

Devils' Delight



The garden where *Retribution* is less than *Divine*

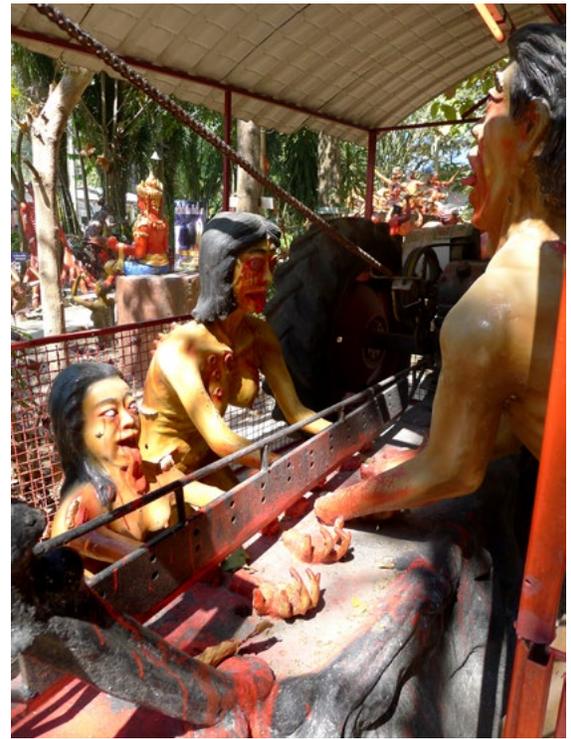
With my eye to the viewfinder of my camera, photographing two horny-headed demons sawing a woman in half with a devilishly fierce two-man felling saw, I sense a frisson of terror shiver through me at the thought that the two-metre high chap with blood dripping from his fangs overseeing the job might be eyeing me up from behind, weighing up whether I should even be allowed to get as far as the book where my life's deeds and misdeeds are recorded or suffer his painful caress immediately. I move on rapidly, passing a man with an engorged penis that looks like a baby whale in the middle of a blood-bath, not wishing to know what he got up to in his earthly life – just in case I'd done the same!

Wat Mae Kaet Noi, north of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, is one of twenty hell gardens in the country, and the

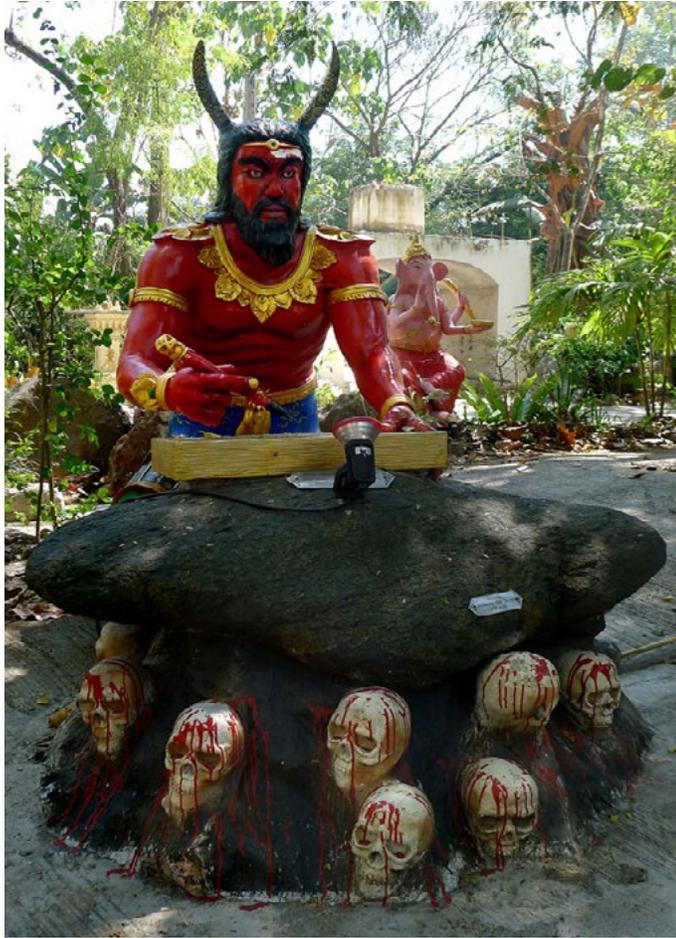
'surreal tapestry of pain' conjured up here will give you more heebie-jeebies than all the other nineteen put together. Wat Mae Kaet Noi brings modern technology into portraying the whole infernal hog of the terrifying treatment that awaits you for your earthly indiscretions.

