



Korea Times
A Korean
tourist, center,
striking a drum,
tries to befriend
an Ahka hill tribe
woman, during a
tour of a village
near Chiang Rai
recently. The
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Luring Trekkers to Hill Tribe Villages

Mekong Frontiers Open Up to Tourism

This is the first of a two-part tourism report on northern Thailand. ED.

By Hong Sun-hee
Korea Times Correspondent

GOLDEN TRIANGLE— The skinny naked boys standing by the river jumped into the water as the high-speed ferry approached the Laos border. Each one was desperately swimming toward something which a few minutes later turned out to be our boat. They took a long, deep breath after placing their feet on the side of the ship and begged for money from the passengers. These boys at an age when children in other countries enjoy candy and toys, dived back into the river with the coins in their mouths that will ease the hunger of their families. Their forays into the water allow them to encounter "rich" foreign tourists carried on Thai boats that cannot stop on Laos soil beside the muddy Mekong river.

The lurid tales of the Karens and drug warlord Khun Sa have threatened the stream of tourists to the Golden Triangle where northern Thailand, Myanmar and Laos intersect. We passed by a tranquil village with a number of shops selling beverages and souvenirs and a House of Opium museum. A construction site on the river's edge will soon blossom into a casino that will, in a few years time, lure tourists into the Myanmar border for gambling, a vice that is banned in Thai territory.

After the ferry ride, we boarded a bus that climbed into the winding hills, past dusty hamlets, to arrive at Mae Sai, the northernmost town on the Thai-Myanmar border. Here, the accessories to a modern lifestyle are apparent. A six lane highway to the Burmese border is just the beginning of the development of the Mekong, one of the most pristine major waterways in the world, which is now opening up to trade and tourism, revealing a richness of cultural and scenic sights as well as huge economic potential.

For travelers, the most alluring attraction of Mae Sai, the hub of contraband trade where seven Thai banks have branch offices, is the opportunity to sample a taste of Myanmar. Three hundred baht (less than 10,000 won) is all you pay to cross the concrete bridge that links the two countries. After several steps onto the bridge, a tug on my pants caught my attention — a wide-eyed girl of five or six in shabby clothes, a hat perched on her head. Tied around her waist in a bundle of cloth was a still infant. I touched the baby's fingers and was relieved to find it alive. I felt a deep pang inside me as I could imagine her future in the wake of the socialist country's accelerated opening to the outside world.

Historically, the Mekong's 4,200 kilometer passage from its headwaters high on the Tibetan plateau to the

broad, flat delta near the South China Sea, has been the lifeline linking the Indochinese peninsula.

Northeast Thailand is strongly influenced by the various hill tribes that make their homes in the highlands, some of whom had settled there even before the Thai people. But their past is shrouded in mystery since they don't possess a written history.

The tribes are major tourist attractions of northern Thailand in addition to some magnificent ruins and ancient temples which dot the former Sukhothai capital.

Comprising seven major tribes — Meo, Karen, Yao, Lisu, Lawa, Lahu and Ahka — each with its own distinct culture, religion, language and colorful style of dress, these people maintain an independent culture and lifestyle untouched by the 20th century. Their way of life will likely erode with the flood of tourists that will soon bring modern consumerism to their very feet.

In the past, these people used a slash-and-burn technique of clearing land to grow opium poppies or maize. They earned a bare subsistence income from their traditional cultivation and were protected to a certain extent by drug traffickers. Their farming style has resulted in widespread destruction of the native forest and alienated them from the plant-loving Thai people.

A half-day or one-day trip will take travelers to the Ahka or Lahu tribes who have been resettled at easily-accessible riverside locations under the supervision of the government.

Another tribe, the Lisu, has in the past farmed opium, their main source of income. Though the drug is now banned, the men of the Lisu have not given up the habit of smoking opium in shuttered bamboo huts while the women embroider, weave or stage brief performances of folk music and dance to feed their families.

The tribal people, particularly most of the men, do not live past 50 due to their opium addiction, active sex lives since their early teens and poor drinking water. Because most are not recognized as Thai nationals, medical services and schooling are not available.

