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New Discoveries in Northeast Thailand

One of the finest aspects of travel lies in the discovery of the new. Even for well-seasoned globetrotters, there's almost always something unknown waiting to pique the interest of the curious. Join travel photojournalist **David Bowden** as he takes his first steps in Khon Kaen, a relatively unknown destination in Thailand.

I think I must have used up a few passports over the years of travelling to Thailand, and I thought I had a reasonable grasp of the country, but when Khon Kaen was suggested for a short visit, I must admit I was scurrying for atlases (yes, they still make them), guidebooks (yes, they still print them), and making phone calls to old Thailand hands on my fixed phone line (yes, they still have them).

Khon Kaen had simply slipped past me as it had never been on my travel radar. But with over 100,000 people in the city and many more in the surrounding service catchment area, it's no slouch in terms of regional importance. There is a university, a large hospital, and a dozen or so flights per day from Bangkok, 450km to the southwest. The capital of the province of the same name is one of the Isan provinces about two-thirds of the way

along the highway from Bangkok towards Vientiane (the Lao capital) located on the Mekong River.

OPENING DOORS

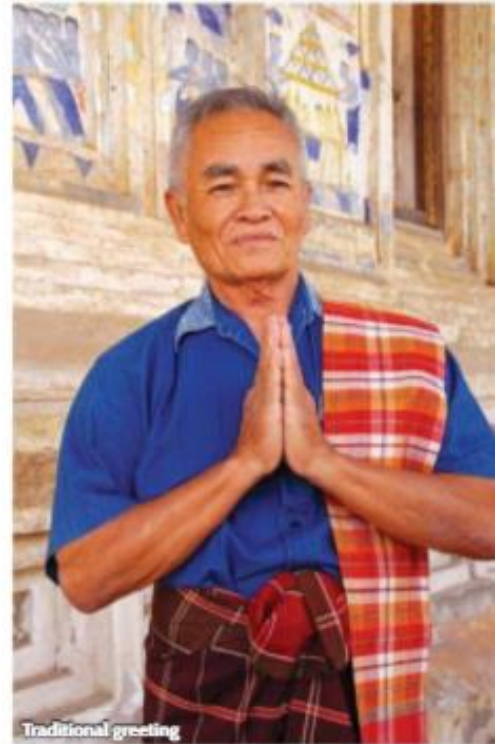
I always loved the quote from Jim Morrison, the controversial lead singer of The Doors who once remarked, "There are things known and things unknown, and in between are the doors." The Doors are not only meant to be listened to, but also to be

opened, so it was into the unknown that I headed... and perhaps opened a few doors along the way.

I knew I was in a place that welcomed few travellers as my driver from the airport to my hotel pointed out details of the city that many of us would have taken for granted. The sprawling hospital was on the list as was the even more expansive university which

is also a teaching facility for the hospital. Then there was the market, a few schools, the train station, traffic lights, and a large supermarket. Maybe I made up the traffic lights but they could well have been on the list as an example of the city's modern facilities being pointed out to me.

There are international hotels, too, and I soon got the impression that Khon



Traditional greeting

Kaen serves a much larger part of northeast Thailand than just the city limits. My accommodation was the impressive AVANI Khon Kean Hotel and Convention Centre, which has only been open a few years. The size and modern facilities of the hotel and the convention centre confirmed that this was a city that didn't entirely depend upon an overflow from those who could not be housed by their relatives when they visited.

TEMPLES, TOURS, AND TRINKETS

My visit to Khon Kaen was largely in the hands of others, but I confess I quite liked the idea of visiting a place that I knew very little about. It was venturing into the unknown and here I was at the abyss; do I lie by the pool with a few chilled Singhas or ask a few questions and head off to discover my surroundings?

My adventurous side took control, and it wasn't long before I had the concierge bailed as I probed him for information. Being one that has always been fascinated by the variety exhibited in Thai Buddhist architecture, my ears pricked when I was told of an unusual temple in the nearby village of Sawathi. Photos from a brochure had me intrigued, so the hotel's van was



Beer Garden London Inn, AVANI Khon Kaen



Elephant murals, Wat Chai Sri, Morlam Village

summoned and we were soon on our way to Wat Chai Si (Chai Si Temple) after the villagers were notified of my interest.

I was met by two locals who, along with some colleagues in the village, are keeping the local Isan culture – especially its music and song – alive throughout the region and in many parts of the country. The village is famous throughout Thailand for a traditional Lao-Isan song called *Mor Lam*. The centrepiece of the village is the small but unique Wat Chai Si and its enclosed prayer room. While most Thai temples shimmer in the sun with glistening orange, yellow, and green tiles and are lined with ornate representations of Buddha and other icons, this one was very subdued and its decorations were not so obvious. I must admit being a little underwhelmed, but the welcoming committee was warm in its greetings and pleased that I was there to learn more.

On closer inspection, I realised why the temple was protected as a national treasure, despite it being old but not that old (over 100 years). I was informed that its architecture was influenced by Vietnamese artisans who used brick, plaster, and lime in its construction. The interior *sim*, or prayer



Khon Kaen walking street market



Coffee van, Khon Kaen Walking Street Market



Isan sausage

hall, was not accessible but there was sufficient distraction in the decorated exterior walls. Generally speaking, fine art is rather wasted on me, but I am aware of the term *naïve art* and it was this that I saw in the ornate frescoes lining the walls.

It looked like some naughty children had been let loose with texta colour pens, as some of the drawings looked like they had been done by people as bereft of artistic talent as me. I wondered if it was historical graffiti, but was told that even the historians are baffled by some of the eclectic drawings. According to historians, the Buddhist narrative is not so clear, although there is a relationship to the life of Buddha, serious accounts of Buddhist hells, and local traditions.

While I was fascinated to see a temple that was so unique, Wat Chai Si may not hold the same fascination for the average tourist, so travel here with an open mind and be pleasantly surprised.



Duck noodles

STREETS FOR WALKING, STREETS FOR EATING

After a swim and freshening up back at what I discovered was a very smart AVANI hotel, it was time to prime myself for the evening. My visit coincided with the opening of a new hotel beer garden in front of the already existing London Inn pub.

London Inn was a real find in what I thought was in the middle of nowhere. It's a quite sophisticated English-styled pub, and the new outdoor beer garden featured comfortable lounges, refreshing cool air (Khon Kaen is located on a plateau that can get quite cool in the northern winter), live football television coverage, free pool tables, draft Hoegaarden beer, and some great bar snacks.

Just as I was settling in, my transport to the night market arrived. Thailand calls these markets 'walking streets' as a section of road is closed off to traffic, stalls are set up and seemingly the whole town turns out to snack and buy creative goods from the markets. It was a perfect night for it, too, and I made the most of it snacking on local spicy barbecued Isan sausages, papaya salad, and barbecued meat on skewers. Being a student town, students were singing, playing instruments, and out advocating environmental reforms. There was a busy craft scene with some stalls selling the local *mudmee* tie-dye cloth. After snacking in the



BBQ meat on skewers

market it was back to the AVANI for a little late-night football action and some sleep-inducing Hoegaarden beer.

Thailand never disappoints and my short time in Khon Kaen confirmed that moving outside one's comfort zone rarely fails to produce something of interest to inquisitive travellers. Adventurous travellers may want to stop like I did on an overland journey through Thailand's northeast, especially for those travelling by train or bus into southern Laos. ■