

Phuket Rubber Farms

Before Thailand became one of the Asian tiger economies, agriculture had been the main economic activity. The main crops include rice (of which Thailand is the world's leading exporter), sugar, cassava (an edible, starchy, nutritious, tuberous root used in making bread or cakes), maize, rubber, cotton and tobacco. Fishing is also significant, especially for prawns, which have become one of the country's largest exports. The country's other principal natural resources are minerals and gemstones.

However, in Phuket, where we spent most of our time, rubber is the main crop. Yes, literally, a 'crop'. I had never thought of rubber (or latex) as being a natural crop, but after traveling through Phuket, the main plant you see on the side of the road and in the fields, is the rubber tree. It is so cool – rows and rows of thousands of rubber trees. Our knowledgeable guide explained that a hundred years ago, Malaysia was the main supplier of rubber, but a Thai person secretly smuggled some rubber tree seeds out of the country and brought it to Thailand. Ever since Thailand has been the world's main exporter of rubber.

The stem of a mature rubber tree is about 6-8 inches in diameter, the tree stands about 25-30 feet tall, and the leaves are green. You can immediately tell if it is a rubber tree because there is a small black cup about 2 feet from



the ground hanging on the side of each tree. This container is made of either a coconut shell or, more recently, of plastic.



Once a plantation of rubber trees have been planted, it takes about 6 years for them to grow and become harvestable. In the meantime, the farmers also grow pineapple crops between all the rows of rubber trees, and harvest these. Once the rubber trees reach a certain height and shade

outdoes the hot sun, the pineapple plants are removed and the rubber harvesting begins. A rubber tree can then be harvested for about 25-30 years, before its rubber production is depleted. The cycle of the pineapple-rubber tree plantation then re-starts. I found this to be a wonderful example of how well space is used and the business of farming food is optimized.



We drove by a rubber plantation. I asked our driver to stop the car so I could take a closer look. I hopped out with my camera and went straight up to the cup to check it out. From just above the cup, there was a little bit of white substance very slowly dripping from the tree into the cup. I put my finger into the black container and picked some of the rubber out. It was dry and sticky and looked exactly like

the Elmer's paper glue we buy in white and orange bottles. My guide grabbed his pocket knife and sliced into the bark at a downwards angle just above the cup. Within seconds a flow of white liquid built up, ran down the bark line and dripped into the cup. It was liquid rubber in its most raw, purist form!

He explained that it is harvested at night when it is cooler so that the rubber flows freely and quickly. Each night, the farmers re-cut the bark on all their trees. This takes a few hours. Then they return to the beginning and collect all the liquid rubber from the cups. That cut of bark then dries up and the tree waits for the next cut, a day later. The harvesters then take all of the liquid to their small farm buildings where they begin to cure it.

A few days later, we actually made a trip to an active rubber farm and learned, experientially, how to work the rubber. It was awesome! And it was lucky we had the guide we did, Teeru (or as the Thais called him, Mr. T). Not only did Mr. T speak English well, but his family owns a very large plantation where he worked for most his



youth. He could explain the whole process and answer our questions impeccably. The farmers lived in a very small wooden home (more like a large shed) which had a stove, a couple of wooden platforms for beds, a crib for their baby, an outhouse, a small

Buddhist shrine and a large poster of the King of Thailand (these features were common in the Thai homes and businesses). Next to their humble house was another building, a little larger than their house, and made of cement, which was dedicated to the rubber process.



Between Mr. T and the resident farmers, they showed how the whole process works. The rubber curing process involves having a large tub filled with the white rubber



liquid. It looks like a giant container of milk. They then allow the rubber to begin to harden. This looks like and feels like gooey balls of cottage cheese.



They then take the hardening substance out of the tubs and pile it onto a mat on the hard cement floor. This is the fun part – you get to squish it and pound it with your bare feet!

Once you get it pounded into a rectangular shape, you pick it up, and put it through the

rubber press (this looks like an old towel drying machine). You do this several times, each time setting the press at a tighter, narrower setting. The product – a very hard, compact, well shaped white rubber rectangle that looks exactly like a large



white bathroom mat – when folded, they look like thick towels. It is then ready to hang on drying racks preferably in the sun. It is left to dry for about 2 weeks and turns a light brownish colour and becomes very hard and strong. This is the



curing process. It is then ready to send to the factories, where it is made into hundreds of useful rubber and latex products and sent around the world for our everyday use.

