



## On the beautiful Mekong

*The Spirit of the Naga is omnipresent.*

*The people of Nakhon Phanom present the Naga with a spectacle of Rua Fai / boats lighted -- seeking to live in harmony with the Naga.*

*This describes events in October 2012 (not much has changed over the centuries)!*



# What is the Naga?

The Naga-spirit is common in all the Buddhist countries of Asia, and in many countries the Naga concept has been merged with local traditions of wise serpents and/or dragons.

The legend of the Naga is an especially strong and sacred belief held by Thai and Lao people living along the Mekong River.

According to folklore, the Naga is neither good nor evil, but rather mischievous and finicky, demanding respect from humans and capable of disastrous interferences if reverence is not offered from time to time.



Most Buddhist Temples along the Mekong will have at least one image/reminder of a Naga.

Garlands of flowers are offered to the Naga at the port for crossing the Mekong in Nakhon Phanom.

The Naga also dominates the lights along the Mekong walkway in Nakhon Phanom.



# Rua Fai to please the Naga

Now that we know the powers of the Naga – it is easier to understand that centuries ago, the people living in this region (now called Nakhon Phanom) came to believe that at an auspicious moment of the year they should honour the Naga.



They created a festival called the Rua Fai (boat lighted) this was/is celebrated on the night of the full moon at the end of the monsoon season.

The belief is that by creating this visual delight (i.e. showing the Naga their respect), a **Happy** Naga would make their life a little easier.

Each year for centuries they have been making their Rua Fai for the Naga of the Mekong.



# Rua Fai traditional-technology

In recent years, as more people learned of this beautiful event, people come from far away to watch this Rua Fai pageant on the Mekong River.



Fortunately, the local people have remained true to their values, and they continue to make their Rua Fai -- as they did centuries ago.

Perhaps the most wonderful part of this event is that the modern/global world has not changed the tradition of the Rua Fai Festival to honour the Naga.

In case you are wondering ...

The boats average around 50 meters in length (150 feet) -- and the lights are burning candles (as they have been for millennium).

The same skills that made the first Rua Fai are still used by craftsmen today ...

This made me very curious ...

**How are the Rua Fai made?**



# "Know-how" -- lasting for centuries

The region around Nakhon Phanom is one of the poorest in per-capita-revenue in Thailand.

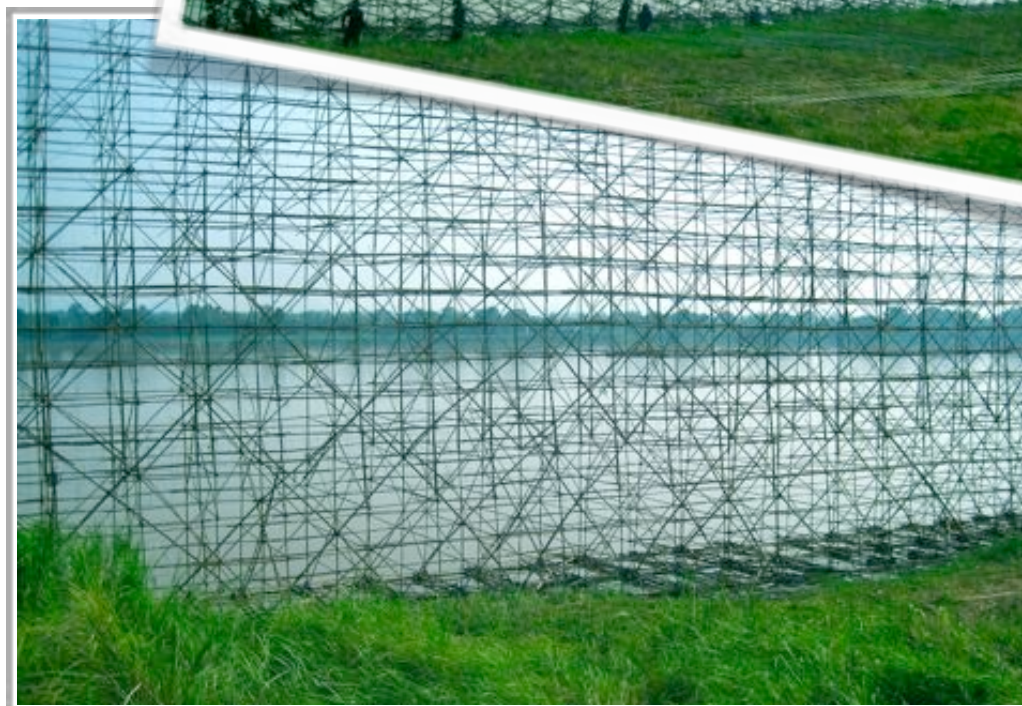
On the other hand, in a recent study, the United Nations found that it was the **"Happiest Province in Thailand"**!

