

krabi

Oct 2014

magazine

KHAO SOK

the other emerald jewel

NEW WINE IN KRABI

the time is wine o'clock

SILENT RETREAT

shutting up and shutting out for ten days



DINING - TRAVEL - LIFESTYLE - LEISURE - REVIEWS - WELLNESS

Seeing Green



As we turn off the main road to Phuket headed north and whiz along the roads through Khao Phanom, shadows of the crags creep over us. These karsts are definitely not like the others, and for those of us who've lived here long enough and have become used to the scene, it's like seeing them all over for the first time. Unlike Krabi, they tower over the clouds and jut up through the sky.

We arrive at Khao Sok Paradise Resort greeted with ice-cold glasses of homemade hibiscus tea, a nice reprieve from the bipolar nature of the weather which at that moment, is screaming hot after a burst of rain. We take a moment to imbibe the vista of endless hues of green from the terrace restaurant as they cascade over, under and all around the limestone mountains. Even with the buzz and bustle of the jungle, it's noticeably quiet and still, and we realize it has taken us entirely too long in our years of residing in Krabi to make it here.

The staff had just picked up a few shrimp and a puffer fish under the bridges leading to the tree houses. When the nearby Sok river tides rise, the waters sweep through parts of the resort and leave behind tiny beings as the flow fades back to the river. Just a normal Monday.

From the chaos of the hotel industries in busier parts of Thailand, Eric and his wife Theeranuch sought refuge in Khao Sok years ago. In search of more freedom to be with their three children and find balance, the couple used their hospitality industry experience to build a resort that reflected the same values. Tree houses – even deluxe ones – and bamboo bungalows dot the premises,



each outfitted with all the right comforts and the outdoor space that the scenery practically mandates from visitors. In fact, it's their deep love of nature that defines their modus operandi; an unimposing resort that's compatible with its surroundings in structure, size and operation. Outfitters used are locally sustained, eco-tourism operators that aim to appreciate nature with minimal impact.



Conservation is increasingly an urgent issue in one of the oldest rainforests on the planet that's seen decades of conflict and exploitation. In 1944 an epidemic nearly wiped out the population, and beginning in the '60's was an influx of logging and mining industries that had unmitigated consequences on the rich biodiversity of the area. It wasn't until the late '70's when a communist insurgent occupancy inadvertently began to divert efforts to protect the pristine area. While travellers often overlook Khao Sok in favor of the nearby beaches, treetop camps such as this still aim to complement this wild and wonderful oasis, even with the few visitors that do make it there. Eric and Theeranuch see community-based eco-tourism as the key to the park's long-term survival.

In 1944 an epidemic nearly wiped out the population, and beginning in the '60's was an influx of logging and mining industries that had unmitigated consequences on the rich biodiversity of the area.

Khao Sok Paradise Resort is one of only three treetop camps that offer eco-friendly visits to the wildlife sanctuaries with local, independent and experienced guides. Eric is also the pioneer of the Jungle Survivor trek, a multi-day journey that provides survival and conservation education in this complex and delicate ecosystem. Tuk is his trusted guide whom has been living in Khao Sok and trekking through the jungle his entire life.

In only a few days, Khao Sok cast its unavoidable spell on us just as it had Eric and Theeranuch years prior; a sharp contrast to other landscape hotspots of Thailand. Even under the intermittent deluges

of rain in green season, Khao Sok is a nature lover's paradise, a green paradise of the deepest, most vibrant shades. Three days was merely a fleck on the surface of this mystifying haven of wildlife and biodiversity.

For more information, there are several forms of contact. Phone: 083-306-0144, Website: www.khaosok-hotels.com, Email: khaosok.hotels@gmail.com, Facebook: KhaoSok Paradise Resort





Thailand's Secret Garden

Khao Sok National Park is what desktop screen savers are made of and yet, it's not highly visited. One of the oldest and richest terrestrial ecosystems on Earth, it's a world of awe-inducing sights and adventures, and this is certainly not an exhaustive list. The dry season (November-May) is ideal for jungle treks. Waterfalls and canoeing are best in the green season. Explore away.

KAYAKING/TUBING SOK RIVER

Snaking through the mountains, some sheer-faced cliffs drop off right into the water without the ease of a bank. Even in green season under a light afternoon mist, the postcard views are majestic as billowy clouds frame peaks in just the right way. Every trip includes a break - bamboo cups filled with coffee heated over a fire with which to take pause at the scenery. Advanced level kayaking skills not needed as a local professional will paddle so visitors can take it all in. For the more adventurous, tubing the river is the way to go. Be not mistaken that this is a "lazy" river however, and be mindful of the safety guidelines in some of the faster moving areas.

