

WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER

The charms of Chiang Rai

Thailand's northernmost province surprises tourists with dramatic scenery, stunning cultural icons, and a shining example of social and sustainable development

Now a lush canopy, it's hard to imagine the hillsides as barren earth as they were 30 years ago



LEFT AND INSET: A view of the lush greenery of Doi Nang Non; The Doi Tung Royal Villa

Views of the winding road emerged in brief flashes, illuminated by floral roadside sculptures, as we drove after dark from the airport to our hilltop accommodation.

It wasn't until morning, however, that we got the full panoramic view of the spectacular Doi Nang Non, a mountain range which stretches across the highlands of Thailand's Chiang Rai province. We were staying at Doi Tung Lodge, a peaceful retreat atop the range's highest peak at 1,630m.

The province of Chiang Rai, itself located at the northernmost tip of Thailand, has been largely overlooked by tourists in favour of the similar sounding Chiang Mai. Much of this has to do with its location in the Golden Triangle – a name given to the region where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar meet – and its history as a leading region for the production of opium. In recent years, however, it has become a shining example of social and sustainable development, with an industry based on alternative cash crops, namely coffee, and community-based tourism, thanks to efforts by the royal family, NGOs and the determination of the local people.

A troubled past

Doi Nang Non draws its name from its appearance – its peaks and troughs roughly resembling a reclining woman, with the mountain of Doi Tung corresponding to the belly. Now a lush canopy of greenery, it's hard to imagine the hillsides as barren red earth as they were just 30 years ago.

This was a by-product of opium cultivation in the region, with hill-dwelling ethnic minorities reliant on the illicit drug trade for their livelihood. Locals lived in poverty without basic

infrastructure or government support, and had few alternative opportunities for income, particularly as the area was controlled by an armed militia. With the opium trade came slash-and-burn agriculture, poverty, drug addiction, human and arms trafficking and HIV/AIDS.

Change came when the beloved late Princess Srinagarindra, the grandmother of Thailand's current king, visited the area in 1985. Guided by the notion that "no one wants to be bad, they just don't have the opportunity to be good", she focused on "helping people to help themselves" via her non-profit organisation The Mae Fah Luang Foundation under Royal Patronage.

The Doi Tung Development Project (DTDP) was set up in 1988 as the flagship project of the foundation, covering an area of approximately 150 sq km and benefiting 11,000 people from six ethnic minorities in 29 villages. Reforestation projects, the provision of public amenities and healthcare, and education on the alternative uses of natural resources, proved key in the creation of legitimate livelihoods and the eradication of poverty. Opium workers were first transformed into reforestation workers, laying the foundations for the cultivation of economic crops to provide long-term stable incomes for the villagers – the most important of which was coffee.

Arabica coffee

The peaceful 784-hectare coffee plantation bears no trace of its former opium roots, the perennial trees now offering a great yield which is sold to buyers in Thailand – including Thai Airways – and exported to Japan. The DTDP rented coffee plots to villagers, with the sense of ownership incentivising them to look after their land and increasing productivity. Training in the art of coffee-growing, too, was pivotal, with team members even polishing their nails to the perfect cherry colour as a guide to harvesting well-ripened coffee berries. →



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Farmers in the region sell their yield to the Doi Tung brand, a sustainable social enterprise set up in 2000 which comprises five businesses: café, handicrafts, processed food, agriculture and tourism. Part of the proceeds from Doi Tung products are sent directly to the villagers and the rest is invested in public health, education and the environment. The 2020 harvest season, for instance, generated a total income of US\$604,485 for villagers. Farmers are also offered support to create their own brands, which fosters entrepreneurship in the region.

The DTDP is continuing its work with the enterprise, collecting data to further develop strategies on the care and harvesting of coffee and macadamia plants, and looking at the economic potential of new crops, such as vanilla, cacao and mushrooms.



ABOVE: Villagers grow and process coffee beans in Doi Tung and Doi Pha Mee

Royal connections

Princess Srinagarindra's presence is felt throughout Doi Tung, with monuments dedicated to her life and a visible outpouring of emotion from locals when they speak of her work.

Many refer to her affectionately as Mae Fah Luang, 'Royal Mother from The Sky', who descended from the heavens to relieve their suffering.

Our visit in early December coincided with the eighth Colours of Doi Tung Festival, an annual celebration which takes place every weekend and on public holidays during December and January. The festival celebrates the culture of the six ethnic tribes in the area – Akha, Lahu, Tai Yai, Lue, Lawa and Chinese – and includes a street food market, and stalls selling traditional handmade crafts.

Aside from the festivities, there are ample tourist attractions in the area which offer an insight into the history

of Doi Tung. The Hall of Inspiration features a permanent exhibition on the principles and works of the Princess Mother and her family, while her former residence, the Doi Tung Royal Villa, is located high up on the hill.

Most impressive of all, however, is the Mae Fah Luang Garden on the slopes beneath the royal villa. The beautifully landscaped gardens lie at the centre of the former drug and weapon trafficking route and are a perfect visual manifestation of the social transformation of the area, with poppies replaced by various flower species planted amid streams and ponds. It's a masterclass in horticulture and, much like the coffee plantations in the region, was created to provide job opportunities for the local people who tend to the land. Many of the gardeners also now own flower nurseries through which they generate income.

