

Vineyards and winery

Wild gaurs, grape fields and mist-clad mountains make for an intoxicating concoction on Khao Yai National Park

Story and pictures by PEERAWAT JARIYASOMBAT

Agricultural projects are changing a remote mountainous stretch of Khao Yai National Park in Wang Nam Khieu district of Nakhon Ratchasima into a charming hideaway.



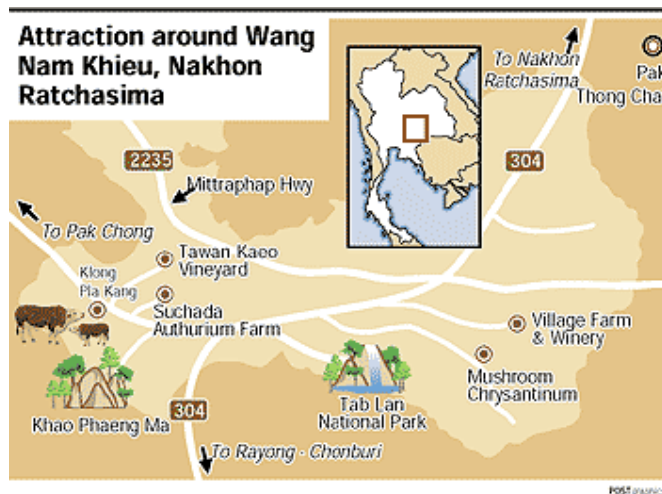
You can choose the flowers yourself from the plantation.

"I am a farmer. I own 100 rai here."

"Wonderful. But you are a woman. How do you manage it?"

The whole forest was in complete silence. From the observation tower by a vast savannah a group of tourists watched a flock of gaurs graze freely from a distance of 200 metres. They kept chatting away until the gaurs overheard them and fled into the bushes.

"They can smell our presence. What a pity," they kept talking much to the annoyance of the park officer.



Klong Pla Kang is a new wildlife watching spot that allows tourists to observe gaurs and other animals from a convenient distance without the need to use binoculars. It is part of Khao Paeng Ma forest.

Every evening gaurs traverse the savannahs to enjoy grazing. They have enjoyed the privacy for years without being bothered by noisy tourists.

Today, more and more tourists are coming to Wang Nam Khieu, a picturesque mountainous area on the quieter side of Khao Yai, to explore various farms and fruit plantations. The misty horizon and evergreen jungle make tourists jealous of farmers who live there.

"Here it is not a resort. We run a farm and the accommodation we provide blends perfectly with nature." said Khun Janjira Phianphanich and invited me to visit her vineyard.

Situated on a calm misty hill, the Village Farm & Winery is a major wine producer in the area. It has a large barn which has been turned into an open-air lobby and restaurant where visitors can relax and enjoy the simple atmosphere. The barn is sparsely furnished to give it a real rustic feel. From there you can see farmers at work. Behind the barn is the storage room where farm implements are kept.

The mountain breeze sometimes blows away the mist that usually covers the farms in the evening and morning baring colourful flowerbeds and neatly planted Shiraz grapevines.

The Village Farm & Winery sprawls 200 rai over mountain slopes that enjoy temperate weather. Monsoon rains keep the area wet from May to October which is followed by the chill of winter until February, the ideal climate for growing grapes.

"We grow rose in front of grape rows. The rose plant serves as an indicator. If the rose flower or leaves get infected by fungi it can be more easily detected. We know then that it spells trouble for the entire grape plantation."

Normally, the liveliest period for the farm is winter, particularly November to December, when grape plants bear fruit. At other times of the year the farm is usually quiet, except on weekends when tourists come to sample local wine and food prepared from vegetables freshly plucked from the farm.

The Village Farm & Winery has been operating for a decade now. It was conceived along traditional French lines beginning with improving and perfecting the quality of grapes grown on its farms.

"When the French wine expert first visited here, the whole farm was clad in mist all day. So he gave it the name Chateau des Brumes or castle in the mist."

Once you step inside the winery, you will notice that its old-fashioned architecture houses modern wine-making equipment. It incorporates wine-making skills and technology adopted from Australia, France and Israel. Attention is paid to every detail. The wine, particularly the special ones, are aged in oak barrels at a stable temperature of 16 degrees Celsius.

"This wine was selected to serve delegation attending the Apec summit Thailand hosted last year," wine-maker Suradej Busabong, pouring the red wine into a glass for me to sample.

