



Condé Nast Traveller

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IN THE LOOP

RESPECT FOR THE LAND IS AN INHERENT PART OF THE TRIBAL TRADITIONS
OF NORTHERN THAILAND. TODAY THAT LINK IS BEING INCREASINGLY CHERISHED
ACROSS THE REGION AS PEOPLE SEEK OUT AN EARTHIER WAY OF LIFE

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THERE'S MAGIC IN THESE MOUNTAINS. AND IT'S NOT JUST that of shamans and forest spirits, but an ethereal force drawing city dwellers and silence-seekers to rural Chiang Dao in the Himalayan foothills of northern Thailand. Wanderers for whom café-filled Nimmanhaemin, Chiang Mai's digital-nomad hub, has become too bustling, or hippie hideout Pai, two-and-a-half hours west, too commercial. Artists who find Bangkok's concrete jungle too uninspiring, too hurried, too confined. They come here to escape. Some stay for a few weeks, others never leave.

This valley town one hour north of Chiang Mai, surrounded by tree-clad limestone mountains, has long been whispered about in bird-watching and caving circles, but is starting to pop up on the travel consciousness for new reasons. My creatively inclined friends in Bangkok, my adopted home for the past seven years, all have trips lined up. And so, one bone-chilling November morning, I'm in the sidecar of a souped-up Royal Enfield, racing down a hilly country road lined with corn fields and banana groves. The air slapping my face is smoky – farm-crop burning is still practised in these parts.

Driving the bike is charismatic William Le Masurier, Chiang Dao's man-about-town. 'I've lived in Seoul, Shanghai and Tokyo, but I see the most potential here,' he says, his golden smile glistering in the sun (he lost two front teeth landing face-first on a marble floor in a Chinese karaoke joint). Born to a Thai mother and a British father 29 years ago, he spent his childhood moving around the globe following his father's work assignments. But summers were spent hanging out on the banks of the Ping river, near the

CITY RETURNEES, FULL OF FRESH IDEAS, HAVE COME BACK TO THEIR PARENTS' FARMS, GROWING AVOCADOS TO SELL ON FACEBOOK

family holiday home in Chiang Dao. It's this same house he turned into an Airbnb, after leaving behind a career as a brand manager in Shanghai. Now, four years later, he manages a dozen artfully decorated villas and cottages, as well as a fledgling tour business.

Our first stop, on the sloping outskirts of town, was Chiangdao Blue, an indigo-dyeing studio run by Siripohn Sansirikul, who spent 17 years in Hokkaido before moving here five years ago with her Japanese husband. She now grows the plants in her garden and hosts tie-dye classes. 'I feel so empowered by the greenery here,' she says. Similarly, ceramicist Juthamas Thanusan settled in this place because it had 'good energy', turning a ramshackle house down a lone dirt track into an atelier, with three cats for company. Up a serpentine road leading further into the mountains, the wood-carving workshop of Thamarat Phokai is pitched next to a babbling stream. We end the day at Hoklhong Cafe, run by Teerayut Chantachot who moved here from southern Thailand to grow coffee beans and roast them in clay pots over a wood fire.

Chiang Dao is the land of plenty. 'Throw a mango and it will grow,' Le Masurier says. Wherever you look, something is being cultivated. There are fields of chives and garlic, starfruit and peaches, trees with branches so heavy with longan fruit they are propped up with bamboo stakes. Big-town returnees, full of fresh ideas about the future, have come back to their parents' farms and grow organic avocados to sell to city folk on Facebook.

Like much of Thailand's rural north, the peaks around Chiang Dao are criss-crossed with a patchwork of tribal villages; the Lahu, Lisu, Karen and Akha all have their own rituals, clothing and dwelling styles. Their ancestral ties blur modern geopolitical borders, with communities reaching all the way to south-west China and north-east India. But the Thai state hasn't made life easy for them – many are undocumented, disconnected and shunned by urban society. On Tuesdays, they come down from the hills to trade gold for currency and sell their handicrafts. Stuffy townsfolk call such youths *dek doi* – mountain kid, wild child. Le Masurier sees the term as a badge of honour (he

