



'Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan' temple with a distinctive Sri Lankan style Stupa

DISNA MUDALIGE

The year 2013 is a year of celebrations for Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Thailand. It marks the 260th anniversary of the re-establishment of Upasampada and establishment of Siam Maha Nikaya of Sri Lanka with the arrival of Ven. Upali Maha Thera from Thailand.

Parallel to this occasion, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), Mumbai Office in coordination with the Royal Thai Embassy in Sri Lanka invited a group of Sri Lankan media for a tour in Nakhon Si Thammarat (NST), a province which I would like to call as 'home away from home' for any Sri Lankan brought up under the Buddhist culture.

Almost everything we experienced in this province situated in the Eastern shore of the Southern Thailand reminded us of familiar locations and features found in Sri Lanka. The etymology of the name of the city itself depicts how much we have in common to share. Nakhon Si Thammarat, as pronounced by Thais, has derived from its Pali-Sanskrit name 'Nagara Sri Dhammaraja'.

Within this province, there is a separate district and city under the very name NST which had been the centre of trade and administrative capital at one time in the history of Southern Thailand. It had also been an independent kingdom for many centuries.

The flight distance between Bangkok and NST is about 582km. It took about one hour and ten minutes for the domestic air carrier to take us to our destination.

Inspiration

We paid homage to the biggest temple in the Southern Thailand 'Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan' during our stay at the NST. Interestingly this temple, even though not well known by many Sri Lankans, has greater connections with Sri Lanka.

Dr Bancha Pongpanit, professionally a doctor, and an archaeological enthusiast, who volunteered to explain us the historical value of the site, observed the shape of the stupa in this temple is similar to that of 'Kiri Vehera' in Polonnaruwa. As believed this stupa houses Buddha's relics. According to the legend of the temple as explained by Dr Pongpanit, the ship on which Prince Dantha and Princess Hemamala (Thais pronounce as Prince Thontha Khuman and Princess Hem Chala) was voyaging to Sri Lanka with sacred Buddha Relics had wrecked in the Indian Ocean, and they were helped to enter the shore of Southern Thailand safely.

Thereafter they sailed to Sri Lanka on boat. Once they arrived in Sri Lanka some relics were gifted back to those in Southern Thailand and King Si Thammarat built a pagoda housing the relics. The present pagoda had been restored and refurbished at many times over the history while retaining the distinctive Sri Lankan style. It has a height of 55.78 meters and the top is entirely covered by pure gold. The gold covered

Nakhon Si Thammarat (NST) in Thailand

HOME away from HOME!



Natural beauty of the Kiriwong village

part is 8.29 meters high. This temple has been submitted to the tentative list of the UNESCO since August last year to consider for inscription as a cultural heritage on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The temple also consists of a Bo tree brought from Sri



The temple also consists of a Bo tree brought from Sri Lanka and its museum contains ancient Buddha statues with similar features as those found in historical sites in Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura

tors with Thai counterparts in their perseverance to protect Theravada Buddhist culture.

Faithful devotees

When we visited this ancient temple on the day prior to the Navam Poya, it was crowded and busy with devotees preparing for the annual Makha Puja Festival which fell on the next day.

As explained by our tourist guide, it was a merit making ceremony observed mainly in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos on the full moon day of the third lunar month (this usually falls in February).

At the temple we saw devotees, ranging from youngsters to very old, carrying long pieces of yellow robes with so much faith to wrap around the body of pagoda as homage to Lord Buddha. We learnt these robes were their donations to the temple.

This unique tradition practiced for more than 800 years is called 'Hae Pha Khuen Thart' in Thailand, and is regarded as a great Buddhist virtue that one should practice at least once in a life time.

The Makha Puja day is to appreciate the divine grace and goodness of the Lord Buddha and has been declared a national holiday in Thailand.

Colourful procession

Next day, we could watch the long charming procession of the International Makha Puja Festival 2013 heading to the temple. Thousands of people belonging to all folks of life were taking part in the procession representing various organizations and institutions in the 24 districts in the NST.

They were carrying yellow, red and white long pieces of cloth to wrap around the stupa. Making the event more colourful, school children were carrying the paintings related to the life of Buddha on the cloth. These paintings were their creative contributions.

Towards the end of the parade, teams from other countries joined in holding the country's name board. This year 10 countries were represented at the parade including Sri Lanka. The rest of the countries were Nepal, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia, India, Bangladesh and Japan.

NST Rajabhat University President Chatchai Sukranachau told us they hope to invite cultural groups from other countries to perform at the parade from next year. He also said the NST airport would open for direct international flights by next year making the journey to the Southern Thailand much easier, observing that it would help to attract more tourists.

Natural beauty

The visit to Kiriwong village in Lan Saka district was the most interesting part during our tour in the NST. This village is memorable for its greenery, stunning natural beauty and self reliant community. Some assume the name 'Lan Saka' has its etymological connections with the word 'Lanka'.

Kiriwong village reminded me of a typical Sri Lankan village and the Divi Neguma national programme aimed at achieving self reliant economy.

The villagers in this locale lead simple and quiet life styles and engage in variety of community sustainable income generation activities such as growing chemical free organic fruits, eco tourism related home stay, chemical free natural tie-dye, handicrafts and herbal products etc.

This village surrounded by mountains and jungles has been found to account for the best Ozone in Thailand and has been rated number 7 in relation to the finest air quality in the world. My attention was grabbed by a nicely decorated small tin priced 69 bahts on which it was written 'Lan Saka- the Best Ozone' at a handicraft sales outlet. To my amusement it was found to be a souvenir containing nothing but air to recall the unpolluted fresh air a visitor could breathe in this locale.

While walking around the village we could see and often pick and taste fresh chemical free fruit varieties such as Durian, Mangusteen, Jampada and Long Gong. As learnt, these quality controlled chemical free fruits have found their way to export markets in Japan, Hong Kong, China, Vietnam and some European countries.



Devotees carrying yellow robes to wrap around the stupa that houses the relics a day prior to the Makha Puja



A section of the participants at the Makha Puja Festival



'Lan Saka- the Best Ozone' Souvenirs at a sales outlet

Produced by Lake House Copyright a 2009 - 2013 The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd.