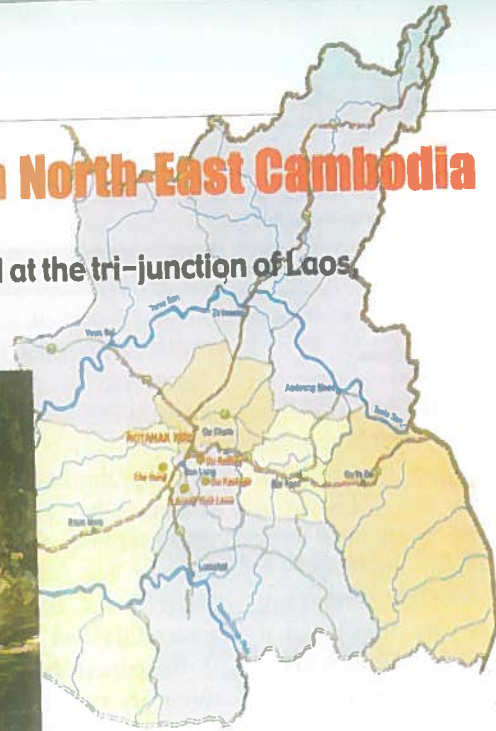
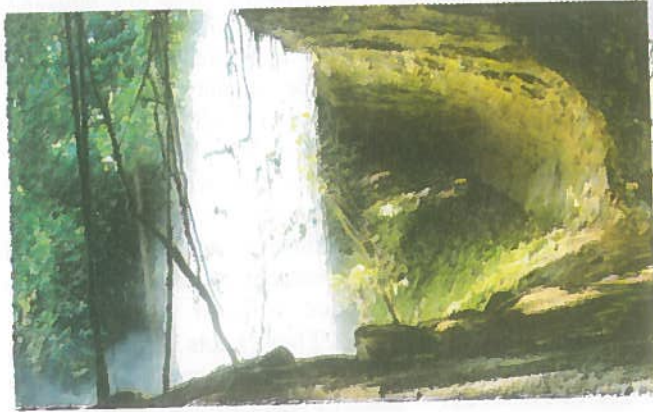


Trek to Chaong Waterfalls in North-East Cambodia

Adventure abounds in the rain forests located at the tri-junction of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. ■ by Murli Menon



The chalet at Tribal Hotel, where I was lodged, is located adjacent to the evergreen rainforests that straddle the tri-junction where Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam meet. Vietnam is exactly 68 km from Rattanakiri, while Laos is almost the same distance.

Rattanakiri is tucked away in a corner of north-eastern Cambodia, which is home to several indigenous tribes, who have lived in these forests since centuries. Rattanakiri is famous for its semi-precious stones, including rubies, amethysts and onyx. Most probably, the name Rattanakiri is a corruption of the Sanskrit word "ratanagiri" or 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 competes for space on this narrow forest-road, which is just a slushy swamp during the wet season. Tropical showers and sudden downpours are common here, throughout the year.

Most importantly, there are no repair-shops or mechanics for most part of the journey through the jungle and it is not uncommon to encounter stranded cars on the way, from Kratie to Rattanakiri. Only

trucks, pick-ups, Land Cruisers and Toyota Camrys are suited to take the rigours of this cross-country moto-cross across rural Cambodia.

The upside is that one is able to observe several colourful flowers, sight beautiful birds and enjoy the canopy of green throughout one's painful sojourn! There are a few impromptu stops at wayside villages for a quick breakfast and lunch, which also help break the monotony of the bumpy car-ride. The sights of nature during the journey are beau-

teous but the attractions of Rattanakiri are like a sparkling ruby.

Several pure and pristine lakes are scattered all over this tranquil province. Many beautiful waterfalls criss-cross the hills and one can trek to any of these falls for a close tryst with nature. Each waterfall – secluded, calm and peaceful – is hidden behind a sacred grove. Each waterfall is different from the other and one can almost categorise the humanlike qualities of each!

I met several Chinese tourists, who came through Vietnam. They had entered Laos overland from Yunnan in China, taken the bus to Luang Prabhang, then had crossed the Mekong (which demarcates the border between Laos and Cambodia) from Luang Prabhang to Stung Traen in Cambodia and reached Rattanakiri from Stung Traen by pick-up vans

Compared to the others, I was fortunate to have flown into Phnom Penh from Bangkok and taken the bus to Kratie. Then it was a six-hour ride in the back-seat of a Toyota Camry with an Australian, working at a voluntary organisation at Phnom Penh, his Cambodian friend and a family of locals, who shared the front-seat.



