

## Song Kran in Hua Hin



Refreshing breeze at the dawn in Hua Hin never fails to gently wake up the senses of her people to another day of the tropical tranquillity. From the direction the first sunlight glimpses the horizon, the vintage sound of a train grinding off the town's artistically acclaimed train station drifts through the beachy air.

One would be likely to identify April 13 as another blissful day in this peaceful beach destination, if not reminded by puddles of water dotting the roads and alleys all over the town.

On April 13th of every year such mundane thing as puddles of water on the streets reflect the multi-faceted Thai spirits through the traditional New Year festivities known as *Songkran*, the kingdom's most anticipated cultural event.

Those puddles of water are the last of rowdy dousing that gets kickstarted around the midnight of April 12 by teenagers who are armed with machine-gun sized water pistols on their speedy motorbikes.

Nowadays, Songkran is best known for its wild water splashing, the reason for it being dubbed *the Water Festival* in English.

After one long year of nervous anticipation, many Thais do not waste even a minute of the opportunity to open the friendly fire with their water pistols among themselves.

Aqua battles break out as soon as the clock strikes the first minute of April 13. Some even see a premature beginning in the Songkran Eve.



People trolling on curbsides on 12th are not aware they already are off the safe zone until they get splashed by house owners who have turned their 200-liter water buckets into Songkran-style tanks and gardening hoses into mortar equivalents.



Though wild and raucous as it has become, Songkran factually traces back to a whimsical myth of the Indian origin. The tale carries a spiritual background hinting the ancient faith in the compassionate divinity. Rituals and ceremonies growing out from the belief are originally supposed to be conducted in gentle and restrained manners.

The Songkran festivities were initiated back in the days as the authority's subtle tool to keep its people alerted on the timing of the kingdom's New Year. Established as the prime public event, Songkran holds significance both in the religious and household spheres.



Today, Songkran is a three-day event and a long holiday, lasting from April 13 to 15, with the first day making the heyday filled with dignified ceremonies alongside the signature splashing spree. The Thais on their countrywide days-off take to the street and let themselves go.

Shying away from the watery chaos, most shops and food places are closed on 13th. Some reopen sometime on the last two days, when the frenzy starts to wear out.

The early morning of April 13 each year sees the traditional face of Songkran in Hua Hin awaking on Petchkasem Road, which crosses past the front of Hua Hin Temple.



Fronted by a Buddha image, a saffron line comprising hundreds of monks from multiple monasteries across the town makes the way out through the temple gate. They split into two rows and descend towards each edge of the road, which is lined up over 100 meters with tables covered with white clothes provided for the Buddhists gathering to do merits on the auspicious day. A beachside residential community close by also puts on the same kind of group food offerings on the seaside.

All of the food offered is packed and canned products such as milk, canned fish, instant noodles and Thai desserts. The food makes provisions for young novices who are ordained during their two-month summer school breaks. The novices mostly are in the ages ranging between 10 and 15 years old. [Illus: Novices with baskets]

Among other traits that leave visitors to Thailand tremendously thrilled are the gratitude and the respect the people have for their elderly. The fact that the first day of Songkran, April 13, is billed the Family Day as well as the Day of the Elderly makes a shining example for it.

Family members of all ages engage in the *Rod Nam Dum Hua*, the hand bathing of the elderly, the ceremony where the seniors have their hands sprinkled gently and, in return, bless their offspring good lucks for the year to come.

Despite its beauty and heartwarming meaning, the Rod Nam Dam Hua gets swept away through time. In developed parts of the country, it has gone into the

oblivion of the fast-paced urbanization.



However, thanks to the Municipality of Hua Hin, the ceremony is still in its presence in this peaceful town. Annually run in the Pone Kingpeth Park, which serves as the outdoor city hall, the Rod Nam Dum Hua finds a survival passage and gets itself etched down in the awareness of Hua Hin's young generations.

