

## Three peaks in Petchaburi

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Less than two hours from the centre of Bangkok is a historic hilltop palace built by King Mongkut, the ruler who began Thailand's relationship with the West.

We had long wanted to visit the hilltop palace known as Phra Nakhon Khiri in Petchaburi province. Built by King Mongkut, who was a keen astronomer, it has its own observatory. The King calculated that in 1868 there would be a total eclipse of the sun visible only from a certain point in nearby Hua Hin, and he gathered together a huge party of Siamese and foreign dignitaries to witness the event. So large was the gathering that a temporary city was built for them. King Mongkut's calculations proved to be precise: the eclipse took place exactly where and when he said it would, and his reputation as a respected astronomer was enhanced. But the King's triumph was short lived. At Hua Hin he contracted malaria, and died soon after. Phra Nakhon Khiri therefore holds a special place in Thai history.

Sunday morning, and the South-bound expressway was relatively traffic-free. Usually when we take this road we are heading for Hua Hin, a favourite destination, but Petchaburi is considerably closer. So we guessed it was an easy one-and-a-half hour drive. We cleared the Maeklong river with its lovely multitiered, blue-painted fishing boats after little more than half an hour, and an hour later the steep hills of Petchaburi province were around us.

We could see the chedis of the palace high up on the hill directly overlooking the town, but decided on a little exploration first. Khao Wang market on the main road was a good place to buy caramelised fruit, local sweets and cookies, and the custards for Centre of learning for Thai arts. which this town is especially famous. The choice seems endless, the custards in their square foil containers spread out on the market stalls. We loaded the car up, then went in search of lunch.

Quite by chance we found Krua Khunpor up a little soi along Ratchadamnoen Road. A private house, and tiny, we had the immediate sensation of being part of the family. Mother does the cooking, father takes the orders, son buys the produce from the market, daughter serves the food. It was all very friendly. We had some local fish, a prawn salad, chicken with cashew nuts, and a couple of market-fresh vegetarian dishes. Nothing too heavy. We had some busy sight-seeing ahead of us.

There is a funicular railway to take you to the top of the hill. 'Vo! pay 70 baht for the combined fare and palace entry fee. The railway carriage is open and you sit facing downhill, so it appears that the ground is falling away beneath your feet. A couple of minutes later we were at the doors of King Mongkut's palace.

Steep and craggy, the hill has three peaks. There has long been a temple on the eastern flank, and the King, when he was a monk, would come here often. He ascended the throne in 1851 and in 1858 began building his palace as a residence for when he came to the province. The residential and court buildings are on the western peak, and designed in European style. King Mongkut was the first of the Chakri Dynasty Kings to actively seek relationships with the western countries, and the design of the palace, coming so soon in to his reign, marks a major shift of style for Siam at that time. On the eastern peak was built a new temple, Wat Phra Kaew, while a ruined chedi on the middle peak was replaced with a new chedi named Phra That Chomphet. So on two peaks you have traditional Siamese architecture, and on the third, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century European. The three peaks are connected by a pathway.

The palace itself is more like a gentleman's country residence than a Royal palace. The rooms have a pleasant domestic scale, and of course there are continual glimpses through the windows of the town and the plain below. There is a throne hall, for the King would receive visiting dignitaries here, but it is relatively austere. Austere too are the King's private quarters. You ascend a staircase so tiny and so narrow that there is a green-flag system to advise you when the way is clear. Larger visitors squeeze their way through. The King's chamber is an odd shape, the bed tucked into a niche. His Majesty, we felt, must have been a fairly small man. Next to the bedroom is a bathroom, equipped with an ancient tub, a Chinese-style brass water jar, and a western-style washbasin.

Next to the residential building is the Phra Thinang Wetchayan Wichien Prasat, sparkling white in the sun, and with a long and pretty terrace giving views right across the plain to the mountains that separate Thailand and Burma; for Petchaburi had a strategic significance in those days. The building, with its five distinctive spires, signifies that this is a royal residence, rather than any old palace. The spires are built with steel, startlingly modern Western technology of the time, as is the observatory to the front of the structure. The observatory, Ho Chatchawan Wieng Chai, was the romantic touch we had really come to see.

A two-storey cylindrical tower, with massive walls and semi-circular openings, it is surmounted by a dome made of curved steel beams and glass. Again, the spiral staircase to the viewing gallery is tiny. We spent a long time up there, trying to imagine the King with his telescopes and charts, surveying the heavens. It is a beautiful spot, and with some reluctance we descended.

Phra Nakhon Khiri is a popular destination for Thai from across the nation. Several times we were encouraged to join Thai groups for photographs. Thais love to have themselves photographed alongside funnylooking farangs, and this has happened so often to us over the years that we must be familiar figures throughout the country. We sat down for a cold drink at the foot of the steps to the Phra Thinang, and were astounded to see the entire cast of Calypso, the cabaret show in the Asia Hotel, sashay past. They had become friends when we did an interview with them a few months previously. "We're just here for a day's outing," said Pui, who was in charge of the group. "Have to get the bus back soon for tonight's show."

A word of caution. Monkeys live in these hills, and the palace grounds are a happy hunting ground for them. They thrive on sandwiches, ice cream and Coca-Cola, and they love brightly coloured objects such as handbags and cameras. Be very careful when you are visiting, or you could be relieved of your valuables. As we sat with our cold drinks we saw a European tourist, standing on her own by the wall, with a bag of food. A lone monkey crept along the ground towards her. She watched him apprehensively. The monkey stopped, threateningly, just a couple of feet away. The girl gave a little scream, dropped her bag, and made a fast exit. The monkey picked up the bag and headed for the trees. We had never seen a monkey mugger before, but there is a first time for everything.

There was one more historic sight we wanted to see, and we drove back into the town. Near the Petchaburi river, along Phongsuriya Road, there is Wat Yai Suwannaram, a centre of learning for all senior academics in the field of Thai fine arts. Originally built in the 17th century, the temple was renovated during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Its main bot is surrounded by a cloister filled with Buddha images, and there is a giant Buddha image inside. The wall murals date from the 1730s, but are disappearing; and the roof has been filled in with cheap modern tiles, clearly as an expedient to keep out the weather. Next to the bot is a pond, with a beautifully.

For dinner, we headed on to Cha'am harbor. This remains a working fishing village, untouched by the tourism developments that have taken place next door. The oyster boats had pulled in, their boxes of catch stacked high against the deck housing, held in place by nets and racks. The seafood restaurants here are little more than tables and chairs under an awning next to the dirt-track that runs along the seafront. How to choose? We didn't know, so we took the place with the best view, and sat with a fresh seafood dinner and a wonderful view of the sun setting over the harbor.