

# Destination

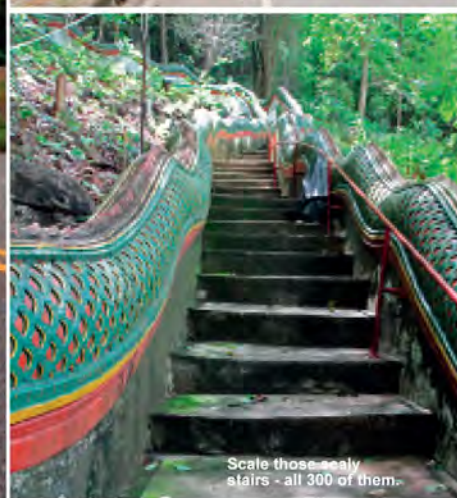
Text & Images : Jeffrey Warner

## A Two-Wheeled Horse (!?) and a Basket of Eggs The Cave and Hot Springs of the Mae On Area

Free yourself. Set out onto the open road.



The road of culture: An hourglass to eras past.



Scale those sealy stairs - all 300 of them.

### Welcome to Northern Thailand, a blissfully intriguing part of the world with near endless cultural depth, best explored by meandering from the beaten travel-path.

Although frequenting the sacred-turned-touristy places such as the Doi Suthep temple may be a part of your travel checklist while bathing in Chiang Mai's charming, big-city-small-town ambience, perhaps you'll also be interested in a slightly more adventurous day-venture involving a motorbike, cavernous cave, bubbling hot springs, eggs and a few hundred *baht* expenditure.

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Equipped with an adventurous spirit, camera and perhaps a helmet on your head, dart-off eastward on Route 11 - 'the super-highway,' beginning at the Nimmanhaemin and Huey Kaew Road Intersection - veering onto Route 1006 toward San Kamphaeng, after about ten minutes. You are 15 km. away from this quaint lil' town and 35 km. shy of your cave and watery destinations.

While approaching San Kamphaeng, *sabai, sabai* - take it easy; no need to rush. Blue and white signs will guide you, so consider slackening your overall pace. Soak-up the airy energy of the majestic skyline and verdant rice fields while taking note of the traditional, stilted and wooden rice houses tucked between the modern and block-like, stucco buildings.

Part of this stretch can involve relishing the presence of ancient trees seemingly more dated than Old Man Time as they twist skyward and bend over the roadway. This scene is majestically beautiful, especially if you can overlook the fact that their limbs on one side have been hacked off, while the blacktop is starving their (and the area's) root system.

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What you can and will witness (if you are looking) are further markers related to the accelerating, socio-economic changes that are whirl-winding this part of the world. But, hey; you're on holiday, right? Contemplate this snapshot in world history for a few moments and move onto San Kamphaeng proper - famous for its silk factories, while offering a lively Saturday evening street-market and a plethora of shops and restaurants.

Beyond the town center, you'll come to a T-intersection. Hang a right and journey through the up-country feel of a windy road lined with rice paddies and an occasional wooden house. Stop and say hello to a cow or two perched amid the banana tree-filled landscape, or feel perfectly safe in exploring side-roads, stopping to absorb the sound of near silence...if you've cut your motorbike engine for a moment.

Another T-intersection and taking a left onto Route 1317 (which is a more direct path from Chiang Mai, if you wish to bypass the San Kamphaeng adventure) will result in you becoming one with an expansive landscape incorporating scattered villages below an often fog-laced, mountainous skyline.

Welcome to planet-Thailand.

Keep-on. The road to the Muang On cave will be to your left. Give your motorbike engine a bit of a workout on the steep, upward slope leading (dead-end) to a small, market area and 20 *baht* cave entrance fee (against cost of attendant, upkeep and electricity). There's also a dragon-décoré, 300-stair ascension to the cave's entryway.

After your winded arrival and downward scaling of steep, concrete stairs, while ducking through some claustrophobia-enhancing gaps, your lungs will be filled with the warm, moist air of an enormous, seemingly water-carved chamber. Saunter to your left toward a gleaming-white and twinkling stalactite being used as a *chedi* and religious site, overhung by dangling cave formations.

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Perhaps it's time for hiding in a cave for awhile.



Listen to the near-silent echoing of trickling water droplets.

From the stairs again, meander to the right past a sizable, horizontal Buddha statue and venture to the back of the cave. For a treasure hunt, seek a channel-like hole in the left-side wall that certainly appears to have in it a human skull-like formation. Apparently, local tribes-people took refuge in this cave system when the Burmese invaded, as they did from time to time in the region's not-so-distant past. So that skull-thing... Real or just the cave having a laugh on you?



A peaceful place, indeed.



Boo!



Wide-open spaces: The scenery here is quite easing.

Investigate the cave for awhile before once again - out in the open air - mounting your two-wheeled horse. You are about to experience a location where hot spring geysers are hurling water skyward in a lush, 40-acre park surrounded by spectacular hillsides and large, shady trees. At this point, the bubbling, sulphur and chloride-odorous water is waiting to cook your lunch.

So head further up the road another kilometre, turn left and follow the signs to the hot springs and well-tailored flower garden fronting a spa complex boasting an open-air mineral pool and several bath-houses of various sizes.

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A primary draw, beyond the water's profound healing powers, is the chance to boil chicken and/or quail eggs in a tank that has the springs' 100-degree Celsius water flowing through it.

You can purchase these delicacies for 25 *baht* per bamboo-packaged batch of four before immersing them in the steaming water. Be diligent in guarding your boiling nest-egg though, before the occasional (perhaps confused) scavenger scurries off with your shelled snack, as sometimes occurs here.

Plunk your bum next to the less than one-meter-deep canal within which its waters swirl snake-like throughout the site, dip your limbs and savor this uniquely cooked-up meal experience. Balanced and chilled-out, perhaps try out your revitalized legs by taking a walk while deciding whether you will back-track to Chiang Mai via the same route.



Fifteen minutes should do the trick.



These miraculous waters serve as a popular cooler-weather destination.

With renewed legs and a tasty treat, this adventurous trek is really neat.

This time, take notice of the white signs triple-penned in English, Thai and the rarely-seen, traditional Lanna language. Also explore some of the handcraft shops selling traditional Thai items (such as the umbrellas of Bo Sang) along this 'road of culture.'

All of this in half a day! Aah...Thailand! 🇹🇭

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