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DESTINATION: THAILAND

*In a City of Temples, a Sanctuary of Repose
Finding serenity in a Chiang Mai inn, and in the many faces of Buddha*

By Emilie C. Harting

"I want to create as many visual experiences as I can to make the eyes perceive happiness," said Thummanit Phuvasatien, the owner of Suan Doi, a small hotel in this provincial city full of visual delights.

Chiang Mai is a cultural treasure trove, home to 300 temples and the center of northern Thailand's arts and crafts--a magnet for Buddhists and shoppers. I am neither. I was in Chiang Mai because my daughter, Thea, was on an Antioch College program affiliated with Chiang Mai University, and it seemed a good place for a family vacation. She researched the guest-house market, and in May 1997 we--my husband, Rob, our son, Morgan, Thea and I--settled in for nine days at Suan Doi.



Once I pushed aside the beads at the entrance hall and stepped into the lush garden, I was captivated. Wandering the slate paths, I noticed pairs of shoes outside the guest-room doors and felt reassured of having an authentic Thai experience.

But this was no simple house, rather a compound--a two-story building of 39 guest rooms, library and restaurant set in an acre of trees and flowers, soothing fountains and birds warbling in cages.

In the corridors, all open on one side to the gardens, were sitting areas furnished with chairs, ottomans and cases of bric-a-brac. And urns of varying size stood everywhere--on tabletops, along railings, beside paths--reflecting the northern Thai custom of rural houses keeping urns of water outside for strangers passing through. Some of the urns in Suan Doi, I would discover later, housed guppies. "No reason," said our host, "but to please the eye."

It was our noses that led us to the heart of Suan Doi: the restaurant in the garden, where meals are served beneath carved wood umbrellas. Before long we had a favorite table where the rhododendrons grew high and Albert the parrot entertained in his cage, repeating whatever was said to him in English or Thai.

From the table we could see the outline of the guest library, a rustic wooden building. On the bottom floor was a collection of books about handling "troubles," loosely defined as any state in which one needs spiritual rejuvenation. Upstairs, you could recline on pillows and look into the trees. Our children, 21 and 25, spent one long, rainy afternoon reading there.

The style of the gardens and the decor of the rooms combined Japanese, northern Thai and Balinese influences, with a lot of carved wood. Our rooms, and the others we peeked into, were individually and artfully decorated, air-conditioned and outfitted with Western-style bathroom fixtures.

Northern Thailand is bracketed by Myanmar (Burma) and Laos--the infamous Golden Triangle of the historic opium trade (though here, drug-dealing can mean the death penalty). These cultures, plus that of the Yunnan area of China not far away, have made Chiang Mai distinctive in architecture, religious practice, art, health (it is a center of massage training, yoga and tai chi) and cooking. Mr. Poy (as the owner of Suan Doi is known to guests and staff alike) had an idea for a different approach. Although he is northern Thai, he wanted a Vietnamese restaurant for Suan Doi, so he apprenticed to a Vietnamese chef, then came home to hire and train his own kitchen staff. The result is delightful. We enjoyed excellent sweet-and-sour soups and rice-paper-wrapped vegetables, and such specialties as mung-bean cakes coated in sesame seeds and chicken with lemon grass.

I often would walk from one sitting area to another with an iced lemon drink, read for a while, listen to the birds, watch the staff tend to the garden, then move to another sitting area and do more of the same. However, I always ended up at one of the round dining tables in the garden, the better to keep the cool drinks coming. (We were there in the hot season, which is from March through July, with temperatures in the mid-90s.)

We seldom encountered other people enjoying the garden. Most of Suan Doi's guests are Thai professionals and businesspeople who prefer the tranquillity of an inn to large hotels. And many of the American guests are attending conferences at nearby Chiang Mai University or its research facilities, or visiting relatives--as we were.

Our daughter had finished a three-month work-study semester and was staying on for another three months to work on an AIDS education project. She was able to carry out basic transactions in Thai, and her familiarity with the city was invaluable. But Chiang Mai is small and easy to get around. And we had no trouble finding locals with some knowledge of English and a lot of eagerness to be helpful. Still, it is important to carry a card or brochure from your hotel with the address written in Thai.

Most tourists stay on the city's east side, near the historic center and the must-see Night Market. Suan Doi is on the west side, two blocks from busy Huang Seay Road. There we would hail a songthaew (pronounced "song tag"), a cross between a flatbed truck and a commuter van. (You hail them by standing at the side of the road and shaking your hand downward.) The 20-minute trip across town to the restaurants and tourist spots cost \$1.50 for the four of us.

We felt quite comfortable everywhere, and in fact much safer than we have in European cities. An American Thai friend, a native of Chiang Mai who visits often, told us to watch out for pickpockets at the Night Market, a vast, crowded bazaar, but even there we felt safe.

We spent most days visiting wats, or Buddhist temples. There are 100 just within the square mile of Chiang Mai's old city. Most wats are topped by at least one chedi, the distinctive bell-shaped chamber with tapering spire that is emblematic of Thailand.

Wat Phra Singh, one of the most important, stands near the western gate of the old city not far from Suan Doi House. It has an elaborate public sanctuary decorated with frescoes depicting life in 19th century Chiang Mai, a 14th century library and an adjacent monastery and secondary school for boys. Four hundred monks live there.

