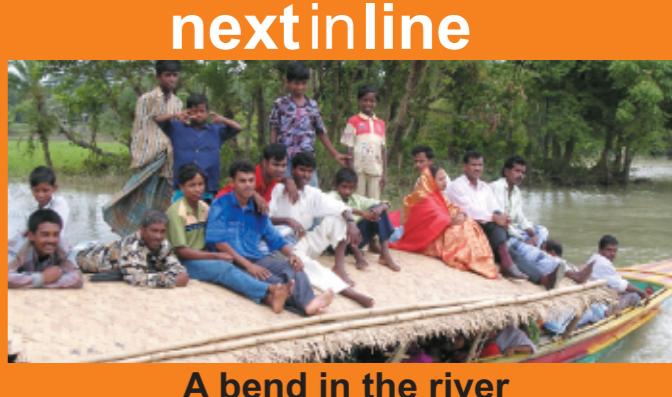




DHAKA SUNDAY AUGUST 10, 2003

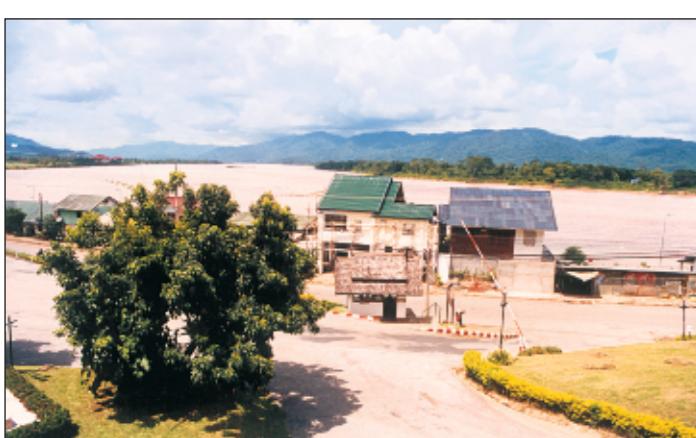
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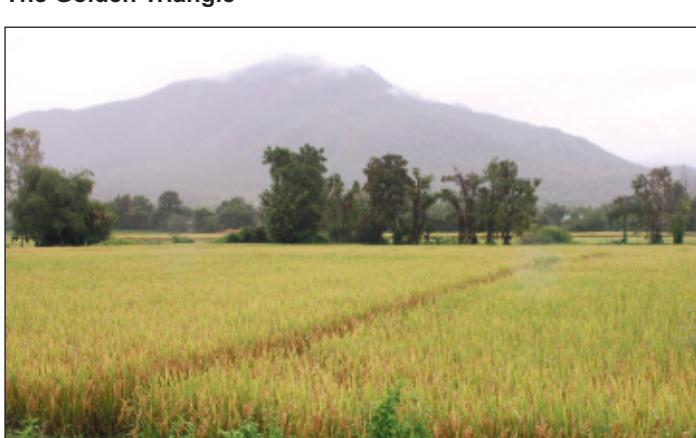
A bend in the river



The Golden Triangle with the casino seen in Myanmar side



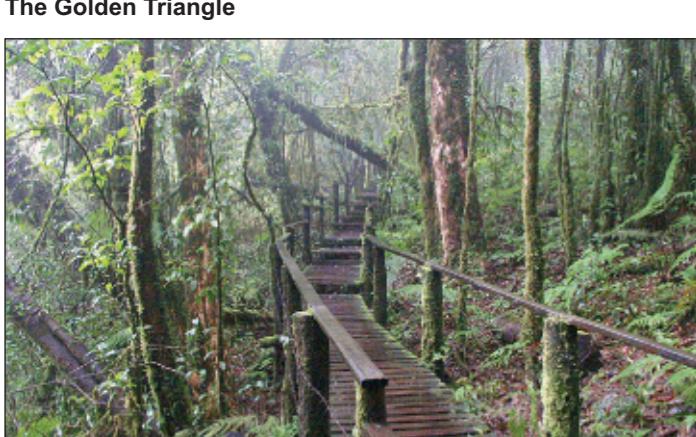
The Golden Triangle



Sleeping Lady mountain



The Golden Triangle



The entrance to Doi Tung garden



A rapid flowing through Mesai



Doi Tung garden



In Golden Triangle

LOCATION > CHIANG MAI. CATEGORY > FAMILY / ADVENTURE

LOOKING at the conveyor belt at the airport, you know it is Chiang Mai, fabled for the long-necked tribal people.

As luggage start flowing in, the first things to catch your attention are the golf kit boxes. From all over Southeast Asia and even the Pacific Rim, golfers are flocking to the paradise of golfing. When you step out, you know it even clearly that you are in Chiang Mai and not in Bangkok, as you are sure to compare.

The idyllic city just basks in the sun to welcome you. No highrise, no traffic jam, less of glitz and yet an immaculate city that glints of warmth. Narrow roads running along a winding canal with staccato of an ancient brick wall reminds you that this an 11th century city in contrast to the name Chiang Mai meaning new city.

People are also different from down south where Bangkok buzzes with activities and swirls with tourist money. Here, you will find people strolling by the roads with fluffy dogs on the leash, a scene unusual in Bangkok. Otherwise, many things are in common – the unmistakable nightlife, pubs, tourist hangouts and night bazaars. The feeling of eternal happiness hangs in the air, of course.

