



PREGGERS ON THE HONDA

Mahseer by Motorcycle

Dropping bombs in Thailand BY ROB ROBERTS

WHEN I WAS A KID I made my own fireworks out of cardboard, gunpowder, and a hefty amount of duct tape. So when Bobby Kauktol told me that we'd be tossing cherry bombs at large mahseer on the River Yuam, I was feeling right at home.

Fishing hadn't been a top priority on this trip to northern Thailand, as I carted my pregnant wife around 800 miles of serpentine roads on a rented Honda Phantom. But one evening I spotted a small ad in the corner of our route map with the words "fly fishing" and a photo of a thirty-inch fish with large scales and a gummy mouth. I asked my wife to saddle up.

Two days later we met Kauktol in the small riverside town of Mae Sariang. As I stared skeptically at a restaurant menu offering fried pig uterus and roasted cricket, Kauktol explained that the biggest fish were gulping red fruit pods that drop from riverside trees during wind storms—hence the name cherry bombs. He warned me that mahseer would drive me crazy. I asked if we could fish the next morning.

Kauktol was alert and energetic when he showed up at my hotel, despite having stayed up most of the night spinning clusters of red and purple deer hair. He quickly launched into an endless stream of stories about everything from past clients to small-town Thai politics, explaining that his friends don't understand his catch-and-release ethic, that gangsters from Bangkok like to go on fishing vacations, and that there are rumors of fish up to 40 pounds on the Burmese border that have teeth like sharks and skin like leather. When I asked him how many foreign tourists he'd guided for mahseer in the past year, he paused and then replied, "Maybe seven."

The River Yuam meanders through small villages and hardwood forests in the foothills outside Chiang Mai, the second largest city in Thailand. It takes a day or so to reach the area if you're following the classic Mae Hong Son motorcycle loop, even longer if you're worried, as I was, about crashing and giving your wife roadrash. The river features classic dry-fly habitat with

broad tailouts, dogleg bends, and undercuts. If you ignore the stands of bamboo and banana trees, you might think you were on a side channel of the Beaverhead or Big Hole.

Walking upstream from our access point, I found a deep run where the river slammed into bedrock and then cascaded over a submerged log, forming a small pocket of foamy water in a side eddy. With the low river and the summer sun overhead, I crouched behind a leafy bush and was just about to cast when Kauktol yelled from across the stream, "Wait! The windy is coming!" Within minutes, the windy did come, and the trees overhead started to rustle, scattering leaves onto the water. "Now!" he said, and I launched a size six cherry bomb into the swirling hole. I saw a flash and a brief explosion, and then felt the line tighten before a mahseer ran me under a log and broke me off.

Thailand is home to three different species of mahseer—golden, blue, and Thai. A member of the carp family, mahseer have forked tails, scales like a medieval shield, and downturned mouths similar to a bonefish. There's a popular drink on Thailand's fabled party island of Ko Phangan that involves a mix of Coca-Cola, Mekhong or Sam Song whiskey, and Red Bull. Mahseer fight like they've downed two of them, plus an eight ball of blow.

While we took a break in the shade, Kauktol told me about a large white-and-brown mayfly that hatched later in the year and, like the falling fruit, brought hefty mahseer to the surface. He also described the River Ngao, another remote gem that flows around car-sized boulders and requires a long off-road adventure to access. The conservation model that keeps these areas protected requires each fisherman to pay a small fee. This fee goes directly to local village leadership and, in return, locals keep their nets out of the water.

It must be working, because I managed to land several decent fish that day, and I saw a few others that could eat a twenty-inch brown trout. The fish were difficult to land in the skinny water, but the process was easy enough. In fact, I'd learned it as a kid: Light the fuse, launch it, and hold on.

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