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# Travel

The New York Times

SUNDAY, MAY 7, 2017

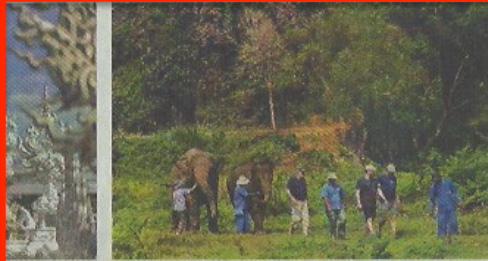
THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MAY 7, 2017

TR 9

## 36 Hours

GOLDEN TRIANGLE, THAILAND

Find a grotto for peaceful contemplation and commune with the elephants in this once-remote region.



From left: a Buddha at Golden Triangle Park on the Mekong riverfront; the White Temple, which depicts the Buddhist cycle of life and death; "Walking With Giants" at the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp and Resort.

**By DONALD FRAZIER**  
Descending from China in grand, graceful arcs, the upper Mekong unfurls in a tranquil, lulling sheen. Only battlement ruins to the south betray the region's heritage, a blood-soaked clash of empires, contested by Thai, Burmese, Laotian and Khmer armies for centuries. Fortresses and royal cities are now all but swallowed by jungle and farmland.

The once-remote Golden Triangle at the northern tip of Thailand is now a haven for peaceful contemplation in dozens of temples and shrines, from gilded palaces to secret grottoes, where you can meditate to the sound of water dripping on limestone or the chattering of monkeys. One mountain outcropping has become a favorite for passing elephants, who gaze over the misty Myanmar and Laos beyond.

Over the last few decades the area has been rediscovered. As they reclaim it from the drug smugglers and blissed-out backpackers who made it notorious in the 1970s, travelers today find a bracing climate — it can be 25 degrees cooler at night here than in the coastal cities — along with natural beauty, verdant courtyard lodgings, riverfront restaurants and street markets where a handful of fat, juicy grilled cicadas can cost just a dollar.

### IF YOU GO

- WHAT TO DO**
- 1 **Fat Free Bicycle Shop**, 157/4 Moo 2, Rimkhong Road, fatfreebike.com, Sinsombun Market, Phaholyothin Road, off Route 1290.
- 2 **Wat Pa Sak Historical Site**, off Roboiving Road, 66-53-650-803, Wat Phra That Chedi

- 3 **Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp and Resort**, goldentriangle.anantara.com /dining-by-design/.

- 4 **Four Seasons Tented Camp**, Golden Triangle, Wiang, off Route 1290, fourseasons.com /goldentriangle.
- 5 **Wat Tham Pla, Fish Tail Cave**, Pong Ngam, Mae Sai District.
- 6 **Khun Sa Old Camp**, Ban Hin Taek, Mae Fa Luang District.
- 7 **Lavallee Restaurant**, lavallee.thailand.com, Sridonmooon Art Space, www.sridonmooon.org/gallery /sridonmooon, both on Si Don Mun.
- 8 **Roeng Poy Cafe**, Route 1290, north side of Phaholyothin Road.
- 9 **Wat Pra That Pukhao**, uphill from Route 1290, across from the Tung Luang Chaleum Phrakat shrine, Wiang.
- 10 **Hilltop Redoubt**, Golden Triangle Park, Route 1290, Wiang, mae-fa-luang.org.
- 11 **Busukum Resort** (7 Moo 1, Tumbon Wiang, busukumresort.com) a 10-minute walk from the river, is a cluster of cozy cottages around an ornamental garden. Around 580 baht.

- 12 **Where to Stay**  
The Anantara Golden Triangle and Elephant Camp (Sai San Tan Luang 2, Wiang, goldentriangle.anantara.com), a five-star resort, overlooks a meadow with elephants. Double rooms, about 30,700 baht.

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### Friday

#### 3 P.M. > OLD TOWN CYCLING

Near the center of Chiang Saen, hop onto a rental at Fat Free Bicycle Shop, (around 450 baht, or \$13 a day) and weave past temples, food stands and antiques stalls. Roads are spacious and in excellent condition throughout the district, traffic is sedate, and even the occasional swarm of motorbikes will let you pass. Stalls on the main street, Phaholyothin Road, offer simple, carefully prepared dishes, from chicken fried in bamboo stalks to river fish steamed with herbs. With fresh-squeezed fruit juice, you'll pay about 130 baht. More adventurous palates can venture into the Sinsombun Market to sample specialties such as frog legs or wasp larvae smoked in the nest which are white and puffy, like popcorn.

#### 4 P.M. > ANCIENT EMPIRE

Slide along the shaded eight-century-old city walls that guarded the capital of a long-gone Lanna state. At the historic park the 14th-century Wat Pa Sak (wat means temple) pulls together motifs from Thai, Khmer, Burmese, Laotian, Hindu and Buddhist cultures, its spire still pointed toward heaven. Admission, 100 baht. Back in town monks in saffron robes frequent the compound of the 13th-century Golden Buddha, one of the oldest and largest in Thailand and the remains of its original temple, Wat Phra That Chedi Luang. Off to the side, some of the more reputable dealers in regional crafts sell indigenous weavings, and Buddha statues that make up in shipping fees what they are discounted for in price.

