

## ORIENTAL EDEN

**Bronwen Evans**

*For hundreds of years, foreigners have been beguiled by the exotic fruits, spices, and islands of southeast Thailand. New beach resorts in the Koh Chang archipelago are now attracting the latest generation of explorers.*

Long before Siam's ancient capital of Ayutthaya was built, sailing ships from China, Persia, Portugal and Spain swept along the coasts of the South China Sea to the port of Chanthaburi in the Gulf of Siam. After loading their ships with silks and porcelains from China, lacquer and gum from Vietnam, they came to Siam where they gathered precious gemstones, ivory, timber and spices in addition to essential supplies of food and water.

To these early arrivals from overseas, Siam must have seemed idyllic. Luxuriant trees hung with delicious fruits, the air resonated with birdsong, and the food was tasty, spiced with seasoning such as cardamom, ginger and black pepper. Spices from Siam gradually found their way into the cuisines of the West; incense made from aloewood scented church altars; and Siamese rubies and sapphires came to adorn the fingers of the rich.



It is perhaps curious then, that given the beauty and abundance of this oriental Eden, Southeast Thailand, especially Trat and its neighbouring province of Chanthaburi are not so well known among modern day travellers. It is probably because there seemed no need to cultivate a tourist industry. The prosperous locals were too busy tending to their orchards, polishing their jewels and sanding their fishing boats.

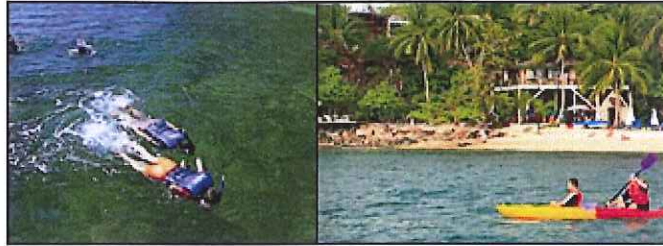
Times change, however. Although the region today is as prosperous as ever, around a decade ago, the Thai government, realizing that other popular destinations were in danger of becoming overcrowded, decided to develop Koh Chang in Trat province as "the next Phuket". Being a late arrival on the tourist map was not a disadvantage. On the contrary, Koh Chang benefited from the experience of more established destinations in Thailand. Tourism development in Koh Chang has been carefully planned.

The director of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Trat office, Mr Chuchart Oncharoen, says that the special character of the area comes from its gardens, orchards, gems and fisheries. This fertile abundance has required excellent roads to transport produce to the rest of Thailand. The domestic transport links are improving, and new roads and bridges are also being built to Cambodia.

"Soon we will have a coastal link between the triple gems of Koh Chang in Thailand, Koh Kong in Cambodia and Phu Quoc Island in Vietnam," says Chuchart.

Koh Chang is the second largest island in Thailand after Phuket and part of an archipelago of 52 islands on Thailand's southern border with Cambodia. Together, with most of these small islands, around 85 percent of the island of Koh Chang is a national park. To protect its pristine beauty with rainforested peaks, white sandy beaches and clear blue waters, the government has designated Koh Chang as an area for sustainable development. This means that limited tourist development is permitted in zoned areas. Roads around the island have been upgraded and private sector operators are encouraged to build upmarket accommodation.

Indeed, five years ago there was little available for tourists on Koh Chang apart from a few beach bars and backpackers' bungalows. Now the island offers a wide choice of accommodation from luxurious private villas with their own swimming pools and spas, to cute bamboo cottages. There is also a cosmopolitan range of restaurants and nightclubs.



"Koh Chang is an ideal place for visitors who love peaceful surroundings, relaxing and water sports such as snorkelling, kayaking and sailing. With the rainforest in the interior of the island, people can also enjoy the tranquillity of beautiful waterfalls, indigenous wildlife and trekking," says Chuchart.

For travellers interested in history, a visit to Trat and Chanthaburi is most rewarding. According to Professor Prem Wachanagun, who heads the department of Marine Archaeology at the National Maritime Museum near the city of Chanthaburi, Chanthaburi was one of the first places in Thailand to be settled. The first known settlement was 6,000 years ago. By the time the great maritime fleets began arriving in the 15th and 16th centuries it was already a thriving and cosmopolitan settlement hosting Siamese, Khmers, Chinese, Malays and Vietnamese. The Chinese settlers were mainly Teochew, from the region of Shantou on the coast of China. This was to be a unique factor in Thailand's later development, as their descendants gradually migrated northwest and settled in great numbers in Bangkok and other parts of the country.

