

Kanchanaburi

Thailand, the land of friendly smiles and fabulous beaches, is also blessed with plenty of relatively untrammelled spots that are just far enough from the bustle and clamor usually found in popular destinations. All offer their own unique attractions for the adventurous and/or frazzled traveler, and one of the loveliest is the provincial capital of Kanchanaburi, about 130 kilometres west of Bangkok.

Kanchanaburi is not a hotspot for lively nightlife or luxury hotels and restaurants. However, if spending a night or two in a floating inn and dangling your feet in the river from your own veranda appeals to you, then you'll want to check it out. It's easy to get there from Bangkok by train, bus, hired car or even a taxi, but if you want to spend a little quality time in the area the best bet is a car and/or a rented bicycle or motorbike, since this is also not a compact area; it sprawls.

Actually, there is a lot to do and see in the quiet and mostly undeveloped province of Kanchanaburi. The town is situated in a fertile valley where the Khwae Noi and Khwae Yai rivers meet at the Mae Klong river. The Khwae Noi, by the way, is also known as the River Kwai, as in 'Bridge Over . . .', and most foreigners who come to Kanchanaburi come to see the famous bridge and the war memorabilia in two impressive museums and a large cemetery.

The bridge, built during WWII as part of the infamous Burma Railway (aka the Death Railway) stands as a monument to that monstrous undertaking, and anyone familiar with its history will find a visit to the site an intense experience, though certainly not a joyful one. There are loads of tours available, or you can go on your own to 'Hellfire Pass' upriver, another famous/infamous section of the railway.

Kanchanaburi sits at the bottom of a mountain range literally veined with caves and tunnels that are fascinating in themselves with natural stalagmite and stalactite formations. Note that none are in easy walking distance, and some are at least 20 or 30 minutes away by car, but well worth the trip. Along the way you can detour to several really beautiful waterfalls; the scenery is marvelous – and extremely photogenic – but most of the trails are daunting unless you're reasonably fit.

One of the most memorable caves is more or less dedicated to the Buddhist monk (you ready?) , Phrabhavanaviriyakhun, who was born in Kanchanaburi. Along with some high-hanging bats and some of Nature's most artistic sculptures in limestone, there are statues of the Buddha in each stage of his life, seated on natural pedestals in a series of grotto shrines.

Fairly nearby is the notorious Tiger Temple, which is a temple only to man not-so-kind's greed and will wrench your heart if you have a scrap of empathy with wild animals. If you wish to be photographed with a tiger so heavily sedated he can barely open his mouth, much less bite, go right ahead, and don't forget to tip the 'keepers' on top of the exorbitant entrance fees.

Fortunately, elephants are a different story; there are several well-run camps where you can meet and greet and catch a ride on one of these amenable giants. Taweechai Elephant Camp is one of the largest, located about halfway between Kanchanaburi and the magnificent Erawan Falls. Another is Elephants and Friends Conservation Camp, which can only be reached by motorbike, not by public transport; it provides some delightful and very educational interaction between visitor and elephant.

Kanchanaburi town has two main sections that include a 'downtown' area of shops and other businesses, and a stretch along the Mae Nam Kwae Road where most of the guest houses are located. As mentioned, many are built on rafts that float in a most delightful way on the running river, both in

the town and ranging much farther upriver. No hot water for showers, but that's not a hardship since even nighttime temperatures seldom fall below 80 degrees (F).

Of course there are more conventional lodgings available, but the lack of neon and noise pollution is a great relaxer. Kanchanaburi is an excellent choice for getting off the beaten track and slowing the pace. There is an interesting contrast also, between the remembered horrors of the Great War in those parts and the peaceful, natural beauty that typifies the river valley and the entire province of Kanchanaburi today.

Destination Myanmar

<http://www.elegantmyanmartours.com/tourism-news.html>

The long isolation of Myanmar, still known to many as Burma, may be coming to an end, but there is still a ways to go. Western sanctions prohibiting commerce with the country have been suspended or lifted in some cases, and over the past year or so the word has gone out that foreign tourists are welcomed by the Parliamentary government, and certainly by the majority of Myanmar's people.

Lonely Planet placed Myanmar at Number 2 on its list of the top ten countries for adventure travel in 2012, and the tourist board is scrambling to meet the challenge of an influx of visitors eager to explore the marvels in this relatively unknown corner of the world. Rudyard Kipling said it was a land 'like no other' and even today that statement rings true. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the country as it opens the door to its future is whether it can retain and cherish the very qualities that define its allure.

Myanmar's Ministry of Tourism has estimated that this year will see a million tourists arriving in Yangon, the country's main portal – as opposed to around half that number in 2010-2011. The capacity to accommodate those visitors is estimated at roughly 25,000, and that includes the entire country, not just Yangon, Mandalay and the new capital city of Naypyitaw.

For some, this means 'hurry up and build high-rise hotels', but for those who hope to save Myanmar from the fate of so many areas in the world that have sacrificed the natural environment and indigenous culture to the demands of a booming tourist industry, it's a dilemma of imponderable proportions.

Advocates of “ethical tourism” insist that visitors should be aware of both the short and long term impact of such a boom and spend their holiday funds where they will do the most good. That translates to staying in private guest houses, avoiding package tours, eating the local cuisine in establishments operated by locals and generally trying to support the working residents rather than the still-powerful military faction that is well known for its lack of enthusiasm where human rights are concerned.

Whether you call it Myanmar or Burma, this is a small country with huge potential that could go either way in the next few years. Its natural resources include the non-sustainable ones so dear to the hearts of big businesses like oil companies. The richest resources arguably lie in its gentle, gracious people with their devout Buddhist ideals, and in its almost untarnished rivers, mountains and shores. Preserving those riches will not be easy, but informed visitors can do their part to help.