

THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE AND THE GREAT DRUG GAME

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The Golden Triangle, so named by a CIA operative, is a region in South-East Asia that's notorious for hosting a global hub of narcotics production

The mighty Mekong appears to be in a drug-induced stillness on a moonlit night. There's no breeze, no noise, no movement at all at the riverfront in Chiang Saen, the Thai border town 900km north of Bangkok. From our perch on the first floor balcony of a seemingly empty hotel, my travelling companions and I gaze down at the famed Golden Triangle that lies at the confluence of the Ruak and Mekong rivers.

On the left lies Myanmar, wooded and dark. On the right, we see the rolling hills of Laos. "The smuggling boats will be crossing over later tonight downstream," says one of our group, only partly in jest.

Long before somebody thought of linking up Delhi, Agra and Jaipur on the tourist map, a Central Intelligence Agency operative coined the term Golden Triangle to highlight what was then the world's largest drug-producing zone. This broadly mountainous region covers north-eastern Myanmar, northern Thailand, northern Laos and the north-eastern corner of Vietnam. This region is a major producer of *Papaver somniferum*, also known as opium poppy. Author Frank Dikotter eloquently describes it as "silky flowers held high on elegant stems, turning entire fields white, red, pink and purple". The morphine of the opium poppy is extracted from the latex. From this, heroin is produced, which enters the global market via southern China and Hong Kong.

Before the 1980s, Thailand was the big transit hub for heroin. However, now it appears to have cleaned up its act (a big sign at the Golden Triangle makes a sharp if grammatically-incorrect point: "Death sentence is for person smuggles in drugs"). One can't say the same about Laos and Myanmar, though.

According to a recent United Nations report, drug production has surged in the Golden Triangle. Many of the drug syndicates have switched to lab-produced crystal meth and other synthetic highs.

Our small group is a mixture of old friends and new, marking a midlife moment with a quick weekend road trip. Elevated by blaring 1970s rock, we reach the Golden Triangle after a stunning drive through a longer, hilly route from Chiang Mai, 300km away.

Chiang Saen has converted its infamous tag into a cheesy tourist spectacle, with day trips, boats rides and a variation of a photo booth to mark the Golden Triangle. It's quite underwhelming, apart from a large museum dedicated to opium. It has a bizarre, dark, long tunnel with anguished human figurines in the walls showcasing the effect of the drug on the human mind. There are also helpful demonstrations of how to make opium, and a collection of pipes.

The museum also reminds us that India was the largest producer of legal opium in the 1800s (Patna, Bengal and Malwa served up the top grades). There's a dedicated section that talks about large opium "factories" in Patna and Ghazipur.

Beyond the touristy stuff, a lot is obviously happening below the surface in Chiang Saen, one of the oldest enclaves in Thailand. Given that much of the drugs finds its way to the US, the Americans have a large presence in this seemingly tranquil town. The Chinese have recently set up an observation centre just a little downstream from where we were staying.

Other governments, including India's, are keeping a watchful eye. You sense murky interests at play here and the need for discretion.

A young lady photographs us as we gingerly step into a small high-powered boat. Skimming over the water, we enter Myanmar waters in a few minutes and view a large casino on the shore. However, there's more to come on the Laotian side, where we disembark.

After a cursory immigration process (no passports required), we walk into a golden domed complex that has shopping (along with a KFC!) and is filled with Chinese tourists. In the distance you can see construction cranes dotting the skyline. Gambling is the new drug in this 3,000-hectare Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

Funded by China's Kings Romans group, this multibillion-dollar project has been carved out of communist Laos. As gambling is banned in Thailand, the casinos will attract visitors from the mainland. It will also feed the insatiable appetite for gambling in China. There are nightclubs, hotels, and even an international airport planned.

"In the SEZ, everything from currency to cuisine is Chinese," writes Tom Fawthrop in South China Morning Post. The Chinese are running the show in this enclave, which is far removed from the poor Laos beyond its borders. UN agencies have voiced concern that the casinos will launder drug money. There's also a flourishing sex trade.

In particular, the action has shifted to the Wa state in Myanmar. Its border with China is one of the most dangerous in the world for trafficking of drugs and humans. Meanwhile, in Thailand, the Bangkok Post reported that 12,000 cannabis sprouts were planted in Chiang Mai in the first industrial-scale medical cannabis-making facility in the Asean region.

Clearly, the great (drug) game continues to be in play.

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