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By Vira Rojpojchanarat
Permanent Secretary
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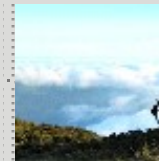
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BANGKOK



The sea pearl of China



A route to the top

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Off the beaten track in Khao Luang National Park

Nakhon Si Thammarat province is about as far off the tourist track as an adventurer can get in Thailand these days. Having perused maps in search of something more exotic and untrammelled than Phuket or Koh Samui, my attention was drawn to Khao Luang, a National Park of some 600 square kilometres, sitting just 40 kilometres off the eastern Gulf coast.

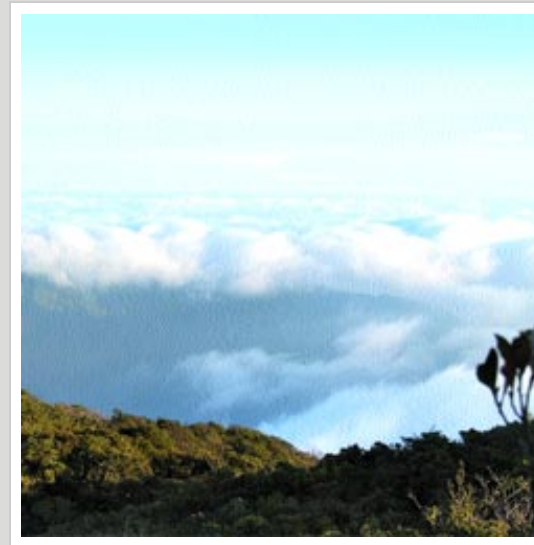
Khao Luang is home to one of Thailand's most diversified ecosystems and a huge swath of undisturbed tropical rainforest that is host to a variety of ferns as well as a large number of rare orchid species.

The park is also the site of southern Thailand's highest peak, Khao Luang, at 1,835 metres. The mountain rises out of the jungle and is usually shrouded in cloud. Being tired of Thailand's drive-to-the-top mountains (such as Doi Inthanon in the north), a three-day slog up what was supposedly some very challenging terrain sounded promising.

I started out from the village of Khiriwong, a hamlet situated in one of the most verdant valleys I have ever seen in Thailand, set amidst rolling folds of jungle-clad peaks. Khiriwong was inundated by floods in 1962, 1975 and 1988, and after the last disaster a "green fund" was set up to establish an agro-tourism project to help the villagers earn a living.

Today, Khiriwong is a model of what eco-tourism ought to be, with local home-stays, mountain-guide services and a cooperative offering novel items like mangosteen wine and shampoo, bamboo purses, coconut-shell ornaments and a variety of durian sweets. The slopes of Khao Luang are some of the most fertile in the country.

To accommodate my tight schedule, my guide Pai decided we would take motorcycles up to the end of the road, saving three to four hours of walking, and allowing us to camp at 900 metres by early evening so we



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could reach the summit the following night. I had no objections to this plan, but if I had known what was coming, I would probably have thrown a bottle of whiskey into my bag.

Some lunatic had put slabs of concrete along a steep path leading up to the vertical fruit orchards of Khiriwong, making it possible for the locals to attempt motorcycling to their farms rather than walking. We started up prolonged grades of 25 per cent plus, with me bent all the way forward, clinging to Pai for dear life, trying not to let my backpack and gravity drag me off the back of the bike.

Soon, the path was so overgrown and rutted that Pai couldn't even keep his feet on the pedals, instead kicking his legs out as a brace against the mud and roots as we lurched back and forth.

The unrelenting grade continued and I wondered how much longer I could hold on. Just when I thought I was coming to the end of my wits, Pai yelled that we couldn't ride double and that I'd have to walk up the final 15 minutes.

When I caught up, Pai had a devious grin on his face and said, "You were scared weren't you?" He laughed and said that several visitors in the past had turned back, and that no woman had ever made it to the orchards thus far.

As soon as we entered the jungle, we lost the track. Pai led the way, hacking at ferns, branches, and all sorts of spiky flora with his machete. The mountain is virtually off-limits half the year due to the rains, which reduce the jungle to a leech-infested quagmire. We were the first to make the ascent this year, so the path was overgrown in many places.

Above 900 metres we made our way through colonies of dao din, white wildflowers, surrounded by huge Mahasadam fern trees, a species that helps prevent soil erosion and increases moisture. Waterfalls were everywhere and their fresh pools made a welcome relief for our sweaty bodies.

By early evening we'd made it to a banyan-tree clearing known as Lan Sai. We pitched our tents next to a roaring set of falls, the sound of the water punctuated by cicadas and the occasional hoot of gibbons in the distance. Pai whipped up some fiery naam prik chilli paste – a staple in southern Thai cuisine – to go with a red pork curry.

The following morning we headed up through the deciduous forest spotted with bua chaek, a primitive fern; more of the eight-metre Mahasadam ferns; and pink and white begonia. By late afternoon we reached a high ridge, where wind, moisture and mist have caused the evergreen forest to become stunted and twisted. Mosses, ferns and other clinging plants survive in the harsh conditions, along with rhododendrons.

Our arrival at the top was a less-than-spectacular event. The terrain flattened out and suddenly there was nothing above us. A signpost read: "Welcome to the summit of Khao Luang, 1,835 metres."

The Gulf of Thailand and Surat Thani can be seen from the peak, but today, as on most days, both were obscured by cloud and mist that rolled in from all sides. Views could only be had by climbing small trees to see above the jungle, which came all the way to the summit.

I thought to myself that I had certainly seen better summits, and the route up had been very demanding. But then a gibbon appeared out of the mist, making its way through trees in the distance, and I thought about the fact that it is always the journey and not the destination that counts.

Besides, there was still the motorcycle ride back down to consider.

Dave Stamboulis
Special to The Nation

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