One guidebook estimates there are at least 200,000 Buddhist monks in Thailand, but that is a somewhat misleading statistic to Westerners. Almost every Thai male lives as a monk at some time in his life, usually as a teenager or before marriage. But this monkhood typically is short, sometimes as little as two weeks.

The Phra Singh, or Sighing Buddha, image in Wat Phra Singh is one of the most beloved, and seeing it was a turning point for me. I will always remember entering the Lai Kham (Gilded Hall) and seeing the many smaller golden Buddhas at the feet of the Sighing Buddha. That is when I noticed how the faces of the northern Thai Buddhas have more reflective expressions than the chubby Buddhas with rounded faces I'd seen in southern Thailand. But Wat Phra Singh was only an introduction.



Young Monks. *Photo: Paul Ross, www.GlobalAdventure.us*

Northern Thailand's most sacred temple is Wat Phra That, which looks like a gold palace on the top of Doi Suthep, a mountain just 12 miles from Chiang Mai. We got there by taking a songthaew from White Elephant Gate on the north side of the old city. As we swerved around the roads leading up to Doi Suthep we were able to look down the mountain through forests and across waterfalls.

We entered Wat Phra That after climbing its 300 steps. (There is a tram for the equivalent of 25 cents.) The compound was filled with Thais who had come to make offerings of flowers, candles and incense to the Buddha. Foreigners, or farang, were greeted by a

large sign proclaiming in English, "Dress impolite can't enter this temple." Anyone with bare legs or shoulders would be given a sarong.

Wat Phra That's golden chedi is more than 50 feet tall and has a cap of gold and silver ripples. Surrounding it are gold lace umbrellas resembling Tiffany lamps, and smaller temples with pointed roofs, multicolored latticework studded with gold, marble foundations and dragon tails at roof corners. Numerous two- and three-foot Buddhas line the gold fences.

After descending Wat Phra That's steps, we hailed a songthaew for the jaunt farther up the mountain to the gardens of the royal family's summer palace, quite a few acres of pink, white and red flowers, a vegetable farm and more mountain views. There was also a tent where Thais were cooking local specialties while their chickens roamed free. We bought our lunch--noodle soup with vegetables and, yes, chicken--from one of them and ate at a picnic table.

One day we walked through the heat and dust to Wat U Mong Therajan, on a hill about two miles from where we were staying. This "forest wat" was established in the 14th century and later abandoned. Some of it was restored in the 1940s, and a small group of young monks lives on the grounds. We heard their chanting as we walked up the steep incline to the tunnels that lead to the shrines.

At the end of one tunnel we found an altar with a freshly painted 12-foot-long reclining gold Buddha, his hand cupping his chin. In front were gifts left by worshipers--candles, pottery and a picture of Thailand's monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyada.

Another day's outing, this time with a driver arranged by Suan Doi House, included elephant rides, a short raft trip and a visit to an orchid and butterfly farm, and ended with shopping on Sankamphaeng Road, a nine-mile stretch of factories and showrooms for silk, ceramics, gems, lacquerware and silverware. The shopping--the quality, variety and price of these local products--is a must for many visitors. But not for us. It was much more fun to pick up gifts such as hand-woven pocketbooks or lengths of silk at small shops or the Night Market.

Our most adventurous side trip was to Sukhothai, Thailand's oldest city, now a historical park. There we saw the various elements of Thai culture merge: the Buddhist faith from the Sinhalese (Sri Lanka); Hinduism from India; ancestor worship from China; a government system from the Mongols; social customs, language and art from the Khmers (Cambodia).

Near the end of our visit to Sukhothai, at Wat Si Chum, I spent a long time gazing up at a 19-foot feminine-looking Buddha inside a stone enclosure. While sitting Buddhas often have their hands in their laps to indicate meditation, this one had its right hand touching the ground, calling on the earth's support against evil.

I often dream that I am back in Thailand, and I feel at peace, even though I am an outsider in that culture where life is on a more transcendent plane.

Harting is a college English teacher and writer in Philadelphia.

GUIDEBOOK

Temple Land

Getting there: Northwest Airlines flies from LAX to Bangkok with one stop (no change of plane) in Tokyo. The restricted round-trip rate for travel by April 23 is \$638. United, Canadian and Japan Air also fly LAX-Bangkok for that price, but with change of planes. Thai Air's rate is \$1,350.

Thai Air has frequent daily flights from Bangkok to Chiang Mai for \$110 round trip.

Where to stay: Rooms at Suan Doi House, telephone and fax 011-66-53-221-869, range from \$42 double to \$60 for the executive suite. Breakfast (American, continental or Thai) is included. Address: 38/3 Soi Charnstrasup, Chiang Mai 50000, Thailand.

Suan Doi doesn't have a swimming pool; for a few dollars we swam at the Amari Rincome Hotel two blocks away. It is billed as one of the top luxury hotels in Chiang Mai, and the guests we spoke to seemed pleased. Peak (winter) rates start at \$141; 301 Huay Kaew Road, Chiang Mai 50000, Thailand; tel. 011- 66-53-221-130, fax 011-66-53-221-915.

Two restaurants we liked very much: Riverside Cafe on Charoenrat Road just north of Nawarat Bridge, which has inexpensive Thai and American food and live blues music; and Sheve Shiraz on Charoen Prathet Road near the Night Market, for vegetarian northern Indian specialties.