

"Heaven and Hell at the Isaan gateway" written by Michel GÉRARD

After Heaven in the National Park of Kao Yai, welcome to Hell with the visit to a temple that will reveal all your sins: a representation of Heaven and Hell, attractions and small trains, close to Nakhon Ratchasima



The region of Korat, at the door of Isaan, offers different interesting places to visit, little or unknown by tourists. I present to you now "Heaven and Hell" with on one hand the vast national park of Khao Yai and on the other the strange temple named Wat Pa Lak Roy situated a few kilometres from Nakhon Ratchasima.

I left Bangkok that day with about twenty people for a weekend-discovery to the gateway of the Isaan region, in the north-east of Thailand. The journey proved to be ecological when we arrived close to the Khao Yai National Park, extended on more than 2000 km². Settling down in a remote luxury hotel surrounded by the mountains of the park, my friends and I enjoyed the landscape while inhaling big gulps of oxygen that were necessary for the cleaning of our lungs blackened by the air of Bangkok. We had lunch at the restaurant of the hotel in an atmosphere of rest and well being with the songs of the birds.

The afternoon was dedicated to relaxation in the place's infrastructures like the swimming pool and the sauna. The reason for our visit to the park of Khao Yai became clearer at the beginning of the evening when we went on board vehicles equipped with halogen spotlights for a night safari. The park shelters animals that go out only at night, a unique opportunity to observe the Thai fauna. In fact, most species living in Thailand can be found at the park of Khao Yai: among them are the deer, gibbons, wild elephants, leopards and tigers. After this night safari we met around a table in a small local restaurant to relish a regional Isaan cuisine and enjoyed the rest of the evening.

The second day seemed promising after a night spent in the silence of nature. Just after breakfast, we left to go to Korat. A stop at the city's large square was essential in order to see what used to be the old gate of the city and the statue of Thao Suranari (known also as Khun Ying Mo), a courageous woman who commanded the local citizens in a battle that saved the city from the Lao attackers of Vientiane during the reign of Rama III. All Thais coming to Korat do not fail to pay their respect to her and some do not hesitate to pass through the old gate in the belief that a marriage would be in the offing in the same year according to the local population. The market, situated at walking distance from the famous worshipping area, gave us a good opportunity to see some local products and to observe the people while drinking a glass of Thai coffee.

It was then time to leave for the Khmer site of Prasat Hin Pimai, about sixty kilometres away, to visit a temple that was built before Angkor Wat and would have served as model for the latter. This temple was begun under the reign of Jayavarman V at the end of the 10th century and was completed under Suriyavarman the 1st, at the beginning of the 11th century, when the Khmer kingdom had spread from Sukhothai to the boundaries of Burma and Malaysia. The site was at that time connected directly to the capital of Angkor in Cambodia by road. The atmosphere of the temple was serene under the freshness of the trees and we took superb photos in front of the place that served several times as decors for Thai movies. In the mid-day sun we enjoyed a copious picnic in the shade of the oldest and largest tree of the Kingdom, Sai Ngam (the beautiful Banyan), situated at the entrance to the city of Pimai.

After lunch we headed toward Wat Pa Lak Roy's Heaven and Hell, an outstanding temple located at about twenty kilometres from Pimai. With an exhibition of sculptures of colourful animals, scenes of daily Thai life and numerous symbolic animated statues that produce frightening sounds or music (provided you slip a coin into the slot), this temple recalls people's awareness of the different sins that they should not commit during their lives. The site is like a public park where it is possible to take a small train pulled by a tractor and travel around the place or to elevate in the sky a statue of Buddha, which is pulled by a cable. Here there is no gold Chedi, but an original Uposatha that adds to the weirdness of the place.

Besides this, the monks were present to give us a general blessing and everyone received a small Buddhist amulet as a souvenir. Every sculpture or scene represented contained an enigma, a proverb or an explanation on the corresponding sin. Noy, our guide, proved to be very helpful with the translation of these comments that are written only in Thai and are noteworthy for the purpose of learning more about the culture of the country. Heaven and Hell are also shown, with a way to the latter that is impressive but frightening. New statues are built every day and the temple is not only a place of cult and teaching but also an Art museum, open to the sky.

I am confident that all participants of this journey will remember this temple and the message that it delivers with its representations of the terrestrial sins as well as the beauty of the park of Khao Yai forever

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