

Motorbike Adventures: Day Trip to Chaiya

One of the best things about living in Surat is the ease with which you can take relaxed, inexpensive trips to neighboring cities. Don Sak, with its ferry connection to the islands and the beautiful beaches and costal roads of Khanom are all within an hour's drive on a scooter or motorcycle. My latest discovery on this front is that for half a tank of gas and three or four hours on a Sunday morning, you can take a gorgeous drive to the north to visit Chaiya, an attractive little town with an incredible collection of temples, old and new(ish).

In the crowded riverfront neighborhood of Surat is the Donnok bridge, which takes you from the noise and exhaust fumes of the city into an entirely different world of palm groves, fresh air and a quiet, village atmosphere. As you reach the halfway point of the bridge, the temperature drops several degrees and the jungle comes into view. The trip begins here, on a lush, green winding road past rice paddies, groves, villages and untamed forest. You'll cross rickety bridges over creeks lined with fishing shacks that will remind you of Tom Sawyer. You'll see temples, roadside markets, and extravagant mansions. It's a never-ending photo op. It's not the safest road in the world, given its blind curves and the Thai fearlessness on the yellow line, but if you cling to the left and take it easy on the throttle, it's manageable.

As you enter the town of Chaiya, you'll begin to see signs in English for the various temples. There are four or five, but I'll focus on the three I visited: Wat Long, Wat Phra That Chaiya, and Wat Keaw.

Wat Long



This ancient temple is largely in ruins, but its beautifully geometrical shape is preserved. It was apparently built in the ninth or tenth centuries, but the exact date is uncertain. . It's the least advertised of the temples, and I stumbled on it entirely by accident. You'll find it on a side street across from a high school, and pretty much in someone's front yard.

Wat Phra That Chaiya



This is a more modern temple, or at least so well-maintained that it appears brand new, but it's part of an old complex and full of ancient artifacts. It's also the only place I've seen Thai tourists; I visited on Mothers' Day, so the other visitors were there for largely spiritual purposes, but I was by no means the only one snapping photos. The complex has temples, two smaller shrines and a collection of beautiful statues and trees. The central temple is in the standard Thai style, colorful but elegant. Behind this temple is the giant one, a white spired dome in the center of a walled courtyard. The path that circumscribes the temple is lined with dozens of seated Buddhas, large and small, some in perfect condition and some so old and decayed that I feared the slightest breeze would turn them to dust.

On a later trip to Chaiya with Peter and the Super crew, we also visited the folk museum on this complex. It's fantastic--full of incredibly well-maintained artifacts from the last 5,000 years of human presence in the area. The coolest thing by far is a barrel-sized steel drum, beautifully carved, that dates back 2,000 years. Incredibly stuff. The museum costs 100 baht, but when we said we were teachers they dropped it to 50, and the dropped it to a group rate of only 25. Good deal.

Wat Keaw



This temple was the one I came looking for, and it proved the most impressive. At first glance it's little more than a three -storey pile of rocks, but as you approach the base of it, it's a

hauntingly beautiful sight. It's off the same era as Wat Long, but despite the fact that it has maintained more of its height, it has lost that pleasing geometrical structure and almost appears to have melted like wax in the South Asian sun. But each of its four sides still boasts altars and seated Buddhas in various states of decay. As you enter the temple, the temperature plummets and the air is thick with centuries of water and rot. The statues, now wanting for heads and arms, sit elegantly draped in cobwebs and the thick moss that earns the place's name, the Green Temple.

If you've got the time and energy to do a little extra driving, you can also visit Suan Mohka, a silk village about 15 minutes from Chaiya. The region is famous for the material, and in this spot you can browse any of the three or four shops and walk around the little outdoor factory in the back, where dozens of looms weave beautiful bolts of fabric. This is a good spot to buy souvenirs for the folks back home; they have lots of good Thai-style kids' clothes, purses, scarves and ties.



Along this same road you'll find a seafood restaurant sitting on stilts on the beach. They serve a wealth of delicious shrimp and squid meals, and some of the best tom yum I've had. It's a great great spot, right on the water with a boardwalk out to views of the neighboring islands.

The total cost of the day can be as low as seventy baht and won't get pricier than two or three hundred, and Wat Keaw was one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen. I'd recommend it to anyone.