

MEKONG *magic*



Thailand is fast becoming a fisherman's paradise, as Adam discovered on a recent trip to the island of Krabi.

Whilst on an incredible holiday in Krabi, Thailand, I sat on my sun-drenched balcony and thought: "How beautiful this place is – so warm and idyllic. How could this holiday possibly get any better?" I honestly didn't think it could, until I booked a day at Gillhams Fishing Resorts.

I phoned and booked a few days in advance to avoid disappointment and pretty much forgot all about it – we were just having such a good time. However, before you ask, no, the fun didn't involve ladyboys or ping-pong! I was with my girlfriend and we were just so chilled and

relaxed, having the time of our lives.

The day soon arrived but, following a green curry and a few drinks the night before, it was not easy getting up at 6am! We had to meet the Gillhams taxi man in the nearby town, and from there it was a 20-minute drive to the venue. I was quietly looking forward to this day, as friends who had been before said it's a must-do trip of a lifetime. So off we went, through the lush Thai countryside – weaving in and out of the limestone cliffs and, in no time, we were there. As we stepped out of the air-conditioned 4x4 into the very well-maintained front reception, we were

greeted warmly by Sean Gillham – son of Stuart, the owner – who proceeded to offer us an English cup of tea. We sat and stared out at the seemingly peaceful lake. Peaceful? Huh! If only we knew....

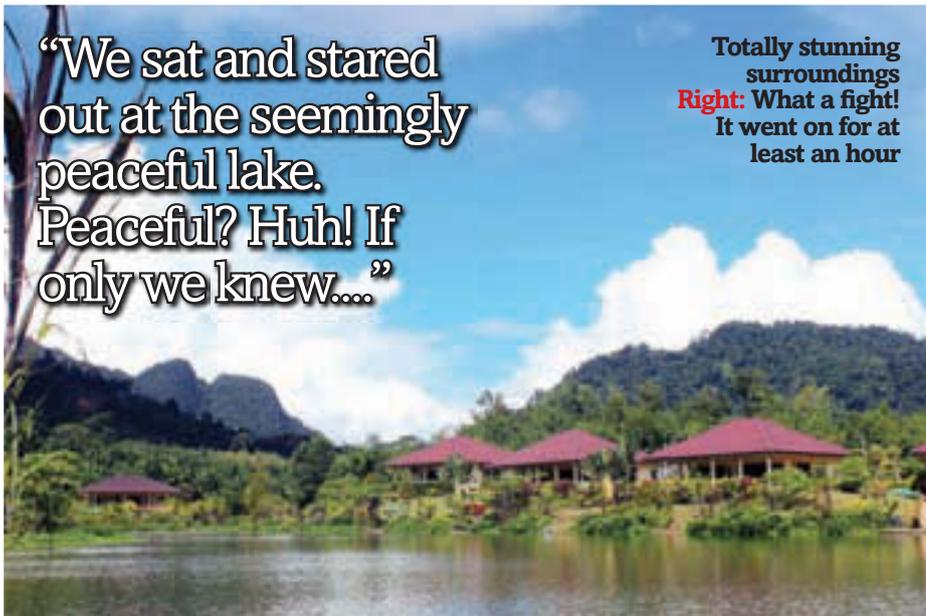
After signing the acceptance sheet in the rulebook, we were introduced to the day's guides and then set off to our swims with our tea in a thermal mug. Not a bad start, I thought. Thankfully for us, only two or three day tickets were sold that day, so we had plenty of water to fish. I was given the very end swim on the opposite side to the accommodation; it looked ideal and extremely fishy.



Main pic: One of the biggies; doesn't get more exotic than this
Top right: : Seriously rod-bending action
Right: A little hug in the margins
Below: The view from the Buddha swim



“We sat and stared out at the seemingly peaceful lake. Peaceful? Huh! If only we knew...”



Totally stunning surroundings
Right: What a fight!
It went on for at least an hour



My experience of these monstrous fish is very, very limited, other than catching a few small ones last year at another venue and what I had seen on Jeremy Wade's TV programmes. I was more than happy to listen to the guides, who just seemed to know when the fish would arrive in the swim and what species they would be. So, with the advice taken on board, I cast the first rod with a sea deadbait to the near margin only a few yards out. I then added a handful of Gillhams pellets and on the buzzer the rod went. On my second rod, I was given permission to use a tub of Mistral Rosehip bottom baits I had snuck into my luggage, so I put two on the hair and cast tight to the marginal vegetation down to my left, under a little Buddha statue. A few handfuls of pellets were then scattered around the margin to get the fish picking at them, much like carp fishing back home, but on a grander scale.

