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Yaek Loam A Volcanic Crater Lake in Cambodia



by Murli Menon



From Phnom Penh, take the bus to Kratie and then a shared taxi from Kratie to Rattanakiri. Motorbike taxis will take you to the volcanic lake from your hotel at Rattanakiri.

The evening at Phnom Penh was spent browsing through the various tourist guides that are distributed free at all Phnom Penh restaurants. Driving to Kratie for a Mekong cruise to watch the river dolphins is en route to the drive to Yaek Loam volcanic lake in Rattanakiri. The next day, I reached the pier where boats are parked and negotiated with the boatman for a 1-hour cruise on the Mekong for a memorable experience.



I have just returned from a fifteen day sojourn visiting the hitherto unknown and unexplored north-eastern borders, where Laos and Vietnam meet Cambodia and China in what is going to be known as the Golden Quadrilateral. The north-east of Cambodia is similar to the Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. However, the tribes who live in the hills of Cambodia still follow their century old practices, as these regions are not accessible by air and roads are non-existent. However, some of the world's most beautiful natural attractions, including pristine volcanic crater lakes, waterfalls and evergreen forests, are located in this tribal infested belt.

The more adventurous tourists sneak into this part of Cambodia either through Laos or Vietnam, but both these journeys are only jungle safaris through mud roads. In this article, I try to give readers a first-hand experience of travelling through one of the remotest terrains on our planet, armed with a Wi-Fi notebook, new battery and two digital cameras. The easiest way for International travellers to reach the volcanic lake is to fly to Bangkok and take the connecting flight to Phnom Penh.

The Mekong River at Kratie is an amazing sight and so are the lush evergreen forests that straddle the borders of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. I could get fabulous pictures from all these picturesque destinations, not to forget the colourful and delicious-looking food from the Indian restaurant in Phnom Penh which served me "home food" during my brief stay in Phnom Penh before moving to Kratie.

North-Eastern Cambodia is home to several indigenous tribes who have lived in these forests for centuries. Rattanakiri is famous for its semi-precious stones, including rubies, amethysts and onyx. Most probably, the name Rattanakiri is a mispronunciation of the Sanskrit word Ratnagiri or a mountain of gemstones.

Getting to Rattanakiri is extremely difficult as there is a single dirt road which winds its way through thick evergreen tropical rainforests. Both to and fro traffic compete for space on this narrow forest road, which is only a slushy swamp during the wet season and can turn into one in November too, as tropical showers and sudden downpours are common here throughout the year.



Another option to go to Kratie is by bus. Phnom Penh Sorya Transport Company operates a bus from Phnom Penh to Kratie, leaving Phnom Penh at 8 a.m. and arriving at Kratie at 2 p.m. It is advisable to spend the night at one of the several riverside hotels overlooking the Mekong, before continuing to Rattanakiri by taxi, before 11 a.m. to reach Rattanakiri before nightfall. It gets dark in this part of the world at 6 p.m. There are no streetlights once you leave, Kratie! The bus to Kratie makes a stop for breakfast at Kompong Cham and another for lunch at a roadside restaurant.

As these stops are located in small kompongs (kompong means village in the Khmer language), fresh fruit vendors fill the buses as soon as they stop. One can buy juicy mangoes, peeled jackfruit, grapefruit, pineapples and coconuts at these tiny bus stations.

During the car drive, there are a few impromptu stops at wayside villages for a quick breakfast and lunch, but these can help one break the monotony of the car ride. The sights of nature during the journey are beautiful but the attractions of Rattanakiri are like the sparkling ruby mounted on a gold ring.

Kachanh waterfall is like a wild tribal beauty, unfettered and violent. It gushes out like a volcano, spewing ash with a loud hissing noise. Katieng falls is like a sacred deity, which flows down at an even pace with a gentle hum and in several parallel cascades flowing down in a synchronous flow. Falls are like a mother with snow-white water cascading down the rocks in several tiers, giving it an appearance of sublime beauty and it is a touching moment to view this multi-tiered fall.

Also, there are no repair shops or mechanics for most of the journey through the jungle, and it is not uncommon to encounter stranded cars during one's trip from Kratie to Rattanakiri. Only trucks, pickups, Land Cruisers and Camry are suited to take the rigours of this cross-country motor-cross across rural Cambodia.

The upside of this bumpy journey is that I could observe several colourful flowers, sight beautiful birds and enjoy the canopy of green throughout my painful sojourn. Getting to Rattanakiri from Phnom Penh is a hard task. Hence, it is advisable to break the journey to Kratie, which is a 6-hour journey from Phnom Penh by bus.

