

Ratchaprapa Dam

By Blake Schlaich

One of the great advantages of living in Surat Thani is the town's proximity to so many attractive destinations. It's Thailand's southern hub of travel and transport, which means that you can catch a bus, boat, plane, or train to just about anywhere. Any Lonely Planet will tell you that on your way to the famous, exotic beaches and islands of southern Thailand you have no choice but to transfer through Surat Town. For us teachers, that means that on any given weekend we can hop on a 3-hour ferry ride to Koh Samui or Koh Phangan, take a 4-hour bus trip down to Phuket, or ride a motorbike an hour to the beach in Khanom, and that's just to name a few. However, one place that is often left unmentioned when it comes to the beautiful, exciting hotspots of the south is Ratchaprapa Dam.

About an hour and a half mini-bus ride west of Surat Thani is Khao Sok National Park, a not-so-hidden gem of the south. The National Park is 740 square kilometers of emerald forests, limestone mountains, rugged islands, crystal waterfalls, and home to over 400 species of wildlife. In fact, Khao Sok is covered by the oldest evergreen rainforest in the world. In 1982, the Ratchaprapa Dam was built to provide hydro-electricity to surrounding towns, subsequently flooding much of Khao Sok and creating the enormous man-made Cheow Larn Lake that is there today. The peaks of the mountains now poke through the surface of the lake creating hundreds of islands covered with both plant and animal life.

A few weeks ago, we (Super teachers) all got together to spend an incredible three-day weekend on the lake. Being that it was Father's Day weekend (which is also the King's birthday), we knew that it would be busy so we called ahead and made reservations at one of the many guesthouses in Khao Sok. There are a few different types of accommodation in Khao Sok. Camping is one option. There are also standard bungalows as well as tree houses (yes, tree houses) available on the main land. We opted for the floating bungalows (yes, floating bungalows) on the lake. Also called "raft houses", these bungalows are built on floating, well... rafts and are accessible only by boat.

Early Saturday morning we grouped up at Talad Kaset where we caught our mini-bus. After about an hour and a half of staring out the window and hitting *skip* on my iPod, we finally reached the edge of the National Park. The bus dropped us off at the pier to the lake. We all made one last snack & drink run being that this would be the last time we'd have access to a store until we returned.

Before boarding the long tail boat that was to take us to our floating (yes, floating) bungalows, we had to pay a park admission fee. Anyone who has spent any time traveling in Thailand can tell you that prices for *farang* are almost always double or triple what Thais have to pay. It's just the way it is. All national parks have clearly marked signs similar to the one we saw at Khao Sok which read something like: *Foreigners pay 200 baht; Thais pay 40*. As teachers working and living in Thailand, there *is* a way around this extortion if you can present your work permit and passport. We all had passports but, to be safe, we keep our work permits at Super English so we were unable to provide those. FORTUNATELY, Janet

and Brittany have a pretty good grasp on the Thai language and our Thai friend, Yanee, was there to help translate too. Eventually, we all paid the 40 baht Thai price. (Super- 1; Khao Sok- 0) Then, all the fun began.



From the pier to Smiley's floating bungalows (where we stayed), it was a beautiful 45-minute boat ride over the deep green waters of the lake. There is a good view of the dam shortly after departing the pier, but what's really impressive are the giant limestone karsts that jet out of the water, some of them hundreds of feet high. The boat ride was one of my favorite parts of the weekend and we hadn't even arrived at the bungalows yet!

When we did finally arrive, I was impressed. The bungalows were simple, yet adequate. Each bungalow had two double beds and a bathroom in it. There were about ten rooms total, five on each side, joined by a restaurant/ bar/ entertainment area in the center.



We checked in and the staff had already started making us dinner for the night. Did I mention that breakfast, lunch, and dinner are all included in the price? While we waited for dinner we took out the kayaks and inner tubes, went swimming, and played "Kayak Battle" ... it is what it sounds like.



The rain started as dinner was served. We spent the rest of the night eating and drinking in the center area. The grand finale to the night's agenda was a talent show. There was rapping; there were guitars; there was stand-up comedy; there was dancing, singing, a

random Ukrainian girl doing pull-ups from the rafters, and then there was whatever Ryan attempted to do. All in all, it turned out to be a great time.

In the morning we woke up to a delicious breakfast of eggs, toast, and fruit. Morning is my favorite time of day in Khao Sok. The heavy mist slowly creeps across the tops of the mountains, sinking in to each valley like an avalanche of fog in slow motion. We watched the scenery, drank some coffee, and went for a quick swim to get the blood flowing. We had a big day ahead of us. Also included with the price of the bungalows is a guided, 3-hour trek through the jungle and a gi-normous cave system. *Straight Indiana Jones style.*

All fifteen of us jumped in the long tail with our two trekking guides. It was about a 30-minute ride to where we would begin the hike and the entire time I felt like I was at Disney Land on the Jungle Cruise.



