

The Chonburi Buffalo Races

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The first weekend of October (the 3rd and 4th in 2009) sees the annual Chonburi Buffalo Races in the Chonburi province of Thailand. Though some date the event to a hundred years or less it is probably centuries old. Regardless of whenever it started this traditional festival has never decreased in popularity and now benefits by being part of the 'tourist' round for those in the know. Sadly many tourists never get to hear about it.

The origins of the festival are rooted in fun and games when farmers from the surrounding countryside came into Chonburi to trade goods and celebrate at the time of the full moon and the end of Buddhist Lent. They would arrive with their fully laden buffalo carts and the games would start.

The races are preceded by a parade of decorated buffalo carts. With the mixed hues of umbrellas protecting from sun or rain, people dressed in their finest the whole place is a mass of colour.

Visitors to Thailand who have ventured outside of the cities will be familiar with the Water Buffalo. Generally a peaceful languid creature who seems happiest when up to its neck

in a muddy wallow. Seeing them racing they appear to be a completely different animal.

The festival has all the fun of the fair including Muay Thai boxing, greasy pole climbing, tug of war, cock fighting, Ta Kraw Lod Huang plus the Thai Traditional music and eating eating all day.

Originally it was the home farm water buffalo, those pulling the carts into town which were used but now things are different. Today's buffalo are especially bred for racing. They are exercised, trained and fed secret recipes. Beer and eggs is a big favourite. The racing buffalo are a much sleeker animal, these are the greyhounds of the buffalo world. The buffalo are raced according to 'class' and there are several races over the days along the 130 metre track of hard packed earth in front of the Chonburi City Hall. Depending on the weather dust will billow under hoof or mud will splatter.

Buffalo Racing in Chonburi

Things go wrong on occasion

Though the races themselves are extremely popular there is much else besides. There are beauty competitions for girls and beauty competitions for buffalos too. It is here that the traditional bigger and more robust Farm Buffalo have their day. Only they can enter the beauty competition.

The races themselves have some similarities with 'running the bulls' only here the buffalo have riders on their backs. They race along the muddy track egged on by onlookers who have to dive for cover with some frequency. There are several races during the day which are all very popular. There is no betting for money in Thailand but everyone will have their favourite animal to shout for. It is a good family day out and a definite 'must' for any tourist in Bangkok or Pattaya lucky enough to be in Thailand at this time of year.

The Water Buffalo

The domestic Water Buffalo *Bubalus bubalis* has been domesticated for some 3,000 years. This domestic animal is the close cousin of the now extremely rare wild Water Buffalo which can be found in the jungles of Thailand. Essentially they are the same animal but the wild form is endangered whereas the domestic animals number in the millions. Though they are mainly thought of as Asian domestic where they pull carts and plough fields they can be found in many other countries of the world. In Europe they are farmed mainly for their milk which goes to produce the delicious mozzarella cheese. Around 5% of the world's milk comes from Water Buffalo.