and insects humming. Our guides then gave us a second briefing. It was more detailed than the previous day. There was a lot to absorb and they rightly didn't tell us everything in one go, only when the need arose to make for a safe and exciting trip.

After being told how to sit on the raft, our gear was loaded on to it and we were issued life jackets and helmets. For one member of our party it was his first time in such conditions and he was clearly excited by the prospect. We set off and were almost immediately enveloped by the green of the forest.

“Let's go, begin slowly. That's right... great”, our guide intoned. In the beginning the water was smooth and we oared slowly. Our efforts were clumsy at first but as we got further down the river we began to improve and operate as a team.



The lush green and picturesque jungle surrounding Ban Mae La Na.

While it was still only mid-morning, the sun was high and it was quite warm and very dry _ the water in the Kong River is heavy with silt and looked more like coffee shake.

Although you come across rapids at frequent intervals, we encountered our first about four or five kilometres downstream. The front of the raft took in more water than the rear. But we had able hands in the bow. The rest remained mid-raft to savour the experience. It was wet and it was cold, but it was fun as well.

We stopped for lunch at Zoo Zaa waterfall. I was struck by the sight of the beautiful waterfall _ 300 meters long _ on the slopes of a deep forest. Flowers, moss and ferns surrounded the base of the waterfall. It was a powerful cataract and a loud fusion of muddy brown and white spray. Some members of our party went for a swim, while others hung around idly and some went and stood under the waterfall.

The first day we travelled 15 kilometres and negotiated three rapids. It was a testing ride and a new experience for all of us onboard. In the late afternoon after we beached the raft at a camp in the jungle and our guide set up a kitchen while the rest of us helped each other making beds and erecting mosquito nets. We gathered for drinks after everyone had settled their gear and cleaned up for the day. Dinner was a Thai dish of fried vegetables with oyster sauce and omelette soup with steamed rice.

After dinner I enjoyed a peaceful guitar recital provided by our multi-talented guide. As the sun set on the forest, I tried to settle down for a night under the bright stars and listened to songs late into the night sung impressively by our guide who clearly had plenty still left in him after the long hectic day on the river.

We heard the wake up call at about 7 a.m. and got up to watch the sun climb over the ravine. I had a large breakfast of eggs, fruit and toast cooked on an open fire. Then we got the raft loaded. The camp police checked out if our guide had instructed us visitors to clean the campground of all trash. After inspecting the site he was satisfied and wished us a good day.

We passed a gorge flanked by towering trees. The view was fantastic. We were rowing in a virgin forest in the basin of Pai River _ a sanctuary under the care of the Mae Hong Son Forestry Department.

We rowed through narrow and fast rapids before ending the excursion with a party by the bank of the river. By every count it was a memorable trip. I had made new friends. The teamwork was excellent. It left me with warm memories of a time well spent.

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