



The Lost Temple of Doi Tung

Description



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I didn't notice the creeping fog until it had just about swallowed us up in late afternoon. We were high in the rugged Northern mountains that create the Thai border with Myanmar. I've often seen those fingers of creeping mountain fog from a distance, but this was the first time I found myself in their dense grasp.

We had set out from Chiang Dao in mid-morning with the plan of first visiting the ancient temple and twin stupas called Doi Tung. Doi Tung means roughly "Flag Top" mountain. The stupas dated back almost a thousand years. From there, we'd head on to Mae Sai, the Thai border town with Myanmar.

My wife and I were staying a few days with her brother Benjobe who worked his small orchard in the Chiang Dao district. Benjobe grew citrus and planted teak trees. He also had built his farm house and all the out-buildings. More impressive was the fact that he had built a pretty decent road of about a 1/2 mile to his house from the main road. He liked to boast that in 20 years his teak trees would be worth enough to retire on. Sure enough, 20 years later, he sold the farm, mature teak trees and all for a tidy sum.

During dinner the evening before, I had told Benjobe that I had seen a map of the area with a "historical site" marker on it called Doi Tung, that was located high in the border mountains. He knew all about the place and had been there years ago. Over a dinner of river fish with spicy mango sauce, northern Thai sausage, and somtom, we plotted our trip for the next day to Doi Tung.

Benjobe told us that along with the twin stupas, there was also a Wat or temple. The Wat wasn't as old as the stupas, but was old enough so that no one really knew any longer just when it had been built. My wife had heard of the temple since she was a child but knew nothing else.

As we drove closer to the Myanmar border, the mountains seemed more impenetrable. Traffic had been light all morning. We passed a village at the foot of the mountain and as we started to climb upward, the cars disappeared altogether. We were approaching Doi Tung from the south which is a seldom taken route.

A well maintained, two-laned road gently curved upward. As our elevation increased so did the trees and bamboo until the mountain slopes became forested.

We came to a t-intersection in a saddle of the mountains. To the right led to the Queen Mother's estate and communal farm which she had built in the 1960s to ween the local Hilltribes away from opium cultivation to more "respected" crops. To the left led to Doi Tung and its ancient chedis. From this saddle I could see west into the forgotten country of Myanmar. The terrain was ripped with ridges and mountains as far as the eye could see.

This area of the Thai/Myanmar border at the time was suffering from significant political strife. The Shan are the dominant culture in this area and they were fighting for independence from the central Burmese government. Shan guerillas and government soldiers were frequently getting into fire fights no more than a mile or two from the road we were traveling on. The Burmese government was also heavily involved in heroin and amphetamine smuggling into Thailand and had many hidden routes through the area. This of course resulted in Thai army rangers constantly patrolling the area. At times all three groups would take pot shots at each other.

We turned left toward Doi Tung and the road quickly narrowed to one lane. The curves were no longer

gentle, but we're now switchbacks up the mountain side. We gained a ridge line and the road flatten out. The jungle-mountain forest was as dense as anything I'd ever seen. Huge clumps of bamboo, a foot thick at the trunk, shot up at least 75 feet and much of the forest floor was covered with giant ferns. Small patches of sunlight pierced the jungle canopy here and there.

The road meandered up and down, twisting and turning for another 5 miles. It was slow going with potholes and partial wash outs from past torrential rains. From the t-intersection far below, we hadn't seen another car and I didn't expect we would as the road showed little signs of use. Benjobe stopped the car so I could closely inspect a clump of giant bamboo. Absolute silence. We climbed back into the car and continued on.

The road dipped downward slightly into a dell and I saw a temple for the first time. There were also two old stupas easily seen from the road about 35 feet tall covered in faded gold paint. Where the paint had worn away you could see the blocks of laterite that the stupas were made from. Laterite was the building blocks the ancient Khmer used to build Angor Wat.

We had finally arrived at Doi Tung.

These twin stupas had been rebuilt around the early 1960s or 50s and were at the original site of the twin stupas first built about a 1000 years ago. I wondered whether the laterite blocks were the actual blocks used to build the original stupas. As legend goes, these stupas housed the bone relics of Lord Buddha. We parked the car and approached.

As we walked toward the stupas, I saw a small, open air temple to the right. The Wat had a steeply tiled roof and three of the walls only came to waist high. A large Burmese Buddha with it's sad almond eyes dominated the alter with numerous teak elephant carvings at the base.

