

Living within the concrete confines of Bangkok, it is easy to forget just how close we are to some truly fabulous countryside. The usual traffic-congested weekend escape routes from the city all too often lead to Pattaya. But head northeast instead of south and bright lights and bars are replaced by a different kind of wildlife. A two-wheeled excursion into Khao Yai with Spice Roads provides a unique experience of quiet back roads and dirt trails, abundant bird-life and a taste of the increasingly popular local wines.

Less than two hours after leaving central Bangkok our minibus, complete with cycle mechanic, half a dozen bikes strapped to the roof and enough spare parts, fresh fruit and drinks to support a major sporting event, pulled up at the edge of Khao Yai National Park. The area has long been regarded as Thailand's finest national park and is known for its outstanding natural beauty. The cooler Khao Yai climate, fertile soil and proximity to Bangkok mean that the area is also considered one of the best locations in Thailand for growing grapes. On the gently rolling hills and in the valleys that skirt the park, bamboo, bananas and fruit trees are steadily being replaced by acres of grapevines.

Kitted out with top quality TREK mountain bikes and cycle helmets we planned to visit two of the biggest and best vineyards in the area, PB Valley and the Granmonte Estate. As the first gentle hill approached it soon became clear that we were all going to have to earn our taste of wine. Having done little cycling since my teens and now encumbered by a less than appealing middle-age spread it seemed good to have a goal to aim for. Spurred on by the promise of drink or not, there is no doubt that cycling in Thailand is the best way to get up close and personal with this beautiful country. The two day Khao Yai Wine Trails cycle tour is meticulously planned and shortly after a steady pedal along a stretch of deserted tarmac we turned off the main drag onto a dirt track and headed towards tree-covered limestone outcrops. It wasn't long before the rust-coloured arteries made the heart beating a little faster. Downhill runs over rough ground were a sobering experience producing involuntary bursts of speed and the inevitable panicky snap at the breaks. Exhilarating but not too demanding, the first stretch acted as a good warm up. The track that led the group to the Granmonte Estate became more of a challenge for unseasoned cyclists but our leaders also offered an alternatively route. The reward for enduring the thigh-burning climb up troublesome slopes was a series high speed freewheeling descents passed



Vineyards in Khao Yai grow Syrah and Chenin Blanc grapes but there are plans to introduce other varieties

Wine Country

A cycle tour of Khao Yai is the ideal way to explore the beautiful countryside and vineyards. Local travel operator Spice Roads offer the perfect weekend getaway.

MICK SHIPPEN



Grape harvest takes place in January and February



Inclines provide special challenges for cyclists!

carefully manicured vines.

Thai wine production is still in its infancy. The first vineyard in the country, Chateaux Loei, located in the upper reaches of Thailand's northeast, started a mere ten years ago and led to the establishment of others across the country. In the beginning many were skeptical about the possible success but Thai vintners have proved everybody wrong and the wine is receiving increasingly favourable responses.

CEO of the Granmonte Estate, Visooth Lohitnavy explained that although grapes grew very well in Khao Yai the vines had

to be cared for a little differently due to Thailand's seasonal downpours.

"The climate and soil may be different", he said 'but we can grow very good grapes here, especially Syrah and Chenin Blanc. In Europe, harvest takes place in September but here in Khao Yai it is February."

The vines here grow very quickly and we are able to produce two crops a year but in actual fact we don't. The second crop would ripen during the rainy season and give problems with mould.

"This is avoided by cutting back the vines after the first harvest in February. We believe that this practice also prolongs the life of the vines", adds Visooth.

The Granmonte Estate currently produces 60,000 bottles of wine a year, a figure soon set to increase to 100,000. Most of the wine is still sold in Thailand but the export market is steadily growing, along with the reputation of the wine.

"The growth of the Thai wine industry has been spectacular", says Visooth. "Currently we have five percent of the market and there is huge potential for growth."

The Granmonte Estate currently only grows the grapes, choosing to contract out the production of wine to the neighbouring PB Valley Khao Yai Winery. In the formative years of Thai wine making, investors turned to the French for expertise, a fact that could well explain the lack of body or limited appeal to the

modern palette. Recently, however, there has been a change of heart and the masters of New World wines, the Australians, have been recruited as consultants. Visooth's daughter is also currently studying viticulture in Australia so the future of Thai wine is looking good.

After sampling half a dozen wines we cycled a few kilometres down a traffic-free road toward the PB Valley Khao Yai Winery. Here, over 2000 rai of the valley floor is taken over by vines. Bordered by lush rolling hills, the setting is spectacular. The estate is also home to a fine restaurant and an idyllic resort. When the owners first decided to produce wine here over 50 varieties of grape were planted in order to determine the ones best suited to local soil and weather conditions. As with Granmonte the choice was Syrah for red and Chenin Blanc for white, although plans for Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and a Zinfandel are in the pipeline. The PB Valley estate currently yields an annual crop of over 280 tons of wine grapes. A fascinating tour of the on site state-of-the-art facility containing 225-litre French made oak barrels which currently produces over 140,000 bottles

of plonk a year was followed by a well-earned and enthusiastic sampling of the wines. Fortunately the well-oiled cyclists were

bundled into the winery's own open-side bus and driven to the restaurant for a fine meal and, of course, more wine.

The Spice Roads two day, one night Khao Yai Wine Trails cycling tour makes a super weekend break. It covers 60 kilometres of riding through beautiful scenery and includes meals and a night in the Cabbages and Condoms resort. The cycling is not too demanding and is therefore suitable for all ages and levels of fitness. It leaves Bangkok every Saturday morning but can also be arranged for weekdays. The Bangkok based company is the leading adventure cycle tour operator in Southeast Asia and runs several tours across Thailand as well as in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia and the Philippines. For further information visit www.spiceroads.com

Wine info: www.khaoyaiwinery.com and www.granmonte.com

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