ROMANEE HOT SPRINGS

Like any other hot springs, a visit here involves cancelling all other post-hot springs plans; it's hard to operate in a melted state. In Thailand, there are abundant emergences of this geothermally heated groundwater from the Earth's mantle, and Romanee is located an approximate 15-minute drive from Khao Sok Paradise Resort. Four pools varying in heat between 20 to 50 °C are available, and both visitors and locals alike can be found soaking. The waters high mineral content is believed to have therapeutic value. The hot springs are locally sustained by the community. As such, they share the expenses for operating the pools by charging a small entrance fee to the public.





NIGHT SAFARI

The wild things come out at night. Since many of the animals sleep during the heat of the day, they are nocturnal and thus, hunt and move about mostly at night. This is partly attributed to the fact that animals here have been preyed upon for nearly 50,000 years; naturally wary of humans, restricting movement to the dark hours may well just be another strategy for survival. Visitors have a chance to see wild boar, deer, civet cats, slow loris, serows, bears, perhaps even a wild elephant, among many other roamers of the dark. Sightings of the slow loris and civets are most common. An experienced guide is needed for this trek.

JUNGLE TREKKING

At 790 sq.km of protected area, the Khao Sok National Park has a myriad of treks, waterfalls and caves to explore in an enduring forest canopy abundant in flora and fauna. While there is ample trekking available for the hardier footed, there is plenty for the casual hiker as well. Online resources, guidebooks, and most notably the park headquarters are a great place to start. A typical Cheow Lan Lake day trip will include a trek to three fascinating caves – most notably Namtaloo Cave - in the Tone Tuey Creek area. Wading up the creek and into the primary jungle, trekkers pass by water-eroded limestone crops, trudge

Animals here have been preyed upon for nearly 50,000 years; naturally wary of humans, restricting movement to the dark hours may well just be another strategy for survival.





sounding too sensational, because that is in fact what it is, sensational. The park maintains four floating lodges which can be visited by day for lunch and a swim, and overnight stays can be arranged as well, the latter of which is an extraordinary experience. Visitors can expect to see an array of wildlife on the shores during the day, such as gibbons, macaques, osprey, langurs, hornbills, and eagles. Because the lake is a result of the Rachabraphah Dam built in 1982, dead standing trees still protrude from the waters, providing perches for fish-eating birds as well as important nesting sites. It's possible to tailor explorations of the lake by renting canoes or kayaks instead of opting for the traditional longtail boat rides.



through the river sometimes in knee-deep water, and through lush bamboo and liana forest, the backdrop of which makes for a stunning trek. The Namtaloo Cave passage varies from 10-15m wide to more tight, constricted areas only passable one person at a time. Pristine cave formations, columns, stalactites, stalagmites, calcite ponds and rime flow formations abound. There's also an abundance of cave dwellers such as bats, toads and more. Weather permitting (flash floods inside the cave are common, most notably during green season), visitors can traverse the entire 500 meter long cave, starting in the north and exiting the southern opening. An experienced guide (emphasis on the experienced) is highly recommended, as flash floods can be fatal. Respect Mother Nature!



CHEOW LAN LAKE AND FLOATING RAFT HOUSES

In an effort to attract visitors, references to Halong Bay are tossed about and signs reading "Guilin, Thailand" direct lake goers. We think these are misnomers as the lake doesn't need any coattails to ride; it's a gem by itself, comparisons be gone. In fact, the karsts rise up to 960 meters – more than three times that of Halong or Phang Nga Bays.

A day on the lake is a must, if not an absolute minimum. 165 sq.km of long arms, hidden coves, grottos and creeks, it's hard to find the right adjectives to describe the views without

JUNGLE SURVIVOR TRIP AND WILDLIFE SANCTUARY VISITS

Named after the Saeng river, this river valley once swarmed with tigers, rhinoceros, Siamese crocodiles (yes, giant saltwater crocodiles once lived in the Gulf of Thailand), Gurney's Pittas, and many others. Most of these are gone today but a visitor can expect to find Malayan tapirs, Asian elephants, sun bears, gibbons and other primates, deer, reptiles, birds, perhaps even a few otters. The cloud leopard and Malayan tiger are much more elusive and a rare sighting. A visit must be planned at least five days in advance. This is also where visitors can partake in the Jungle Survivor Trip, which can be organized 4-5 times a year through Khao Sok Paradise Resort (**see 'Seeing Green' pg. 39 for contact information**). Visitors must go with a guide as well as an armed ranger for protection from the wild elephants.

While there are highlighted areas that most visitors flock too, there's so much more that goes unlisted. Again, Khao Sok National Park is huge, and with four surrounding national parks altogether it's the largest protected area in south Thailand, so visitors should not feel compelled to visit only highlighted areas. The deeper you delve, the greater the rewards.