The sparkling red Chateau des Brumes 2002 had a fine crimson colour with bouquet of ripe red fruits and hints of oak. The cellar-aged late-release wine was rich and dry, and went well with the big portion of beef steak served for dinner. Sipping wine in the quiet barn by the vineyard was a nice soothing experience.

For those who don't enjoy wine, there are easy corners under the shade of trees to relax in privacy.

I spent the night at the farm's sunset terrace house, a two-storey wooden villa comprising 15 rooms. The guestrooms on the ground floor have joint terrace facing the valley. But rooms on the loft can open through. Built in farmhouse style, all the rooms are decorated simply for real relaxation. None of the guestrooms have television or air-conditioning.

"Just open the door and the mountain breeze will filter in to keep you cool. But in winter it is quite cold here so guests prefer staying in the loft. It is much warmer there," said Suradej.

Early morning the next day, sitting by the glass window of the lobby, I saw a thick layer of mist shrouding the valley before me. I spent the time sipping coffee and listening my favourite songs from the CD player. Other guests went to the barn for their morning coffee and breakfast.



From top:
A farmer on a routine round of the vineyard. Wang Nam Khieu is an emerging wine-making industry; Authurium fields at Suchada Farm; A farmer checks table grapes of Nan Fah (middle) and Black Queen species.



From top: Enjoying open-air breakfast in natural settings. The barn is shrouded in thick mist every morning.

The owner has another 2,000-rai vineyard some 20 kilometres away where table grapes are grown. Thousands of rows of grapevines carpet the slopes. It is another world altogether. But if you don't want to venture that far there are other farms in the vicinity that grow table grapes, notably the seedless variety. Most of vineyards also sell bottled grape juice.



A comfortable corner of the Village Farm & Winery.

Those who drive to Khao Phaeng Ma may notice an anthurium farm on the right hand side, some four kilometres off Highway 304. Sprawling 20 rai, this is the Suchada Farm that is home to some 20-30 species of anthuriums. It's nice watching their bright red and pink blossoms dotting the landscape. The blooms last for a few weeks.

The anthuriums are sold at prices ranging from 10 to 30 baht each, depending on the size and species. If you are looking for very special prices, visit the farm on Saturday. After cutting and segregating the flowers for wholesale delivery, the farm puts the rest on sale, each specimen costing a few baht only.

Another delightful for flower lovers is the chrysanthemum plantation in Ban Thai Samakkee. Many houses grow the bright-yellow flowers and allow customers to select them from the plantation itself. Vegetarian and health conscious tourists spend more time here buying vegetables and mushroom free of chemicals.

Although these plantations are beginning to draw more tourists to Wang Nam Khieu, the district is relatively quiet and peaceful, particularly on weekdays. I drove up there and came across only a handful of tourists.

But the rush is certainly on with land prices skyrocketing to 100,000 baht per rai in Wang Nam Khieu. I can imagine the future of wild gaur and its green rolling hills in a few years from now.

TRAVEL Tips

Wang Nam Khieu: is a southern district of Nakhon Ratchasima. Motorist from Bangkok can go via Highway 7, then get on Highway 314 and head for Chachoengsao before turning right into Highway 304.

Klong Pla Kang: is 23 kilometres off Highway 304. Watching gaur, visitors are advised to keep quiet. Late afternoon is a good time to be at Klong Pla Kang forestry unit. Binoculars are available, but you can carry your own to play it safe.

Village Farm & Winery: is six kilometres from Wang Nam Khieu district office. It offers various packages that include accommodation, dinner and breakfast. Several types of rooms are available. It is especially recommended for those who love staying on farms and enjoy the quiet of the countryside. For more information, call 044-228-407 to 9.

Wine buffs should visit the farm during October to December when the Nouveau red wine is ready for sampling. It is a blend between Shiraz and Black Queen grapes.

Alternative choice of accommodations include Wang Nam Khieu View (044-228-060 to 2), Krissawan Farm (044-0228-465), and Ban Rai Rim Than (01-9775-317).

Suchada Anthurium Farm: (01-6525-404) offers flower all year round, with special prices offered every Saturday.

Tawankao Vineyard: produces fresh table grapes and grape juice. November is the grape season. For more information, call 01-372-8411, 01-2590-694.

The Chrysanthemum Plantation: is located in Thai Samakkee. Its seeds and flowers are available for sale. For more information call Mr Somprasong Pradapmuk at 09-627-2765.

For more information about attractions and accommodation call Wang Nam Khieu district at 044-228-245 to 6.