

Cheow Lan Lake Adventure, Thailand

Whoever would have thought there would be great fresh water fly fishing in tropical southern Thailand? It was one of those fishing adventures where the journey was as much fun as the fishing. Two foreign fly fishermen left Singapore on an early Saturday morning cut priced flight to Phuket just an hour away by air. It was the start of a jungle fly fishing extravaganza.



The target was the easily spooked Thai mahseer in the rivers feeding Cheow Lan Lake in Thailand's south. My German scientist co-fly fisher David and I were met at Phuket airport by a Belgian driver for a two hour trip on excellent roads north east to Cheow Lan Lake where we met our host Meik from Denmark – a veritable united nations of fishermen! From there it was another hour or so in a longtail boat far up the lake through karst limestone mountains which were spectacular and account for the tourist title “Little Guilin”.

Arriving at the luxurious floating “Bamboo Hilton” marked the end of the journey – minimal services were part of the attraction of the jungle setting with a mattress on the bamboo floor and a mosquito net being the complete in-room decor. Being able to sit on the bamboo deck in front of the bungalow (local description) and cast a fly line to the sound of cicadas and Asian hornbills screeching like winged monkeys overhead was heaven. It turned out that we weren't the only fishermen who knew about the Bamboo Hilton. There was a group from Singapore, a couple of guys from Malaysia and Thailand – around ten of us in total, and all ready to compare stories at dinner and mislead each other up the wrong arm of the lake to where we caught “the big one” earlier that day.



But what of the fishing? Neither of us had fished for mahseer but Meik was an expert. Skimming across the lake in the longtail boat and heading for that secret river saw us setting out on foot at the first set of rapids where the boat could no longer navigate upstream. The jungle was too

thick to walk through unless we followed the wild elephant trails which didn't follow the course of the river because, of course, elephants aren't fishermen. The only option was wading up the river with Meik taking us to the next pool or run where he had caught mahseer with other fly fishing clients in the past. He had an uncanny knack of spotting dark shadows moving through the water or waiting on station for food on the current. Once fish were spotted the casting began, using Meik's special flies which we have been sworn to secrecy about. Suffice to say the go-to fly was a grossly oversized fluoro wulff – use your imagination ...



Meik's advice was that each cast over mahseer reduced your chance of catching them by twenty percent and he was spot on. The first cast has to be accurate and to say that my casting was tested is very true. With Meik spotting and calling out "twelve o'clock, just downstream of the boulder", me casting as far as I could and Meik yelling, "one metre more" then on the next cast, "two metres more" and me yelling back, "I can't" came to be our running

joke. But whatever the casting skill level, we were catching spooky mahseer on dry flies in the middle of a steamy Thai jungle, David a few more than me. The mahseer is a great fighting fish and more than once we found ourselves chasing a hooked fish downstream to avoid that disappointing tippet snap off as the mahseer took advantage of the current.

We were consistently catching mahseer of about 30 cm but between us, only five each day, with each fish being an exercise in stealth, crawling upstream to present a fly on the nose of a cruising fish as if a bug or indeed a petal had fallen from the overhanging jungle trees (they really do eat petals). On one of our return walks late in the afternoon, we were walking along a recently fallen eroded mud cliff and could see below us a school of 45 to 60 cm mahseer lying deep in the clear water of a gently flowing pool. Even if we could have somehow descended down to river level on the opposite bank, and if they had not already been scared down to the bottom, only a two-handed eleven foot rod and a good spey cast could have reached them. Being smart and spooky fish is clearly how they became so big.



Each day was rise before dawn, sausages, eggs and tomato and black coffee for three before jumping on the longtail boat and up another arm of Cheow Lan Lake to start wading with a few unscheduled laps of backstroke on slippery rocks for me in fast water ... but always more mahseer around the next bend in the river with the sound of howling gibbons in the background, lunch of fried rice and sweetened coffee boiled in

freshly cut bamboo sections, then more fly fishing, before the two or three hour trek back to the longtail boat at sunset.

At dinner time back at the Bamboo Hilton the open air kitchen turned out great home-style meals on a couple of gas burners. Fried rice and green chicken curry and tom yam soup with fruit for dessert for the foreigners (I have already mentioned the western style breakfast just for us), Malaysian favourites for the Malaysians and Singapore-friendly dishes for the Singaporeans – a great deal of effort was put in to making everyone feel at home – home style food and more than I could possibly eat, all with local ingredients and great flavours.

With Cheow Lan being in Khao Sok national park, the jungle and its animals are protected – to the point that our compulsory national park ranger who accompanied us into the jungle



each day was equipped with an M16 assault rifle which he slung over his back, barrel down. Whenever he was leading us through the jungle and he bent over to pick up something interesting off the forest floor, all of us following scattered as the barrel pointed in our direction. We didn't encounter any rogue wild elephants, angry Asian ox or tigers but had we done so we would have been right behind our ranger.

The highlight of the trip, which was a lowlight at the time, was our well-armed national park ranger getting us lost in the jungle late one afternoon. We were well and truly off the beaten track, picking our way through the jungle, turning around and re-tracing our steps, only to try a new direction through thorn vines and foot trapping climbing vines which caused an unscheduled lay down in the mud. The final part of the escape, at least the last part of getting un-lost, was



the descent of a scientifically calculated seventy degree jungle with us grabbing on to bamboo each step to control the speed of the fall while trying to avoid the tree trunks with the barbed spikes. At the point where I tossed the four parts of my precious Sage rod to a waiting ranger below (yes, we were a little desperate) both feet slipped out from under me and I was hanging onto a bamboo trunk with both hands, feet dangling below thinking “how do I descend the next ten metres gracefully?” The answer was to accept that it was not going to be pretty and just let gravity take over, so it was 9.8 metres per second squared crashing vertically through the jungle to the river side. Lots of scratches and cut up palms but great relief to be back in the open. As soon as we hit the river, we could see the funny side. The embroidery on the back of the camo peaked cap from an un-named New Zealand outdoors shop I was wearing bore the slogan “Out there and doing it”. We decided on the spot that we would augment the slogan by adding words at the beginning “Over 50 and ...”. This mis-adventure quickly became our adventure.



After three amazing days on Cheow Lan, we took the same longtail boat and captain who had looked after us for four days back to the other end of the lake with Meik who drove us an hour or so back to Kao Lak on the south western coast of Thailand, where he lives, to our end-of-trip hotel. My personal quest was to eat so much authentic Thai food that I would want no more. This was realized ... and lasted only about two days after arriving back in Singapore.

I rarely trust anyone else to organize fishing adventures for me. Meik proved that he had done this so many times before that everything worked smoothly and professionally which is rare in this part of the world. A fly fishing trip to Cheow Lan with Meik is a do-able thing from Canberra with cheap flights from Sydney to Singapore to Phuket with a number of carriers. Meik can be relied upon to organize everything else (including secret flies and a great sense of humour). Expect exciting mahseer adventure in an exotic bamboo Thai jungle environment!!! Take a look at www.thai-fishing.com