

## "Three days when boys become girls"

written by Michel GÉRARD

Whereas Mae Hong usually offers to the traveller an atmosphere of tranquillity in the middle of the mountains, the equinox of spring sees a millennial Buddhist ceremony taking place where the boys become, for some time, girls...



Mae Hong Son is situated at more than 900 kilometres from the capital as against about 300 kilometres for Chiang Mai, the famous "Rose of the North". Easily reached by plane or by road, this small city reveals Thailand of the past when it was under a strong Burmese influence, through the architecture of its temples, its traditional dresses, its language and its handicrafts. The population of this region is composed of Karen, Hmong, Lisu and Shan, without forgetting the amazing worldwide known tribe of women with long necks.

Many Burmese style temples of great interest are to be seen in Mae Hong Son: Close to the lake Jong Klang where it is pleasant to go for a walk. Here you will find the Wat Jong Klang as well as the Wat Jong Kham with its small museum of old objects and Burmese dolls. A twelve metre reclining Buddha is visible in the Wat Phra Non temple in the western part of the city. The Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu is the most important among them and dominates the region on the summit of the hill. Surrounded by mountains and verdant valleys, this temple presents an impregnable view of the regional capital and was constructed by the first sovereign of the city in the middle of the 1800's.

At the equinox of spring, in the beginning of April a Buddhist ceremony named Poi Sang Long takes place in commemoration of the coming of the millennial tradition of the Shan people. About twenty young boys aged eight to twelve participate in this exceptional festivity that lasts three days before starting their three month religious retreat. In the morning of the first day, everybody is in a festive mood within the temple and helps in the dressing of the small princes who are made to look like girls. There, they have their heads shaved and are dressed in colourful costumes. Some sacred jewellery belonging to the family is taken out again from some drawers for the occasion: bracelets, necklaces, medallions and gold broaches as well as rings set with precious stones.

To conclude the whole thing, their faces are made up with small white dots or other religious signs and red lipstick is worn. Thereafter, during the ceremony they will be venerated like small sacred princes and will be carried on the shoulders of their older brothers, because they must not lay a foot on the ground and no woman can touch them. They are then taken from house to house, to the rhythm of gongs and tam-tams, from where they receive small gifts in return for their visit that is, for the people, a blessing. They will be assisted in all their gestures until the end of the third day after which it will be time for them to receive the robes of monks and to enter the monastery.

Fortunately, the rest of the year is not without interest. There are numerous activities such as trekking in the forest, observation of the birds and plants, elephant riding, climbing or rafting on the Pai River. Visits to Karen villages, Lisu or Meo is also possible which will help you to discover the way of life of these people, their customs and their handicrafts.

An excursion to a little town called Pai, about 110 kilometres from there, is also of interest. Regular air-conditioned buses and mini-vans travel a sharp, curved road to reach the place. Numerous police check points are situated along the way to prevent Burmese nationals from getting to Chiang Mai and also to fight the problem of drug smuggling into the Kingdom. At the destination, you will find a region of forest and mountains, populated by the ethnic tribes of Shan, Lahu, Lisu, as well as a village of the Kuomitman... Motorcycles and bicycles are available for rent and are the best ways for one to explore the surroundings. Visitors to Pai can enjoy themselves and relax by bathing in the cascades of Maw Paeng, in the middle of a green and magnificent environment not far from the city. After a trek in the forest, a traditional massage with medicinal herbs and a sauna for the well being of the body are available luxuries for relaxation as well. The Poi Sang Long ceremony is also celebrated in Pai and visitors can enjoy the same festivities as in Mae Hong Son.

Other manifestations take place during the year like the flowers festival of the "Bua Tong", a kind of wild sunflower that blooms almost all thirty days in November. Or the procession "Chong Para" at the end of the rainy season where the actors get into costumes of animals to celebrate, following the local belief, Buddha's return after he gave a sermon to his mother in heaven. Also worthy of notice is the national holiday of the "Loi Krathong" festival that obviously adds another dimension to the tradition with the release of small hot-air balloons into the sky at night.

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