

Rubber, Rubber Everywhere



Before we say good-bye to southern Thailand, let me return for a moment to an observation I made earlier about the abundance of rubber trees in this part of the country. The place is lousy with rubber trees. You can barely turn around without running into rubber trees, which leads me to pose this question: If I were to lose control of my car, leave the highway and strike one of these rubber trees, would I bounce off? I shied away from testing that proposition, but it certainly is worth considering nonetheless. I will have to get back to you on that.

It's not as though southern Thailand is the only place where one finds rubber trees. It's true that the climate, with its abundant rainfall, has traditionally provided ideal conditions for their growth, but we have increasingly seen rubber trees growing in other parts of the country, even in northern Thailand. Rubber prices on the world market have been reasonably good and that has spurred increased planting as well. Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia account for 72% of the world's rubber production.

The thing that struck me most about these rubber plantations was that as we drove by, we would see these rows between the trees which seemed to go on forever, often abutting a hill or mountain. The visual sensation was this dark tunnel opening up on the other end --- sort of a light at the end of the tunnel. I never really got the shot I wanted, but the one I have will give you some idea of this.

The trees grow quite fast in this climate and in as little as five or six years they become productive. They will keep producing for 26 – 30 years. Once the trees have been cut they can be used in the manufacture of high-end furniture. They are valued for their dense grain, minimal shrinkage, attractive color and acceptance of different finishes. These trees are prized as an "environmentally friendly" wood, as these they are get cut down at the end of their latex-producing cycle.



One of Cindy's relatives --- one is hard pressed to find someone around here who isn't one of her relatives --- has a plantation and we went over there one day and were shown just how this latex gathering process works. Cutting the tree, essentially causing a wound, starts the latex flowing. A special knife is used to remove a small slice of the bark. You can see the splices which have been removed above the current one. These cuts are generally made in the early morning hours and the latex slowly oozes its way into a cup or a coconut shell placed below a small



spout at the end of the cut. Half to three quarters of the cup will be filled in a single day. When the flow ceases, a new cut is made. The cuts progress down and around the tree. Once the latex has been collected, the tapper brings it back to the house and adds some additional compounds to the solution to make it congeal. The tapper then works the solution and finally feeds it into what looks like one of those old wringers washers until it becomes a sheet that resembles a small throw rug about an inch thick. These sheets are then taken and sold to processors.

Finally, a shot of what the well dressed rubber tapper is wearing these days. Well, not all rubber tappers look *this* good. Hubba hubba!

You Can't Even Throw a Stone ...

I've already referred to the fact that Cindy has relatives all over Khanom. In fact, I would wager that one would be hard pressed to throw a stone around here without hitting one of them. And it's not just the more obvious relatives. They seem to exist at various levels. There are the easily associated biological relatives, of course. But then you also have the "pseudo" relatives who may be friends that have assumed relative status. One example of this is your relationship to someone in a friend's age group. I pretty much have been labeled "Uncle Bill". Thank goodness they have not chosen to refer to me as grandpa. We will explore this in greater depth another time.

We did, in fact, come across at least one of Cindy's relatives that she didn't know was her relative. On another occasion, I heard her on the phone talking about someone else. As most people go by nicknames, real first names are not often used and last names are too long, she was trying to identify another person. When the name didn't ring a bell, she attempted to refer to person based on whose cousin or nephew it was. When that didn't work, she tried to zero in on where this person lived in the village. It must have gone something like this, "You know Noi don't you? She's the cousin of Lek. You know, the one that lives down by the river." I wish I could remember all the permutation, but I found this whole conversation hysterical. Eventually the other person did know who Cindy was talking about.