

Glamping in the jungles of Thailand

Deborah Dickson-Smith | March 31, 2015, 2:04 pm

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Bathing the elephants. Photo: Deborah Dickson-Smith

The sun is setting and the noise from the jungle, a noise that I had assumed was an industrial plant over the hill somewhere processing timber with a large number of circular saws... turns out to be cicadas.

Gradually, as the light fades, so does the symphony of cicadas, until we're left with a few chirping crickets, the odd gibbon hoot and tiny ripples on the water in front of our floating tent.



Sunset over Cheaw Lan Lake. Photo: Deborah Dickson-Smith

We're into the second day of our Elephant Hills Safari, an African style 'luxury' safari on the Thai Peninsula, about halfway between Phuket and Krabi, in the Khao Sok National Park.

Our Safari started yesterday with an early pickup from our Phuket hotel and a 2.5-hour journey to our first camp at Elephant Hills. On arrival we're greeted with a slap up Thai curry buffet lunch and shown to our glamping accommodation, permanent canvas tents complete with a queen size bed and bathroom bigger than my own bathroom back home.

Once our buffet feast has settled we head down to the river bank and clamber into canoes for a trip down the Sok river. About an hour downstream we clamber ashore and climb into our safari truck which takes us to the elephant camp a few minutes away.

Here we meet the elephants and we're given a comprehensive lesson on everything from their behaviour in the wild, their use in the now defunct logging industry and what has eventually brought these beasts here, to a sanctuary in the far south of Thailand, a long way from home.

Quite simply, there is little natural environment left for Asian elephants to survive in, a legacy of the now-defunct logging industry, which has left disconnected pockets of rainforest throughout Thailand. So it's hard for elephants to survive as they normally would, but also, some of these beasts have been domesticated for so long they've forgotten how.



Mother and baby at Elephant Hills. Photo: Deborah Dickson-Smith

There are now many national parks in Thailand, the result of a grass roots-led environmental movement that started back in the 1980s. A movement that ended the logging industry, stopped the construction of a dam in central Thailand that would have had a devastating impact on the environment, and which has now created a generation of conservationists.

Thais visit their own national parks more than any other nationality - the parks are not there purely for the benefit of international tourists like me. Looking after the natural Environment is a value that fits well with Buddhist philosophy, so after the success of the grass roots environmental movement back in the 80s, it became something taught to the younger generation of Thais in schools by Buddhist monks.

And then there's places like this, educational centres that introduce tourists to these magnificent creatures. These elephants have travelled from North and Central Thailand, and brought with them their Karen Mahouts who, dressed in colourful traditional garb, click, cluck and slap their cheeky charges into line as we first learn how to give them a scrub, before preparing a lunch of pineapple, bananas, sugarcane and elephant grass.

