

# PHI TA KHON

The One-in-the-World Festival

*By Dararai / Photos by Induang*



Most people choose to join local festivals to spice up their monotonous daily routine. Others are willing to go backpacking to tread on untrodden ways to search for the meanings of "travellers". I myself am keen to experience new things from travelling because seeing the world in other aspects can broaden my view of life. And I believe, that of everybody else as well.



A trip of mine to witness a unique Phi Ta Khon Festival in Dansai County, Loei Province (520 km northeast of Bangkok) was impressive. My very first time in this province didn't disappoint me at all. The awesome views of mountains shrouded in mists alone rid me of tiredness from seven hours in the coach. When considering the amusement received from the festival, I could only judge that this trip was really enjoyable.



The Phi Ta Khon Festival is an old traditional event taking place only here yearly around June. It is held as part of *Bun Phra Wet* and *Bun Bang Fai* (Rocket Festival), which is the major festival of the province.



The procession of Prince Vessantara  
and his wife, Maddi

Bun Phra Wet is a religious ceremony in which people listen to the recitation within one day, of the *Mahachat* story, the story of the last former incarnation of the Lord Buddha. Bun Bang Fai is the launching of bamboo rockets to pray for rain.



There are two local legends said to be the origin of this Phi Ta Khon festival. One is a tale of two lovers whose affair was opposed by their parents and who were accidentally sealed in a cave and died there. As time passed, more and more spirits came to be their attendants. When it is the time for the Bun Phra Wet Festival, these spirits emerge to join in a parade of the sacred *Phra Uppakhut* (a white pebble collected from the Man River, which is believed to have divine power to protect the village from evil spirits).

Phra Uppakhut, formerly was a monk with supernatural powers. After attaining the highest phase of meditation, he became so powerful that he could transform himself into anything he liked. And he chose to become a white pebble and live in solitude under the Man River.



A Khwai Tu

Another legend is derived from an episode in the Vessantara Jataka recounting the journey home of Prince Vessantara (the last former life of the Lord Buddha) and his wife Maddi after years of exile in the forest. The townspeople then celebrating their return were so delightful that the spirits emerged to join them.



A very amusing Khwai Tu racing contest

Last year the event lasted for three days. The first day began with a Buddhistic ritual at 3:00 a.m. when Phra Uppakhut (the white pebble) was brought from the Man river bank to Phonchai Temple. At 8:30 a.m., the *Bai Si Su Khwan*, a traditional Thai ceremony concerning one's guardian spirit, was conducted to celebrate the arrival of Phra Uppakhut, then followed by the parade of Chao Kuan and Nang Thiam, the male and female mediums of the ceremony, with legions of Phi Ta Khon figures, heading to Phonchai Temple.



Awesome designs of  
Phi Ta Khon figures with weapons

In the afternoon, there were a Phi Ta Khon dancing contest and a Khwai Tu racing contest which were very amusing. Khwai Tu was a model of water buffalo into which a man put his lower body and

walk with it. After that, those who were interested in local arts could have a look at the demonstration of the production of the small Phi Ta Khon masks, which were made of cardboard along with bamboo containers of glutinous rice worn upside down.

Mostly, Phi Ta Khon figures were male but I saw many girls too. The locals would prepare ghostly masks for small Phi Ta Khon and huge models for big Phi Ta Khon in advance of the festival. Regarding the big ones which look like huge puppets, the artisans must hold a ceremony to please deities before creating them. It has been strictly believed that each village can make only two models of big Phi Ta Khon. These two huge puppets representing a man and a woman were operated by men standing inside.



Another scene of Prince Vessantara procession. The locals joining the parade dress in white as part of merit making.

During the procession, a rattling of metal filled the atmosphere. It came from *makkalaeng*, bell-like ornaments hung around the waists of Phi Ta Khon to signify their arrival. Moreover, most Phi Ta Khon carried wooden

weapons in the shape of an oversized penis with a splash of red paint on the tip and played with the audience, who were highly amused by their antics. These phallus were not considered rude. Indeed, they were a token of power and fertility. Natives believe that these things will satisfy *Phaya Thaen*, a most revered deity of the northeastern region who is believed to control the well-being of villagers.



In front of Phonchai Temple,  
Phi Ta Khon figures are teasing  
with each other boisterously.

On the second day, at 8.00 a.m. all Phi Ta Khon gathered at the ground of Ban Dan Sai school. Around 10.00 a.m., the inaugural ceremony began. Certainly, the highlight was the parade of big and small Phi Ta Khon which included Khwai Tu and Thang Bang performances (men dressed in primitive savage costumes poking clubs).

The processions were very eye-appealing, especially Phi Ta Khon and Khwai Tu who played with onlookers joyfully. Northeastern music was the key that made the whole performances full of fun. All participants danced boisterously to the cheerful rhythm, entertaining the crowd. In the afternoon, there were the procession of Phra Vessantara to Phonchai Temple and the rocket shooting. In the evening, lay people came to listen to *Phra Mala*\* sermons at this temple. And those who preferred dancing joined the Phi Ta Khon party in front of the County Administration.

In former times, at the end of this day, all Phi Ta Khon would toss their ghostly costumes and masks into the Man River to signify that the return of Prince Vessantara had chased away all evil spirits. But nowadays, villagers keep them for the next year's festival.

On the third day, at 04.00 a.m., the townspeople went to the temple to listen to the Mahachat story. This practice was believed to generate a great merit for them. Around 8.00 a.m., worshippers presented foods to Buddhist monks. Then the ritual to ward off bad luck from the town was begun by incantation.



The rocket procession.

The Phi Ta Khon Festival is like Halloween of Western countries in that both provide people with excitement and fun. In the former event you can also observe the friendly lifestyle of the rural people of Thailand. Let's visit Loei Province to join this festival which will cover the period of 19-21 June this year. The Phi Ta Khon procession is scheduled to take place on 20 June. You will find the trip worthwhile and memorable.

### **How to Get There:**

**By bus:** Bangkok-Loei bus services are available at the North and Northeast Air-con Bus Station (Mo Chit Mai), Tel: 0 2936 2852-66. It takes about 7 hours to reach Loei.

**By car:** From Bangkok, go along Highway 1 (Phahonyothin). After passing Saraburi town, drive along Highway 21 through Petchabun province. Then continue driving along Highway 203, passing Lomsak and Lomkao counties. And you will reach Dansai county, Loei province.

**By air:** A direct flight takes 1.20 hours to get to Loei.

*\*Phra Malai was an arhat (a Buddhist with the highest attainment like saints in Christianity) who could travel in heaven and hell and came back to teach human beings on earth to do good deeds so that when they were dead, their souls would go to heaven. A Phra Malai sermon is one about the arhat's*

*teaching concerning heaven and hell.*

For more information about the detailed schedule of the festival, please contact Loei Tourism Cooperation Centre on tel: 0 4281 2812.

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