


FOOTLOOSE murli menon

in nature's lap

Nestled between majestic mountains and azure waters is the Sam Roi Yod National Park in Thailand, a site of outstanding natural beauty as well as great ecological significance



As I write this from my sea-facing room at a resort that lies on the periphery of a national park in Thailand, I realise how lucky I am to be in a place that is nestled between majestic mountains and stunning emerald waters. As the winds waft towards me, I feel that I can almost touch the tranquility pervading this bird sanctuary that lies within the confines of Thailand's most picturesque national park, Sam Roi Yod National Park, that means 'three hundred mountain peaks' in English. The limestone mountains here make it a site of outstanding natural beauty, but it is the freshwater marsh and coastal habitats, that give the park its ecological significance.

The 10km drive into the headquarters of the national park is over a dusty road along the banks of lagoons and mangrove swamps. All along the way, you can spot several migratory herons, cranes and storks which begin to arrive here by the end of December. Several large waterbirds including herons, egrets, robins and magpies can be seen nestling on the branches of the mangroves.

After you enter the park, an innovative foot-board over the waters takes you to the interiors of the forests over numerous small bridges. On some islands, it is possible to walk across to the other side before continuing further on the wooden pathway. At several junctures where the water levels are uneven and deep, wooden planks have been strategically placed such that you can tiptoe over them with minimum noise so as not to disturb the extremely sound-sensitive waterbirds.

After a 30-minute trek over the wooden boards, you come across a forest road which winds its way through the mangroves. A leisurely walk through this path, flanked on one side by the giant hills of rock and granite, and by shallow mangroves on the other, is all that is needed for close encounters with several species of the feathered kind. The bird species that can be found inside the national park include the Bronze Winged Jacana, Purple Heron, Brahminy Kite, Grand Coucal, Green Billed Malpuha, Great Egret, Oriental Magpie-Robin, Purple Heron, Chinese Pond Heron, Rufous Woodpecker, Blue Billed Bee-Eater and Stork Billed Kingfisher, among hundreds of other migratory birds. Carry along a book to quickly identify the birds, and know more about their dwelling and behaviour. Arm yourself with

a camera with a great lens if you wish to capture the avian species in pictures.

As mangrove swamps are a natural habitat for macaques, one can sight several species of macaques including the lion-tailed macaque, stump-tailed macaque and the pig-tailed macaque inside the mangrove swamps that dot Sam Roi Yod National Park. The unique feature about this national park is that the hills surround this park in a way that they form an inland sea. The sea runs parallel to the road for at least six kilometers, and walking alongside the sea is a tryst with nature which is bound to be memorable. Because this park is hemmed between the sea and the hills on either side, it has a picture postcard look that will be etched in your memory for long.

Do take time out to see the migratory birds from northern China, who fly down every winter to nestle among the hundreds of miles of mangroves around the park. The moderate climate, thick mangrove cover and numerous lakes and lagoons make it an ideal sanctuary for large waterbirds to make their nests and provide a secure environment for laying and hatching of eggs. It also provides amateur birdwatchers and tourists alike, an opportunity to observe the beauty of these winged crooners at close quarters.

The bounties of nature including clear skies, a cool sea breeze and lush greenery on all sides can also be enjoyed if you choose to trek alongside the mangroves. You can also venture deeper into the mangroves on small boats to spot macaques. However, they scatter away at the first sounds of approaching humans. A more relaxed technique to spot these gentle creatures is to wait patiently alongside the reedy plants. As we learnt from experience, feeding wild monkeys is neither advisable nor expected. Suddenly, one of the more adventurous ones landed on the branches nearby. After keenly observing the scene, it squeaked and signaled to his mate. Soon, out of nowhere, seven to eight long tailed macaques landed alongside us and swung wildly from one branch to the other.

If you are feeling adventurous, we suggest you pitch a tent on the Sam Phraya Beach to get away from the crowds. As you stumble upon natural wonders in this gorgeous park, you will realise how some things are meant to stay in the deepest recesses of your mind, ensconced in your memories forever. ◀

Feeling thirsty? Here, take a sip. This water bottle, by the way, is made of the finest crystal glass, decorated with pure gold and studded with 113 diamonds. The water that you just wiped off your chin is the purest spring water from the artesian source in St Leonhard, Germany, and has been refined with 24ct edible gold flakes. After sipping from the world's costliest bottle of water, you must be hopefully feeling hydrated and high, we hope.

Aurum 79, a water bottle worth nearly ₹5 crore, was one of the exhibits at the recent Big Boys Toys expo in Dubai. Aristippus of Cyrene, the ancient student of Socrates, would have loved to be in Dubai for this event. After all, he did preach that the goal of life was to seek external pleasure.

One question that has been haunting minds ranging from the profound Greek to the Internet-jaded modern is, "What makes people happy?" The answer depends on who is asking whom, and is more likely to confuse than thrill.

Abraham Lincoln probably got it right when he said, "People are as happy as they decide to be." Studies of twins have revealed that half of our 'happiness traits' are genetic. That means, it is up to us to control the remaining half. We may not be able to control all events that affect our life, but we can certainly decide how we react to those events.

How we perceive bad situations regulates the presence of hormones in our body. Think 'this too shall pass' and you are likely to be full of feel-good

endorphins than bad cortisol. Mizuta Mashide, the 17th century Japanese poet and samurai, must have been feeling very good when he wrote this haiku: *Since my house burned down/I now own a better view/of the rising moon.*

Scientists say one effective way to train ourselves to tone down our reactions and be happy is to practice meditation. Experiences are likely to give more lasting happiness than acquisitions, though the Dubai expo brochure is not likely to mention this.

Moving up from individuals, can we measure a nation by how happy its people are? According to the World Happiness Report, commissioned for the United Nations Conference on Happiness held last year, "Happiness seems far too subjective, too vague, to serve as a touchstone for a nation's goals, much less its policy content. That indeed has been the traditional view. Yet, the evidence is changing this view rapidly."

The report argues, "Happiness can be objectively measured, assessed, correlated with observable brain functions, and related to the characteristics of an individual and the society."

Experts divide the measurements of happiness into two broad categories—*affective* and *evaluative*.

Affective happiness captures the day-to-day joys of friendship, time with family, and sex, or the downsides of long work commutes and sessions with one's boss, the report notes. On the other hand, *evaluative* happiness measures very different dimensions of life, those that lead to overall satisfaction or

frustration with one's place in society.

The authors of World Happiness Report, those in academic pursuit of happiness, have been very happy with Bhutan, the country that gave the world a new indicator of growth.

In 1972, Bhutan's king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, gave the world, brought up on the popular gross domestic product (GDP), a new yardstick—*gross national happiness (GNH)*. Though it is based on Buddhist spiritual values, cynics do not dare to dismiss it as mumbo jumbo.

Today, it is this vision that drives Bhutan's planning process. Every proposed policy must pass the GNH test. The world is scrambling up the Himalayas and taking notice.

GNH is based on four principles—*promotion of sustainable development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment and the establishment of good governance*. Working with an international group of scholars and researchers, the Centre for Bhutan Studies refined these into eight factors—*physical, mental and spiritual health; time-balance; social and community vitality; cultural vitality; education; living standards; good governance; and ecological vitality*. That should hold good not just for a nation, but also for every individual.

If the idea of GNH sounds like some utopian nonsense, Adam Kramer, a psychologist from the University of Oregon, has developed a GNH model based on the use of positive and negative words in social network