

Prasat Muang Singh Historical Park: Mahayana masterpieces

'Prasat Muang Singh', or the Tower of the City of Lions, located along the Kwan Noi River basin in Kanchanaburi province, features several images likely to be of particular interest to Mahayana Buddhists, as well as other visitors with an interest in Mahayana Buddhism.

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Prasat Muang Singh ('Tower of the City of Lions'), an ancient outpost of the 13th century Khmer Empire in Kanchanaburi province, is considered to be one of the most important historical sites in the Kwai Noi River basin.

Its strategic location is clearly demonstrated by the extensive temple ruins alongside the Kwai Noi River, a potent reminder of the vast expanse of the Khmer Empire. The outpost is of great significance, as evidenced by mentions in the Prasat Phra Khan inscription made during the reign of King Jayavarman VII (1125-1215).

Currently part of Muang Sing sub-district, the ancient city's vestiges include several layers of walls and moats, with the Prasat Muang Sing at the center. Several Mahayana Buddhist images

can be seen at the main monument, while there are three less significant ones nearby. It is likely, nevertheless that they were also built around the same time in the 13th century. The area had long been an important route for communication between central Thailand and Lower Burma (modern Myanmar).

There is a Khmer-style temple built from brick, one of several in the country, the most famous form internationally being the Angkor Wat in neighboring Cambodia. Prasat Muang Singh is similar to its larger counterpart in Cambodia, but has not fared so well over time. In fact, the only remaining parts visible today are the main building and a smaller building at the north-west corner of the site.

Sacred history

At the site of the temple complex, there are four groups of ruins, two of which have been fully excavated. The Prasat Muang Singh shrine is located at the center, facing east towards Angkor.

A reproduction Avalokitesvara (a bodhisattva 'who embodies the compassion of all Buddhas') sculpture stands inside the northern wall, highlighting Prasat Muang Singh as an important Mahayana Buddhism center. In Chinese this literally means 'the Lord who looks down'. To the northeast lies a small shrine and by the main entrance is a small museum featuring Mahayana Buddhist sculptures.

Dating even further back, discoveries such as prehistoric human skeletons, metal tools, vessels and ornaments were found on the site, and these artifacts can be seen at the southern part of the complex.

A peaceful retreat

A map of the site based on aerial photographs reveal that it was once far more extensive. A few crumbling bricks here and there still reveal where other sites may once have been located.

Inside the temple you'll find several trees growing up through the stone slabs on the temple floor.

The government department responsible for the temple has successfully enhanced the site by planting lots of flowers, trees and shrubs.

While there are a handful of restaurants, a museum and some stalls, the area has not been overly commercialized and was certainly peaceful and relaxing during this visit.

I parked my bike close to the restaurant in the shade and switched from a pair of boots into some open sandals; slightly more practical for this adventure.

After a meal I strolled over to the ruins and took in the sense of history. With a good spread of trees in and around the temple, there's plenty of shade. Taking photographs was a bit of a challenge as it was hard to get a clear shot without people getting in the way. I pretty much just had to shrug my shoulders, since it's great to see that plenty of other people are visiting the site.

If it's unlikely you'll be able to pay Kanchanaburi province a visit any time soon, bear in mind that it's possible to find similar forms as Prasat Muang Singh, such as Prasat Kamphaeng Lang in Phetchaburi province, Noen Thang Phra in Suphan Buri province and Muang Si Mahosot (Phra Roth) in Prachin Buri province.

Prasat Muang Singh
Historical Park is open from 9 am to 6 pm. Admission is 40 baht per

person plus a vehicle charge at 10 baht for a bicycle, 20 baht for a motorbike and 30 baht for a car. For further information, please call Tel: +66 (0)34 591 122, or +66 (0)34 799 566.

Transport connections:

Car:

Take Highway 4 (Phetkasem) from Bangkok through Nakhon Pathom province before getting onto Highway 323. This road will take you through Ratchaburi province past Tha Maka in Kanchanaburi province. You'll then need to drive through the city itself to get to the park.

Bus:

Air-conditioned and non air-conditioned buses leave Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal regularly throughout the day. The trip takes about two to three hours.

Train: Trains leave Bangkok Noi Railway Station twice daily for Kanchanaburi. Call Tel: +66 (0)2 223 0010, or +66 (0)2 223-0020 for further details on train timetables.

In brief

Realizing the importance of the site, the Fine Arts Department initiated a comprehensive renovation of Prasart Muang Sing in 1974. The site was a mound covered with heavily overgrown vegetation at that time.

Once the renovation work of the monument was completed, covering an area of around 640 rai (102.4 hectares), Muang Sing Historical Park was officially opening in a ceremony presided over by H.R.H. Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn (on April 3, 1987). Since then, the park has become a proud cultural heritage site, serving as an educational source as well as an interesting tourist attraction in the region.

On the boundary of the historical park is a museum housing a large display of various artifacts and sculptures to provide an understanding into local history.

Muang Sing Historical Park has a large range of facilities. Excellent roads serving the area make it easily accessible and there are plenty of comfortable accommodation options established along the banks of the Kwai Noi River. Thus, Muang Sing Historical Park became an important place to visit in the study of art and culture, as well as to relax in a comfortable surroundings.