



# Travel Industry TODAY



HOME

ABOUT VIDEOS COLUMNISTS CONTACT SEARCH



# ONE NIGHT IN BAN KOK

Exploring the Isan Region of Thailand

Steve Gillick

SHARE ON FACEBOOK



19 MAY 2015: Ban Kok is a small village about an hour southwest of Khon Kaen in northeast Thailand's Isan Region. Each day at sunrise and sunset an amazing phenomenon occurs. The villagers set out mangoes, grapes, melons and jackfruit around their homes. A faint rustling sound can be detected as the grasses in the yard

begin to bend and sway. And then, like a scene out of the movie Jurassic Park, one creature, then two, then eight emerge from the undergrowth and start biting off huge chunks of the fruit.



This is the turtle village, also known as Mu Ban Tao, which refers to the *Tao Pek*, or elongated turtles that embody the holy spirits that have protected the village for the past 250 years. We arrived at 5:30 pm only to find one or two turtles but by 6:00 pm, one house had 10 ‘guests’ at the fruit banquet.

The village itself was comprised of typical rural Thai homes. Built on poles, the first level under the home is for industry, animals, shade and cooking with the ‘second’ level containing the sleeping quarters. While the idea of “One Night in Bangkok” (referring to the song from the play ‘Chess’) reflects many people’s concept of what a visit to Thailand is all about, those who venture to the relatively undiscovered attractions in Isan (sometimes spelled Isaan) are in for wonderful surprises, visual and physical adventures and culinary bounties that overwhelm the senses.

Isan literally means 'northeast' and refers to Thailand's largest region bordering on Laos and Cambodia. Courtesy of the Tourism Authority of Thailand and Smiling Albino, we spent six days exploring the region. We drove all the way from Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen, Udon Thani, Nakhon Phanom and Khong Chiam (before flying back to Bangkok from Ubon Ratchathani), however travellers can fly into the major cities to save time or explore specific areas of interest.



Our guide, Kob, set the pace on the first day when she spoke about a market on a train. We really had no idea what she meant. But arriving at the Prapong Railway Station, about 2 1/2 hours from Bangkok, we found a row of food vendors, actively selling their goods and waiting for the 7:30 am train. It arrived at 8:00 am - and all the vendors crowded on with their bags, boxes and pots for the 20 minute ride to Kabinburi. On arrival, we found one of the most interesting and friendly markets ever encountered, featuring cooked foods, vegetables, fruits, bamboo, chicken, pork, rats, fish of every kind, insects (crickets, water beetles, grasshoppers and ant eggs), spices, noodles, rice and other sumptuous goodies.

The next day near Nakhon Ratchasima, we visited what some consider to be the model for Angkor Wat. The Phimai Historical Park features a 12<sup>th</sup> century Khmer Temple complex that sits on an

ancient highway leading to Angkor. There were perhaps a dozen visitors during our stay—a far cry from the crowds at Angkor Wat—but the architecture, the wall carvings and the symbolism at Phimai is as equally breathtaking. The nearby museum, where many of the statues and carvings have been carefully preserved, is also a must.

A typical Isan lunch down the road at the Rim Moon Restaurant featured sticky rice made with chicken sausage, mushroom, salty eggs, lotus reeds, bamboo and spices. This was followed by crab dumplings, Tom Ka Gai (chicken coconut soup with chili paste), steamed rice and vegetables with snow peas, baby corn and shrimp in oyster and fish sauce, then chicken with ginger, onions and jelly mushrooms, and finally fish cake with young coconut meat and red curry. Kob noted that in Isan, ‘Culinary is king’ and she referred to food as an analogy for travel: a fusion of flavours, styles and personalities’.



An afternoon visit to the Silk Village was an eye-opener. Unlike the typical silk factory tours that many of us have experienced, this was a rustic Thai village where the silk worms are raised and the silk threads are then gathered for production elsewhere. In the heat of the day, in the shade of the first floor under the houses, the village women tend their children, stir the cocoons in boiling water, collect the silk thread, and engage in friendly social banter with friends.

A short drive away was Ban Kok, the turtle village, and then after reaching Khon Kaen around 8:00 pm, we visited the night market—along with hundreds of locals (and very few tourists) to enjoy a late dinner of Pad Thai, fried chicken and cold Singha Beer.

Continuing the next day toward Udon Thani, we visited Koo Kaew Village which specializes in weaving grass mats, and we had time to wander down narrow paths to the rice paddies to enjoy the scenery and the silence, save for the buzzing of insects and the chirping of birds. Then it was on to the sacred site of Kham Chanot—the Naga Shrine—located in a forested temple. The belief is that a mythical large snake, the Naga Lord Sisothe, lives in the area and can bestow good luck, health and prosperity to those who show reverence. A 100 meter bridge links the main temple to the island on which the Naga temple is situated, where upon visitors are confronted by a cacophony of colour, chanting and people rubbing huge gongs that produce sounds that are carried by the wind to the ears of the Naga, and bring good fortune.

In Nakhon Phanom we enjoyed a sunset cruise along the Mekong River, with Laos just a stone's throw away, and then joined the locals on Mekong Walking Street, an upbeat night market.

On the way to Khong Chiam the next day we scampered around Sam Pun Bok: the 3000 holes of the Thailand's Grand Canyon. We had the opportunity to share in the experience of providing food for the monks on the street and in the local temple, on the following morning and then, after engaging with the fascinating mushroom rocks at Sao Chaling and then the rock paintings at Pha Taem, we chatted, through our tour guide, with the abbot of a small forest

monastery. Where else in the world can you have so many different and meaningful experiences?

Being woken up by a rooster who crows at 12:50 am and then at 2:20 am and then at 3:30 am is not such a bad experience when you emerge from your room to see the sun rise reflected as bands of gold on the Mekong River, while local fisherman cast their nets in the river as they begin another day in Isan.



For travellers who have visited the main centres of Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Phuket, the Isan Region is just waiting to enhance the Thailand experience. It's family friendly, solo explorer fascinating and everything in between. It satisfies about a dozen niche market interests and responds to the modern traveller question: 'what else can I do?'

And by the way. There is a guesthouse near Ban Kok (the village) for those who wish to spend that one night...or more.



## BAN KOK



The market at Prapong Railway Station





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

[Read more from Steve Gillick](#)

Comments for this thread are now closed

### Important Update

When you log in with Disqus, we process personal data to facilitate your authentication and posting of comments. We also store the comments you post and those comments are immediately viewable and searchable by anyone around the world.

- I agree to Disqus' Terms of Service
- I agree to Disqus' processing of email and IP address, and the use of cookies, to facilitate my authentication and posting of comments, explained further in the Privacy Policy

Proceed