Rafflesia – they smell like hell, but look like heaven. Although the largest species of these giant red flowers with spotted yellow petals are not found in Thailand, there are three other species that do grow in the park. Rare and unusual, the flowers are actually endoparasites – a species that lives inside the body of its host, with no roots or leaves of its own. In this case, Rafflesia need wild grape vines -more commonly known as liana- in order to grow. Unlike other flowers, instead of being pollinated by insects seeking nectar, they are believed by botanists to be pollinated by flies that are attracted to the oddly sweet stench. They bloom once a year between January and February, for about 3-4 days. The official flower of the Surat Thani province, this endangered plant boasts medicinal properties.

The Human Footprint



If the mist-shrouded karsts could speak, they would tell of a marred history of survival. Arguably one of the most beautiful, yet highly undiscovered and undocumented National Park's of the world, Khao Sok's present day conservation battle is poised today, but the path was an arduous one. A twist of fate perhaps did more for its road to conservation than the national park designation does today.

In 1961, the 401 road construction invited a barrage of workers and settlements which also brought modern weaponry, and thus unprecedented threats to the wildlife. With the new road, a flood of eager settlers arrived who looted the rich lowland forest, clearing and claiming the landscape for plantations. Soon after, concessions were obtained for logging and mining (tungsten and tin), and unmitigated consequences followed as rich wildlife habitats were destroyed at an alarming pace. The Sok river at that time was muddy brown with sediment runoff as a result of massive soil erosion. What appeared to be an age-old story of destruction happened upon a measure of relief however, in a strange turn of events.



In the 1970's, a group of Thai University students had taken to the streets in protest of a return to military rule, but following a military-lead student massacre in 1976 they fled to the forest in fear of their lives. Labeled 'communist insurgents,' (a euphemism for their anti-government beliefs at that time), their occupation of some of the most inaccessible recesses of Khao Sok's forest - their hideouts deep within the rugged karsts of the present Cheow Lan Lake site - thwarted military intervention for almost eight years. They lived a largely self-contained life, growing their own food, raising chickens and pigs, fishing, but never hunting. Self-imposed orders forbade any member to shoot animals as a survival tactic rather than a conservation method, as gunshots could potentially give away their position. The same caves that a typical day trip to the lake entails - Namtaloo and Seroo - served

as a protective outpost and hospital during the occupation.

The stalemate between military and students curtailed illegal poaching of endangered species; many poachers refused to enter the combat zone for their own safety. Loggers were kept at bay; their roads prevented from penetrating the forests, since machinery would also risk the students' location.

During the student occupation, the government began to look into the Khao Sok area beyond their military interests. An aerial survey had confirmed the mountain streams around Khao Sok as part of the largest watershed in southern Thailand. Further reports confirmed the area's rich biodiversity of flora and fauna, rare vegetation, vast wildlife, and outstanding geographical features. Logging and mining practices were terminated, and in 1980 the area was established as a National Park.

However, in an effort to secure a reliable source of power for the South's rapid development of commerce and tourism, as well as to flood out the 'insurgents,' the Rachabrapha Dam was constructed, creating a massive reservoir for generating hydro-electric power. Efforts to mitigate the effects of the ensuing flooding were futile. The present day recreational corridor - an artificial lake - was initially an ecological disaster: caves and massive trees were submerged as the waters rose, animals unable to cross water were trapped on small islands, and foraging animals lost the lowland grounds used to survive. Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) funded the largest wildlife rescue operation ever undertaken in Thailand prior to the damming, but it was unsuccessful. Many of the captured animals perished under stress and a 1995 study revealed 52 species of fish had been lost.

Hardly a visitor that whizzes by on top of the water stops to think what's below the surface. Few remnants of the student occupation remains; most bunkers and caches of supplies have long been swept away by the water. Still, the great irony remains that in an effort to save their own lives, these students inadvertently helped save Khao Sok, preserving it until it acquired park status. If not for them, Khao Sok's precious landscape and life within may well have gone up in smoke or given way to the biological deserts of oil and palm rubber plantations that command much of the southern landscape today.



The Thai government has refocused its efforts to preserve what remains of the area today, despite the irreparable consequences of its past. Its residents work tirelessly to encourage community-based eco-tourism to help sustain the park, as more visitors arrive each year (although that rate is miniscule in comparison to other regions of Thailand). Government and non-profit organizations have channeled funds into the future, promoting conservation education in schools and the community at large. Khao Sok and the surrounding protected areas comprised of two wildlife sanctuaries and two adjacent parks, is still rife with undiscovered treasures. Much of this fairytale landscape is unconfirmed, and wildlife, flora and fauna documentation is still in its infancy.

Khao Sok's valiant battle to preserve the largest protected forest in southern Thailand is hopeful. Despite its challenges, it remains a gem of fascination worth exploring.