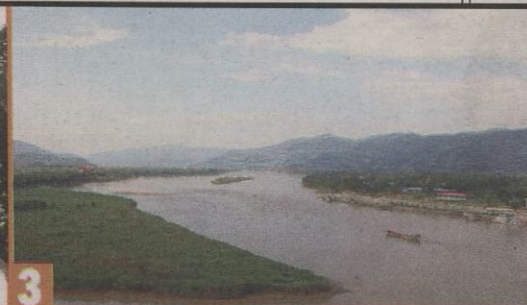




1



2



3

- 1 The Swiss-chalet inspired exterior of the royal palace in Doi Tung
- 2 The Wat Rong Khun, located 5 km south of Chiang Rai
- 3 The confluence of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar at the Golden Triangle

Down the opium tunnel

What does it take to resurrect an opium-addled town? A dedicated royal, Thailand's Chiang Rai will tell you

Aruna Rathod mirrorfeedback@timesgroup.com
TWEETS@_MumbaiMirror

On top of the Doi Tung mountain in Chiang Rai, northern Thailand, stands a chocolate-coloured villa that overlooks the city. It's both, a literal and metaphorical sentence. Built to be the summer palace, of the late Royal Highness Princess Srinagarindra, this Swiss-styled chalet was meant to be the base station from where the Princess Mother — mother of the present King of



Thailand— ran her Doi Tung Development Project (DTDP). It is believed to have transformed the fate of the city.

CAPITAL TO OPIUM HUB

Established in 1262 as the capital of the Lanna Kingdom (land of million rice fields) by King Meng Rai, Chiang Rai later gained notoriety as the hub of the region's opium trade. Located on the north-western border of Thailand, with Myanmar and Laos as neighbours, people from these countries (and China as well) crossed over to settle in Thailand.

Good soil, water from the river Mekong and its precious status as a border province made Chiang Rai an ideal hub for the illegal drugs business in the 18th century. Poppy was cultivated abundantly and opium replaced rice as the primary cash crop.

RESURRECTION

In 1972 when Princess Srinagarindra was visiting Chiang Mai (the neighbouring city, which later became the Lanna capital), she was reportedly disturbed by the decay in Chiang Rai. It is said that she then decided to restore the city to its lost glory. For this, she set up the Doi Tung Development Project (DTDP).

Started in 1988, the Doi Tung project covered approximately 15,000 hectares, comprising 29 villages of six ethnic communities — Akha, Lahu, Shan, Leu, Lawa, and Chinese. Over the years, the lucrative opium fields were replaced by coffee and tea plantations and macadamia trees in an effort to cleanse the area. The tea, coffee and nuts were sold to tourists under the Doi Tung brand, offering villagers an alternative livelihood.

« The palace gardens are in full bloom through the year

TRAVEL GOING OFF TRACK

Phase I of the project concentrated on providing basic healthcare, including drug-rehabilitation, developing infrastructure such as roads and reservoirs, and reforesting the area. The second phase helped to create the brand Doi Tung and earn income through food, handicrafts, horticulture and tourism. Outlets at tourist spots offer woven fabric and clothing, handmade carpets, ceramics and paper for sale. The tourist is even allowed to visit local artisans at their mini-factories to witness the making of the artefacts first-hand.

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

However, Chiang Rai continues to try and learn from its history rather than erase it. To this effect, there's a Hall of Opium museum, a part of the Doi Tung Development Project. Housed in a modern building, surrounded by dense greenery, the museum is built such that visitors must pass the Tunnel of Torture — which serves to instill in the visitor, the fear of opium by emphasising its ill-effects. The five-minute walk culminates into a short film that traces the history of opium back to 5,000 years.

Two floors are dedicated to a multimedia exhibition on opium. Interesting, and shocking, is a gallery of artists and famous people who died due to drug overdose. The tour leaves you informed, sad and a little disturbed — but the spacious 'hall of silence' — deliberately placed at the end allows you to sit and reflect.

Once you make a trip to the Hall of Opium, it is imperative to see how close the border is — about two kilometres away is the Golden Triangle on roads

» CONTINUED ON PAGE 36