As for the future of the DTDP, members of the team stressed that their

ultimate aim is to work themselves out of their jobs, leaving locals to run the projects and achieve financial sustainability. Indeed, the impact of the DTDP goes beyond Chiang Rai, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime recognising it as a model for Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development (SALD) in 2003. There are now international outreach programmes in place in Myanmar, Indonesia and Afghanistan.

International prominence

If you're not familiar with Chiang Rai for its coffee or opium, it is highly likely that you were glued to the TV during the extraordinary two-week Tham Luang cave rescue operation in 2018. To remind you, a football team of 12 young boys and their assistant coach ended up trapped in the cave in the district of Mae Sai – a labyrinthine cave system which snakes for 10km beneath Doi Nang Non. →

ABOVE: Mae Fah Luang Garden on the slopes beneath the Doi Tung Royal Villa



SIGHTS IN THE CITY OF CHIANG RAI

Wat Rong Khun

Thailand has more than 30,000 Buddhist temples across the country, but the so-called White Temple by Chiang Rai artist Chalermchai Kositpipat differs from many of the traditional designs. The sparkling white structure is full of symbolic nods to heaven and hell – from a daunting Bridge of the Cycle of Rebirth, surrounded by hundreds of outstretched hands, to the tranquil Gate of Heaven – along with modern twists such as murals of Superman and Mickey Mouse. Finish your visit with a trip to the ornately decorated bathrooms in the golden building. The temple opened in 1997 but works are ongoing and set to continue until 2070.



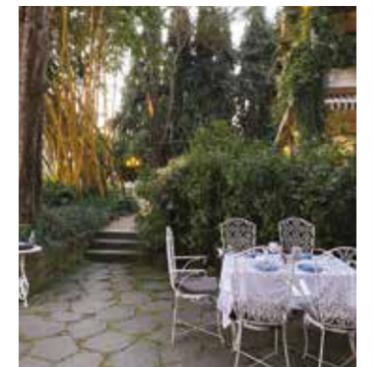
The Mae Fah Luang Art and Cultural Park

This 24-hectare oasis situated on former rice fields to the west of the city is peaceful and picturesque, set on a lake that reflects the beautiful architecture and indigenous plants from the region. The site houses the region's largest collection of artefacts from the Lanna Kingdom. The impressive Haw Kham (Golden Pavilion) is a real highlight, built from 32 old teak houses and presented as a gift to Princess Srinagarindra in 1984. The candle-lit interiors feature Lanna and Burmese-style Buddha images, with a wooden Buddha dating back to 1693 suspended at the centre.



Chivit Thamma Da

The family-run café and bistro Chivit Thamma Da is a beautiful setting with seating flowing from the vine-covered white house into the grounds on the banks of the Kok River. The restaurant sources the majority of its produce locally to support the community and offers a seasonally changing menu. Don't miss the aromatic *tom kha gai* (chicken coconut soup), fried rice served in a pineapple, the mixed Lanna platter and the detox mocktail made with fresh mint from the garden.





Travellers can take part in a traditional coffee dripping workshop before savouring a cup

The 'Great Cave of the Sleeping Lady' was a favourite haunt for the boys, but monsoon season meant that the cave began to flood, pushing them deeper inside until they were 5km from the entrance. The cave complex reopened as a museum and tourist attraction in 2019, located in the Khun Nam Nang Non national park. It's a fascinating experience, with the boys' bikes and belongings on show at the mouth of the cave, a museum with a mural dedicated to the brave team of international divers, and a sculpture in honour of the former Navy Seal diver Saman Gunan who died during the mission. Visitors can enter the cave – we brave souls ventured in – and there's a newly extended trail that includes access to the underground chamber used by divers during the rescue.

While it was busy during our visit, it seems that it is not yet on the global map. Tours are in Thai – we had a translator with us – and there doesn't seem to be a website. Nonetheless it's worth a visit to get a glimpse of the miraculous feat and pay homage to its heroes, especially ahead of the release of a Netflix series slated for this year.

Community-based tourism

We finished our tour of the Chiang Rai province with a visit to the village of Doi Pha Mee within the Mae Sai district, home to the Akha tribe. Like Doi Tung, the village has long been snubbed due to its history of opium farming but swapped poppy fields for



TOP: The site of the 2018 Tham Luang cave rescue operation. ABOVE AND LEFT: Phamee Coffee café in Doi Pha Mee

coffee plantations and community-based tourism following a visit by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Srinagarindra's son, in the 1970s.

Villagers now rely on coffee, lychee and oranges for a stable income, and are eager for people to visit and experience the village's cultural highlights. Phamee Coffee, for instance, hosts a variety of cultural activities, including Akha dance recitals in traditional dress, orange-picking, cotton-weaving and handicraft workshops. Travellers can also take part in a traditional coffee dripping workshop before savouring a cup alongside exquisite local cuisine amid the emerald-green scenery. The food is even hero-worthy, with diver Vernon Unsworth coincidentally dining at the table opposite us.

We made our way to the airport, confident that Srinagarindra's mission to transform the area is being accomplished. It's now up to us to spread the word. I'm sure the Royal Mother from the Sky looks down on Chiang Rai with immense pride. 🇹🇭

Thai Airways' Doi Tung packages

Thai Airways partnered with the Doi Tung brand earlier this year to create 'Black Silk Blend' drip coffee for its first class and business class cabins.

Thai International's Royal Orchid Holidays offers two- and three-day packages to Doi Tung from THB11,900 (£273) per person including a transfer to the airport, meals and accommodation. The airfare is not included.

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