I was surprised to smell burning incense and even more surprised when I noticed an old woman praying at the alter. I had thought we were alone. The last car we passed along the road was a couple hours ago and there were no other cars parked nearby other than ours. I had no idea how this woman had gotten there.

The three of us huddled close together and watched this woman for a moment. I shrugged my shoulders and told my wife and Benjobe that I wanted to see the stupas first. My wife said she would go over to the Wat first and pray. Benjobe followed her.

Yes, the laterite blocks were the originals. I could tell because they were rough hewn and not symmetrical. Modern laterite blocks, that is blocks cut from laterite for the last 100 years or so, are the same shape and size with almost perfect right-angles. The ancient blocks are each slightly unique to the careful eye in both size and shape.

I backed away from the stupas for a better view. I now understood that the "rebuilding" of the stupas 60-70 years ago was really just a cosmetic renovation. Any loose laterite was cemented back in place; jungle undergrowth was cleared away; and a new coat of stucco and paint was slapped on. But the stupas themselves that I was looking at were almost 1000 years old.

I looked over to the open-air Wat and saw my wife and Benjobe talking to the old woman. Not surprising as my wife will start up a conversation with anyone, especially in a setting like this. I walked

over to see what was up.

My wife introduced me to the old woman whose name, or more accurately, nickname was “Thomm”. (In Thai the word “thomm” means the sound a drop of water makes in a deep pool. It’s a seldom used nickname.) Surprisingly, she spoke my wife’s northern dialect which meant she was from the Chiang Mai/Lamphun area.

When I joined the group, they stopped speaking dialect and switched to Thai so I could understand. I know a few words of the Northern Dialect and I know it when I hear it, but you’ll lose me fast in conversation.

Thomm had been coming to Doi Tung since she was a little girl. I was hesitant to ask her age even though in Siamese culture such a question isn’t taken in offense. But still I kept to my white upbringing and didn’t ask that obvious question.

She was very old to be sure. Easily 85 if not over 90. Thomm was a tiny woman, 100 lbs at most and maybe 5 feet tall. Her dark brown face was covered in deep wrinkles and she was missing a few teeth. Although she used a wooden walking stick to help with balance, her gait was still strong and sure.

I did ask her how in the hell did she get up here? I expected her to say that a family member had dropped her off and would soon return to pick her up. I was surprised when she said she walked up here from the village at the base of mountain. I only half believed her as that’s about a 2000 foot elevation gain and almost 10 miles...but then again we hadn’t spotted any traffic on the only road up here all day. “By the roadway?” I asked. She laughed at my accent and told me that there’s a pathway from the end of the village to Doi Tung and that she knew it well.

Thomm related to us that she’d been coming to Doi Tung with her family since she was a little girl. Her grandfather had insisted that they always walk up from the village below as part of a family pilgrimage. Her grandfather had told the family that his grandfather adhered to the same tradition generations ago.

I asked her about the stupas and what she knew about their renovation. Yes, she remembered a team of monks that were here during one of her family pilgrimages and repaired them when she was a young woman in her 30s. She said this with a wide grin and it was confirmation that she was indeed in her 90s. The monks pretty much left the stupas where they had always stood and just “fixed them up a little bit with some fresh paint.”

This was first-hand confirmation that the stupas we were looking at were the originals and had only undergone minor repair work years before.

My wife asked Thomm about her family and the two of them fell back into Northern dialect. I guess the question struck Thomm as personal and she felt more comfortable continuing the conversation with my wife. I excused myself and wandered off to explore more of Doi Tung.

I walked past the Wat and the stupas toward the outcropping that was the actual rocky point of Doi Tung. The fog now was really rolling in and casting an ever increasing shroud about us. My wife and Thomm were only 35 yards away, but I could barely make them out. Benjobe was praying at the Wat.

To my delight, I came across a line of nine stone Buddhas semi-hidden in a small dell where the fog

gathered thickest. They stood at least 10 feet tall and were badly worn. The Buddhas were all in the lotus position and fierce Nagas, the mythological, multi-headed serpent, rose above each of their heads.

I closely inspected these Buddhas. They were made of a crude, poured concrete that over the years had turned a mottled black. About half of each Buddha was covered in moss. The detail of the faces of both the Buddhas and the Nagas had been substantially eroded over time. In fact a few of the slender Naga heads had broken off and lay at the foot of their Buddha. Whether it was decades or centuries, these Buddhas were old.