We finally pulled up on a small piece of shoreline and embarked on our adventure of the day. The two guides were great. One spoke decent English, the other... not so much. We hiked along as they led the way and pointed out the different flora and fauna of the rainforest. Along the trek they made us hats out of vines and giant leaves, showed us how to make native-style war paint by grinding rocks together, and they even carved bamboo flutes for everyone. We donned our mud masks, wore our fairy hats, and whistled with our bamboo flutes. It was magical. Okay... now back to the badass jungle trekking.

After hiking for about half an hour we had crossed a few streams. Then...

somebody noticed. LEEEEEECHES! This created a frenzy. For ten minutes everyone whirled around in circles checking themselves for tiny bloodsuckers. After everyone picked themselves clean, we continued on to the mouth of the cave.

This is when the fun really started. This cave and tunnel system ran for kilometers underground. The guide was weary of letting us cross through it because of the water levels. A few years ago an entire group of tourists got stuck and

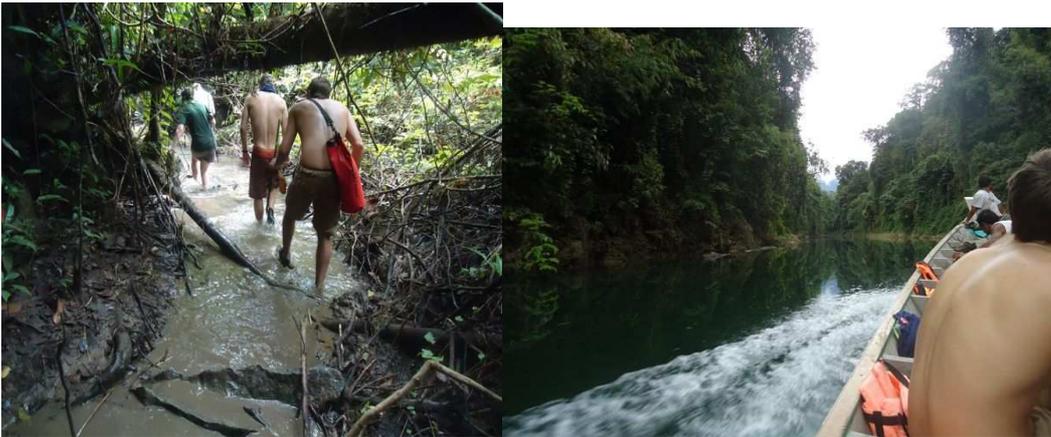
drowned in the cave. It had rained the night before, so the water was higher than normal, but the guide said we were okay to go through. It took the better part of an hour to get through to the exit point. Along the way, it was pitch black except for our headlamps. There were parts where we had to swim and parts where we had to climb. The cave is nicknamed, wait for it... the Bat Cave. No, Batman doesn't have his HQ there. It is, however, inhabited by thousands of little bats that we could see hanging from the cave ceiling. I've done a lot of really cool stuff since moving to SE Asia, and this is probably one of the best times I've had.



After leaving the cave, we started off on the final leg of our hike back to the boat. Earlier in the day we ran into another small group of hikers that said they'd seen a dead deer that had just been slaughtered by a tiger. Our guide gave us the invaluable information to, if we see the tiger, all run away together so that the tiger only eats one of us. Safety in numbers I guess. We continued on the trail, all of our eyes scouring the jungle for the giant cat-beast. We didn't end up seeing the tiger, but we did find his breakfast.



All the manly men crowded around for pictures and the girls nervously waited for us to finish. Standing next to a tiger's recent kill in the middle of a jungle is not the best place to be. Nonetheless... awesomeness. We then, trekked out of the rainforest and back to our boat and headed back to the bungalows.



We rounded out the day with a delicious dinner, swimming outside of our bungalows; a few more kayak battles, and a little party at night. The next day, after our morning swim and breakfast, the Smiley's staff took us in the longtail back to the

pier where we were to catch the bus back to Surat. We would have been able to stop on the way and go cliff jumping, but problems with the boat didn't allow.

Regardless, everyone had a great time at Ratchaprapa Dam. I'd highly recommend it for a long weekend! If you decide to check it out, here are some packing suggestions that you don't want to forget: bathing suit, shoes that you can get wet and dirty, headlamp or flashlight, snacks and booze (they have a limited supply once you're out there on the lake), towel, dry-bag and poncho (it WILL rain), badass knife (recommended but not necessary), a book, and most definitely bring your camera!

This was one of the best weekends I've had in a long time. Did I mention that the entire trip only cost us each 2000 baht! That's: roundtrip bus to/from Surat and Khao Sok; roundtrip longtail to/from the pier and Smiley's; breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day; endless drinking water and instant coffee; room with bed and bathroom; booze; kayaks and inner tubes to use; and the trek with two guides and boat. All for about \$60 US! You can't beat a weekend like that!