Gigantic tribal statues at Ratanakiri.



The natural attractions of Rattanakiri are manifold but the jewel in the crown is the Yaek Loam volcanic lake, which is located 5 km from Banglung (the centre of Rattanakiri town).

The other natural attractions around here include many waterfalls, lakes and the Virachey National Park. Kachang waterfall is like a wild tribal beauty. Unfettered and violent, it gushes out like a volcano spewing ash with a loud, hissing noise.

Memorable trek

Every minute of the trek around Rattanakiri is exciting. My three-hour trek to the Chaong waterfalls was most memorable.

The better part of this trek is through a dirt-track, that winds its ways through the evergreen, tropical rainforests. However, there are several tribal settlements and a few huts selling tropical fruits and coconut water, along the way.

As the area is prone to incessant rain, all houses are built on stilts. There is a single community-well in every tribal settlement. There are different huts for males and females, symbolised by a pointed roof for females and a dome-shaped roof for males.

Males and females are free to choose their own partners after attaining puberty and leave these community-huts to set up their own dwellings after the couple gets married. The main, indigenous tribes found on the hills that surround Virachey National Park, include the Hmong (who have migrated here from Laos), the Kraeng and the Prau.

They have their own dialect and are happy in their isolated existence. They gather fruits, leaves, roots, shoots, tubers and wild-fruits from the forest, load them on their handmade, palm-leaf baskets and trek long distances to sell these vegetables, roots, tubers and fruits at Banglung market.

They keep away from the mainstream population of Rattanakiri and are extremely shy. It is often difficult to communicate with these indigenous people, as even the local Khmers do not understand their

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native tongue. They are seen, not heard!

These innocent tribals venerate the forest deity and have beautifully-carved idols of their gods, which are found inside caves, near the waterfalls or at their sacred groves. They are extremely hospitable to strangers, once they are convinced that the visitor's intentions are friendly. The women, especially, are extremely camera-shy but, once the ice is broken, they do pose for photographs, albeit reluctantly.

At the markets, they sell their produce at extremely unbelievable prices, as they are content with the little money they receive. One can purchase 200 gm of raw tamarind for as little as 200 riel (Rs 2) and a dozen, large, wild bananas for 1,000 Riel (Rs 10).

These tribes prepare a delicious, roasted-tapioca-like snack from a pink-coloured tuber (the tuber is charcoal-roasted till it acquires a golden hue), with sesame seeds liberally sprinkled on it. This healthy, nutritious and eco-friendly snack is ideal for breakfast and tastes out of this world. It is extremely rich in fibre and has a beneficial therapeutic effect on one's digestive system.

Also, one can easily preserve the above snack by wrapping it in



A Rattanakiri shopping place.

banana-leaves and carrying it along during one's jungle treks. It does not lose its flavour or its fresh taste even after one day. It is an ideal companion, especially during the long treks through uninhabited forests.

The journey to Chaong waterfall crisscrosses several Khmer villages and passes settlements of the indigenous tribes. Most of the indigenous people live near waterfalls, or volcanic caves or thick forests or similar, high-energy places.

The earth here has a reddish hue, not unlike the soil in Palakkad in Kerala and looks extremely productive and fertile. Rice is the staple diet

of the locals as it is cultivated throughout the Mekong Delta.

Chaong falls are located 6 kilometres from Rattanakiri town, and, for most of the distance, the mud-road is wet and slushy. The final 500 metres have to be trekked on foot. It is advisable to be extra cautious here, as the jungle-path is extremely slippery and a single misstep can result in a fall. The trek through the jungle leads us to a mini-waterfall, with a shallow pool and one can easily swim here.

However, this tiny waterfall is only a preview of the larger one, which is located a few metres downstream. The gurgling sound of the

water reverberates in the air. The most nail-biting part of one's trek is the descent to view the main fall. As one goes down the slope, with only the tree-trunks for support and to get a firm footing, one can see the gorge below. Certainly, this trek is not for the faint-hearted.