"It moves me that my offspring carries on the tradition. They live up what I, their grandmother, was doing back in the day," the 57-year-old Suree from Aang Nam Village speaks of the thrill of her family's practicing the Rod Nam Dum Hua.

Following the celebration of the Thai gratitude, glide the moments of glitter. As attendees of the Municipality-hosted traditional Songkran ceremonies are enjoying the perfectly prepared spicy green paste chicken curry *Kaeng Keow Wan Kai* and vegetable stir-fry provided complimentary by the host on the right side of the park, ecstatic drum beats break out from the street. The exuberantly embellished Songkran procession is ready to take off.

Seven adorned wagons powered by pickup trucks driven underneath, each measuring about three-meter tall and four-meter long, fill up the street in front of Pone Kingpeth Park.

Bedecked with magnificent royal-themed contingents such as elaborately carved gold teakwood thrones, layered golden umbrellas, white elephant models and even real elephants, the procession gracefully flaunts its glittery grandeur that shines right even into the sights of observers standing at a far distance from the park.

Each wagon is decorated into the shape of royal carriage to be laden with a beautiful young dame dressed as a Songkran Fairy, coupled with a good-looking young man or a cute little girl to keep her entourage. The ornamentations are exquisite with replicas of royal valuables and amazing jobs of flower arrangement.

Be prepared for the glam and grandeur that escalates each single year, though. The Municipality of Hua Hin aspires to keep bettering the festivities in each and every aspect. This year's arrangements of free concerts performed by most requested artists such as the prince of Thai country music Chakkrapun "Got" Arbkawnburi, pop rock sensation Kala and hot new wave Endorphin attest to the Municipality's determination to bring the happiness to the people of Hua Hin.

"Each year we make it bigger and better. We have successfully drawn in sponsorships from the private sector, which has enabled us to present to our people what they want and ask for," says the Mayor of Hua Hin Municipality Sirapun Kamolpramot.

The prestigious Songkran procession advances through wild water fights all through the way it makes around the downtown as if a finest opera performed in front of loudest graffiti-filled backdrops.

A burly, flat-chested thirty-something guy in gender-bending outfits and a baby blue afro wig turns a dirty orange ice box situated right in the center of Dechanuchit Road, the nightly location for the Hua Hin bazaar, into his solo stage, bouncing to a one-time Japanese smash hit that plays in the one-track-repeat mode for eternity.



A gaggle of teenagers, mostly guys, on Sasong Road, the most zestful site of Hua Hin's splashing scene, blast hardcore music out of their gigantic, deejay-spun sound system while bobbing their heads to it so hard it would not even be startling if their skulls would just unwittingly fall off the necks. Several teens get themselves mounted on motorbikes and roam the streets just to get soaked and smeared with muddy white paste *Dinsorpong*. And they make easy preys at their very own will. Just wave them in and they will pull up for you to get your itch to douse and dirt someone undone.

Dinsorpong is sold at 5 baht per pack and come in a variety of colors hued with harmless food colorings. Dinsorpong shares kiosks with the yellowish aromatic traditional Thai perfume Nab Ob.



*Some kiosks on curbsides even sell bagged water at 5 baht per pack. They could make painful weapons in water wars so, beware of them.*

Another uniquely Songkran element is pickup trucks packed with 10-20 water warriors whose ages appear to extensively vary by far. It is not unusual to see small kids of five years old or plump housewives in their late 40s enlisting in these temporary armies.

When two Songkran pickup trucks appear to find themselves running past each other, passers-by benefit from an amusing experience watching a major splashing

showdown between folks of the two trucks. They douse. They scream. They screech. They hooray. They howl. They hug. The deepest chunk of their craziness erupt...to the level you want to just jump off the dry, safety zone and join them.

The wild and wet rounds of fun go on until April 15. They are the only three days in summer, or even the draught season in some parts of the country, that roads and tracks never are let lose the wetness.

The water splashed during Songkran may dry away just overnight but the multi-dimensional spirits of Songkran in Hua Hin remain and await to return as soon as the clock strikes the first second of April 13 in the following year.