Both of the above contribute to the long-lasting tradition of the Rua Fai:

- The farmers have never invested any money into making their Rua Fai, various communities in Nakhon Phanom gather together to construct a Rua Fai
- The locals work collectively, each contributing that which they have to assure that their Rua Fai will please the Naga. *The United Nations study emphasized that strong community links are an important part of "Happiness".*

The construction of the Rua Fai starts a couple of weeks in advance and the farmers use the natural resources that they have around them. Since bamboo grows abundantly, it is used for the basic structure and the people of this region are skilled craftsmen.

The Rua Fai are constructed in the exact same way that they were centuries ago!



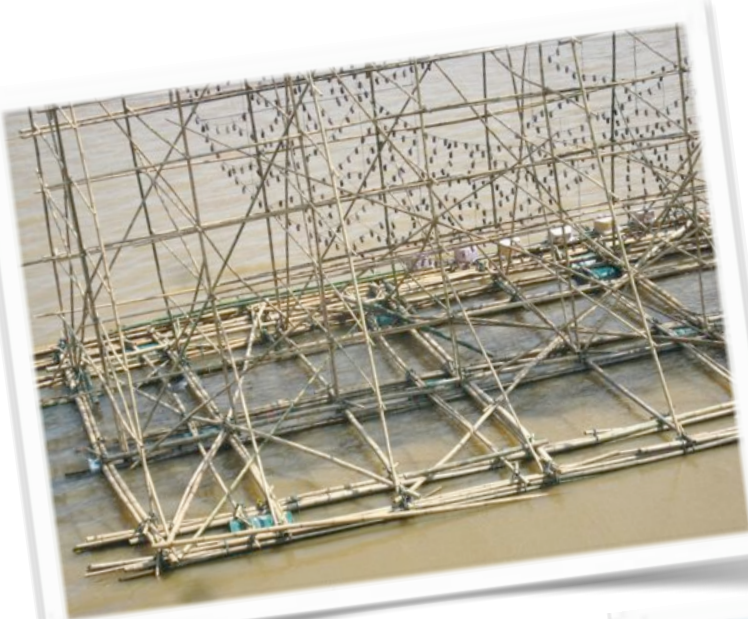
Before turning the page - maybe you want to guess (as I did) what they use to make the theme in lights on these Rua Fai?

I was totally wrong in my guess about how the lights were made.

IF you are clever (or a farmer) you might figure out how they make their Rua Fai glow ... *then you do not need to read the following pages.*

# The Rua Fai needs to float & be beautiful

As is obvious in the pictures – each boat expresses a message through the lights on the Rua Fai.



When the basic shape for the Rua/boat is finished, they then use heavy vines that are wound throughout the structure to create an outline for the visual and lights.

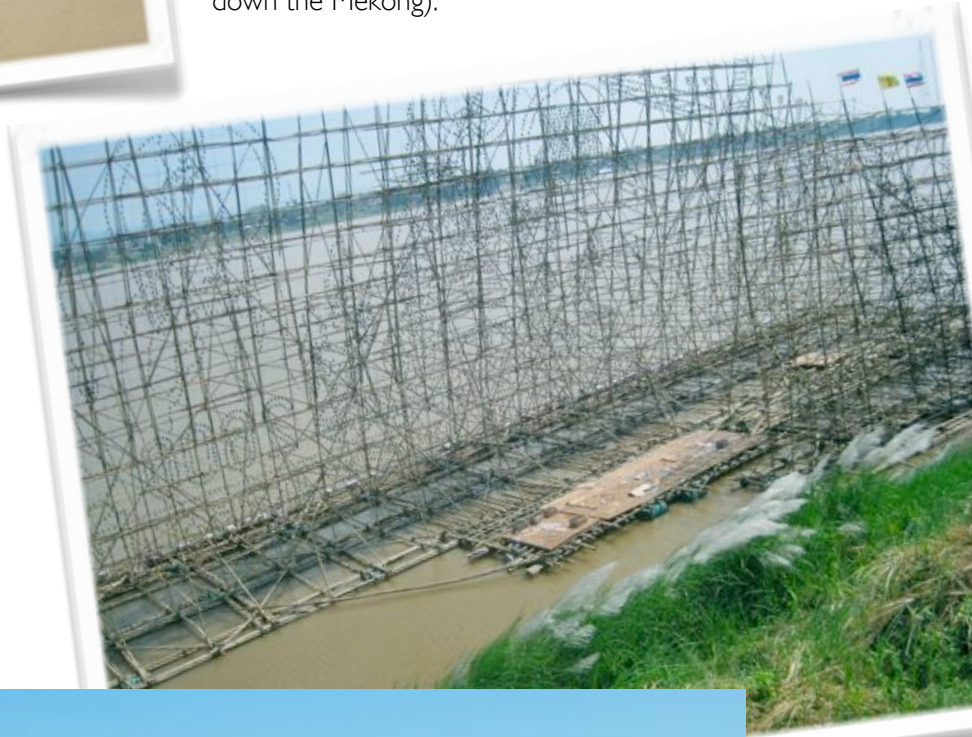
At this time they also build the platforms so that the Rua Fai will float -- and also a place for the oarsmen that must row/ guide these Rua Fai down the Mekong.

