

The Mushroom Gatherers of Tung Nang Dam

She whispered into my ear as we crouched in the small wooden speed boat,

"P-GiGi, next time you visit, can you bring me a gun?"

Norn Naam (meaning water), wanted a water pistol, as opposed to the brown fluffy bear we had brought her! She is a great little mushroom hunter, leaping through the mangroves and cashew trees all the way to the beach where we got down into the murky waves and sung like gibbons.

Her home is amongst a collection of forest orchids, over a meadow of crabs exposed on the low tide in their estuarine home of mangrove roots. Her father, Khun Somboon (translated as Mr Perfect) smiles and appears with a handful of *phak wan* (a bush vegetable), and his two kids run to their dad and follow him like lively goats, bare footed ungulates, through the trail of Tung Nang Dam Island (Field of Black Women).



Their mum died a couple of years back. A moving picture of her stands at the Buddhist altar of their freshly built home by the orchids. We sit and chat about life on the island, eat some strange textured mushrooms and drink instant coffee with sweetened condensed milk. The tin is later seen floating out with the tide - a convenient but not such an environmentally thought out rubbish removal system!

In the zest of this family we feel alive and a part of this great journey. Full of love and adventure, we try the leaves and popping mushrooms, we take on the biting bugs with slaps and no hidden agenda. Just a day out. A Sunday.

Naam and her brother are currently on educational scholarships from NATR and her father is receiving support to rebuild his fish farm across the estuary. Yet, they have given us so much more than we could ever give them...and we wonder at our luck to be here. And we are so tired we can barely eat our coconut ice cream fast enough, in the back of the pickup, with a clump of sticky rice to compliment and get the sugar levels up...and up we go...and down of course at times as the sugar cycle flows.



by Georgi Marshall
NATR Volunteer