They are nonetheless hospitable and welcome visitors to their villages. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand, about 80 percent of travelers to Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai make inquiries about trekking to the tribal villages.

Trekking in this part of Thailand is almost impossible without a tour guide as outsiders know neither the roads nor the language and have no information about which tribe will welcome them and provide shelters. They are asked to hire a guide registered with the Professional Guide Association or the Jungle Tour Club of Northern Thailand.

Trekking tours last two days to two weeks; the two night three day trips are most popular.

Those taking part in the three-day trek board a truck after breakfast at a hotel, and ride the rugged mountain roads for four hours. After a brief stop for lunch, they enjoy the natural beauty of the land as they walk three to four hours to arrive at a tribal village where they will, for the night, live as the natives do. The walking resumes the next morning and after lunch, tourists may rest their tired feet when they ride elephants for two hours after which they again walk for hours to arrive at another village for the second night. The following morning, they transfer to a bamboo raft and return to the mundane world, flowing down the rapid currents of the Mekong river.

Park Tae-young, a guide accredited with the Tourism Authority of Thailand, reports that the trekkers he has escorted have not complained about the physical intensity of his tours, rather they have appreciated their brief encounter with another people and another time.



A Myanmar girl begging for money with an infant bundled against her chest is pictured at a small bridge over which tourists from Thailand can step into Myanmar.

China's Quake-Struck Northwest Hit by 200 Aftershocks

BEIJING (AFP) — More than 200 aftershocks have rocked northwest China in the 20 hours since it was struck by a strong earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale, local officials said Saturday.

"Since the big earthquake yesterday, we have been hit with more than 200 aftershocks and the most serious registered 5.0 on the Richter scale," said an official charged with emergency rescue in remote Jiashi county in northwest Xinjiang.

Copy Editor Sought

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5 Rilling, Opposition Lawmakers Grilled on Hanbo Connections

Stato prosecutors yesterday brought in four lawmakers of the ruling New Korea Party — Reps. Kim Deog-ryong, Park Chong-ung, Park Sung-vum and Lah Oh-yeon — and the minor Democratic Party lawmaker Lee Choong-jae for questioning on how much they had received from the failed Hanbo Group and whether or not the money was given to them in return for favors.

A source at the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office (SPPO) said that those summoned yesterday and the rest of 33 politicians to be called in the days to come were suspected of receiving at least 50 million won each from Hanbo owner Chung Tai-soo. "No incumbent ministers or high profile bureaucrats will be called in," the SPPO source said. The 33, who are allegedly included on the "Chung Tai-soo" list of politicians include 20 incumbent lawmakers; 11 non-parliamentary chapter office heads; one governor and one mayor. The SPPO, however, didn't reveal the names on the list.

Among the five lawmakers summoned yesterday, Rep. Park Chong-ung first presented himself at the cavernous SPPO building at around 11 a.m. Park took time to shake hands with journalists before posing for photographers.

"I have already come clean about the 'political donation' I received from Hanbo," he said. "I hope that we will learn from this scandal and there will

be no repeat of such incidents."

Reps. Park Sung-vum and Lah appeared at 2 p.m., while Reps. Lee and Kim appeared at the SPPO office in Socho-dong at 3 and 4 p.m. respectively. The two Parks are suspected of receiving 50 million won each in the 1996 general elections but Lah, a member of the National Assembly finance and economy committee, was never mentioned as being on the Chung list prior to the SPPO summons.

Lee, a six term lawmaker, told reporters prior to his appearance at the SPPO that he received 10 million won from Hanbo Corp. president Lee Yong-nam, who went to the same college with him following the April 17, 1996 general elections. "I spent it on hospital bills for my wife, who has suffered from lung cancer since last year," he said, adding that her treatment costs 7.6 million won every day.

A senior SPPO prosecutor said that the prosecution will indict those who are found to have received bribes in return for extending favors to the bankrupt group on a selective basis after the questioning of the 33 politicians is completed.

Meanwhile, Reps. Kim Sang-hyun of the main opposition National Congress for New Politics (NCNP) and Kim Yong-hwan of the splinter United Liberal Democrats (ULD) were released yesterday morning after undergoing over

night questioning.