Resting up against the bushes in my swim was a float rod which, if the going got tough, was a chance to bag a fish off the top; anything from a giant Siamese carp to an Arapaima, but most likely a Mekong catfish. I wasn't really fussed what took the bait, so long as it was a monster this place is famed for. I hair-rigged another Rosehip, then cast the float out over the top of a bar the fish tend to patrol. I let the float settle and Spombed pellets over the top; at this time we hadn't seen anything moving until the Spomb hit the surface, then the swirling started. Another Spomb and more swirling... you could see the fish getting excited, and then suddenly the float was away with lightening speed. The bait-runner was doing its best to keep up with the run, and so was I! I'd only been fishing about 10 minutes and had been awake just an hour, so wasn't expecting such an early run. I picked up the rod after a split second, wondering what was happening – I was on a 6lb catfish rod with heavy braid and the clutch pretty tight, but I couldn't do a thing with this fish. It sure woke me up, though!

One of the most important rules on

Gillhams is when you hook up you need to blow a whistle to get one of the guides over for some much-needed help. He will then clear your other rods away and give you space to play your fish, so with my girlfriend sitting relaxing in the sun, she was called into action as I asked her to blow the whistle. I exclaimed: “I didn't even hear that, let alone the guide!” So then, like a foghorn, the whistle took a serious hammering and, within half a minute, the guides were bringing my other rods in. This fish had gone off up the lake; all the other anglers had reeled in so I was safe to play the fish wherever it decided to take me. This fish was so strong; I just had to hold on until it decided otherwise. It took more line with another powerful run and, by now, it was more than 100 yards away – what a fight! I asked Steve the guide what he thought it was and he was adamant it was a Mekong, as an Arapaima would have jumped or tail-walked by this point. I was playing this fish using the strength of the rod and the clutch to try and gain some line then, with a massive swirl on top, the fish started coming back to me – not of my doing; it just decided on a different route. As it came close to my swim we thought it was done, but no, the merry dance continued for another half an hour or so; by this point I was feeling very fatigued and dehydrated and was begging the impressive



One of the 'smaller' ones

fish to give up. Then, suddenly, it surfaced about 10ft out – we saw a huge silver flank and knew it was a Mekong. My Mekong personal best was 80lb and, if I chopped this fish in half, then half again, I would have still smashed my PB. It looked every inch of 6ft and, in a flash, Steve was in the lake slipping the net around the goliath. Sweat was pouring off me and my hands were aching like crazy. I got in the lake with Steve – it was photo time! My well-experienced, photo-specialist girlfriend was doing the business with the shots and, after a few great photos, we treated the hookhold and I was allowed to hold the massive Mekong, until the rudder-like tale started beating and she was ready to go home. With one huge tail-swoosh, the estimated 150lb beast was gone



I can't believe how strong these fish are



and left me just a plume of bubbles 20m long as a thank you.

OMG! I was shattered, but totally blown away. Being the keen angler I am, the rods went straight back on the spots and I was soon fishing again. I sat down and guzzled a litre of water with a fat grin on my face. Despite the sun-burnt shoulders, I had a one-fifty in the bag – what a start and it was only 9.30am! Sean came down and had a chat for a while and, by now, I was ready for some food. Armed with a very impressive menu, I ordered the sausage-and-egg baguette with a dollop of brown sauce and an ice-cold Coke. “Half an hour,” Sean said, so I challenged myself to catch another before my sandwich arrived. I cast a fresh Rosehip on the float rod about 30 yards and Spombed over it; again the excitement of the swirls began and, after two Spombs, the Buddha rod bent round double and the line flew off at a rate of knots. I cranked the float rod in and beached it, then grabbed the Buddha rod and held on for dear life – another huge something-or-other had taken the Rosehip bottom bait. Well practiced at whistle-blowing by now, my girlfriend emptied her lungs and Steve was back in a flash. This was another really hard-fighting fish and again it went all over the place, taking line at will – I just hung on, hoped and prayed. After an hour-long battle we landed another 150lb-plus Mekong, followed by more photos, more aches and pains, and more water needed! After another safe

release, I sat for a bit and rested – I needed to get my breath back and take stock of what was happening. I knew I wasn’t going to need any rocking to sleep that night! Sean arrived and kindly delivered my food and wasn’t surprised that I’d had another fish – it was obviously a good swim.

By 5pm or so, I’d had five estimated 150lb-plus Mekong, both on float and bottom baits. With two hours to go, I knew there was time for another; it had just started to cool down, which was nice, and the fish started putting on a magnificent show: Mekongs rolling all over the bar and Arapaima coming up for air. I was keen to finish the day with a big “Ari” as the guides called them, so the next one that showed had a deadbait cast near it; I then crossed my fingers and said a short prayer under my breath. Trouble was, I couldn’t resist one more cast with the float rod for another massive Mekong, so out went the float rod to the bar.

