

Kanchanaburi

Introduction

Kanchanaburi is Thailand's third largest province. It covers an area of 19,486 square kilometres, most of which is forested mountains. There are fertile plains around the meeting point of the Kwai Noi and Kwai Yai Rivers where the town is located. To the west, Kanchanaburi shares a border with Myanmar and has the Tanaowasi Range as its borderline.

Beyond the compact provincial capital, some 130 kilometres from Bangkok, Kanchanaburi unfolds in progressively arresting scenic beauty in a landscape characterised by several waterfalls, caves once inhabited by Neolithic man, national parks, and tranquil riverside and reservoir settings. Many of its major attractions are also connected with the Second World War, and more specifically the years 1942 to 1945.

Kanchanaburi is now composed of 13 districts (Amphoes): Muang Kanchanaburi, Tha Muang, Tha Maka, Phanom Thuan, Bo Phloi, Lao Khwan, Sai yoi, Thong Pha Phum, Si Sawat, Sankhla Buri, Dan Makhom Tia, Nong Pru, and Huai Krachao.

Attractions

The Bridge over the River Kwai Internationally famous, thanks to several motion pictures and books, the black iron bridge was brought from Java by the Japanese Army and reassembled under Japanese supervision by Allied prisoners of war labour as part of the 'Death Railway' linking Thailand with Myanmar. Still in use today, the bridge was the target of frequent Allied bombing raids during 1945, and was rebuilt after the war ended. The curved spans of the bridge are the original sections.

War Museum This museum, located near the River Kwai Bridge, displays the collection of weapons, tools and utensils of the Allied prisoners of war and Japanese soldiers during the Second World War.

The JEATH War Museum This enclave in the riverside precincts of Wat Chaichumphon has been constructed largely in the form of an Allied prisoners of war camp. The name JEATH is derived from Japan, England, America, Australia, Thailand, and Holland. The thatched detention hut with cramped, elevated bamboo bunks contains photographic, pictorial, and physical memorabilia dating from the Second World War. The museum is open daily from 8.30 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.

Kanchanaburi Town Gate This is located on Lak Muang Road near the meeting point of the Kwai Yai and Kwai Noi Rivers. It is built in 1833 during the reign of King Rama III after the town was moved from the original site at Tambon Latya, 18 kms. away.

Kanchanaburi War Cemetery On Saeng Chuto Road, opposite the Railway Station, it contains the remains of 6,982 prisoners of war who perished during the construction of the 'Death Railway'.

Chong Kai War Cemetery 2 kilometres south of town, on the bank of the Kwai Noi River, this occupies the former site of the Chong Kai prisoner of war camp. This second cemetery is more peaceful, attractively landscaped, and contains some 1,750 remains.

Wat Tham Mangkon Thong Situated 4 kilometres from town on the bank of the Kwai Noi River, it is well known for the incredible performance of the nun floating in a pool. There is a small museum where a variety of ancient objects are on display.

Wat Tham Phu Wa The monastery in natural surroundings, famous for meditation, is 15 kilometres away from the provincial capital. There is a beautiful cave with plenty of stalactites.

Somdet Phra Sri Nakarin Park Situated in Kanchanaburi's Agricultural College at Tambon Nong Ya, 9 kilometres from town, it is also known as "the Stone Garden" which abounds with stones of different sizes and shapes in its large area.

Wat Tham Sua and Wat Tham Khao Noi Located at Tambon Muang Chum, 4 kilometres beyond Wachiralongkorn Dam, these two adjacent temples house very beautiful Thai and Chinese style buildings and a huge Buddha image situated on the mount.

Wat Pa Lelai This ancient temple is 18 kilometres away from the provincial capital. It is located at Tambon Lat Ya, which once was an ancient border town involved in battles between the Thai and the Burmese during the Ayutthaya period to the early Bangkok period. Another nearby temple called Wat Khun Phaen houses a ruined pagoda dating back to the early Ayutthaya period.

Kanchanaburi Cultural Centre The collection centre of human lifestyles from the past till the present is displayed at the Rajpatara Institute of Kanchanaburi, 14 kilometres out of town on the route to Sai Yok.

Ban Kao National Museum The museum, some 35 kilometres from town, was constructed beside a Neolithic burial site discovered by Dutch prisoners of war during the construction of the 'Death Railway'. Specimens of Neolithic remains are on display. It is open daily from 9.00 a.m.- 4.00 p.m.

Prasat Muang Sing Historical Park This ancient site is 43 kilometres out of Kanchanaburi on the bank of the Kwai Noi River. The principal structure, the Khmer Prasat Muang Sing (Tower of the City of Lions), is believed to have been the westernmost outpost of the Angkor-centred Khmer empire. A wide range of artefacts including temple carvings, religious statues, implements, and pottery shards indicate the once-thriving city must have been inhabited from approximately the 12th to 14th centuries.

