

destination

Northern Exposure

From natural highs to cool urban lows, Chiang Mai remains the perfect weekend getaway. Jay Lamey reports

The glistening green paddy fields begin to encounter square clumps of houses, which gradually increase in density, their red roofs staring up at the plane. Finally both colours give way to the duller hues of the Chiang Mai airport and we touch down for a weekend away in the north.

Our base will be Kantary Hills, a newly-opened hotel on the happening Nimmanhemmin Street. In addition to catering to the tourism market, the low-rise property is positioning itself as a provider of luxury serviced apartments for long-stay guests. General Manager Magrin Phromyothi says a 'large room' concept is central to the design, and is proving attractive to clients such as visiting professors, NGO staff, and resident expatriates.

After spending a few hours resting up in my comfortable suite and hitting the gym, our group ventures out for dinner by Chiang Mai's iconic Ping River. We choose the aptly named Riverside, a rustic structure looking

over the water. As we eat, a group of people climb onto a small boat and take their place at some tables. At first I assume it's a pleasant gimmick of a dining space, because the boat's boutique size is unlike any floating restaurant I have encountered. But when I look up moments later its gone, floating away with its colourful lamps and an extensive dinner smuggled aboard.

Once satiated we hit some of Chiang Mai's famous markets, although we avoid the actual 'Chiang Mai Night



THIS PHOTO: SUITE AT KANTARY HILLS; ABOVE AND TOP: DOI INTHANON NATIONAL PARK; OPPOSITE PAGE: RESTAURANT / BAR AT KANTARY HILLS; CHIANG MAI'S NIGHT MARKETS



who have long been renowned for their traditional dexterity with silver. The prices for 92.5% earrings, bracelets and necklaces are excellent and the designs pleasantly varied, handmade honesty giving them an earthy resonance.

On the following day we take an

excursion to Doi Inthanon, Thailand's highest mountain. After a visit to the chilly peak, we set off on a walking trail with a guide from a local Hmong village. The circuit takes approximately two hours and offers a robust but achievable opportunity to experience the majesty of the landscape. We cross a small bridge over a stream, signs indicating that it flows from here, 2,500 metres up, all the way to Bangkok. We wind onwards past thick tree trunks before suddenly leaving the protective canopy of leaves and appearing on a treeless hillside, populated instead by tall dry mountain grasses. The views are tremendous, small villages stuck onto riverflows in the valleys below us.

In the evening we visit another genuinely exciting market, Sunday Walking Street. It is supposed to be less 'touristy' than the original Chiang Mai night markets, and while it may possess a higher degree of authenticity,

With the opening of a highway to China, the economic prospects of the north are bullish

it is absolutely shoulder to shoulder on the Sunday we visit. Sophisticated local crafts are again the order of the day here, such as painted lotus leaves on black frames, while fake Red Bull t-shirts are thankfully absent. Buskers add an extra dose of liveliness to the already buzzing atmosphere and small bars behind the roadside stalls offer a stylish way to rest the legs and check out the crowd.

Later that evening, we get a taste of Chiang Mai's happening indie scene when we check out Monkey on Nimmanheminda Soi 9, a short walk from the hotel. Even on a Sunday it's packed, retro-dressed clubbers dancing away below mural-covered walls.

Two days in Chiang Mai provides only enough time for a tiny sample of what the city, province and region offer. It's no wonder that foreigners often spend months here, learning traditional Thai skills such as massage or cookery, exploring the mysteries of Buddhism or trekking into some of Thailand's least known terrain. Chiang Mai is a modern city with a charm deeply rooted in the surrounding lands. 🍷

Market'. And what markets they are. Varied and intriguing, the solid years of internal and international tourism have weathered Chiang Mai into a shopper's paradise of the alternative kind. We're not talking brand names and air-con here, we're talking about arts, crafts and clothing genuinely seductive for their uniqueness and creativity.

Outside the City Hall we stumble upon a temporary art market with stalls from all the northern provinces showcasing their talent. The quality is at times excellent and the mood always pleasant, a simple commune between the artists of this creative region and their guests.

After a browse and a cup of local coffee we continue on to Saturday Walking Street on Wualai Road. This street has long been home to many silversmiths and is still a great place to purchase the precious metal. Most of it is produced by the Karen people,