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# Heroin cough syrup and the museum of drug addiction

The Hall of Opium in Chiang Rai brings to life the effects, good and bad, of the poppy flower through history

By Bruce Holmes 16 March, 2011



Contorted faces depict the suffering that opium can inflict.

Into the dimly lit tunnel we walk and, as our eyes adjust, the sculpted faces on the walls take shape before us. Some are tortured and contorted, with eyes that evoke a sense of fear and suffering, others have far-away looks suggesting a dream or trance-like state.

It's a dramatic introduction to a museum with a difference, The Hall of Opium in Chiang Rai province in northern Thailand.

We are now in the heart of the legendary Golden Triangle where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar intersect, an area which was once the preserve of drug smugglers and warlords.

From the tunnel, we emerge into a light and airy room with displays that illustrate everything you'd ever need to know about the opium poppy and how the opiate drugs are created.

There's even a small garden (behind glass) that's full of these poppies. As one visitor Lee-Anne says, "It shocks me to see what destruction one pretty flowering plant can cause."

## Opium for crops

In the auditorium a short film explains how in 1988, Her Royal Highness the late Princess Mother decided that she wanted to educate people about opium in the Golden Triangle and throughout the world, though it was not until 2004 that this museum was to open to the public.



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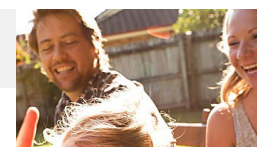
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Posters display some of the harrowing effects of years of drug abuse.

[crops for opium poppies](#) and also the push for tourism developments in the region.

In the meantime however, royal initiatives saw the enactment of programs encouraging the hill tribe peoples to [substitute other](#)



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The museum's historic overview shows how opium was used to enhance sleep by the Egyptian Pharaohs and how the opiate-based [laudanum](#) was used for pain relief during the 18th and 19th centuries by such figures as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Benjamin Franklin.

There's even a re-creation of an apothecary's shop from that period.



*The two sides of the poppy -- medicinal use versus drug abuse.*

### Heroin cough syrup

Something you won't be able to buy in the pharmacy nowadays? [Heroin cough syrup](#), developed by Bayer Laboratories in 1898, a year before the company brought us aspirin.

Shocking yes, but this does remind us that the opiates have been used for medicinal purposes for a long time. Who would not want morphine to dull the pain of serious injury and illness?

This contrast is illustrated effectively in the "dark and bright" hallway. Walking through this space, we see images of the plant's benefits for humanity on one side, contrasted with pictures of the suffering it has caused on the other.

Next we step metaphorically from the London docks into the representation of an English ship from the 1700s, which soon after transforms into a 19th century clipper.

The trading nations, led by Britain, were the ones who forced China to accept the import of opium brought from colonial India.



*The Opium Wars were a defining period in Asian and European history.*

### Start of the Opium Wars

Essentially, the [British East India Company](#) saw this as a way of balancing their trade, so as not to use silver coin to pay for tea, spices and silk.

Chinese government resistance to this practice led to the Opium Wars of the 19th century and the imposition of the will of the foreign powers thereafter.

When he sees all this, another visitor, Vince, is shocked. "I didn't realise that opium was a tool of trade for Great Britain and other

powers. The ugly underbelly of colonialism," is how he sums it up.

The museum's mock-up of a legalized Siamese (Thai) opium den from the late 1800s brings the scene to life, with opium-smoking paraphernalia like pipes, weights and [damper bowls](#) for vaporizing the opium.

Photographs of drug-addicted celebrities adorn the walls as we approach the interactive galleries, where visitors can choose to hear the voices of addicts and ex-addicts telling their tales of the battle with drugs.

Finally, the Hall of Reflection is a quiet room with quotations from famous religious leaders, philosophers and world leaders on the value of leading a life of moderation -- here visitors can think back over the experience, from that first walk through the tunnel of darkness.

As our group makes a move to leave, it's Janet who sums it up well when she says that the Hall of Reflection helps to lift the mood and focus on the positive steps that have been taken to improve people's lives, that in effect "you are left with the feeling that there is light at the end of the tunnel."



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