

# Bangkok Post

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## TOURISM BOOST

Mae Fah Luang  
University poised to set  
a new benchmark for  
tourism in Chiang Rai  
**Horizons, Page H1**





THURSDAY ♦ AUGUST 4, 2005

**T**he Mae Fah Luang Centre for Learning is a centre of learning in Muang District, a pristine mountain area. It would transcend the Triangle where the border is. Blessed with panoramic views of forested parks and gardens, buildings, sports and breathtaking mountain views. "It's a town in itself. Here are stores, sports fields, public cafeterias," said Rachana, who drove me around the area. It's hard to imagine that long ago was a deforested area who brought serious damage to the environment.

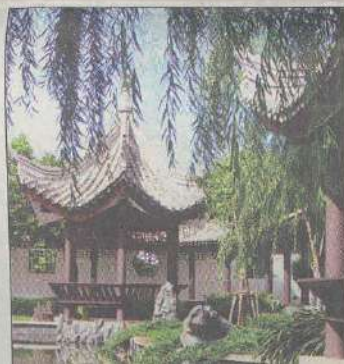


# Horizons

THURSDAY ♦ AUGUST 4, 2005



## re, travel education



The Mae Fah Luang University (MFLU) in Chiang Rai is more than a centre of learning. Sitting resplendently on a sprawling 5,000-rai in Muang District of this northern province, it's surrounded by pristine mountain scenery. It was conceived in such a way that its appeal would transcend students and reach tourists visiting the Golden Triangle where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Burma meet.

Blessed with panoramic views of vast green fields, winding roads, forested parks and gardens, the MFLU is a perfect blend of modern buildings, sports and recreational centre set against the backdrop of breathtaking mountain scenery.

"It's a town in itself. Here you can find everything you want: convenience stores, sports fields, public areas, recreation centre, banking services and cafeterias," said Rachadaporn Pimprapan, its public relations officer as she drove me around the campus.

It's hard to imagine the ground where the campus sits today not very long ago was a deforested patch at the mercy of illegal loggers and farmers who wrought severe damage to the environment and local ecology.

The plan to build the university there was first mooted in 1997. "If we had let encroachment continue, the damage would have been more severe. The idea to build a university there was also a way to restore the land and return it to its rightful owners, the public," said Dr Wanchai Sirichana, president of the university who pioneered the idea and also saw it come to fruition.

The university is separate from the Mae Fah Luang Foundation in the same province. It was named in honour of the Princess Mother who made Chiang Rai her home and initiated several development projects to help underprivileged people.

Apart from its role on the academic side, Dr Vanchai aims to turn MFLU into a trendsetter for tourism development in Chiang Rai.

"For many years now, Chiang Rai hasn't had a major tourism development. The province has been relying on the same old attractions like the Golden Triangle and royally-sponsored projects on Doi Tung to draw visitors. The opening of the university should mark the start of a new era in promoting tourism in the province," he said.



# Nature, travel and education



ABOVE  
Chinese garden in the middle of the campus.

MAIN PICTURE  
The Mae Fah Luang University is destined to become Chiang Rai's latest tourist landmark.

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Since the MFLU, like other universities around the country, is no longer privy to financial support from the government, Dr Wanchai has had to devise other ways to raise money for the university. To that end, he has launched a reforestation campaign under which 50,000 trees have already been planted in and around the campus, and it will be maintained in the years to come. The idea is to give the campus a park theme with landscaped lawns and gardens to attract visitors.

"We want it to be not only an academic institution but also a place of recreation where people can come to learn, rest and relax," said Dr Vanchai.

Self-drive tourists will appreciate its winding roads that offer breathtaking mountain view.

That aside, its Sirindhorn Chinese Language and Cultural Centre is a must-see attraction. Built with support from the Chinese government, it boasts genuine Chinese architecture and exotically landscaped gardens and pools that look more like paintings on canvas than for real. It charges



# horizons

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## DISCOVER **Thailand**

Positioning itself as a tourist attraction as well as a centre of learning, the Mae Fah Luang University is poised to set a new benchmark for the development of tourism in Chiang Rai

Story by  
JABINEE KUMAR





# Cultural centre and spa add to Chiang Rai's tourism potential



The beautifully landscaped garden at the Mae Fah Luang University's Sirindhorn Chinese Language and Cultural Centre makes it a perfect place to learn Chinese; the serene atmosphere is one of the centre's oriental charms; and a view of the university at sunset.