NCNP's Kim admitted to receiving 50 million won from Hanbo but claimed that the money was a political donation, not a bribe, a prosecution source said. ULD's Kim denied having received money of any amount and a Hanbo executive, who Hanbo owner Chung had ordered to pay Kim off, confessed that he had not delivered the money. The prosecutors are being caught between a rock and a hard place in their attempt to indict the politicians they have summoned. A lenient law allows politicians to receive donations, virtually condoning their bribe taking with little fear of prosecution. However, public sentiment is calling for indictments and prosecution.

In another development, NKP Reps. Seo Sok-jai, a five term lawmaker and Kim Yoon-hwan, a six term lawmaker and National Assembly speaker Kim Soo-hwan all denied reports that they were also on Hanbo's payroll, saying that they were groundless accusations intended to smear them.

Rep. Kim Yoon-hwan, an NKP advisor and one of the "seven dwarfs" who are considered as long shot presidential hopefuls in the ruling camp, said that he had met Hanbo owner Chung only once in his life during the "sixth republic" led by former president Roh Tae-woo, now himself serving time for wrongdoing while in office.

Deaths From Traffic

Mishaps Rise 22.6

A total of 12,653 persons were killed in traffic accidents out of over 265,000 accidents last year, up 22.6 percent over the previous year, the National Police Administration reported Friday.

A total of 355,962 were injured in auto accidents last year, up 7.3 percent from the year before.

By accident causes, 382 died from traffic signal violations (up 60.5 percent), 2,378 from crossing the median, (up 39.9 percent), 979 from drunk driving (up 41.9 percent) and 2,160 from reckless driving (up 56.7 percent).

In light of the sharp rise in traffic deaths, the administration instructed local police agencies Friday to enforce measures aimed at reducing such deaths by 10 percent.

The measures call for setting up and operating teams tasked with reducing traffic-related deaths. (Yonhap)



Yonhap
Some 20 officials of Chungju City Hall in Chungchong-pukto, are seen working for citizens in Hanbok, traditional Korean costume, Saturday. City officials wear Hanbok on the second Saturday of every month, which they have designated as a day for wearing traditional clothes.

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Weather Forecast

TODAY

Clear skies will give way to cloudy skies. Windy afternoon. Lows of 5 to 10°C (41-50°F), highs, 14 to 23°C (57-73°F).

Sunrise: 6:01 a.m.
Sunset: 7:05 p.m.

Seoul: Becoming cloudy
8°C (46°F) / 17°C (63°F)
Pusan: Becoming cloudy
10°C (50°F) / 19°C (66°F)
Taegu: Becoming cloudy
8°C (46°F) / 22°C (72°F)
Kwangju: Becoming cloudy
8°C (46°F) / 21°C (70°F)
Taejon: Becoming cloudy
7°C (45°F) / 18°C (64°F)
Chuncheon: Becoming cloudy
5°C (41°F) / 18°C (64°F)
Kangnung: Becoming cloudy
13°C (55°F) / 23°C (73°F)
Cheju: Becoming cloudy
9°C (48°F) / 16°C (61°F)

TOMORROW

Cloudy skies will gradually clear. Morning lows of 5 to 11°C (41-52°F), daytime highs, 13 to 19°C (55-66°F).

Sunrise: 6:00 a.m.
Sunset: 7:06 p.m.

Seoul: Cloudy to clear
10°C (50°F) / 16°C (61°F)
Pusan: Cloudy, light rain
10°C (50°F) / 18°C (64°F)
Taegu: Cloudy, light rain
9°C (48°F) / 19°C (68°F)
Kwangju: Cloudy, light rain
11°C (52°F) / 17°C (63°F)
Taejon: Cloudy to clear
9°C (48°F) / 16°C (61°F)
Chuncheon: Cloudy to clear
6°C (43°F) / 14°C (57°F)
Kangnung: Cloudy to clear
10°C (50°F) / 17°C (63°F)
Cheju: Cloudy, light rain
10°C (50°F) / 15°C (59°F)