

The Chanthaburi coast boasts a charming fishing community that sits at the scenic confluence of a verdant forest, mountains and the sea

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Chanthaburi is a treasure trove waiting to be explored. Easily the most underrated of the eastern seaside provinces in terms of tourism, it offers visitors a host of leisure activities - bush walks, verdant forests and adrenaline-pumping jet skiing.

Chanthaburi, or Muang Chan as locals prefer to call the province, is known to have played a prominent role in Thai history around the Rattanakosin period. Briefly during the early 20th century it was occupied by the French whose influence can be seen in the architecture of edifices that dot the provincial town. Rustic homes of ancient Chinese communities also add to the charm of the town area.

The province is popular for its Kok reed mats, tropical fruits and gems, while scenic waterfalls and the majestic Chanthaburi River compliment the awesome landscape at Kung Wiman Beach where a lush forest meets the turquoise sea.



A trawler from Hua Laem fishing village takes to the sea. Fishing is a profession its residents have been following for generations and they still feel proud doing it.

I visited the century-old Hua Laem fishing village in Kung Wiman which has a small beach facing the Gulf of Thailand. The village sits at the foothills of the Cardamom Mountains. The location has served as a backdrop for several local television dramas and commercials.

I was told that Hua Laem was the original settlement in the area, founded by sea gypsies who arrived here from southern Thailand. Most of the residents of Kung Wiman are either descendants of sea gypsies or survivors of Chinese shipwrecks, or both.

To reach the village we drove on a scenic road draped with natural beauty. The fishing village overlooks the mangrove-fringed bay of Kung Kraben, while at the other end forested hills cuddle up to the sea.

It was drizzling when we reached the home of Saichon Sawadipoom. The 33-year-old fisherman looked groggy after a siesta: "I take my boat out to sea at 4am and often don't get back until the next day," he said with a southern drawl. "The sea is not as fertile as it used to be but we can still manage to make a living. The best catch can be found 15-20 miles from our village. A lot depends on the weather, so we don't have a fixed schedule, but it suits me fine. I have been in this profession for a decade."

While other fishermen tend to work in groups, Saichon prefers to go it alone. His medium-sized boat has capsized several times but he always managed to survive by radioing for help in time. He feels he's been pretty lucky so far.



At Hua Laem visitors can occasionally spot the odd boat sitting idly as the younger generation has left the village in search of jobs in the city.

Saichon, who lives in a wooden house built on stilts, makes a reasonably good income. Four to five thousand baht a month is however not enough to keep pace with the rising cost of living, he said. When asked what he thought about opening his house to visiting tourists, Saichon said it was worth a try because it would certainly help bolster his income.

Tourists frequent Hua Laem daily to purchase dried squid, he said, and having them stay as house guests would be a nice way to learn from each other. "Ours is a closely-knit community and everyone's home is open to guests. The chairman of the local administration told us however that we would need to improve our sanitation to accommodate city folks. I don't know about the others, but I would give it a go and provide homestay for visiting tourists."

Being a small village, it took us just a few minutes to walk through Hua Laem. From what we saw it was obvious that the residents' main source of income were squids as hundreds of squid-catching contraptions were lined up at the village entrance.

At the pier, children could be seen frolicking in the mid-day sun, while a tourist sat in anticipation of boats arriving with their first catch of the day.

From there we proceeded to a mangrove forest that was a short distance from the Kung Kraben Bay Royal Development Study Centre in Tha Mai district. Set up in 1981, its prime objective is to prevent deterioration of mangrove forests. The centre is also tasked with research, development and enhancement of fishery and marine life in coastal areas, with emphasis on integrated farming.



Fisherman Saichon Sawadipoom poses in his trawler which has survived several storms.

Over 1,000 rai of lush forest extend along the bay's curve. Through the years, it has become a popular educational and recreational hub for students and nature lovers.

The smartly designed nature trail through the mangrove is dotted with exotic plants and trees. At rest areas along the path, there are information boards that tell visitors of its eco-system and the centre's goals. Unfortunately, all the writing is in Thai.

A cool sea breeze brushed my face as I stepped on the 850-metre-long boardwalk in the mangrove forest. The blazing afternoon sun showed no sign of relenting and I had to squint my eyes. The hike nevertheless turned out to be a pleasant one as I meandered past trees that went by names like *Rhizophora*, *Sonneratia alba* and so forth.

I tried to make the most of the peaceful surroundings and felt a sense of wellbeing enveloping me - I felt spiritually rejuvenated. I was hoping to enjoy the sunset by the bay, but it started raining again. For cover, I followed the wooden steps to a rest area and watched the trees dance in rain; it put a smile on my face.

With heavens showing no sign of easing, we decided to walk in the rain. In its inner sanctum Kung Kraben Bay holds a mangrove forest. There is also an extensive marine shrimp farming area behind the mangrove that is worth checking out. It has been in place since 1987. Water in the shrimp farm is closely monitored for acidity in order to assess its impact on the coastal environment.

Tourists can go kayaking in the mangrove or visit an aquarium that is just a stone's throw away from the shrimp farm.

Chanthaburi doesn't just offer quiet fishing villages and walks through mangroves but also peaceful beaches just three hours drive from Bangkok that are waiting to be explored.



When not tending their families, women folks help their husbands mend fishing nets.



This boardwalk leads visitors through a mangrove forest all the way to the sea.



Dark clouds gathering over the mangrove forest accentuate the beauty of the surrounding landscape.



Resting points along the wooden path also provide visitors cover against the sun and rain.