



*(Top) Winding through the village for several hours, the procession is eagerly awaited by the residents (Above). The biggest tree around also becomes the biggest launchpad around (Above Right). Everyone lends a hand to get the rockets in place (Opposite page bottom right)*

Preparations for the festival start weeks prior as there are hundreds if not thousands of rockets to be made. Ban That has five or six rocket making factories and it best left to the professionals to put them together. The larger rockets are about nine metres in length and hold some 120 kgs of gunpowder, which is enough to make a decent sized hole in your backyard if something does go wrong. Mind you the sight of some of the 'professionals' smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol while making the rockets was a little disconcerting.

Even if you don't make your own rocket, you can still enjoy the festivities by buying one. They came in basically two sizes - approximately 2.5 metres for 1,500 baht and the big ones that you can purchase for 30,000 baht. You can take them home and decorate them and on the day the event starts your rocket will be picked up and delivered to the launch site.

On the first day of the festival a parade of colourfully decorated floats wind their way through the village until early afternoon. The crowd, dressed as colourfully

as the floats then starts to congregate at the launch sites for the first firings of the larger rockets.

The larger rockets need about a dozen people to get them into place with others alongside with wet cloth and icepacks to keep the powder inside stable. Another disconcerting thought. Once the rocket is placed upright on the launch pad, it is secured tightly. This is done so that when ignited the missile will be at full power when it breaks the tethers and will head where it is supposed to, namely straight up and out of there. If the tethers are not tight enough, the rocket will take off before its fully fired up and could go anywhere, as happened with a large rocket in Yasothon several years ago, that went up then straight

down again into the crowd of onlookers, killing five of them. If the rockets don't fire correctly or don't stay up for very long, the owner is unceremoniously dumped into a muddy hole behind the launching ramp.

It is considered bad luck for the coming rainy season if all the rockets don't take off correctly, so everyone is very keen to make sure the right impression is given to the rain god "Phaya Thaeen".

