

The great outdoors



Take to the heights: a motorbike gets you closer to nature and the people of Thailand - but it's not for the fainthearted

THAILAND TRAILS

Astride a Honda 250 motorcycle, **Ben Davies** rode from Chiang Rai to Chiang Mai - the end of a six-day circuit of the lush mountains and valleys of northern Thailand

In the ancient Lanna capital of Chiang Rai, we have checked into the gloriously named Saen Poo Hotel, equipped with everything that a motorbiker could dream of, from a fridge to a TV - and even a nightclub.

Legend has it that Chiang Rai was founded on the spot where one of King Mengrai's favourite elephants halted on the banks of the Kok River, before circling three times and falling to its knees. The king took this as an auspicious sign and ordered that a great city be built along the banks of the river.

But Mengrai's dutiful construction of Chiang Rai did not bring him the everlasting happiness he craved. In 1317, some 50 years after work on the city began, he was supposedly struck dead by lightning. Today, Chiang Rai's fame owes as much to its location near the infamous Golden Triangle as it does to its spurious historical claims.

We leave early the following morning eager to start on the demanding 188-mile ride to Pai via Mae Taeng. In the northern hills, the people have an unusual superstition. They believe that spirits, or phi, live on the roads and especially around hairpin bends, where they determine the fate of approaching vehicles. On really steep bends, you may well find spirit houses filled with flowers and even glasses of whisky donated by apprehensive villagers.

On the remarkably beautiful stretch of road from Mae Taeng to Pai and Mae Hong Son (Highway 1095), there are more than 150 hairpin bends. But you will also be treated to spectacular scenery of mountain forests and waterfalls, as well as hilltribe villages and national parks. Travelling along these snaking roads is a thrilling experience. One moment you may pass a hilltribe dweller wearing black leggings, silver earrings the size of billiard balls, and carrying a basket full of cabbages on her

Ben Davies's Thai motorbiking odyssey was arranged through Siam Bike Travel Co Ltd (00 66 53 409533, asiapius.com/siambike) which offers guided six-day tours from Chiang Mai starting from US\$995 per person. The Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) office in Chiang Mai can also recommend bike-hire outlets. Honda 250cc trail bikes are ideal for the steep hills of the north.

When to go: In the rainy season, roads can be slippery and occasionally dangerous. The best time for travel is the dry season from end-October to end-May.

back, and the next a pick-up truck filled with monks in orange robes. Some encounters are of an even more peculiar nature. Twice we pass trucks with a cargo of elephants.

Arriving in the delightful town of Pai, set in a broad valley hemmed in by mountains, we spend the night at the Rim Pai Cottages, feasting on spicy gaeng khiao wan gai (chicken curry) at one of the many restaurants near the market. The following day, we continue our journey west along Highway 1095, past Soppong to Mae Hong Son, the City of Mist.

Situated in a lush valley ringed by densely wooded hills and mountains, this peaceful provincial capital makes the perfect spot to rest for a day, to explore the surrounding hilltribe villages or to visit the notorious long-necked tribe known as the Padang. To see Mae Hong Son at its most beautiful, get up at dawn and wander out into the streets in the soft morning light, stopping at the tranquil Chong Kham Lake in the centre of town.

Here, by the waterside, you will find two of Mae Hong Son's most famous Burmese-style temples: the 19th-century Wat Chong Kham with its distinctive white and gold chedis and, next door, the older Shan-style temple of Wat Chong Kham.

After a day exploring the area around Mae Hong Son and the famous fish cave known as Tham Pai (10 miles north), we continue on the last leg of our journey, driving down Highway 108 to Khun Yuam (44 miles) before turning left on to Highway 1263. This magnificent ride is a fitting end to our motorbiking odyssey, skirting the Mae Surin National Park past hilltribe villages (Hmong, Karen, and Shan) and virgin mountain territory. In places, the road is still under construction, but any obstacles are more than made up for by the superb views.

Arriving in Mae Cham, we take Highway 1192 through the magnificent Doi Inthanon National Park, past a succession of mountain peaks, caves, and waterfalls to Chom Thong. From here it is a 29-mile ride on Highway 108 back to Chiang Mai and the end of our circuit.

In Chiang Mai, above the roar of motorbikes, the tooting of tuk-tuks and the revving of vintage trucks, I am struck by two indisputable facts. Thai drivers happily overtake in the face of oncoming traffic and they show absolutely no regard for the normal rules of the road (priority goes to the driver in the biggest vehicle). The bad news for beginners is that Thailand is not the place to learn - but you know that. The good news for experienced motorcyclists is that you will rapidly adapt and even get to enjoy this anarchic state of affairs.

