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In the garden of the concrete gods



Monkey business



A new twist to the royal and ancient

### In the garden of the concrete gods

#### A bizarre sculpture park tucked away in the north-east corner of Thailand houses the towering visions of a Lao mystic

Sleepy Nong Khai is about as far northeast as one can get in Thailand and, outside of a bustling market, the town is mainly a jumping off point for travellers heading to Vientiane in Laos. Yet Nong Khai merits a stop on any Isaan itinerary as it is home to Sala Kaew Ku, a mysterious sculpture garden packed with enough symbolism and arcane imagery to baffle any theologian, and weird enough to entertain even the most jaded traveller.

Sala Kaew Ku's origins can be traced back to the 1970s and a Lao mystic named Luang Pa Bunleua Sulilat. As the story goes, when Sulilat was a child, he fell into a hole while wandering around the mountains of Laos. When he tumbled out at the other end, he met a hermit named Kaewkoo who taught him about Buddhism, the underworld and other mystical matters.

When Sulilat returned home, he began building a concrete sculpture garden to give physical form to his vision. However, fearing that the Communist Party of Laos wouldn't take kindly to his teachings, he fled across the border in 1978 and started the construction of his garden in Thailand. The result of this work is one of the most unique and eclectic collections of sculpture anywhere in the world.

Sala Kaew Ku contains hundreds of concrete statues and figures, some of them over 25 metres tall, with images from every major eastern religion represented, and then some. Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma, Ganesh, and other Hindu deities, as well as Buddha, human-animal hybrids and Naga serpents, are all depicted in various styles and situations, and not always in the ways you might be familiar with.

In one corner of the garden, a goddess with 10 arms sits waving a pitchfork, while across the way a 30m high awning of menacing Naga serpents shades a meditating Buddha.

In another section, a Chinese Buddha with a big belly towers over a stone Ganesh next to a Medusa-like goddess complete with a head of snakes, and a short walk away a pack of howling dogs, human in stature, surround a royal elephant.

There's also Luang Pa's Wheel of Life, an embodiment of all of his philosophies in one giant sculpture. Here, a large mouth guards a womb-like tunnel through which one has to crawl. Inside, a circle full of statues illustrate Sulilat's cosmic vision of the cycle of life.

A small museum on the premises displays an exotic mix of Buddhist and Hindu imagery, with lots of photos of Luang Pa to satisfy those visitors curious to find out more about the man behind the mythology. If you peer closely, another charismatic Asian leader may come to mind – with his hairdo, he's strangely reminiscent of North Korea's Kim Jong-il.

The mummified remains of Luang Pa lie on the top floor of the main shrine building, surrounded by hundreds of Buddha images and pictures of the temple's many benefactors.

I left Sala Kaew Ku feeling even more religiously disoriented and spiritually confused than I normally do, but I'd still recommend the experience to anyone. The giant Buddhas leaning into the sky surrounded by lush jungle foliage are worth the trip out and Bt10 donation, and the offbeat and eclectic nature of the place ranks it right up there with any of Isaan's, or for that matter, Thailand's, top attractions.

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Special to The Nation



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