

THAILAND

A mindfulness journey

A half-day tour of Chiang Mai takes in four temples that feature beautifully carved halls, golden stupas, Buddha statues and libraries of scripture that help inspire visitors

Ron Emmons
life@scmp.com

For anyone in need of a little enlightenment, a half-day tour that takes in four temples on a 6km route leading west from the centre of Chiang Mai to the foothills of Doi Suthep, the guardian mountain of the northern Thai city, might be just the ticket. This self-guided tour – by bicycle, motorbike, or car and driver – is best done in the morning, as the afternoon heat can be oppressive. And remember to dress respectfully, meaning no exposed shoulders or midriffs.

1. Wat Phra Singh
At the gateway to our first temple, in the heart of Chiang Mai’s old city, let us consider what it means to be mindful. As the term suggests, it implies that we should give the full attention of our mind to the present. This is easy when seeing something such as sculptures of celestial beings and paintings of historic events for the first time.

So take a deep breath and discover the secrets of Wat Phra Singh, founded in the 14th century. Directly in front of the entrance is the *viharn* (assembly hall), and behind that the ordination hall and gleaming gold *stupa* (shrine), but it is the tall, slender building to the right that catches most people’s attention.

Surrounded by bas reliefs of stucco angels and surmounted by a scarlet, wooden, upper storey, it is the scripture library, an exquisite example of Lanna (northern Thai) temple architecture.

The most important element of Wat Phra Singh is the Viharn Lai Kham, a pavilion set back to the left of the assembly hall.

With its multi-tiered roof and beautifully carved gables, this is another classic example of the architecture associated with Lanna – which means “a million rice fields” – but it is the Phra Sihing Buddha image inside, after which the temple is named, that is the big attraction.

There is some argument as to whether this is the original or a copy of an image dating back to the 15th century, but there is no denying the serene expression on the face of this “lion-style” Buddha is a source of inspiration for meditators. Murals of legends covering the pavilion’s walls offer insights into Lanna culture.

In the daytime, a hubbub can often be heard coming from the classrooms and dormitories to the south and west of the temple compound, where a new generation of novice monks is setting out on its own dhamma trail. Buddhists believe dhamma is the force that upholds the natural order of the universe.

Do not be surprised if giggling novices corner you to practise their English.

2. Wat Suan Dok
While Wat Phra Singh has no official meditation classes, the other three temples on this tour do, beginning with a one-day, free, introductory class at Wat Suan Dok that is ideal for anyone mildly interested in focusing their mind. It takes place every Friday from 9.30am to 5pm, and visitors are welcome to drop by any afternoon for a Monk Chat.



A view of Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai; a student practising sitting meditation at Wat Ram Poeng. Photos: Ron Emmons



The serene expression on the face of this ‘lion-style’ Buddha is a source of inspiration for meditators

Most monks who join the informal conversations here are students at the Chiang Mai campus of the Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, set in the grounds of Wat Suan Dok, so they can probably spell long words but still need practice with their English pronunciation.

The Monk Chat and Meditation Retreat room is clearly marked, to the right just after what is the biggest viharn in Chiang Mai, which houses several standing and sitting Buddha figures.

Behind the viharn is a 48-metre tall golden stupa and a forest of smaller stupas that contain the remains of Chiang Mai royalty who ruled Lanna until it was subsumed into Siam in the late 19th century.

A smaller viharn beyond the meditation room has a highly revered, black Buddha image – the Phra Chao

Kao Tue – and bright, recently painted murals of traditional Lanna life.

3. Wat Umong
About 3km to the southwest of Wat Suan Dok is Wat Umong, from the entrance of which it is evident that this is a forest monastery: the entire grounds are shaded by trees that also provide wisdom; pithy aphorisms in English such as, “An ounce of practice is worth more than tons of preaching” – a kind of mantra for meditators – are nailed to them.

The meditation centre here offers three-day courses, with a strict schedule of practice from 5am to 9pm. Apart from that, the men’s and women’s dwellings look like a good spot to chill out in the forest for a few days.

Those who sign up for the course will no doubt hear the legend of the founding of the temple’s meditation tunnels, which were seemingly built by King Ku Na in the 14th century to accommodate his adviser, a senior monk named Thera Jan.

Apparently Jan would disappear into the forest to meditate for days or weeks at a time, frustrating the king when he needed to urgently consult his adviser. The tunnels were thus dug to facilitate Jan’s wandering tendencies while allowing the king to locate him when necessary.

The tunnels are the main attraction but the temple also has a large lake, where visitors like to feed the fish, and a memorial to leading 20th century Buddhist thinker Buddhadasa Bhikkhu on an island in the middle.

Other points of interest include a large stupa above the tunnels; relics of broken Buddhas collected from Phayao province, to the east of Chiang Mai; and a “spiritual theatre”, with artwork depicting Buddhist principles such as the impermanence of all things.

4. Wat Ram Poeng
This unassuming temple to the south of Wat Umong is home to the mother of all meditation courses, in this writer’s humble opinion. The 26-day course in Vipassana (“insight”) meditation begins gently, with practice in sitting and walking for a few hours each day, and ends with a commitment, or “determination”, to meditate non-stop for three days and nights.

