

Phu Kradung

Phu Kradung mountain rises steeply from the plains of Loei province, in Thailand's North-east region. With its flat top and sloping sides its shape resembles the wooden bells that farmers hang around the necks of their water buffalo, so 'Phu Kradung' translates as 'Cowbell Mountain.' It is a prominent feature south of the road from Khon Kaen to Loei and I have been intrigued by it since I first saw it almost 30 years ago.

Much of Phu Kradung's attraction is that a visit there is entirely a Thai experience. Well off the normal routes of foreign tourists, there are few foreign faces in evidence and few concessions to those who do come here. It is not an extension of Bangkok's haven for backpackers in Khao San Road, and there is no Sofitel or McDonalds or any other outlier of the global economy.

The walls of the visitor centre at the bottom provide a nice account of the natural history of the park, almost entirely in Thai. The Forestry Department officers barely know enough English to explain the types of accommodation available, but they manage in a fun, amateur way that adds to the charm of the place. At the campground at the top there are loudspeakers for occasional announcements that, aside from the language, have an unmistakable local quality, like the sound systems that thousands of headmen around the country use to pass official news on to their villagers.

So getting there by ordinary, non-air-conditioned bus adds to the authenticity of the trip. This is how farmers' children go to town to buy the latest music tapes, and their parents bring silk to sell in the market. Vendors in the Khon Kaen bus station offer corn cobs, birds' eggs and sweetened rice cooked in bamboo tubes. One of the crew travels half out of the door waving at other vehicles to let us through and keeping an eye open for new passengers to pick up. Of these there are many, and by half way the aisle is jammed.



The hike from the park entrance to the summit is 5.5 kilometres horizontally and 1,200 metres vertically. Even for those who spend all day at it, few would describe it as a casual stroll. The first and last kilometres are steepest and are hard going even with the aid of the steps that have been cut into the rock. In between the track meanders upwards among deciduous trees and boulders that provide little shade, so in the middle of the day it can be hot until you reach the higher and cooler part of the walk.

Occasional signs warn of wild elephants, tigers and king cobras but there is no way to tell how real these dangers are. I meet several couples and a few families sitting exhausted by the track with serious doubts about whether they will make it to the top. Once or twice there is the discomfiting sight of well-groomed students sauntering along followed by two or three elderly local men and women porters struggling under the weight of backpacks hung from bamboo poles.

Women in the restaurants set up every kilometre or so call out for me to stop for a drink. I fear that breaking my rhythm will make the climb even harder, but I finally give in to the charms of Miss Fon. She has run one of a clutch of four or five restaurants near the four kilometre mark for several years, and sets out before it is light each morning to carry ice up from her village. A hard life? Yes, she says, sometimes she does not feel like making the climb. But once up here the air and views are beautiful, and she enjoys the company of the other girls.



When it finally comes, the summit is a surprise. Suddenly the world is flat, a 60 square kilometre plateau covered with pines and ferns and criss-crossed by sandy footpaths. One of these leads to the campground, and the walk takes 40 minutes.

It is not crowded, but I am not alone. There are high-school students from Bangkok, university students from Khon Kaen, birdwatchers, two or three pairs of foreign backpackers, photographers, people for whom the challenge of climbing the mountain and living rough for a few nights seasons their routine lives. They hike from campsite to cliff-top to waterfall, watch the sun rise and set, sit by campfires playing guitars, lie outside their tents recovering from the upward journey or preparing for the descent.