As you carefully lower yourself to the giant rock that obscures the view of the falls, more of the white water starts coming into view. But this view is like a bride who has only partially lifted her veil! So one starts to descend faster. With every step you take, a more beautiful sight unfolds.

It is a perfectly parallel, almost vertical waterfall. The water hits the pool in a gentle hum. The fall is steep and the pool can barely be seen from the top. However, due to the dense overgrowth and giant boulders and rocks, it is not possible to descend the bottom of the falls and one has to be satisfied with a mid-way view. Also, these falls can only be seen from an angle and one is only able to glimpse a side view of the fall.

The waters reflect the light of the sun in the late afternoon. Watching the white water disappear into the hollow of the pool in a never-ending cascade, makes one focus intensely on the present, forgetting all worries of the past and all anxieties about the future. One begins to live in the moment, appreciating the gifts that nature has bestowed upon us, to admire and appreciate. The serene surroundings of this lake, which time seems to have forgotten, help you to realise that the infinite power to relax is within yourself.

Cambodian visas

A 30-day Cambodian tourist visa is available on arrival for Indian passport-holders. However, your passport needs to have a six-month validity while entering Cambodia. One passport-size photograph is needed and two blank pages on the passport for the visa entry/exit stamps. Unlike Thailand, Cambodian



Rattanakiri restaurant: Serving indigenous and exotic dishes to meet all tastes.

immigration offers visas on arrival for Indian passport-holders at all border crossings across Cambodia. A tourist visa costs US \$ 20 for a period of 30 days, which can be renewed for another 30 days only. Business visas cost US \$ 25 for 30 days and can be renewed indefinitely.

How to get to Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh is connected by direct flights from Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Singapore and Hanoi. The easiest way for Indian tourists to get to Phnom Penh is to fly to Bangkok and take the Air Asia flight from Bangkok to Phnom Penh. This flight ticket by a budget airline should cost no more than 5,000 Baht (Rs 10,000) for the return ticket, if booked 15 days in advance on the Internet.

It is advisable to stay overnight at Phnom Penh before making the long bus journey to Kratie. From Kratie, one has to travel 15 km to Kampi, to watch dolphins. This journey can be made by a motor-bike taxi for US \$ 3 (includes pick-up from one's hotel to drop back and includes waiting charges). The entrance fee to the Dolphin Conservation Area is US \$ 7, which includes a three-hour char-



tered boat-cruise, along with a boatman, who doubles as a guide.

How to get to Rattanakiri

Buses leave for Rattanakiri from Phnom Penh at 6.00 am and take about 10 hours to reach Rattanakiri. Only day-buses run to Rattanakiri as the road from Kratie to Rattanakiri is for the most part a jungle-track or mud-road.

It is advisable to break the journey at Kratie and stay overnight with an early-morning cruise to spot the dolphins before continuing one's journey to Rattanakiri by shared taxis, which cost US \$ 10 per person. ■

Fact file

Where to stay

At Phnom Penh Cambodiana Hotel, located on the banks of the Tonle Sap River, is the most convenient location to stay. All tourist attractions, including Grand Palace, Museum and Silver Pagoda, are easy to reach from there.

Where to stay

At Kratie there are a few hotels offering air-conditioned rooms with hot showers. At Rattanakiri the Tribal Hotel offers basic fan-rooms at US \$ 5 per night. Hot-water showers are provided. It is ideal for a long stay. There are no luxury hotels at Rattanakiri and only those tourists who can be comfortable with basic hotels, can enjoy the natural delights offered by this tiny village with indigenous tribes.

Where to eat

At Phnom Penh many small restaurants, serving Khmer, Thai and Indian cuisine are found near Sisaworth Quay in Phnom Penh.

Fresh tropical fruits, including papayas, pineapples and watermelons, are available at the local market.

At Kratie?

Many street-vendors, selling everything from sliced fruits to fruit juices to stir-fried rice-noodles, are found by the riverside promenade. Vegans can get a delicious mixture of grated coconut, baked with rice and sprinkled with baked beans and packed in environment-friendly, bamboo containers.

Tender coconuts are available at street-corners. A bigger version of litchi, called rambutan, is juicy and filling and a smaller version of litchi is delicious and one can eat lots of it to replenish fluids during the long bus-journey.



Rattanakiri people are engaged in localised economic activities to earn their livelihood.