



IT'S BEEN EMOTIONAL

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LONG AND SHORT OF IT

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Scorpion breeder Danai Siriburee with some of his specimens. Photos: Tibor Krausz, Shutterstock

Sting for your supper

Thailand's intrepid scorpion hunters are answering the call of the nation's snack sellers and restaurateurs who can't keep up with demand for the crunchy delicacy

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Crickets, grasshoppers, bamboo worms and giant water bugs are among the most popular deep-fried creepy-crawlies that bemuse foreign tourists at markets in Bangkok.

However, the most exotic and impressive creature, beloved by the adventurous selfie taker, is the large black scorpion.

It takes a braver man to catch them, though.

To an untrained eye, the patch of earth that Somporn Saisuwan selects for closer inspection in a wooded area in northeastern Thailand's Surin province may seem nothing out of the ordinary. Dry leaves and clumps of ferns cover the ground on slightly sloping terrain. But it's a rotting log that catches Somporn's eye.

He turns it over to see what creatures are lurking beneath.

"You might find scorpions clinging to the underside of a log," the villager says. "If you don't, you should look for small holes in the ground."

If a hole is round, it's advisable to move along, because a snake might be coiled up inside. If the

opening has a flatter elongated shape, the inhabitant could be a giant Asian forest scorpion, a forbidding arachnid that often burrows into the ground during the dry season.

Somporn reaches for his digging stick and starts poking around in the earth by the roots of a small tree. Eventually he uncovers a large scorpion caked in dirt. It is a fully grown 15cm specimen with a black exoskeleton and massive pincers.



Some restaurants and vendors want to buy my scorpions all at once

DANAI SIRIBUREE, UNIVERSITY LECTURER AND SCORPION BREEDER

When the creature is prevented from running away, it raises its tail menacingly.

Despite its formidable size, the predator that Somporn has caught packs a relatively mild punch in its stinger. The Asian forest scorpion's venom can cause pain and swelling, but it is hardly ever lethal to humans. In

rare cases, however, recipients of its fury may suffer a life-threatening allergic reaction.

Somporn has been stung on his calloused hands by scorpions repeatedly over the years, but he's none the worse for it.

"It's like getting stung by a bee or wasp," he says, gently grabbing the cornered scorpion by its tail, and dropping it into a plastic bucket. One scorpion down, plenty more to go. "They like to hide in dark, cooler places," Somporn says. "So we [will] go and look for them there."

Rice paddies are also good places to search for scorpions because the carnivorous creatures like to lurk around water sources, where they prey on worms, insects and small lizards. They are also in a habitat in which they themselves can wind up becoming easy prey for local farmers, who regard them as a delicacy.

In times past, when food was scarce in rural Thailand, impoverished locals would feast on grubs, worms and insects. Yet even then, the big black scorpions had a special place in their diet.

"We regard scorpions as both food and medicine," says Theerapat Sutthisan, a resident of the northeastern province of

Udon Thani. "My grandparents used to tell us that eating scorpions would make us stronger and live longer," the villager says.

"Scorpions are delicious when eaten fried or roasted with spicy banana blossom salad," Theerapat says. "You can also drown them in a glass of whiskey or rice wine and consume them soaked in alcohol."

During the rainy season the scorpions often seek refuge from frequent flash floods in people's homes, hiding in nooks and crannies—and shoes. That doesn't faze most Thai country folk.

"They're more afraid of us than we're afraid of them," police-woman Asamaporn Ketchum says. "I love to eat them because they're crunchy and full of protein," she adds, cheerfully mimicking the act of munching on the arachnids. "But they're quite rare these days and cost a lot to buy at the market, so they're like a treat."

Scorpions may not be rare treats for long, though. Thanks to enterprising locals like Danai Siriburee, they can more often be found on menus around Thailand, along with commonly consumed creepy-crawlies.

Danai, who is a lecturer in agribusiness at Udon Thani Rajabhat University, didn't think much of scorpions until, during a visit to the south of Thailand a few years ago, he saw them peddled on a food vendor's pushcart for 100 baht (HK\$25) each.

"I figured selling scorpions could be good business," he says.

He started frequenting villages in Udon Thani and telling locals he would buy all the scorpions they could find. The bigger the scorpions were, the more he would pay for them.

He collects about 2,000 scorpions a month for resale. In late summer, when their breeding season causes the nocturnal creatures to come crawling in the open in search of mates, he can source two to three times as many. Even so, demand still outstrips supply with orders for his scorpions coming from as far away as Phuket, 1,400km away.

"I can never have enough of them," Danai says. "Some restaurants and vendors want to buy my scorpions all at once."

To meet growing demand,



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ASAMAPORN KETCHUM, POLICEWOMAN

Danai has decided to start breeding scorpions. At his scorpion farm on the outskirts of the provincial capital, also called Udon Thani, the university lecturer raises scorpions in cement rings that are furnished with pieces of wood and tufts of hay.

"There are no books on how to do this," he says. "I've had to learn from my mistakes."

Some of the wild scorpions Danai caught to breed in captivity perished when they drowned in trays that he had filled with too much water for them to drink. The carnivorous arachnids, he discovered, can also take to cannibalising one another. Scorpion mothers that give birth to live young, of up to 20 babies at a time, may decide to devour their own offspring. That's bad for business.

"The benefit of this venture is that you can have scorpions all year round," he says.

A stocky man with close-cropped black hair and thick horn-rimmed spectacles, Danai is almost obsessive when it comes to scorpions, despite professing not even to like them that much.

At home he keeps a menagerie of arachnids belonging to many species from around the world. His exotic acquisitions include highly venomous deathstalkers, scorpions from the deserts of North Africa, whose stingers are loaded with potent neurotoxins and could put his life in danger.

"Whenever I leave home, I can safely leave the doors unlocked," Danai says. "People know I keep dangerous creatures around the house, so no one will enter."

On the downside, he's found it hard to recruit a housekeeper.

Potentially further spooking unwary visitors is the fact that his scorpions, which naturally possess fluorescing pigments, glow with an eerie greenish blue in the moonlight. In a country where a fear of ghosts and phantasms is deeply ingrained, many locals might find this natural phenomenon unsettling.

Occasionally Danai sets some of his pet arachnids loose around the house to keep certain intruders out—small geckos. "I'm terrified of geckos," he says. "I can't stand them. Once one of them got inside my shirt and started crawling on my back. I freaked out."



A tourist is offered a black scorpion in Bangkok.