I was running out of pellets, so I had to throw one pellet at a time towards the hi-viz float; for every pellet splash a fish would roll nearby. I threw one every 30 seconds or so and a fish would always roll next to it. This went on for some time, but no joy, so in came the rod and I dropped the depth from 6ft to 3ft. I re-cast and started lobbing the pellets again one by one; again the swirling started and, by now, the feeding was getting more aggressive. I think this was down to the time of day, as they had gone from

lethargic to athletic since it had cooled a bit. I had just a handful of pellets left and the teasing swirls continued, but finally the float slipped away... The braid was flying off the spool and the whistle was blown without hesitation; I think my girlfriend had gotten over her whistle-blowing nerves by now. So started what turned out to be my final and longest battle with another massive Mekong. I stood in six inches of cool lake water on the edge of my swim and enjoyed every minute of my final fight. It was just getting dark and that made it all the more exciting; the guides had as good as finished for the day, but were well impressed when this one battled for an hour or more. However, they were made up for me when we finally netted the biggest fish of the day at an estimated 170lb. I did tip the lads as they had made my day session a red-letter day; in the end we banked six different Mekong in excess of 150lb, with the last being the biggest. I was shattered but didn’t care; the reality was 900lb of fish in a day. I’d like to thank the Gillham family and Mistral Baits for an awesome day’s fishing – it’s gonna take some beating. The Sun always sets on amazing days and this was no exception.

If you’re feeling up to the challenge and want the chance to bank some of these exotic fish, you can book via the website. You can book weeks at a time or, as a teaser, you can book an inexpensive day session at www.gillhamsfishingresorts.com. You won’t be disappointed!

What are Mekong Catfish?

Mekong giant catfish are the world's largest scaleless freshwater fish; they have very low-set eyes and are silvery dark grey. They are toothless herbivores and live off the plants and algae in lakes or rivers. Juveniles wear the characteristic catfish whiskers, called barbules, but these features shrink as they age.

Highly migratory, Mekong catfish require large stretches of river for their seasonal journeys and specific environmental conditions in their spawning and breeding areas. They are thought to rear primarily in Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake and then migrate hundreds of miles north to spawning grounds in Thailand – they will not spawn in stillwater.

They are bred artificially on fish farms such as our friend Mr Toe's, who is involved with the restocking programme for the Mekong River. We only buy our Mekong from a reputable source, such as Mr Toe and, unlike some commercial fisheries, none of our fish of any species have been taken from the wild. Once plentiful throughout the Mekong basin, population numbers have dropped by some 95 per cent over the past century, and this critically endangered species now teeters on the brink of extinction.

Overfishing is the primary culprit in the giant catfish's decline, but damming of Mekong tributaries, destruction of spawning and breeding grounds, and siltation have all taken a huge toll. Some experts think there may only be a few hundred adults left in the wild today, and international efforts are under way to save the species. It is now illegal in Thailand,

ANGLER PROFILE



Stuart Gillham
Year of birth: 1954
Home town: Tumbol Khothong, Krabi, Thailand.
Previously: Uckfield, East Sussex.

Favourite species: My passion is catching big fish of any species.

Favourite venue: I believe in catching what I can from a venue and moving on.

Most memorable catch: Without doubt a 44lb pike from Llandegfedd.

Gillhams Fishing Resort owner, Stuart Gillham, explains more about the curious species

Laos and Cambodia to harvest Mekong.

On 9th June, Thailand marked King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 60th year on the throne. A crowd of more than half a million people gathered in the nation's capital, Bangkok, prisoners were released, and fishermen in the north of the country declared they would no longer catch giant Mekong catfish. Instead, they would hand over their nets to the government in return for \$500 per net.

In a further bid to safeguard the species,

the Thai Department of Fisheries has released approximately 10,000 captive-bred individuals into the Mekong River since 2000. However, enforcement of fishing restrictions in many isolated villages along the Mekong is nearly impossible.

The largest catch recorded in Thailand since record-keeping began was a female measuring 2.7m in length and weighing 293kg (646lb). This specimen, landed in 2005, is widely recognised as the largest freshwater fish ever caught. Thai Fisheries officials stripped the fish of its eggs as part of a breeding programme, intending then to release it, but the fish died in captivity and was sold as food to local villagers.

The best way to fish for Mekong catfish at Gillhams is using float-fishing tactics at 3ft with our own pellets, regularly loose-feeding around the float. Mekong catfish are regarded as one of the hardest-fighting freshwater species of fish in the world.

We also hold the following world records: Chao Phraya catfish at 121lb and the previous world record at 91lb; and Mrigal carp at 17lb 10oz. We have 48 different fish species from around the world, including six species that exceed 100lb, with individual fish weighing more than 400lb.

Gillhams also holds many other big-fish species from around the world, several of which are rapidly approaching 100lb, making Gillhams Fishing Resorts the number one freshwater-fishing destination in the world.

FACTFILE

Name: Mekong catfish
Species: *Pangasianodon gigas*
Thai name: Pla buk
Max length: In excess of 3m.
Max weight: 300kg
IGFA record: 117.933kg (260lb), caught at Gillhams Fishing Resorts.
Diet: Plankton, plants, shrimp, sticky rice, boilies, cereal, maize and fish.

David Kent's world-record fish of 260lb