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Dek Doi villa; accessories in a room at Raya Heritage hotel in Chiang Mai; Lisu guide in Chiang Rai; flowering shrub and pool, both at Pa Sak Tong; artwork at Araksa Tea Garden in Mae Taeng; Alio Slow Bar and Farm in Chiang Rai; Araksa Tea Garden; resident water buffalo at Pa Sak Tong; Lisu Lodge exterior. Previous pages, from left: Juthamas Thanusan at Hand in Hand, her ceramic studio in Chiang Dao; William Le Masurier on the road on his Royal Enfield bike

baptised his business with the same name). ‘They have so much knowledge of the land, things Google can’t tell you,’ he says. They know what happens when ants move their eggs (it’s going to rain). Or when mango trees grow extra blossom (it’s going to rain even harder). They lived sustainably long before eco became into vogue. ‘Now everyone is trying to live like that. People want to get closer to the food they eat, they’re increasingly looking for real things,’ he adds. ‘Here they can find the truth.’

The next day, I’m knee-deep in a crystalline stream cutting through thick bamboo forest. With every step, sediment billows around my feet. We follow overgrown dirt tracks through honey-hued rice fields and past abandoned shanties. There’s a turbaned old woman smoking a pipe in the shade of a tree. She’s nursing a hangover from last night’s rice-harvesting celebrations. If we continue down this trail, we’d end up in Burmese jungles, no border check required.

This is just a taste of the trips Le Masurier takes other curious travellers on. Equipped with, in his words, ‘shitty motorbikes’ (not his Royal Enfield, which he plans to trade for a horse one day) and guided by a Polish-French expedition log from the 1970s, he goes hunting for hidden caves and hot springs with them. They trek up to the abandoned hilltop fortress of Chinese anti-communist militia who roamed these mountains in the 1960s and 70s. They swim in waterfalls, camp on mountains, cook over fire. It’s like a modern-day *Jungle Book*, aided by Le Masurier’s knack for storytelling.

At a Karen village on the way back to town, we stop in on Cha, a friend introduced as ‘the original *dek doi*’ and co-organiser of Le Masurier’s yearly jungle jamborees.

THE HILL PEOPLE KNOW WHAT IT MEANS WHEN ANTS MOVE THEIR EGGS (RAIN) OR WHEN MANGO TREES GROW EXTRA BLOSSOM (EVEN HARDER RAIN)

He rolls cigarettes from banana leaf and tamarind shell and tobacco grown in the rice fields behind his stilted house. We swig Chinese teacups of throat-scorching *lao khao*, a potent rice whiskey brewed by his mother, who also makes us lunch of vegetable curry and forest-mushroom tempura.

On my last night in Chiang Dao, Chantachot invites us to his house. Two bare-bone teakwood huts down a dirt road in a longan orchard, far away from the nearest street-light. Lukewarm cans of Chang beer are passed around a campfire while The Velvet Underground rattles from an iPhone speaker. Above me, the silhouettes of towering trees punctuate the night sky – Chiang Dao translates as ‘City of Stars’ – with the white noise of crickets in the distance.

Thankfully it will take a while before turmeric lattes and açai bowls make an appearance here, but Le Masurier’s bar serving *ya dong* (a herbal moonshine) and organic wine is opening soon. Bangkok’s chefs are snooping around planning seasonal-dining pop-ups. A big magazine editor has apparently snapped up a plot of land between the rice fields, and we bumped into a bar owner from Soi Nana, Bangkok’s coolest nightlife haunt, earlier that day. ‘People don’t come here to make lots of money,’ Le Masurier says. ‘Just enough to live, back to the original Thai way of life.’

A FEW DAYS LATER, I’M SNAKING THROUGH DIFFERENT RICE FIELDS further south in a beat-up Mazda pick-up with Saksaran Duang-in, a Shan textile artist, who is showing me around his hometown of Doi Tao. I’d noticed his work at one of my favourite hotels in nearby Chiang Mai, the craft-packed Raya Heritage, and at markets around Bangkok: tactile shirts and baggy shorts in natural hues and indigo, clearly made by hand on an old loom.

