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# Kayak Racing in Southern Thailand

by Joanne Schwartz

The arms of Krabi in Southern Thailand were wide open with welcomes to paddlers from six countries that came to inaugurate a new series of kayak races in late November, 1996. At the Krabi Berk Fah Andaman Festival we enjoyed hearty banquets of five-star food (spicy sauces on the side, please). We trained and raced with local students, racing for the first time, as well as national team members and active racers from South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the USA.

Our races meandered around highly vegetated karst formation islands poking straight up out of the Andaman Sea. Except for a very small window of about 5° out to the Indian Ocean, the entire coast is protected by islands or by Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Our seas were smooth so all we needed to correct for was a tidal current. Our training the day prior at the same hour of the day let us understand the current and add appropriate corrections in our course. Fortunately, overcast skies and a flexible tube drinking system let us push hard and remain relatively comfortable in the almost equatorial heat and humidity. We had paddled the magnificent upper end of the bay the week before, though, so we were well acclimated and certainly very happy.

Doug and I entered the Marathon races, 30 km and 15 km. Locally-designed and constructed kayaks were provided, surf skis for the longer race and touring kayaks for the shorter race. We were fortunate that Steve Cole, who recently won the Molokai Channel single race in Hawaii, was "in town" and could join us on the USA team. He won with a 3:09:16 time, edging out a favored paddler from Hong Kong with a 3:09:26 time. Doug placed fifth, following by 17 minutes. I came in fourth, about 18 minutes behind a very focused and strong young woman from Chaing Mai, Thailand. Those who arrived at the finish line before me were all half my age, but the challenge was certainly fun. Perhaps next year there will be a "recreational masters" classification and I'll do better. It was great to race with dolphins to the side and frigate birds soaring overhead.

Other races were 15 km junior divisions, single and double, as well as an entire day of K1 Olympic class sprints. These took place in the city's central harbor, flanked with traditional long-tail boats dressed with dragon heads. These are fishing craft hand rowed from a standing position with crossed oars. Highly decorated motor boats with musical and choral groups were also zig-zagging around the harbor to entertain the thousands of local people, dignitaries, media and paddlers.

All of a kayak trip is not paddling. We hiked in the jungles, relaxed in natural hot springs, watched birds (hornbills, frigates, parrots and many more), reptiles (monitor lizards, iguanas, green colored vipers and a host of others), insects (butterflies, centipedes and all manner of crawlies) and mushrooms (from dead man's fingers to several edibles). And, of course, we had lots of opportunity to mingle and talk with local Thai residents at our inns, on the streets, in the market place, and at the race activities. Paddling too was exciting. From our boats we watched monkeys and macaques in the trees overhanging the sea. Huge monitor lizards plopped into the water from limbs high overhead. And we explored the most intriguing sea caves we have ever enjoyed. Long, low meandering tunnels opened vistas to stalactites and other sparkling formations before they opened into small, sunny bays inside the islands themselves. The colors and sounds were always intense!

This first Thailand kayaking race was hosted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Krabi Province, the Thai Canoe and Rowing Club, the local Rotary Chapter, and the owner of the Phra Nang Inn who was in large part responsible for coordinating the kayaking events. Watch this site for info on future opportunities for paddling in this beautiful country.

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17855 Sky Park Circle #A, Irvine, California 92614  
949-261-0200 or 800-SOUTHWIND (800-768-8494)

<http://www.southwindkayaks.com>

[info@southwindkayaks.com](mailto:info@southwindkayaks.com)