This might seem an impossible task to a person who lives their life in the busy modern world, yet can be attained with constant practice.

Courses begin two or three times each month, registration is 500 baht (HK\$107) and although the dhamma is given for free, a donation towards food and lodging is only to be expected.

As well as the usual assembly hall, ordination hall, scripture library, lodgings for monks and meditators, the temple contains a striking, stepped stupa with Buddha images tucked into its niches.

The area around the stupa is a favourite spot in which to practise walking meditation, so if you encounter people dressed in white and walking in slow motion, you will know what they are up to.

After exploring the grounds of the temple and perhaps watching a few foreigners practising sitting or walking meditation, there is just one decision to make: do you head back to town and your life as it was, or do you enter the Foreign Meditation Office – where foreigners register for courses – and take a few more steps along the dhamma trail?



The meditation tunnels at Wat Umong were seemingly built by King Ku Na in the 14th century to accommodate his wandering adviser; detail from a mural in the Viharn Lai Kham, a pavilion in Wat Phra Singh temple.



OPINION

How ‘ultimate’ guides are usually the opposite of what they promise



Illustration: Davies Christian Surya

Peter Neville-Hadley
life@scmp.com

Hello, and welcome to the ultimate guide to ultimate guides, and particularly those of the travel sort.

These days almost every destination has several internet-based ultimate guides, which suggests that there is a lot of false advertising about, or many influencers in need of a dictionary.

On any topic there can, by definition, be only one ultimate guide.

But we’re using the word “ultimate” here in a special sense largely unknown outside the world of digital drivel. Not “the best achievable of its kind”, nor “something final or fundamental”, but “a brief and haphazard collection of material based on little or no personal experience or expertise, that has been given its title to attract more readers”.

Like most other ultimate guides, this one will also be brief, threadbare and unoriginal, and will equally fail to live up to its title. As elsewhere, use of the word

ultimate is intended only to attract your attention, or that of search engine algorithms.

There’s an ultimate guide to Australia’s most famous city that should properly be called “A Few Places My Dad Took Me When We Visited Sydney”.

There’s an ultimate guide to Cuba that’s really “Sketchy Notes on a Weekend in Havana Mostly Spent in Bars”.

There are several ultimate guides to Bali that should be called “A Few Bali Resorts That Gave Me Free Stays in Return for Coverage”, and there’s an ultimate guide to Beijing that, like ultimate guides to many other destinations, is just “Something I Assembled from Material on Other Sites but if You Click the Links to Book Anything I Get a Commission”.

Most ultimate guides to writing ultimate guides conclude – and this is revelatory – that good quality original content is the key to keeping readers’ attention. But despite advising originality, they mostly discuss ways of generating traffic, not of benefiting readers.

Their concerns are with search engine optimisation, use of key-

words in headings, and the right length so readers do not click away in boredom.

They insist, of course, that you keep it short, and seem not to have noticed that unless writing the ultimate guide to brevity, this is in direct conflict with what most of us would understand by ultimate: fundamental, comprehensive and best of its kind, and thus likely to require more than a paragraph or two.

Nevertheless they often spend a third of their space telling you what they’re going to tell you (“I’ve got you covered!”), and much of the rest failing to deliver on that promise. Then they waste further space begging you to subscribe, like, share or comment.

It’s hard to be original, you might argue, when writing an ultimate guide to Paris. It must mention the Louvre, the Champs-Élysées and the Eiffel Tower, for instance, and if these destinations weren’t mentioned it wouldn’t be ultimate. But then it’s equally not ultimate if it contains nothing else.

Taking a stand against time spent lining up for the Eiffel Tower’s lifts might make more

interesting reading. Or offering a different and crowd-avoiding approach (which does exist). Or describing alternative and less well-known high points from which to view the city’s roofo scape. But for that you actually have to do some real research.

Don’t claim expertise you don’t have. Promise us no more than what you can actually deliver

To be fair, the mistake here often lies not in the content, simplistic as much of it is, but in calling it ultimate.

Are you a beauty queen from Mississauga, Ontario, on a visit to China? “A Teenage Cheerleader Does Beijing”, written in your own voice, and covering only what you did and why you liked it would probably be a more interesting

read than a humdrum list of popular sights with descriptions lifted from Lonely Planet or somebody else’s ultimate guide.

Whether you’re a 35-year-old systems analyst from Cheshire, England, who has visited 42 countries, or a 70-year-old grandmother from Sai Kung travelling for the first time, let us know who you are and show us the destination through your own eyes.

Don’t claim expertise you don’t have. Promise us no more than what you can actually deliver. Avoid the standard vocabulary of look-at-me social media, which just makes you sound like everyone else and as if you’ve had too many sugary drinks.

Neither awesome (“I was impressed by it”), nor cool (“I liked it”), nor iconic (“I can’t think of anything else to say”) tell us anything concrete about a place or experience whatsoever. Abandon them all.

Ultimately, you should also abandon the word “ultimate”, especially when your content is just something cobbled together from a few search engine results. Like this piece.