Under a stilted teakwood house in one of the rural communities he works with, a woman in colourful Karen garb of vibrantly embroidered vest and matching skirt spins cotton on a wooden wheel. White fluff blows over the earthen ground, skinny chickens chasing after it. Next door, vats of tree bark and fermented berries bubble deep red and midnight blue, the just-dyed yarn drying in the sun. Across the way, another woman

Opposite, clockwise from top left: indigo furniture and pool suite, both at Raya Heritage; freshly glazed mugs at Studio In Clay in Chiang Mai; washing line in a Karen tribal village; vintage oil containers in the Raya Heritage tea lounge; Locus Native Food Lab; Raya Heritage pool steps







is working a backstrap loom, her lips red from betel nut like smudged lipstick, her leathery hands zigzagging over the cotton strands at speed. It's a one-stop cottage operation, Duang-in explains. The husbands harvest the cotton from their land, the wives work it into *pha sin* wrap-around skirts, V-neck tunics and other garments. He often collaborates with them for his clothing brand Satu, and he's here to discuss his new designs: hooded vests with kimono sleeves, drop-crotch trousers that double as T-shirts. My Thai is too rudimentary to understand what his collaborators are saying, but their scornful looks say enough: 'Who's going to wear that?'

'Some people still think that preserving these crafts means sticking to the traditional designs and ways of working, but I believe that by adapting them for a modern context, we can keep this art alive,' Duang-in explains. 'It sometimes takes effort to convince them, but they're always the first to call me when they see a celebrity on TV wearing the clothes they made.' I ask him if this is his way of helping his community, but he's adamant it's the other way around. 'Without them, I'm nothing. My business wouldn't exist.'

Back in Chiang Mai, I catch up with Jirawong Wongtrangan, another artisan whose work I've spotted all around Bangkok; ceramic coffee cups speckled like quail's eggs in fashionable cafés; rustic bowls and plates gracing some of the city's top tables. He opened Studio In Clay in the sun-dappled back garden of his family home near Chiang Mai's historic centre after cutting his teeth at a local ceramics factory. Specialising in ash-glazing, a centuries-old technique brought over from China and adopted by craftsmen all around Thailand, he now hosts workshops and mentoring sessions.

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While I watch him shave off long worms of clay for a new teapot design, we talk about the importance of keeping these techniques alive. 'Compared to industrial-scale production, Thai craft is accessible and sustainable,' he says. 'We don't damage the environment, and our natural resources continue to grow.' A week before, he went up to a small village in the Nan province where only three women still make traditional pottery, selling their wares for as little as five baht (12p) a piece. 'They have the skill,' he says. 'I just teach them to approach it in new ways, maybe as jewellery, to increase the value of their work. It's a knowledge exchange. I draw on their ancient methods and provide new inspiration.'

AT AN AFTERNOON MARKET ON THE OUTSKIRTS of Chiang Rai, chef Kongwuth Chaiwongkachon is rummaging through mounds of fresh herbs and dried fish. The long tables heave with produce brought in from the hills. Gnarly roots of ginger and galangal, palm-sized water bugs and violent-red chillies piled on small plates under fluorescent light bulbs, sold for 10 baht a pop. To me, it's just another Thai market. For Chaiwongkachon, it's a goldmine. 'Within a week or two, it's going to get much colder up here,' he says, pointing at a basket of thumb-sized pea pods with fuzzy pale-green skins. 'You can predict so much based on what's available at the markets.' A few tables down, he stops at a neatly stacked pyramid of *makham pom*, a kind of gooseberry. 'It's nature telling you to prepare for winter, these things are crazy high in vitamin C. So sour they make you cry.'

He's here to scout ingredients for his new menu at Locus Native Food Lab, northern Thailand's most sought-after chef's table, which books up months in advance. His cooking draws on the region's unique bounty, ancient recipes and tribal techniques, infused with skills picked up working in Japanese and French kitchens around Thailand. 'People don't really understand northern food,' he says. 'It's healthy, it's salty, it's bitter – they aren't used to that. It hasn't changed over the past 100 years, I'm trying to move it into the present, to preserve it and let people know it actually exists.'