Namtok Sai Yok Noi Also known as Namtok Khao Phang, some 60 kilometres from town, this roadside cascade is best visited between July and September when water is most plentiful. Travelling by train from Kanchanaburi to Nam Tok Station is recommended for visitors wishing to experience

trips on the historic railway, and then they can continue by local transport to the waterfall, which is only 2 kilometres away.

Hell Fire Pass This is a part of the Death Railway, constructed during the Second World War and now abandoned. The site is located in a thick forest near km. 66 of Sai Yok-Thong Pha Phum Road. A long passage made through the stone mountain by the Allied prisoners indicates the extreme difficulty in constructing the Death Railway.

Sai Yok National Park This park encompasses the famous Kwai Noi River and contains some waterfalls and caves on the river bank. Namtok Sai Yok Yai, 104 kms. from the town, flows directly into the river near the park office. Its idyllic beauty has been repeatedly celebrated in Thai poetry and song. Tham Lawa and Tham Daowadung are the two caves which house numerous stalactites and stalagmites. The smallest mammal in the world, Kitti's Hog-nosed Bat weighing just two grams, is found in the park area.

From the Pak Saeng Pier in Tambon Tha Sao, visitors can hire a boat with a carrying capacity of 10-12 persons to visit the Lawa Cave and Sai Yok Yai Waterfall. It takes around 4 hours for the return trip.

Thong Pha Phum is 159 kilometres north of the provincial capital. Besides limestone waterfalls, which are the major attractions in the area, there is the following:

Khao Laem Dam This hydro-electric dam is situated on the Kwai Noi River, 6 kilometres north of Thong Pha Phum or 165 kilometres north of Kanchanaburi. The dam, 1,019 metres long and 92 metres high, forms a scenic reservoir extending to the north towards Sangkhla Buri district. An overnight stay in comfortable resorts or raft-houses also offer a relaxing holiday for visitors.

Namtok Kroeng Krawia This roadside waterfall, 32 kms. north of Thong Pha Phum, is often visited by passers-by. The water cascades down a limestone rock face under shady trees. It is most beautiful during the rainy season.

Namtok Dai Chong Thong Travel 2 kms. beyond Namtok Kroeng Krawia, then turn left and go on for 6 kms. It is rather a large waterfall which cascades down towards Khao Laem Dam.

Namtok Pha Tat This huge waterfall in the area of the national park is easily accessible. Visitors can travel north of Thong Pha Phum along Route 323 and turn right at km.105, then go on for 12 kms. to the waterfall.

Hin Dat Hot Spring This hot spring with a pond for bathing is at km. 107 of Route 323 or 2 kms. beyond the entrance to Pha Tat Waterfall. It was discovered beside the stream by a Japanese soldier during the Second World War.

Pilok Some 70 kilometres west of Thong Pha Phum on Route 3272, there was once a lot of mining of wolfram and tin in the Tanaowasi Mountains marking the Thailand-Myanmar border. Nowadays, temperate fruit and decorative winter plants can be seen and bought at Pilok and the villages en route. Visitors are advised to take four-wheeled drive vehicles for travelling along this route.

Sangkhla Buri This small settlement, some 225 kilometres from Kanchanaburi, edges on the northernmost extremities of Khao Laem Dam. The scenic 75-kilometre route from Khao Laem largely parallels the reservoir passing several raft complexes and roadside cascades.

Wat Wang Wiwekaram This extensive temple on the southern outskirts of Sangkhla Buri edges on Khao Laem Dam. The complex is constructed in an unusual mix of Thai, Indian, and Burmese Buddhist architectural styles, and the abbot 'Luang Pho Uttama' is highly revered among local people, including tribal folk and Burmese.

Mon Village This Mon community is linked with the district by a long wooden bridge. Mon is an ethnic minority whose origin is in Myanmar. Here, they live peacefully and their tradition has been continually practised.

Three Pagodas Pass 22 kilometres from Sangkhla Buri, this is a group of three similar pagodas which has been constructed as a memorial for an important trooping route during the wartime of the Ayutthaya period. It also marks the rugged Thailand-Myanmar border and is the site of a small thriving border market. Visitors are allowed to enter the neighbouring Burmese settlement.

Elephant Trekking Elephants in Sangkhla Buri are raised by Karen hilltribes for working purposes. When not working, they are available to tourists to ride. Some travel agents offer one-day elephant trekking in combination with rafting tours in the vicinity of Thong Pha Phum and Sangkhla Buri.

Namtok Erawan This is a 7-tiered waterfall, widely regarded as one of Thailand's loveliest cascades. It is in the area of the Erawan National Park, 65 kilometres from Kanchanaburi along Route 3199.

