

Destination

Text & Images : Jeffrey Warner



Wat Palad: The 'Temple Below the Temple' Pathway to Doi Suthep

While backdropped by a pristine white temple located five kilometers up-mountain from the Chiang Mai Zoo (1 km. shy of the city overlook point), I'm observing a red ant-like succession of tourist-packed *songteaws* ('two-row' taxis) zooming past - likely destined for Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep.

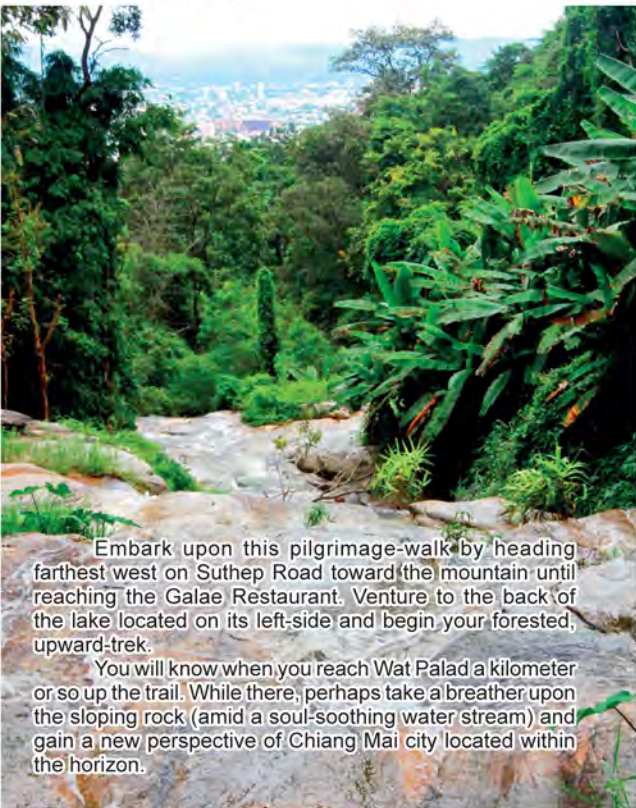


This artifact was strapped onto the back of a white elephant, which was allowed to roam (while being followed by the King and an entourage of soldiers and musicians, of course) in search of a holy storage location.

At one point, the elephant lowered itself onto its front knees (a posture called *yoblong* in the Lanna language). It was first believed that this was the destined setting for the relic. However, the elephant arose and ventured onward to where the hermit and others were previously visited by the earth-God. After a short visit, the elephant-led parade continued scaling the mountain (then called, Doi Oichang; now, Doi Suthep), stopping at another point where the elephant repeated this ritual.

Upon reaching the summit, the elephant trumpeted three times, turned in three circles, knelt and died. And this is where the sacred chedi was built and the relic enshrined (what is now Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep).

Afterwards, King Kuena commissioned the building of three temples to memorialise this epic journey. The first was *Samyob* (a.k.a. *Wat Sodapunnaram*, located at the base of the mountain). Presently, one can see only the foundation-bricks. The second temple is Wat Palad (a.k.a. *Skadagamiwanaram*). The third is Wat Anakamiwanaram (a.k.a. *Mon Phaya Hong*), opposite what is now the Sirtorn Astronomical Observatory.



Embark upon this pilgrimage-walk by heading farthest west on Suthep Road toward the mountain until reaching the Galae Restaurant. Venture to the back of the lake located on its left-side and begin your forested, upward-trek.

You will know when you reach Wat Palad a kilometer or so up the trail. While there, perhaps take a breather upon the sloping rock (amid a soul-soothing water stream) and gain a new perspective of Chiang Mai city located within the horizon.

A face aglow with wide eyes and a bright smile is behind a camera being haphazardly plunged out the side window. All in the valiant attempt at pulling in a snapshot of what is literally a mere decoy for the cultural jewel located in the forest just a stone's throw below: *Wat Pha Lat* (pronounced, "Wat Palad"), which in Northern Thai means "monastery at the sloping rock."

I personally reference this setting as "the temple below the temple," and this is for sure my most favored refuge for spiritual rejuvenation and experiencing authentically-Buddhist, Northern Thailand.

It is, in my opinion, perhaps one of the most majestic places on earth, cultivating an encompassing sense of mindfulness involved with every breath; each step; every critter that could possibly be in my midst (or under my foot).

While Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep remains one of the most famous temples in Thailand, Wat Palad is a significant element of both it and the Chiang Mai area's history. It's likely not featured in your travel guidebook. Actually, although its temple grounds are beyond 650 years-old, Wat Palad itself remained unregistered by the Thai government until 1991.



Kru Baa Sivichai with others who built the road to Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep (1930s).

Most people have still never heard of it. It's unspoilt; special. I feel somewhat repentant about further cracking open an egg on this majestic locale - perhaps most ideal for those deeply into this kind of thing. However, goodness is meant for sharing, right?

In this regard, siphoning-out Wat Palad's seemingly well-kept secrets has been like squeezing blood from a turnip. I was thankfully able to dig-up a snippet of its history and cultural significance via some Northern Thai text. Check out this historical saga.

Folklore has it that long before the Doi Suthep temple was even thought of, a Lua (Lanna Kingdom) hermit and others residing at what is now Wat Palad were visited by a God named, *Prajao Lieblok* (meaning, "God of the earth").

After providing spiritual teachings, *Prajao Lieblok* sat upon the sloping rock amid this lush, hill-forested landscape and said, "In the future, this area will become a big city, fit for a King and famous for its richness in Buddhist traditions."

As a memento of this prophetic occasion, the God embedded an invisible footprint into a rock and bestowed it to a guardian for safekeeping in the on-site cave. *Prajao Lieblok* also declared that this footmark would be revealed only to those worthy of such vision (obviously, a metaphor).

Warping ahead who knows how many years to 1357, Chiang Mai's King Kuena of the Mong Rai Dynasty aspired to build a shrine for a Buddha relic that apparently had miraculously duplicated itself, prior to being enshrined at Wat Suan Dok (located on what is now Suthep Road).

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Among many aspects of Wat Palad's enchanting grounds, check out the moss-laden, brick pagoda. Post-war looting brought with it the theft of whatever was enshrined within, and its partial collapse. Although it's ancient appearance and ambience remain, it's still in a slight state of disrepair. Thankfully, a new steeple-like top was installed by the Thai Fine Arts Department in 2002.

Some say the on-site well contains miracle water. Others maintain it was a pond for the hermit who built it. Like Wat Palad over the centuries, this spring-fed water source has been renovated several times.

The cave containing nine stone Buddha images is said to have provided refuge for those fleeing Burmese forces. Plans for renovating this structure are underway. And one of these relics within apparently continues providing protection from flocking crows, viewed in Thai culture as omens of bad karma. Folklore also has it that if you bring meat to Wat Palad while venturing to Doi Suthep, your innards will become plagued with discomfort. Yikes!

Lastly, check out the prayer hall. Of Thai Lue-style (An ethnic group living in Southern China and the Greater Mekong sub-region), its roof was originally constructed of teak-tree leaves; now of clay. During the Sirichai Period (an era beginning in the 1500s and lasting for over 200 years, during which the Burmese occupied Chiang Mai), a Burmese architect added both the peacock carving located in the top-front face and the rabbit on the back.

The Burma-symbolizing peacock is referring to the sun; the rabbit signifies the moon, and the Buddha in the meditation hall is representatively sitting in-between.

Something to ponder while at Wat Palad: *the temple below the temple...*



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