The night bazaars are something special. If you are a handicraft collector, these are the right places. The artifacts of the northern people in Thailand are distinctly interesting and you can find all types of things made by hill tribes. You can stroll the whole night, haggle, buy, eat out on the pavement, drink and breathe in the unmistakable Chiang Mai night.

In the morning, you can choose to see the elephants. The closest and the largest elephant camp is the Mesai Elephant Camp. About 80 elephants are schooled there from the age of one year to perform amazing feats. They will play football, and dance in a funny manner every time they score, swinging trunks,



How to go there and budget

Thailand and Thai Airways are specially promoting Chiang Mai as a holiday spot because of its immense beauty. The city is cheap, much cheaper than Bangkok while facilities are world class. Thai Airways has teamed up with GMG Holidays to offer a dirt-cheap fare to Chiang Mai at only \$205 which also includes free medical check-up at a top Chiang Mai hospital. For another \$25, the package will include trips to all the places mentioned in the write-up. Or, you can take the Thai flight to Chiang Mai and talk to your hotel for tour operators to take you around. And if you have time, explore everything by yourself.

they will do -- drawing watercolour pictures on easels.

If you are short of time, then you head for Chian Rai, another smaller township farther north. The road runs through dense forests with sharp turns. On the way, you can stop at the hot spring. For many, it is an amazing experience. Vapour drifts out of huge wells. You can buy some eggs, put them in a bucket and dip it in the boiling water. After five minutes, you sit in the roadside restaurant and savour on the eggs while watching the hills smudging the horizon in a blue line.

gone and a cool breeze washes you down. From the top of the mountain, you get a scenic view of the Chian Rai stretch. But that becomes a dull view as soon as you step inside the garden. Your heart will flutter at the breathtaking beauty of the garden set against the king's mother's palace. An artificial waterfall looks so real that you might feel like taking a shower in it. The flowers are spreading a blanket of colour, some on huge wooden boats, some hanging from perched poles. In fact, the garden is so big that it would take you half a day to complete the visit.

The next day, we headed farther north and arrived at the famous Golden Triangle. Our skin crawled in thrill and we were flung back to the memories of our youthful days. It was in one of those Bruce Lee movies that I first came to know about the Golden Triangle -- the haven for international drug smugglers.

The famous Mekong river coming all the way down from China through Cambodia and Vietnam flows in a rabid. This is the same river I have seen in Apocalypse Now. This is the river where the American troops and Vietnamese guerrilla fighters engaged in a bloodthirsty spat.

On the right, less than a quarter kilometre away, sits Laos, its hills and forests looking mysteriously sombre. On its banks, a flock of monks wrapped in yellow chadors performing some religious rites.

On our left, across only about a hundred metres is Myanmar with the enigma of a lost land. From deep in the forest by the Mekong bank came in view a red-titled building. It is a casino, as our guide told us, where the drug lords meet and squander away their money. People from Thailand also go there on boats to gamble.

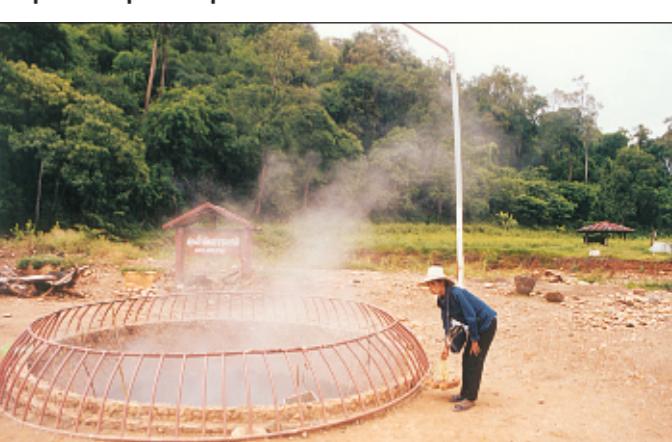
Everything looked tranquil and we found it hard to imagine this treacherous place is often used by drug lords. And police find it difficult to catch them because they can easily sneak into any of the three countries, depending on the nationality of the cops.

The last point we touched is the farthest northern tip of Thailand. A straight road stretches beyond sight into Myanmar. We stopped just on the borderline, the Myanmar flag flying high in front, cars and pedestrians crawling into Thailand. Like any border point, the place vibrates with life.

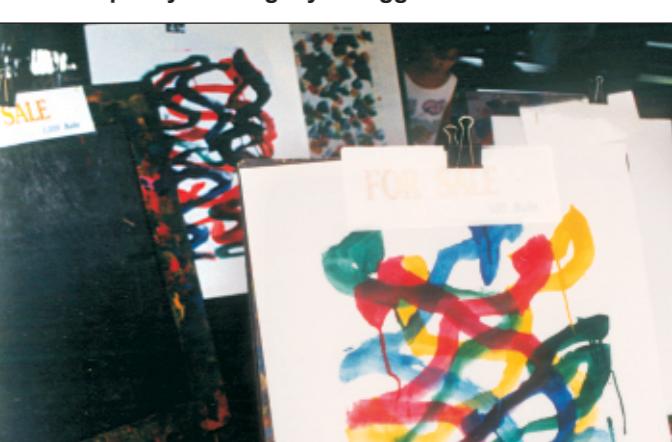
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story & photo: INAM AHMED



Elephants queue up for entertainment



The Hot Spa -- you can get your eggs boiled here



Paintings drawn by elephants at Mesai Elephant Camp



Chiang Mai night bazaar