Down the years, the beauty and wealth of the eastern coast of Thailand has attracted the interest of other countries, not all of it friendly. There have been numerous battles over the last 200 years, with the Cantonese, the Vietnamese and the French all attempting to wrest sovereignty from the Thai kingdom. France even succeeded in occupying Chanthaburi between 1893 and 1905. In 1905, Siam ceded territory in Cambodia, including Angkor Wat, to France to get Chanthaburi back. Thailand tried to recover some territories from French during the second World War but it was defeated by the French navy in the battle of Ko Chang in 1941. Scuba divers today take the plunge all along the southeast coast knowing they have a chance of finding wrecks and treasures of historical significance.

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Above water, visual traces of the region's colourful history can still be seen. The Chinese influence is apparent in the wooden shop houses of Trat and the Chinese shrines and temples scattered throughout the region. Vietnamese settlers have built many Catholic churches and the elegant layout of the towns and cities reflects the former French influence.

The blessings of nature which led to the early prosperity of Trat and Chanthaburi are still abundant today. The green forests and mountains form a spectacular backdrop to the beautiful islands and beaches along the coast, and the combination of mountain ranges and sea creates a unique microclimate. During the cooler months from November to February the daytime temperatures hover around 21 degrees centigrade while the starry nights are crisp and cool. In the hottest months of March and April, the average temperature rises to 34 degrees. In the rainy season, the mountain ranges provide a buffer against the fierce tropical storms which batter other parts of the South China Sea.



The world-renowned Cardamom Ranges on the border of Thailand and Cambodia still ring with the calls of gibbons, elephants, tigers and hornbills. The forests are home to the cardamoms and cloves which gave them their name. On the plains, orchards of exotic fruits such as durian, pomelo, mangosteen, pineapple, rambutan, lychee and rose apple create a colourful sight. At the height of the fruit harvest in May, fruit festivals are held in all the Eastern provinces, while the highways rattle with fruit-laden trucks heading to the markets and ports of Bangkok. And in a clash between the old and the new, wild elephants sometimes barricade the roads in the densely forested areas and overturn trucks in search of pineapples, cassava and other fruit.



Koh Kut



Koh Maak



Koh Kham



Along the coast, the emerald islands, white sands and clear sapphire waters of Eastern Thailand have led to it being dubbed the "Jewel Coast." The islands were once used as a base for pirates for attacking the treasure laden ships of the South China Sea. Today, they are a peaceful paradise of coconut palms and fishing boats. Dolphins frolic in the waves. Schools of colourful fish reflect the light in the crystal clear water around Koh Kut, Koh Maak, Koh Kham which are all part of the Koh Chang group. The beaches in the archipelago are among the most beautiful in Thailand. Six Senses Resorts and Spas is planning to build a private airstrip on the island of Maisi to fly in clients to neighbouring Ko Kut where they will stay at what is being promoted as an exclusive hideaway.



If the pristine islands and beaches of Koh Chang come as a surprise in this age of mass travel, another surprise is the beaches of coastal Chanthaburi. These are only about three hours by car from Bangkok and a popular stopover on the way to Ko Chang. White or golden sandy beaches are lined with casuarina trees. Along the bays of Chao Lao, Laem Sadet and Kung Wiman, peaceful fishing villages nestle by the rocks, with forested hills tumbling down in the backdrop.

The marine sanctuary in the mangroves of Laem Sadet is one of six nature education centres established by the royal family in Thailand. The name of the peaceful bay of Kung Wiman means "curve in the water in heaven". A sign on the waterfront proclaims that it was given this name by Chinese survivors of a shipwreck who believed they had died and

Sources of reference:

<sup>1</sup> In 1907, the Kingdom of Siam and France concluded another treaty by which Siam ceded to France the provinces of Battambang, Siem Reap and Srisophon, which the Treaty of 1869 recognized as belonging to Siam. In return, France made some minor adjustments in Thailand 's coastal boundary. Source: Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs website  
<http://www.mfa.go.th/web/124.php>

<sup>2</sup>The Battle of Koh Chang took place on January 17, 1941 during the French-Thai War and resulted in a decisive victory by the French over the Thai Navy – Source: Wikipedia:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Koh\\_Chang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Koh_Chang)

Naval Encyclopedia of World War 2  
Tales from the Battle off Koh Chang  
<http://www.lemaire.happyhost.org/ship/edito/9993.html>