From Kratie, one has to hire a taxi (only Toyota Camry, Land Cruisers or Mercedes Vans can make this journey over the hilly terrain smoothly) to take one to Rattanakiri. With two brief stops, the taxi journey can easily take about six hours. Most of this journey is through a mud road through the jungle, over many makeshift wooden bridges.



Chaong falls, on the other hand, is very businesslike and offers a straight-line flow, like a prim and proper student attired in crisply starched uniforms and dry cleared ties to the school. Even the sound of this waterfall is a faint hum as if a student who is scared to talk to his bench mate at school. However, the views offered by this waterfall are no less beautiful than the others.

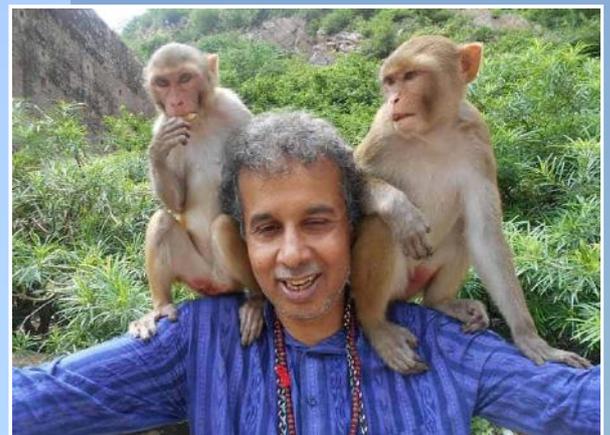
The trek to the volcanic lake starts in Banglung. It is pretty flat, but after the first 500 metres, the gradient of the climb increases lightly and difficulty increases at the halfway mark. The final kilometre is the toughest to climb but the last 500 metres are slightly downhill and once one reaches the lake, there are steps which lead to the wooden pier, offering fantastic views of the Yaek Loam volcanic lake.

The most attractive feature of Rattanakiri is this turquoise green lake nestled amid evergreen tropical rainforests. Known as Yaek Loam lake, it is a large water body with natural lukewarm water and sulphuric fumes can be seen emanating from these waters at sunrise. The lake is 4 km. trek from the town centre known as Banglung and is a gentle climb over a forest mud track.

There is a circular trekking route through the rainforests along the banks of the lake and offers trekkers a jungle experience.

But the most fascinating aspect of this lake is the silence, serenity, tranquillity and peace experienced while meditating at its banks. One is touched by the natural beauty that surrounds oneself. This miracle of nature which has lain undisturbed since creation is an ideal place to unwind, forget all worldly worries and relax to the tune of crickets, birds and sounds of the rainforests.

The crystal clear waters invite one to take a dip in them. Swimming in the lake is a divine, soul-stirring experience. After reaching Rattanakiri from Kratie, you can watch the sunset over Yaek Loam and go to bed early as it gets dark at 6 p.m. in November.





As this lake was formed inside a volcanic crater, the shape of the lake is symmetrically spherical. It is a perfect circle and resembles the moon. This moon-shaped lake is probably the only one of its kind on earth!

The walk under the trees and around the lake is pleasurable as the path is flat and snakes its way around the lake. However, the experience is like a jungle trek through tropical rainforests. Swimming at this crystal clear lake was energy for my soul... The water of Yaek Loam lake is pure. I could feel highly energised particles, as one quenches one's thirst by drinking pure mineral water at this source of creation. The indigenous tribes living around Yaek Loam must have venerated it like a goddess, as even today, it exists like a droplet of tranquillity enveloped by a calm, peaceful, and serene environment.

The day break is at 5 a.m. and watching the sun rise over this emerald lake is the first thing one should do the next morning. In the early hours of sunrise, the lake is calm and quiet. The chirping of the birds and the occasional rainforest cricket's whine are the only sounds that pervade the early morning air. In fact, the experience of hearing the soft musical notes of sparrows and mynahs transports one to another world!

The crystal clearness of the lake is seen in the brilliant reflection of the surrounding greenery on its mirrorlike surface. Minutes can turn into hours as one watches the calm and serene lake without a ripple on its surface. A thin layer of sulphuric fumes is seen a few inches above the lake as soon as the first sunrays hit the water. But these fumes soon vanish, once the sunrise is complete.

The trek around the lake is enjoyable as one observes several colourful butterflies that flutter hither and thither; the diversity of the flora seen also is notable. Trees, shrubs, grasses, ferns, and palms compete with one another for space and the dense foliage prevents sunlight from touching the ground in a few spots!

The most surprising thing about visiting the Yaek Loam volcanic lake is the presence of innumerable seashells. The experience of finding seashells on the banks of the lake, hundreds of kilometres from the nearest sea, is something incredible. However, I am convinced that the Yaek Loam lake was created in the past when the oceans disappeared and mountains arose in their place!

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