I climbed out of the dell and saw Thomm walking alone away from the Wat. With her hiking stick in hand, she walked with the determination of a person who knows where they're going. She quietly faded away into the fog. I walked back to the Wat and found my wife praying along with her brother. I waited just outside until they were finished.

"So, what did the old woman have to say about her family?" I asked my wife. "It was very sad", my wife related. Thomm had outlived her husband, sisters, brothers and cousins. She had no children. Her nieces and nephews and their children had long ago moved away to Bangkok and she lived alone. As far as Thomm was concerned, she was the last of her family. She still made the traditional family pilgrimage to Doi Tung, following the same trail her grandfather had shown her, but because of her age, this was probably the last time she would come.

"Where did she go?" My wife asked. I pointed off to where I last saw her about 10 minutes ago.

"She was walking somewhere over there," I responded.

"We'll go find her and see if she wants a ride back down to the village", my wife ordered.

I walked over to where I guessed I had seen her last. No one. I looked back toward my wife and could barely make her out through the fog. A fresh breeze had now picked up and ushered in an even denser, moist fog. Bamboo loves this kind of weather. Now I knew why the surrounding bamboo forest was the biggest I had ever seen.

I continued heading in the direction I last saw the old woman walking. I continued walking for a few minutes until the mountain side dropped off rather steeply. Still no one. I looked carefully around and to my surprise spotted what looked like a path about 15 yards away.

I quickly approached and sure enough it was a pathway, not wide, but well worn. It led down the mountain side picking it's way carefully through the clumps of giant bamboo. I quickly walked about 100 yards down the trail faster than an old woman could possibly walk, until it came to a rocky outcropping. The forest path stopped, but a stairway had been hewn into the granite outcropping leading very steeply downward. Still no sign of Thomm.

I look carefully at the hewn stone steps and saw through the fog that someone had built a handrail on the most precipitous parts. Thomm was right...there was a trail that let up to Doi Tung. I walked down a dozen or so steps. No one. The going was slow at best and an old woman with a walking stick certainly couldn't navigate these steps very fast.

I was delighted to see dozens of bells of different sizes, tied with leather thongs to the handrails, swaying in the breeze and softly tinkling. A close-up look at the bells revealed that they were Buddhist

temple bells. These bronze bells, imprinted with an image the Buddha, were badly tarnished and rusted. Just like the row of nine Buddhas I had come across in the dell above, these temple bells had been here a long time. And there were dozens and dozens of them, gently warning anyone nearby of the precipice just on the other side of the handrail.

I carefully walked down a series of steps to a small landing. No one. The steps continued downward and quickly disappeared into the thickening fog. I yelled out "Thomm! Anybody here!" Silence. From up above, I heard the muffled voice of my wife calling me. I strained my eyes down the stairs before I turned and carefully climbed back up the stairs.

My wife had followed my direction and found the same path as I did, but stopped where the stone steps began their steep descent.

"I couldn't find her," I told my wife.

"Let's get back to the car. I'm cold and the fog is starting to scare me," my wife said. "Maybe we'll see her along the road on the way back."

We quickly retraced our route back to the car where Benjobe was waiting for us. I took one last look around, marveling at the 1000 year old stupas, now sure that I was looking at the originals. But there was something that disturbed me about the Temple of Doi Tung and the twin stupas, although I couldn't quite put my finger on what. I mentioned it to my wife who chalked it up to a loose collection of spirits she believed were still rattling around the ancient temple complex, trying to find their way home.

As we drove away, we were lucky there was no traffic as we could barely see ten feet in front of us. But the lower we drove, the more the fog dissipated until we finally broke out into a clear sky near the saddle where the main road had forked to Doi Tung. Unsurprisingly, we didn't see the old woman.

We made it back to the village at the foot of the mountain in time for dinner. This was the village where Thomm had said she set out from on her pilgrimage up to Doi Tung. All of us were starving and ate at the only restaurant in the village. It didn't matter that this was our only choice as we found the food excellent.

Again, my wife struck up a conversation with the owner of the small restaurant. She told him all about what we had seen at Doi Tung. I asked him if it were true that there were trails that led from the village all the way up the mountain. "Yes indeed", he replied and proudly told us as a young man he had hiked all the way up the mountain.

My wife then told the restaurant owner about the old woman Thomm. He frowned as she related to him that we had met and talked to her at Doi Tung.

