

The Visa Run *Fun* Can Be *Fun*

Taking the monthly run to Ranong to have your 30-day visa renewed is potentially one of the most onerous and boring hurdles to staying longer term in the Andaman. However, with a little creativity and initiative it can become an exciting adventure. Russell Sandford tells us how.

*F*un and “visa run” are words that are hardly ever found inhabiting the same sentence. But the dreaded visa run is a phenomenon that thousands of Andaman-based foreigners have to endure at regular intervals if they want to comply with the ever-changing rules and regulations set by the jolly jesters in Thailand’s Immigration Department.

For most, the run comprises a nightmare day trip in a cramped mini-van featuring terrifying near misses with on-coming trucks, vomiting shaven-headed football hooligan companions and inedible food wolfed down at indigestion-inducing pace in some horrible fly-blown rest stop.

Yet thousands of longer-stay Westerners endure this tortures for the pleasure of cooling their loins in the Andaman region for extended periods of teaching English, leading scuba groups into shark-infested caves, or merely attempting to break the world binge-drinking record in Patong.

But it doesn’t have to be this way.

You can transform the dreaded visa run into a fun-filled adventure with two simple ingredients—a little planning and a little time. Admittedly, it also helps if you can arrange your own set of wheels in order to explore some of

the possibilities suggested in this article, although you can follow the adventure path using available public transportation as well.

Now, let’s say that instead of the mad screaming one-day nightmare up to Ranong and back, you allow yourself a few days and nights away for a more extended trip. Here’s a guide to some of the wonderful adventures in which you might involve yourself travelling along the coastal corridor running north of Phuket up to Ranong on the Burmese border.

Sawasdee Lagoon Lake near Taimuang Township

This is a real treasure and it’s only about an hour from your favourite Phuket barstool.

Just head off the island on the usual A2 road towards Ranong and about 40 minutes after crossing the Sarasin Bridge, which joins the island to the mainland, you will enter the southern fringe of the dusty country town of Taimuang. Don’t blink, or you’ll miss it. The little road to the right for Sawasdee Lagoon is well sign posted a kilometre before the turn-off, and then it is about 500 metres after the village school on your right.

After the turning you immediately plunge into a much sleepier, laid-back world of spindly rubber trees, dogs sleeping in the middle of



the road, sheets of milky white latex flapping in the afternoon breeze and venerable village matriarchs taking their lazy evening stroll. Three kilometres down this little road you'll see a sign and the turn for the Lagoon campground and lake on your right.

Six hundred baht will get you a tent for the night, right on the lakeside, with towels and bedding. There's a small blockhouse shower and toilet facility and a terrific little country kitchen where the cook produces local specialities, which they will serve to you right outside your tent under the stars. Electricity is available in your tent 24 hours a day, so you can read yourself to sleep.

I often eat sitting outside the cottage where I live on Rawai Beach on Phuket but I can still hear the aircraft in the night sky. At Sawasdee Lagoon, however, I sat for over three hours that night and heard nothing other than the rustle of the palm fronds and the occasional cry of waterfowl.

After a blissful eight-hour sleep under canvas, I had breakfast and then went for a swim and a canoe trip around the lake followed by an extended mountain bike trip through the rubber plantations, taking in the local Buddhist temple, Wat Lumpini.

Sawasdee Lagoon, Tambon Natoey, Amphur Taimuang, Phang Nga Province. Call +66 (0) 5784 0217 for reservations and to place your order for dinner

The Arts Riverside Lodge and trekking in Khao Sok National Park

Another gem this, but requiring a bit of a detour off the A2 coastal road to Ranong. Ten kilometres after leaving Takuapa, highway 401 branches off east running across the Isthmus of Kra all the way to Suratthani on the east coast of the Thai peninsula. Take this road rather than the road to Ranong and after about 40 kilometres you will come to the entrance of one of the world's oldest and most pristine natural rainforest sanctuaries, Khao Sok National Park.

This park represents what renowned environmentalist Thom Henley calls "the geography of hope for the human spirit". You would ideally need maybe a week to do justice to this simply spectacular park, but here are a number of possibilities.

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Khao Sok
National Park is
a treasure trove
of incredible
natural
wonders.