Tham Phra That This cave is 10 kilometres north of Namtok Erawan. It contains monumental stalagmites and stalactites.

Sri Nakarin Dam 69 kilometres from Kanchanaburi, and just 4 kilometres north of the Erawan National Park, this massive structure marks the southernmost extremity of an extensive reservoir, which is part of yet another national park.

Namtok Huai Mae Khamin This waterfall with many beautiful cascades is located by the Sri Nakarin Dam, some 108 kilometres from Kanchanaburi. The 1-hour boat ride to the waterfall starts from the Tha Kradan Pier, 12 kilometres from Sri Nakarin Dam. Many resorts in the form of raft houses are

available at Ban Tha Kradan.

Chaloem Rattanakosin National Park - Tham Than Lot 97 kilometres from Kanchanaburi, and north of Bo Phloi, along Route 3086, this 54-square kilometre park encompasses peaceful forests, waterfalls, and several caves. There is a 2.5-kilometre hiking trail along the stream which is laced with several small cascades. The stream flows through Than Lot Yai and Than Lot Noi Caves which house beautiful stalactites and stalagmites.

Huai Ongkhot Royal Project This is a site for the royal project which is planned to develop the infertile area around the Ongkhot basin. It is located at Tambon Somdet Charoen, Nong Phru district, 130 kilometres from Kanchanaburi. The area also houses a Royal Residence and the excavation of Neolithic remains.

Special Interests

National Parks

Kanchanaburi's aforementioned parks offer opportunities for either camping, and/ or fishing, or trekking along nature trails. Camping facilities, which customarily provide cold running water and simple toilet facilities, are available at Chaloem Rattanakosin, Sai Yok and Erawan national parks. Trekking along either well-defined waterfall trails, or nature trails, to visit caves or appreciate local flora and fauna, is a popular activity at all national parks.

Fishing

This is popular on both Kwai rivers, and the Khao Laem and Sri Nagarind reservoirs. Several raft resorts offer hired rods. Edible and popular fish include the Giant Gourami, the Transverse Bellbarb, the Giant Snakehead Fish and the Striped Tiger Nandid. Each is delicious when freshly cooked, either simply fried or in Thai culinary styles.

Rafting & Canoeing

Trips are available from the provincial capital and several holiday resorts. Raft trips leaving from the famous bridge, or the waterfront Song Kwai Road area, cost between 2,000 and 4,500 baht for 10-15 persons, depending on durations and destinations. Trips may entail 7-10 hour return journeys, or include an overnight stay on either the Kwai Yai or Kwai Noi rivers.

Rail Trips

Railway enthusiasts may travel along one of Southeast Asia's most historical tracks, namely the surviving stretch of the 'Death Railway', from the provincial capital to the Nam Tok Railway Station near the Sai Yok Noi Waterfall. The winding track crosses the world-famous bridge and provides a clear indication of how difficult constructing the original track (long since repaired and restored) must have been. One particularly exhilarating stretch sees the line parallel the curving Kwai Noi on a wooden viaduct towering above the river and hugging a steep, cave-ridden cliff.

Shopping

Major souvenir shops are concentrated around the eastern approaches, and riverine environment, of the world-famous bridge. Almost every handicraft produced in Thailand can be purchased there. Browsing to compare quality, and good-humoured but determined bargaining, will ensure favourable prices for readymade leisurewear and other apparel, and popular souvenirs such as bamboo musical instruments, palm leaf mobiles, ceramic decorations, lacquerware and bronzeware receptacles, paper parasols, and Thai silk and cotton lengths. Kanchanaburi is a major source of highquality Thai blue sapphires. These are mined at Bo Phloi, as are onyx and topaz. Purchasers of finished jewellery creations can be made at Bo Phloi's Jewellery Handicraft Centre, and other satellite outlets.

How to get there

Kanchanaburi is connected by daily road and rail services with Bangkok and other neighbouring provinces. Airconditioned and regular coaches leave Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal throughout the day for the 2 to 3-hour journey.

Trains leave the Bangkok Noi Railway Station daily for Kanchanaburi.

Festivals

Boat & Raft Day

Local long-boat teams race boats with great gusto at the waterfront area of the provincial Kwai Yai river to celebrate 'Boat & Raft Day', generally during October.

River Kwai Bridge Week

Each year, late November and/or early December, the world famous bridge becomes the focal point of celebrations. Highlights include exhibitions and historical and archaeological displays; a carnival featuring sideshows, roundabouts, folk entertainment and cultural performances; rides on trains hauled by World War II vintage steam locomotives; and a nightly light and sound presentation re-enacting the bridge's Second World War history, including an Allied bombing raid.

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