"No one fitting that description came to the village today," he insisted. "I've been here all day and the only bus today came a couple hours ago and two of my cousins got off. I remember your car passing by about noontime. This is the only road through the village."

"Maybe the old woman got on the trail before entering the village," I thought out loud.

"Not possible," snorted the owner, not at all liking my implied challenge that he may not know everything that passes in his town. "The pathway starts at the far end of the village by that outcropping

of rocks over there,” he pointed.

No more than a couple hundred yards away was a unique outcropping of rocks and if you looked closely you could see a path beginning to wind its way into the mountains. “You can’t get to the pathway without me seeing. And if I didn’t see her, there’s village folk who would have and I certainly would have heard by now about such a strange event. An old woman walking up the mountain all by herself”, he scoffed.

The conversation was over as far as he was concerned. He abruptly walked away.

On the drive to Mae Sai none of us spoke much. I was happy to reach our accommodations before nightfall. In fact, since that day, my wife and I have never spoken about our trip to Doi Tung.

Epilogue

Twenty-five years later, my wife and I found ourselves again traveling to Doi Tung. Age had only brought us closer together and more dependent on one another. We were staying with my wife’s great niece and her husband in Chiang Rai and had an open day. I told them about visiting Doi Tung many years ago and they readily offered to drive us up there.

As we drove through the village at the base of the mountain, I thought back on the restaurant where we had dinner and its owner. I’d be surprised if were still alive. My brother-in-law, Benjobe, had died years ago.

The road from the village up the mountain was now busy with traffic. The old one-lane road from the mountain saddle to Doi Tung was now a modern two-laned roadway with a broad shoulder. The steep grade and hairpin switchbacks had all been engineered away into gentle turns. In fact, we passed several large tour buses headed back down the mountain.

The parking area for the temple complex was now large and paved. We had difficulty finding a place to park. The day was warm and sunny. There were families, kids and tourists everywhere, laughing and having a fun day in the mountains.

The old open-air Wat was gone and had been replaced with a new temple. My wife went inside to pray and I waited for her outside. Some things don’t change.

There were still twin stupas, but they had been moved about 100 yards from where I remembered them. They were covered in a flawless gold paint that was so bright in the afternoon sun that you needed sunglasses to even look at them. There was a railing around the stupas with signs that warned people not to walk any closer.

I found the dell where the nine Buddhas quietly sat in the dense fog, but they were gone. No trace of them at all.

When my wife came out of the Wat, we strolled over to where I had found the well worn path leading to the precipitous stone stairway. It was now a paved asphalt path that was better constructed than the old one lane roadway we took to get here decades ago.

The paved path veered away from the precipice. Although older, my sense of adventure was still that of a young man. I convinced my wife to leave the paved pathway and try to find the old hewn stone

stairway.

At first my wife and I couldn't orient ourselves to exactly where we were 25 years ago. But we stumbled upon that same well worn trail that we had last seen Thomm walking on. The trail was now mostly overgrown. If I hadn't been on it before and searching for it, I never would have found it.

"The old woman, Thomm." I said to my wife, "This is where I last saw her".
"I remember she just vanished into the fog that day," my wife responded.

We followed the old path a short distance to the precipice. The noise and commotion of the new Doi Tung faded away to almost nothing. Someone had piled up boulders and logs to block the path just before the precipice. I climbed over and stared downward. Sure enough, after straining my old eyes for sometime, I could see the stone stairway. But the handrail and bells were gone.

"There's the old stairway!" I shouted to my wife. She seemed unimpressed.
"Come on back. I've seen enough," my wife said.

We returned to the paved pathway and I heard the sound of bells clanging. I told my wife to wait here for me. I quickly walked about a quarter mile down the pavement where I saw young children striking large bells with sticks that had been arranged along the paved pathway. The children were laughing and screaming with their parents running after them. Tourist were taking photos of themselves with the bells. The bells were shiny and new.

We found our niece and her husband near the twin stupas. They were surprised when we told them we were ready to leave.

"Something wrong?" my niece asked my wife.
"We've seen it all before", she replied unconvincingly. I nodded my head in agreement.

I strained my eyes into the bustle of tourists going here and there. I sadly realized that my wife and I were the oldest people here. I scanned the scene even more intently, not sure what I was looking for.

"She's not here", my wife said softly. "I've been looking for her the moment we arrived."

Category

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