Did you peddle drugs in the here and now, or more strictly speaking, the there and then? If so expect to be ridden over by a Hell's Devil with a horse's head, a fan on his motorbike like the wheel on Boadicea's chariot gouging out your innards. Not nice to animals and argued a lot with your parents? Getting mashed between mechanical rollers is just too good for you m'lud.

At the Buddhist version of the Pearly Gates instead of appearing before the benignly-bearded St. Peter the newly-departed have to face the fiery-red Phya Yom, the Death King. It is Phya Yom's



The hell garden's role is as a visual guide to the benefits of morality, illustrating the terrors awaiting you in Naraka, the 136 fiery pits of Buddhist hell, in the mildly prosaic manner of having boiling oil poured down your throat if you were an alcoholic, or your tongue hacked vertically for lying.



consideration of your good deeds neatly inscribed on a gold plate, against your badduns, scribbled on a scrap of dog skin. If the dog skin gets the vote off you go to the fiery pits of Naraka to atone for your deeds, accompanied by a demon who might have the head of a pig if he wallowed in corruption in life – which adds another connotation to the phrase ‘pigs at a trough,’ – a duck’s if you were always starting fights, a rabbit if you were the jealous type, and any number of other animalistic forms depending on what your lifestyle had been.

You may have thought that Buddhism was all saffron-robed monks and chanting, as far from the hellfire-and-damnation of Christianity as you could get, but even Buddha himself was pretty graphic about the lesser joys of hell in his teachings in the Devaduta Sutta.

The hell-wardens lay him down and slice him with axes. Then they hold him feet up and head down and slice him with adzes. Then they plunge him into a red-hot copper cauldron...he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings.

Not surprising, really, that he feels painful, racking and piercing feelings given the moderately less than tender treatment he’s been put through.

I continue my Dantean stroll, flicking through the memory to see if I’ve committed any of the sins

that will entitle me to having my hands removed by a three-metre saw driven by tractor engine (many of the retributions seem to involve saws of some kind), or boiled in a vat along with a dozen other miscreants. I notice that some of the devils have red light bulbs for eyes. You are invited to drop a ten baht coin into a slot to get the full *son et lumiere*. I do, and I’m entertained by the screams of the punished as they are forced into the bubbling cauldrons. Wat Mae Kaet Noi must be a helluva place at night when the light bulb eyes glow with pleasure, illuminating the ghastly punishments the grinning horned demons inflict on the wicked, accompanied by their terrified screams.

I pass a statue that sends a shudder all men will relate to. Severing a penis in retribution for its wandering is common place these days, but having it cleaved vertically by a woman with an enormous tongue that transmutes itself into a cobra’s head is enough to keep the trouser snake firmly tucked away.

Having worked my way through Hell I arrive at Heaven’s Gate, where smiling faced kids in school uniform listen enraptured to a pair of instructors in khaki – but before I get too complacent I see behind them a group of colleagues who strayed from the path and are hoisted on enormous hooks.

Eventually, though, I’m in Heaven, a peaceful garden of reclining maids with babes suckling contentedly on the breast, gilded Buddhas nestled in cascading deep pink bougainvillea, nymphet priestesses and smiling couples united in heavenly happiness.

At least you can be comforted by the thought that unlike in the Christian tradition, where Hell is for eternity, Naraka is only for doing your penance and sorting out your Kama for the next life. Even if it takes lives as a lizard, a goat and a braying mule to get back to human form, you at least have the chance of working your way to enlightenment, at which point you are safe for eternity from a revisit to the fiery furnaces – even though it’s probably taken you a fair bit of that eternity to get you there.

Wat Mae Kaet Noi. 15 km north of Chiang Mai. Route 1001 from Chiang Mai; immediately before Mae Jo University turn right. The temple is approx. 3km on right from the University. A green songthaew from Wararot Market will take you there.