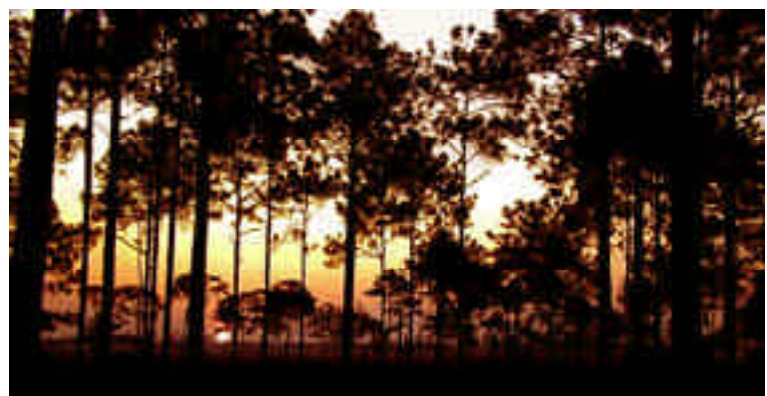
The owner of one of the restaurants adjacent to the campsite says he rarely feels the need to go anywhere. His face shows every sign that he has led a contented life. Occasionally, not more than once a year, the tranquillity of the mountain is broken by the arrival of helicopters flying in construction materials or one of the three or four vehicles that the Forestry Department uses for its patrols and park management. Otherwise his daily routine of serving and chatting with visitors hardly varies. He likes it that way.

With my camera I walk a kilometre or two towards the sunset and try to capture its beauty between the trees and over the shoulder of a larger-

than-life sitting Buddha near the western edge of the plateau. On a clear day the view out over the plains would be stunning, but in early February there is too much haze and smoke from scattered forest fires to see much of the landscape below. And although 2,000 mm of rain fall on the mountain each year, there has been none for three months so the waterfalls are far from their spectacular best..

On the way back I meet two teenage school-girls from the city who are anxious to practice their English. Wouldn't they rather be gossiping with their friends in a Siam Square coffee shop? No, they tell me, reassuringly. This is their first real trip to find out what the rest of Thailand is like. And will they come back? Maybe. There are many other places they want to see. But they have never experienced anything at all like this. They had no idea there were such places.

As darkness falls I realise how badly prepared I am for this trip. I have opted to stay in what the Forestry Department describes as a 'permanent tent,' a small wooden A-frame wide enough for two close friends. Noises above tell me I am sharing my accommodation with a family of mice. I remember to buy matches at the restaurant and light the stubs of candles that a previous tenant has left. With no flashlight I plan to sleep early but I make the mistake of not hiring a blanket and the cold keeps me awake most of the night. Piece by piece I put on all the clothing that I possess, but still shiver and wait for the dawn. Finally I venture out and watch the sun turn the cloudless sky from grey to pink, red and yellow behind the pine trees. This is the wonder that brings people to Phu Kradung.



Getting there:

The bus from Bangkok to Khon Kaen takes five or six hours (250 baht/£4), and from Khon Kaen to the Phu Kradung district takes another two or three hours (49 baht). Taxis can take you the 5 kms from the bus stop to the park entrance (20 baht). There are inexpensive places to stay at the bottom of the mountain if you arrive too late to start the hike to the top.

The Phu Kradung National Park was established in 1962 and is run by the Royal Forestry Department. They have a visitor centre and other facilities near the entrance, and a desk where visitors can book a place to stay in the campground at the top of the mountain. Wooden houses are available for groups of eight (2,000 baht). Smaller groups may rent either traditional tents that they collect and erect after they arrive at the top (100 baht per person), or 'permanent tents' that are made of wood (200 baht per tent). Entrance to the park costs 20 baht for Thais and 200 baht for foreigners, though you might get a discount if you speak Thai.

The hike is 5.5 kms from the park entrance to the summit, and a further 3.8 kms to the campground. You will need a minimum of three hours to get from the park entrance to the campground, walking at a steady speed and with only one or two stops. For many people, six hours would be a more realistic target. There are restaurants with basic food and bottled water and other drinks every kilometre or so. There are more restaurants at the top that also sell basic supplies like batteries and matches.

Late December and early January is usually the busiest time for visitors. The waterfalls are most spectacular at the end of the rainy season in late October, but the track to the top is treacherous when it is wet. For that reason the park is closed to visitors during the height of the rainy season, from mid-July to early October.