Only in daylight you can see:

- the barrels (normally used in their fields), which they place under the bamboo, so that the entire structure floats
- the small raft that is also attached to the Rua Fai (on this, there around 20 oarsmen that row and guide the boat down the Mekong).

Obviously, the farmers now have quite a huge structure – and the only costs have been their own manpower/work and resources from their region.

...everything is ready for the lights.

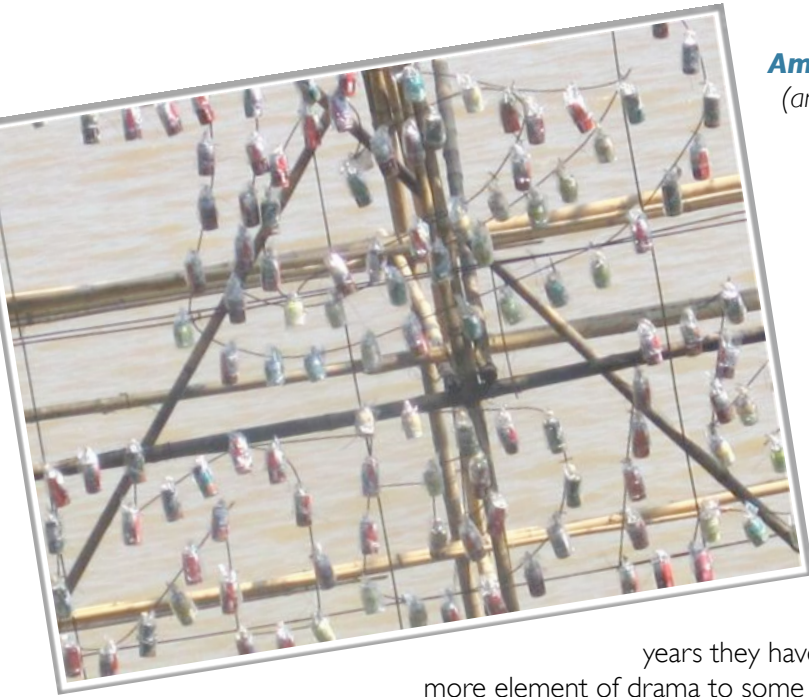


# How to make light?

Obviously -- to impress the Naga, night-lights are needed and as you might guess, they did NOT purchase "made in China" Christmas-lights to place on their handcrafted/homemade Rua Fai.

Again, the ingenuity of the farmers is almost as amazing as the beautiful Rua Fai...

The lights on these boats are made from re-cycled tin cans (coke, beer, ect.). A wick is put in the can with some coconut oil-mixture that burns slowly. These cans are attached to the vine that creates the outline/visual on the Rua Fai.



**Amazingly beautiful – amazingly simple!**  
(and of course, much more...)



In recent years they have added one more element of drama to some of the Rua Fai -- beautiful fireworks displays!

It all becomes even more awesome when one considers that the fireworks are launched from a **raft full of tin-cans (full of fuel) hanging on dried vines and bamboo ...**



Most important - it seems that the Naga is impressed and has blessed the Nakhon Phanom province with an abundance of **Happiness!**

# Nakhon Phanom, Rua Fai and the Naga

## The “Happiest place in Thailand”!

As is clear, respect for the Naga has been well-worth the effort for the hard-working people of Nakhon Phanom.



We can hope that even with the changes/ globalization coming to the communities in Nakhon Phanom -- they will continue their important tradition of bringing together the community to build a Rua Fai to honour the Naga spirit living in the beautiful Mekong River:

Festival of the Rua Fai is held every year on the night of the full moon, at the end of the Monsoon season -- this usually means, the last full moon in the month of October.



*Text & photos;*  
Sheba Suphannahong  
[www.indochinapeninsula.org](http://www.indochinapeninsula.org)  
[www.sriphanomtours.com](http://www.sriphanomtours.com)



*"The Mekong River, from source to sea"; Odyssey Maps*