

Luxury amongst the rice paddies: Northeast Thailand's foray into high-end, sustainable tourism

A luxury Thai pool villa rises out of the rice paddies of Thailand's poorer Northeast - a symbol of how the power of the internet and changing traveller demands have sown the seeds of sustainable tourism in the region.

March 12, 2008 - [PRLog](#) -- Isaan - the poorest region of Thailand - has to date been uncharted territory for most overseas visitors. As the kingdom's most populous region, it has historically been targeted only by politicians seeking votes from debt-ridden rice farmers, whilst tourists have been encouraged to flock to the glitzy enclaves of Phuket, or to spend their dollars in the legendary five star hotels of Bangkok. The announcement of the opening of Green Gecko, in the rice fields outside Udon Thani, therefore seems counterintuitive, signaling a new trend in choices made by visitors to the country, and underlining the importance to accommodation owners of providing unique and memorable experiences.

Green Gecko was launched by Charles Coleman, a long-term resident of Thailand. He has been involved in the hotel industry in SE Asia for two decades, but says: "I only saw the potential of Isaan when invited to the wedding of a Thai couple there. I rediscovered the Thailand of 20 years ago: fun-loving, seemingly carefree people; simple villages with a strong sense of community, and places of untouched natural beauty. But it was clear that the locals were abandoning traditional farming lifestyles in search of the bright lights in the big cities – where often they were hired as cheap labour on short term contracts with no real prospects for growth."

Years passed. The Thai couple at the marriage, Bongkot & Euang, had four children. It was when one of their relatives contacted Coleman in the hope of securing work in Bangkok that he decided to act, enlisting the support both of the family and of local villagers. The latter were keen to be part of a project that would allow them to stay together, rather than having to migrate to the Thai capital to seek work, leaving their children behind with frail grandparents. They nevertheless assured Coleman he was insane, asking him who could possibly be interested in rice farming and water buffalos, in food that Bangkokians shunned for its searing spiciness, or in taking a lazy boat trip through a lotus-strewn lake in an old wooden boat.

From the inception of the project, those involved were keen to ensure that Green Gecko be designed, constructed and finished using local skills and labour, and then be operated by local villagers who would maximize the use of local produce and encourage the preservation of indigenous traditions. From the builders and craftsmen who worked on the construction, through to the use of traditional Isaan silks, cottons, cushions and Isaan-heritage Ban Chiang pottery in the decoration, to the emphasis on fresh organic ingredients in the property's gardens and a policy of strictly local employment, the goal was realized. Facets of the project, such as local employment, an emphasis on a meaningful interaction with the locals and the protection of natural resources may all be tenets of modern buzzwords such as "sustainable tourism", but at Green Gecko they underlie the concept. As Bongkot says, "collecting rainwater and minimizing water usage is automatic in a location where there is no mains water supply; using salt water chlorination in the swimming pool (as opposed to chlorine) makes sense in an area where salt is abundant; growing vegetables organically is a local tradition in villages whose inhabitants do not want to waste scant funds on fertilizers, and creating enduring local employment is something that the villagers of Isaan have sought for decades." Then he adds, with a wry smile, "...and as for interaction with the local people, there are no other farang (foreign visitors) here, so who else can the visitors talk to!"

After six months of hard work, a new - yet traditionally-inspired - standalone villa rose up in the heart of Thailand's rural Northeast, on a large country estate surrounded by woodlands, plantations and rice paddies. Here, Coleman says, "Green Gecko aims to open up the unfrequented region of Isaan, setting a

new standard for fully-serviced and catered holiday accommodation in the Northeast, allowing guests to discover and experience the real Thailand - off the beaten tourist track, yet in style and comfort.”

The villa’s architecture is traditionally Thai: an impressive wooden staircase leads up to the raised and enclosed wooden deck, where a delightful private swimming pool is located, with peaceful views of the unspoiled countryside and evening sunsets. The steeply pitched roofs with their terracotta tiles lend the house an almost temple-like appearance. A raised “sala” here offers protection from the strong midday sun and views over the pool.

Abutting the broad wooden deck are two main buildings. The first of these has impressive, heavy antique doors that set the tone of the villa, replete with wood and an eye for design and traditional workmanship. This air-conditioned space houses a dining room with seating for six, a living room with comfortable teak and cotton sofas, and a sunken area decorated with futons for lounging in front of the widescreen television. Leading off from this area are an additional WC, and a fully equipped Western kitchen (with built-in microwave, oven etc), that in turn leads out to a professional Thai kitchen featuring high-pressure wok burners.

Green Gecko has two eclectic bedrooms, each of which is air-conditioned, has a four-poster king sized bed and a large adjoining bathroom and WC.

The property is run by an extended family and local villagers, with Khun Bongkot ensuring guest satisfaction. He prepares his guests’ meals throughout their stay, varying the spiciness or composition of these to their tastes. “Many really appreciate Thai food. I am delighted to be able to show them both Thai and Isaan cooking - not from inside a kitchen, but by taking them through our garden, picking the fresh herbs and spices we need, and then showing them how to make more unusual specialties. We grow our own produce organically, including pandanus and kaffir lime leaves, limes, mint, coriander, mangoes, papaya, passion fruit, jackfruit, dragon fruit, banana, papaya and so on.”

Guests staying at Green Gecko are assured of having the entire property to themselves. They can simply laze by their pool with a good book or listening to music, or venture out into the surrounding area with its typical rural villages, forest temples, and local markets, abuzz with the sounds and perfumes of Isaan. Alternatively, they can explore sights such as the museum at Ban Chiang, the listed lake of Nong Han with its expanse of pink lotus flowers and wallowing water buffalo, the mighty Mekong river at Nong Khai, or the renowned markets that produce and sell indigenous silks and cottons, pottery and handicrafts.

As travelers turn increasingly to the internet to research their holidays, and as they become more demanding, this type of offering will surely grow in popularity. The internet has removed the middleman, enabling individuals to offer exclusive and unusual experiences at highly competitive rates. Whilst the small scale of these operations will probably not worry the larger tour operators, an interesting shift is surely afoot when a rice farmer sets a fire for his buffalos at night, then wends his way back home through the rice paddies...to boot up his satellite internet connection and confirm another reservation.

Green Gecko may be booked for stays of 2 nights or more via its dedicated website at <http://www.thaivillarent.com>, where availability and rates may be checked online. (Indicative rates: around US\$280 including all transfers, service and daily meals.)

Green Gecko’s sister property, Gecko Villa (<http://www.geckovilla.com>) offers a cheaper three bedroomed alternative to those on a tighter budget (from around US\$160.)

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About Green Gecko: we aim to offer memorable experiences off the beaten track but in comfort and style, with all proceeds staying with the local Thai community.

Website: www.thaivillarent.com

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Source	Green Gecko
Website	https://www.thaivillarent.com
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