The Arts Riverside Lodge (086 282 2677, www.artsriversidelodge.com) sits along the bank of a tributary of the Sok River where huge limestone cliffs, known as karsts, tower over the outdoor terrace restaurant and a monkey swimming pool. After you've settled into your 800 baht a night riverside cottage, you can cross the river by a little wooden footprint-wide bridge, then walk about a kilometre to the local Buddhist temple, Wat Tam Pantoorat. Here tribes of wild monkeys play tag across the cliff face and up in the trees above your head. There are rickety latticed climbing ladders up the face of the cliff, which, if you have ahead for heights, will take you to a monks' mediation cave about 65 metres above the ground. Be careful of the monkeys though, the males can be quite aggressive and were certainly most displeased that I had my little dog "Pip" with me when I attempted the climb.

There's a great single-day, out and back, 8-kilometre walk along the Ban Laen River, starting behind the national park headquarters and heading to the romantically named *Nam Tok Sip-et-Chan* (literally, the 11-level waterfall). It will take you about four hours there and back and the delightful falls have a cool, clear pool at their base for a refreshing dip prior to lunch and the trek back home. Be careful as there were a few leeches around when I walked it with Pip, but that's a very small price to pay for such a day of peace, tranquillity and verdant forest beauty. Tiger, leopard, gibbons, barking deer, Malay sun bears and scaly anteaters have all been seen along this trail at various times.

(The national park entrance charge is 200 baht a day for Westerners).

Alternatively contact my friend Khun Kraisak at the Khao Sok Green Valley Resort (66 077 395 145 or www.khaosokgreenvalley.com) on the village main road just after the Sok River bridge to take a tour to the massive Cheow Lan Lake, which was formed by EGAT's Rachabraphah Dam in 1982. Here, the biggest of the park's limestone karsts vault to an incredible height of 960 metres, over three times as high as the karsts in Phang Nga Bay. They rise out of inky black depths of the lake and are laced with a riot of colonizing vegetation, which seems to claw a living from the cliff face by some magical process. Gibbons, lizards and hornbills abound amid the grottos of limestone stalactites and stalagmites.

You can experience a subterranean walk through one of the three large cave systems and stop for swimming, kayaking and a relaxing lunch at one the floating cabins and restaurants dotted around this massive expanse of water. The total cost inclusive of an excellent lunch featuring fresh fish from the lake is 1,500 baht, excluding your entrance ticket to the national park costing an additional 200 baht.

Andaman Discoveries at Kuraburi Township

Another 90 minutes along the main A2 road to Ranong you'll come to Kuraburi where the NGO Andaman Discoveries has its HQ based at the lovely Cucina Andaburi restaurant. The food and service are a delight, so make sure you arrive with a healthy appetite and ask Khun Ta about her specials that day.

Visionaries Bodhi Garret and Kelly May

set up Andaman Discoveries to help poor villagers whose livelihoods were shattered by the 2004 tsunami.

They arrange home-stays both in Kuraburi itself and in the predominantly Muslim villages along the coast to the north, as well as volunteer tourism where visitors can help with such activities as rubber tapping, soap making, cooking and farming. There are also eco-friendly mountain hikes with local guides or boat visits to the Surin Island group, where you can snorkel in pristine waters.

Andaman Discoveries 292/1, Moo 1, Kuraburi, Phang Nga.
www.andamandiscoveries.com tel: +66(0) 81 243 3848

Ranong Town

At last you've made it, but take time in Thailand's most productive fishing port and savour the hot springs at Wat Tapo Tharam about four kilometres out of town near the Rakasawarin nature reserve. Here the Rim Nam guesthouse sits right on the river at the hot springs: it will make you more than welcome and serves excellent local food as well. Take an herbal sauna and have a massage at the hot springs temple dedicated to the spirits of the springs, while watching old ladies gossip the day away while resting their arthritic limbs in steamy sulphurous pools.

The harbour itself is a fascinating and chaotic bustle, worth a couple of hours observation while sitting at one of the excellent seafood eateries sipping cold beer. Once across the Chan River you're into the equally chaotic Bumese town of Kawthaung, or Victoria Point, as the British colonialists dubbed it.

You can engage the services of one of the boys who meet your longtail for a tour of the area. These are street kids, living rough, often sleeping in the prow of the longtail boats by night. They will give you a half- or full-day tour of the town and surrounding area and are fascinating and informative company. Every baht you give them is of great help to their well being and survival, so please be generous.

There's no doubt that visa running can become a fun and enjoyable activity with a little planning and the area north from Phuket to Ranong is a fascinating area to explore. So next time your 30-day visa is up, don't just rush through on dreaded minibus nightmare, take a little time and enjoy the visa-run flowers along the way!



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