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...a 10-baht entry fee. The centre reflects strong Thai-Chinese culture, cultivated by HRH Princess Sirindhorn, an avid scholar of Chinese art and culture. It will soon introduce courses in Chinese for which it plans to recruit students from the mainland. From languages to history and politics, students can enroll for a wide selection of courses. In due course, it's expected to become the prime centre for Chinese studies in the entire northern region.

To further spur the tourism industry in Chiang Rai, the university hopes to promote the province as a medical spa

## PRINCESS MOTHER'S FINGERPRINTS ALL OVER THE PROVINCE

Getting around Chiang Rai town, you can rest assured you won't come across anything that would make your heart beat faster. The province has somehow managed to retain its tranquility, which in fact is its genuine charm. "People here still lead an easy-going lifestyle. They don't go shopping on weekends but rather go or eat out with their family," said Narcerat Wisespoka, the sales and public relations manager of Dusit Island Resort, a native of the province. Tourism development has been pretty slow. There was a time when Chiang Rai received plenty of attention, with a large number of Thais travelling there to visit royally-sponsored development projects on Doi Tung. That was when Princess Mother lived

there. She had made Chiang Rai her home. "During that time, Chiang Rai was very busy. A lot of famous personalities came here to work for the Princess Mother's projects," recalled Narcerat. After the Princess Mother passed away, Chiang Rai hasn't seen any major tourist developments, although the projects initiated by her — and run by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation — are still going strong. One of them is the Hall of Opium ([www.goldentrianglepark.com](http://www.goldentrianglepark.com)), a museum in Chiang Saen District. It takes visitors into the history of opium, its influence on mankind and society, the Opium Wars and other events using state-of-the-art multimedia technology. The tour lasts an hour and a half.

Another interesting but not so well-known attraction is Rai Mae Fah Luang in Muang District. The 150-rai facility also run by the foundation aspires to be the art and cultural centre of Chiang Rai. It showcases the cultures of northern Thailand, Lanna in particular. Points of interest at Rai Mae Fah Luang include Haw Kham Luang, Haw Kham Noi, and Haw Kaew which features Lanna architecture. The Haw Kam Luang exhibits Lanna cultural heritage such as ancient Buddha images and carvings, while Haw Kaew features a collection of teakwood carvings. When in Chiang Rai make it a point to visit the Wat Rong Khun temple, a creation of national artist Chalermchai Kositpipat. The temple is an architectural wonder. Also visit the Mae Sai Thai-Burmese border market.

Previously it used to be a small market but these days it's much bigger as a result of the influx of cheap Chinese goods from the Burmese side of the border. Visitors can cross the Thai border to Thachilek on the Burmese side where they can hunt for cheap pirated VCDs and copycats of brandname products.



The sculpture of Princess Mother at Rai Mae Fah Luang.

Doi Tung Royal Project is still a major attraction. It has a state-of-the-art museum which highlights the life and works of HRH the Princess Mother in an entertaining manner. After visiting these attractions you will understand better why Chiang Rai is unique.

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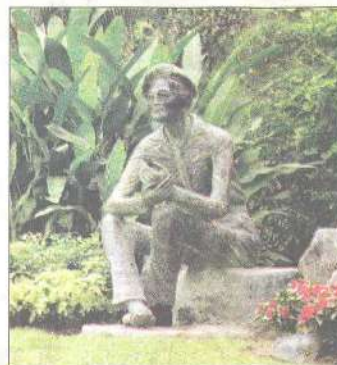
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### Getting there

From Bangkok, THAI and Air Asia have direct flights to Chiang Rai. For booking, browse [www.thairways.com](http://www.thairways.com) (Tel. 02-628-2000, 02-545-2000) and [www.airasia.com](http://www.airasia.com) (Tel. 02-515-9999), respectively. If you don't like to fly, there are daily bus services to Chiang Rai leaving from the Mor Chit Northern Bus Terminal.

### Getting around Chiang Rai

Getting around town, the most convenient way is to hire a tuk-tuk. They usually charge 400 baht for a half-day tour which is long enough to cover temples, many of which have the unique Lanna-style architecture. Car rentals cost 800-1,500 baht per day (excluding petrol) depending on the type and condition of vehicle. You can rent a car from many rental services operating in Chiang Rai town.



ABOVE Mae Sai border market bustles with traders and tourists.

LEFT The Haw Kaew Building at Rai Mae Fah Luang in Muang District of Chiang Rai preserves authentic Lanna architecture.