Opposite, clockwise from top left: tasting at Araksa Tea Garden; William Le Masurier; koi pond at Pa Sak Tong; 'spirit house' in rice fields; bedroom at Lisu Lodge; steps at a market in Chiang Mai; Hand in Hand atelier; swatches at Studio In Clay; Locus Native Food Lab. Previous pages, clockwise from top left: Chiang Dao; wooden vases at Raya Heritage; Lahu tribal dance; tie-dye garments in Chiang Mai; Studio In Clay pottery; handmade broom; clothing patterns at Satu; Saksaran Duang-in; restaurant in Chiang Dao; Duang-in sorting cotton thread; Chiang Dao café; wooden frames at Raya Heritage; baskets for tea leaves; chef Kongwuth Chaiwongkachon; temple north of Chiang Mai; Chiang Dao mountains; cacti at Chiang Mai market; tofu noodles at Locus; Araksa Tea Garden dining room





That night, 12 of us are sitting around the chef's table at his restaurant, which recently moved into a thatched-roof hut with adobe walls overlooking the rice fields of Pa Sak Tong, a lush estate south of Chiang Rai's city centre. Some guests have flown up from Bangkok for one night just to eat here. The monthly-changing menu is a history lesson, cultural awakening and northern food chronicle wrapped into an eight-course feast. There are tacos filled with a purée of those wintry green peas, tiny croquettes of *nam prik ong*, a local chilli relish, and pork *mousseline* with rice-water jelly and curry cream, a riff on *kaeng kradang*, a traditional curry of jellied pork leg. For another course, one of the chefs splits open a bamboo cane that has been roasting in a charcoal fire, a cooking method I witnessed at lunch in a hill-tribe village earlier that week. But instead of the pork I was expecting it revealed *tsukune*, bony Japanese chicken meatballs.

'For this dish, we don't really focus on the flavour,' Chaiwongkachon tells his audience, taking a brick of clay from the fire. 'It's more about the philosophy of northern Thai cooking. Whatever nature provides that day, we combine it.' Tonight, the clay brick contains local rice with catfish and *perilla* (shiso) herb, smelling like November rain. Tomorrow it will be something different. 'Since opening here three months ago, I've made three customers cry,' Chaiwongkachon tells me. 'These flavours reminded them of someone, something – that's how powerful food can be.'

When it's time to return to the high-energy reality of Bangkok, I feel a tinge of reluctance. I think of the riches hidden in the mountains, the communities where 'enough' not 'more' is the aim, and remember something Le Masurier told one of his hill-tribe friends: 'Be proud of what you've got here, because you have so much.' 🍌

WHERE TO STAY

RAYA HERITAGE, CHIANG MAI

No hotel encapsulates northern Thailand's craft movement better than Raya Heritage, with rooms decked out in hand-dyed indigo fabrics, mulberry-paper screens, wickerwork and ceramics – many for sale at the on-site boutique. The Khu Khao restaurant draws on the region's diverse influences, including Shan cooking, while the spa follows a similar formula for its wellness menu with Burmese massage techniques. *Doubles from about £230; rayaheritage.com*

LISU LODGE, MAE TAENG

Worth a detour off the road from Chiang Mai to Chiang Dao, this all-bamboo eco lodge is simple, but the traditional design, kaleidoscopic textiles and views across the surrounding fields of lemongrass more than make up for the lack of air-con. The staff of Lisu tribespeople prepare meals with ingredients from the organic gardens and guide visitors through the adjoining village. Other rooted diversions include a meeting with a local shaman and a tasting at Araksa, a tea garden belonging to the same owner. *Doubles from about £125; asian-oasis.com*

PA SAK TONG, CHIANG RAI

Everything you see from your balcony at this lush private estate is there just for you – 29 acres of rice fields, lotus ponds and even a water-buffalo farm backdropped by mountains – because the two villas (of five and six bedrooms) are rented to only one party at a time. Each comes with a small army of chefs, butlers and therapists who aren't bound to menus or brochures; just tell them what you're in the mood for. You also get a guaranteed a seat at Locus Native Food Lab, tucked away in one of the estate's jungle-fringed corners. *From about £1,380 per night (exclusive use); pasaktong.com*

HOW TO DO IT

Smiling Albino (smilingalbino.com) offers individual packages from £195 per person per day.

Dek Doi (dek-doi.com) can arrange trips in Chiang Dao from about £50 per person for a two-night group weekend. For more information about the region, visit fanclubthailand.co.uk