

NORTHERN THAILAND

January 2018

The two of us headed east from Chiang Mai through forested hill country to Nan Province, an area that until 100 years ago was the Kingdom of Lanna, steeped in culture, art and clothing. I'd also learnt that Chiang Mai had recently been awarded World Heritage status for its crafts and arts.



Phu Chi Fa

From Nan we rode high onto a ridge, which we followed for much of the second day, on superb tarmac, ascending and descending sweeping bends through tree-clad hillsides as the motorcycle flip-flopped from side to side. The enjoyment was only interrupted by a road surface of grey slime, similar to potter's clay, before climbing again on traditional tarmac to a lofty perch near Phu Chi Fa for an overnight stop overlooking Laos.

We descended in the early morning mist, on slippery wet roads, down to the banks of the mighty Mekon river, separating Thailand from Laos and yet more mud. Even at a snail's pace and with my feet down as stabilisers the back wheel kept trying to overtake the front. My boots and trousers were as orange from the mud as the Monk's clothing who offered us a blessing at the nearby temple. A visit to the Opium Museum followed, a grand palatial structure enjoying royal patronage. The history lesson and grave tales of addiction and war had a very sobering effect.



Border Post

Mai Sai was our most northerly point and the border town connecting Thailand with Myanmar. Here, if you so choose, you can purchase a vast selection of pirated and counterfeit goods, most of which have their origins in China, who's border is not far away.

How many times have you stood in line and had that feeling creep over you that you should have been in one of the other queues? Today I waited 30 minutes to be told that I'd joined the wrong queue. I only wanted a stamp.

The road out of Mai Sai in the morning climbed steeply under a canopy of trees that had laid down a carpet of wet leaves on every hairpin bend. In no time, after gingerly negotiating the slippery surface we crested out, right on the border. We had ventured into the area that was once the lair of opium drug baron Khun Sa and the infamous Golden Triangle. My companion once operated here with Special Ops during the 70's.

Read more overleaf...



Contact Gordon

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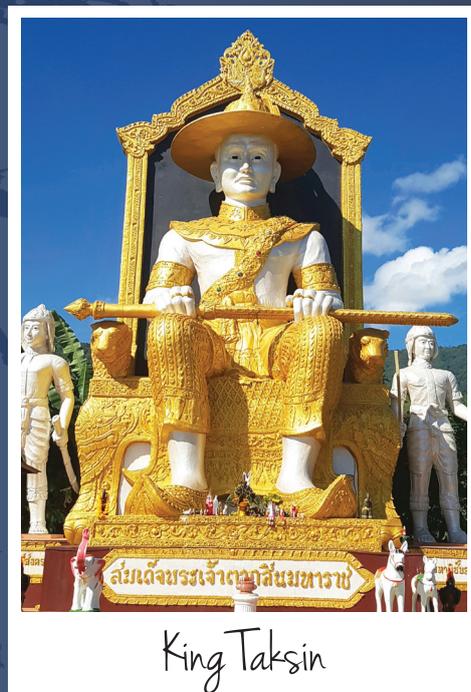
NORTHERN THAILAND (cont.)

A bar of chocolate bought us access to Myanmar through a rickety bamboo border post under blue skies for the first time on this trip. We could see for miles over cloud filled valleys, across a country once called Burma, to the forested hills in the distance.

From here the road followed a ridge, staying close to the frontier before eventually dropping down mile after mile towards our overnight accommodation on the Mae Kok River. Three huge edifices lined the road as we approached Thaton, the last being King Taksin, defender and liberator of Siam in the 18th century.

Another misty start greeted us before climbing up into bright sunshine. The opportunity to enjoy an ice cream, in an air-conditioned fuel station, back down in the valley provided welcome shelter from the afternoon heat.

The elephants seemed to be enjoying the morning sun lumbering around in their sanctuary as we rode by after breakfast. Today's ride covered 200 of the 500 kilometres of the Mae Hong Son Loop. A route that ascended through towering forests on corkscrew roads before opening out into glorious sunshine with views across wooded hilltops into the distance. Once again we indulged in an air-conditioned filling station before riding into the route's famous namesake town.



King Taksin



Kayan Villager

I'd seen images of women with giraffe like necks, supported by brass rings, on the TV as a child but to actually visit their village and talk with them was almost unreal. The Kayan people had fled Burma and crossed the border to escape persecution 30 years ago. The women were extremely friendly and spoke very good English but it was very difficult not to wonder why?

Foolishly I repeated my experience at another Post Office. I wasn't aware that there was a dedicated stamp counter in the corner without a queue. We continued for another day on the Mai Hong Son Loop, riding the curves and mountain roads in warm sunshine, enjoying every moment before our final day led us back to Chiang Mai via Doi Inthanon, Thailand's highest mountain.

The Mai Hong Son Loop certainly lived up to its reputation of being one of the top biking roads in the world but I couldn't help noticing that there were an awful lot of trees.



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