ONLINE: AN OVERVIEW  
Our interactive map:  
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#### 6:30 P.M. > SUNSET WITH A VIEW

Toast three countries, and the elephants below, from a plush open-sided platform overlooking the Mekong. The hilltop pavilion for the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp and Resort lays out a pricey, custom menu from local to Western, all of it with an elegance incongruous with the rough-hewn setting. The Nam Prig Ong Kap Moo (spicy minced pork with crackling) puts an elegant spin on a rugged northern favorite from outdoor grills; Pla Nueng Ma Now is local bass dressed with chiles and coriander from the garden down the hill (18,000 baht for two). The Anantara front desk is a reliable source of information in English on local guides, drivers and the rental of cars, motorbikes and bicycles.

### Saturday

#### 8 A.M. > MORNING COFFEE

As the morning mist clears, grab a cardamom and ginger coffee with a sweet rice cake for 90 baht from a vine-wreathed stall outside the funky House of Opium gift shop. An early departure is necessary for a road trip to the scenic, hilly Doi Tung region, largely inaccessible until recently. Driving is possible on the good but narrow roads; finding your way through the hairpin turns and wandering livestock is not. A good driver will know when to trust the GPS and when to ignore it. (One day with car and guide, 4,500 baht.)

#### 9:30 A.M. > CHINESE OUTPOST

Brave the swarms of macaques at the tiny Yunnanese village and temple Wat Tham

Pla to find a steep staircase flanked by gleaming dragon claws. After a brisk climb, you will reach the Fish Tail Cave, a hundred-foot, chalky yards ending in a devotional space of utter silence. On a small ledge to the side, a humble chipped and age-spotted bust with an enigmatic smile looks more animist than Buddhist. On the way back, you'll face grand views of the Burmese ridges that become the Himalayas. At the stairs' base, youngsters scamper around a fish pond where you can buy crumbs for the lake carp, an offering to the local goddess of mercy.

#### 11 A.M. > HILLTOP REDOUBT

Winding roads lined with craft shops end at the newly restored headquarters of one of Southeast Asia's last warlords, Khun Sa. He may be reviled as a drug gangster who flooded the United States with cheap heroin in the 1970s, but here he receives a statesman's deference in homespun displays tracing his rise to commander of an army, receiving emissaries from prime ministers and kings. Pose with a stern life-size effigy in his original office.

#### 1:30 P.M. > PROVEANCE ON THE MEKONG

Nestle into an open-air island of Gallic hospitality complete with Art Nouveau posters and tumblers of absinthe. Lavallee Restaurant serves a mélange of backyard herbs and vegetables with grilled meats. Phone ahead to place an order; about 350 baht per person. An attached gallery sells handicrafts of the local Akha people, who often show off their traditional dress as well. Just over a footbridge, a much grander gallery proclaims itself in a riot of color and sculpture. The nationally famed artist Sriswan Jantuttakarnkit presides over the

burn-size Sridonmooon Art Space, filled with wall-size expressionistic paintings of musicians, parties, skeletons and jungles with happy elephant families.

#### 4 P.M. > WALK WITH GIANTS

Revered as national icons, the elephants that once roamed this part of Thailand have faced hard times lately. But here, a few dozen find a haven in a preserve with plenty of space to wander. Guests of the super-luxe Four Seasons Golden Triangle Tented Camp can ride them on a two-hour trek that starts at 10,000 baht per couple. Nongtuks who donate 6,000 baht to the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation can visit the camp, and with luck see the elephants trundling up the path to tuck into tall stalks of sugar cane.

#### 7 P.M. > RIVERFRONT REPAST

With nighttime strollers and a karaoke bar on one side, the moonlit Mekong on the other, you can lounge on rattan mats and cushions as the last long-tail craft drift by. The Roeng Poy sidewalk cafe stays open late, bringing out grilled fish, sturdy curries, pungent salads and magnum-size bottles of beer in such large portions and on such tiny tables that sharing is the only option. About 300 baht.

### Sunday

#### 8:30 A.M. > RITUALS AND PHOTO OPS

Shelter from the morning rain and rising heat by this shaded cliff overlooking Wat Pra That Pukhao, where fifth-century worshippers made their altar; now on display is a small stuccoed Buddha of great antiquity. Several long flights of steps connect this rough-hewn temple to an extensive complex of temples on the heights, where dozens of Buddhas gleam and monks explain devotional rituals. Most visitors head straight to an elaborate ceremonial gateway built for photo ops of the panoramic up-river views.

#### 11 A.M. > THE OPIUM POPPY

A huge contemporary museum details the career of that most influential local crop, the opium poppy. Old-school displays at the Hall of Opium Museum tell the story through non-Western eyes, as the engine of an imperialism that captured almost all of East Asia, and made the area the epicenter of a gruesome global trade. The emphasis here is on the present, the human toll of addiction and efforts to keep the culture of the area's hill tribes intact. Admission, 300 baht.

#### 3 P.M. > A NEVER-ENDING CYCLE

Just before you arrive at Chiang Rai's airport, the White Temple depicts the Buddhist cycle of life and death. Outside is a dazzling and ornate monument, white and mirrored; inside, a vast mural of modern delusions that distract us from the divine, including cellphones and pop stars. Enter via a footbridge that spans a writhing, grasping throng of the tormented. Free to Thai citizens; otherwise, 50 baht.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHANG W. LOU/THE NEW YORK TIMES

"Walking With Giants" at the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp and Resort.

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