

SUNDAY LEISURE

THE NATION
January 20
2013

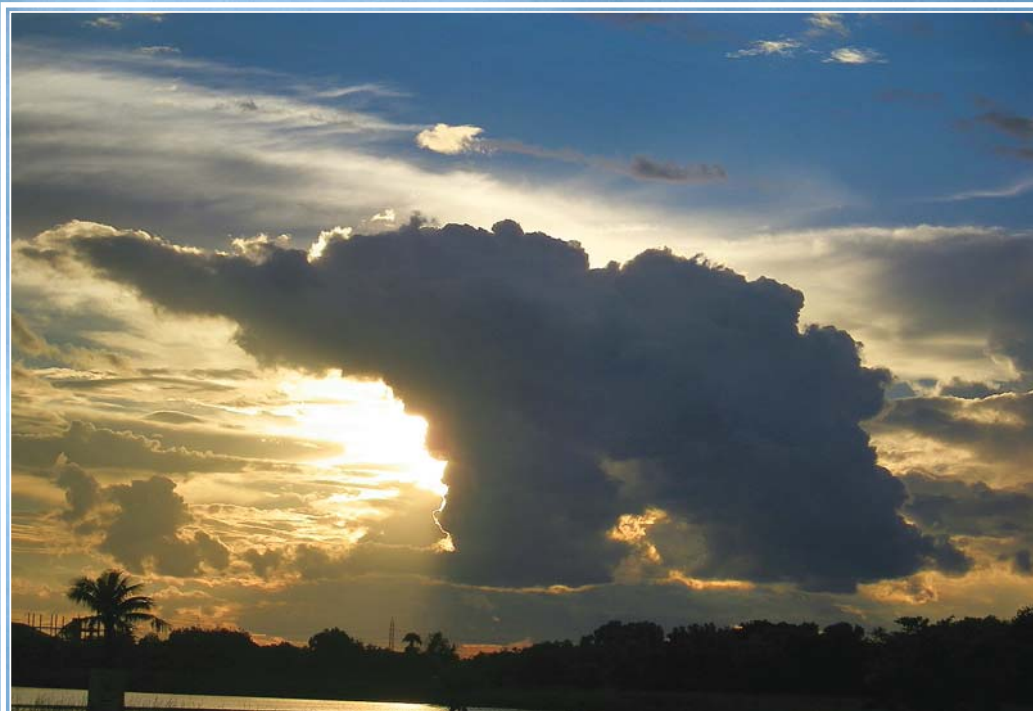
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TASTE TREATS WRAPPED IN LOVE AT **KYO ROLL EN** IN THE GATEWAY EKAMAI MALL 11B



WHEN a mammatus cloud appears, the sky is full of white puffy 'boobs'.



Elephant ahead



IS IT A CAT? Cloud-gazing allows the imagination to run wild, picking out familiar shapes in funny-looking formations.

Poetry of the skies

Live with your head in the clouds by signing up for Thailand's very own Cloud Lover Club

PHOODWADON DUANGMEE
THE NATION ON SUNDAY

This morning, as you sip your coffee, resolve to take up, or at least try out, a new hobby. Head out to the garden or the park, lie flat on your back and watch as the clouds develop and drift slowly across the sky.

You may spot a cat, a bear, an elephant, a heart – perhaps all four or maybe much more. Welcome to the wonderful world of nephelococcygia or cloud gazing. It's fun, free and, you may be surprised to know, as friendly as Facebook.

A popular activity in many parts of the world, with a major website, the Cloud Appreciation Society even offering a "Manifesto of the Cloud", cloud watching has more than 8,000 fans in Thailand alone.

"Our members come from all walks of life, varying from an undertaker attached to a temple to a respected astronomer working in the academic arena. The beauty of sky brings them together," says Buncha Thanaboonsombat, founder of the Cloud Lover Club in Thailand.

Buncha is a scientist who earned his PhD degree in Materials Science at the Georgia Institute of Technology. He is also a writer who brings the complicated branch of astronomy known as

planetology to ordinary folk. When such atmospheric conditions as twinned bows appear in the sky, he explains the phenomena to readers in a simple scientific way. A contributor to a daily newspaper, Buncha is also a keen blogger, constantly posting images of beautiful skies, amazing phenomena and spectacular cloud formations.

From a small group of like-minded followers, his Cloud Lover Club (www.CloudLoverClub.com) now counts more than 8,000 members and is constantly increasing. Small-time cloud lovers have transformed into big-time cloud-gazers.

"We socialise both on and off-line and members are always posting new photos," says Phakhaporn Bunjongjad, a marketing analyst and club member.

"We sometimes arrange workshops and set up cloud-gazing trips for members. We go out and watch the clouds."

Out there, under the big blue sky, the cloud-gazers let their imaginations play out, spotting



CIRRUS CLOUDS above Udon Thani province. The thin, wispy cloud formation gets its name from the Latin word 'cirrus' meaning ringlet.

various forms in the clouds but also keeping a careful watch for rare cloud formations. If Lady Luck is on their side, they might experience some spectacular atmospheric moments when such sought-after formations as the Pileus,



CLOUD-GAZERS always take window seats on the plane, hoping for atmospheric moments below.

Mammatus, Arcus or Lenticular clouds appear in the sky.

Atmospherically speaking, according to Buncha, every cloud has a name, usually Latin, which refers to the way it looks. For example, the pileus cloud gets its name from a brimless hat in Latin, and is a thin, horizontal cap-looking cloud sitting above a huge, puffy cloud. If you hear a cloud lover saying "mammatus", the Latin term for breast, you can imagine an open sky full of white puffy boobs.

"For serious cloud-gazers, finding a rare cloud formation is a big moment," Phakhaporn

says. "When I spotted the mammatus cloud formation on my own, I was so thrilled to be watching a 100 or more breast-like clouds clump together in the open sky."

So what kind of activity does cloud gazing would falls into – entertainment or planetology? Is cloud gazing the new reality show?

"Cloud-gazing is pretty much about aesthetics and science. You can count on the clouds for beauty while offering a chance to your imagination to get some exercise," Buncha says.

"The Sun Dog, for example, is a spectacular atmospheric moment

when two bright spots of light, often on a halo, are found on either side of the sun. Amazing as it's beautiful, there is a scientific explanation beyond its beauty."

Like other hobbies, when the cloud-gazing gets under the skin, it can become addictive. Cloud-gazers always ask for the window seats when travelling by plane. They want huge windows in their bedrooms, so they can lie in bed and watch the clouds drifting across. They can often be found driving out of the city in search of the open sky.

But many haven't wanted, at least up until now, to tell strangers about their hobby.

"Unlike bird-watchers, stargazers or cyclists, cloud-gazers don't usually tell other people what they do for pleasure," Buncha admits. "Imagine telling someone that you spend your leisure time watching clouds. They'd give you an amused look, and decide you were funny in the head."

With the growth of the Cloud Lover Club, that embarrassment is fading and while the male members may not find it a particularly good tactic for landing a hot date, they are meeting plenty of interesting hikers and travellers.

Two cloud-gazing guidebooks, authored by Buncha, are also now available in the Thai language for budding cloud lovers, proving that the sky really has no limit.

Now, is that a cat or a rabbit?



A GROUP OF CLOUD-LOVERS set up the Cloud Lover Club, exchanging ideas about atmospheric moments and spectacular cloud formations.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLOUD LOVER CLUB