

"Motocross on the Northern trails"

written by Michel GÉRARD

Halfway between Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son in the north of Thailand, Pai is a small peaceful city lost in the mountain. The discovery of the region with a team of cross-country bikers is ideal for the exploration of modest remote ethnic villages as well as the different natural sites.



Before departure from Chiang Mai, our sympathetic group gets ready to take the mini bus to reach Pai, situated at 134 kilometres from there. A stop along the way at the cascades of Mok Pha allows to cool us down with a bath that is pleasant to everybody. In the middle of the journey and in the mountain, we eat lunch in a small local village that is the place where the local buses halt in order to relax the dizzy passengers stunned by the speed on a twisting road! With our own means of transportation we are fortunate to be able to stop anywhere and can arrive safely at the destination as well...

Pai looks like a quiet place where visitors can get bored easily, but don't be mistaken because the surrounding area is rich with exceptional natural sites. The city is populated with Shans and Thais with Lahu, Lisu and Karen minorities, as well as Chinese and Muslims. We spend our afternoon in discovery with a visit to the temple Wat Phra That Mae Yen, which is in a small village, one kilometre from there. This temple, which is built on a small hill offering a view of the valley and whose monks are vegetarian, is accessible by a stairway of 353 steps! In the evening, we enjoy a medicinal herbs sauna with a traditional massage which is the real highlight of a stay in Pai.

After a night's rest, the adventure begins. The non bikers are in the lead with Peter and his team on a day dedicated to eco-adventure activities, whereas we try and get used to the Honda 250 or Kawasaki KDX200 on a motocross circuit that enables one to evaluate the performance level of each participant. The novice or expert bikers, supervised by experienced biker instructors, have the opportunity during this early session to get used to the machine in hand before leaving on a mountain trail to reach the mount Phi Lu.

After lunch in Pai, our group of bikers is on the road leading to a trail in the jungle with some difficult passages that will lead us to the Lisu village of Phaem Bok. A stop allows us then to observe sometime in the life of its population and share our impressions on this first part of the trip. Pierre-André, the chief instructor of the motocross school, takes this opportunity to impart technical remarks and advice to all participants. Back at Pai and during dinner, the non biker's group tells us about their journey and their discovery of the ethnic tribes of the region, the moments of leisure at the source of hot water and the bathing in the cascades of Moe Paeng.

The second day of the motocross guides one group by motorcycle and the other by mini bus along a sinuous asphalted road of mountain to Soppong situated 50 kilometres away. The two groups meet again at the market of this small village where we buy some Thai cakes, and after a brief stop we continue on our way to the entrance of the Tham Lot underground cave eight kilometres away. The visit can take up to two hours if you decide to follow the large river and explore the 3 caves accessible by ladders. The trip continues then in direction of Ban Egor along a spectacular track with ascents and descents of maximal slants and many tricky U-turns, to arrive at Mae Lanna close to the Burmese border. Along the way through the villages of ethnic tribes chance for a pause is offered before joining the group of non-bikers for a picnic lunch in the jungle.

The afternoon of this day proves to be more technical for the bikers, with a run along a small trail in the jungle and several crossings of the river to the Karen village of Manola. Quite the same experiences are met by the other group that leaves for a little hike in the jungle in order to get to a village of the Lisu tribe, inaccessible by road. Our two groups meet again in Soppong for dinner and the night. The next morning, everybody gets ready to return to Pai, before handing over the motorcycles and going down the mountain by vehicle to Chiang Mai.

It is certain that all the participants on this tour, bikers and non-bikers alike, will remember this excursion in the region of Pai in the North for a long time!

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*Michel Gerard is a Travel author based in Asia. Visit the Reperages Thailand Travel website for information and ideas of original excursions. Download your *free* ebook: "Stories of Authentic Eco-adventure Destinations for Travellers in Thailand" => <http://www.travel.reperages-thailand.com>*