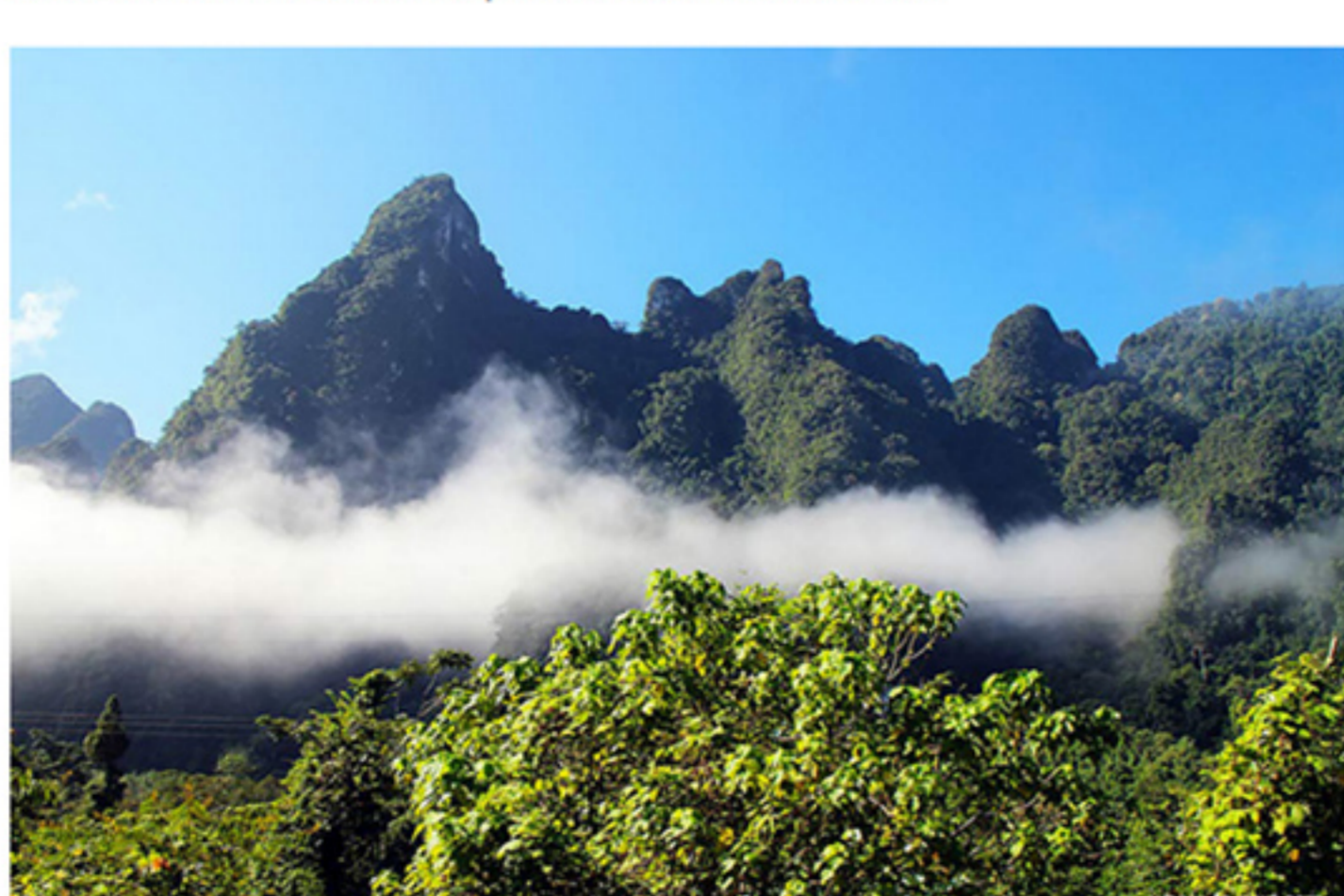


Preparing the food at Elephant Hills. Photo: Deborah Dickson-Smith

Having exhausted elephant food supplies, we take our safari bus back to camp where we watch a documentary about elephants, followed by a dance recital by some local school kids.

We're then given a Thai cooking demonstration, fed another delicious buffet dinner and it's off to our luxury tents for the night. The next day we head for Camp 2: a floating camp on Cheaw Lan Lake. The lake was created by the construction of Ratchaprapa dam, which provides hydroelectric power to the surrounding regions and has opened up this seemingly impenetrable mountainous jungle to visitors like us.

We speed across the lake to our floating tents in a long tail boat, taking a few spins around the steep limestone pinnacles that dot the lake, former mountain tops that are now islands.



Limestone cliffs at Khao Sok. Photo: Deborah Dickson-Smith

After we're plied with a bit more food we take off for our first serious bit of exercise, a 3-hour trek through the jungle, climbing one of the pinnacles to reach a large cave. It's heavy going, the heat and humidity making hard work of it. We finally reach the cave with hardly a dry patch of clothing left on us, but satisfied none the less to have made it.

The track downhill is somewhat cooler, it now being after 5pm, and it takes us a quarter of the time to reach the lake again than it did to reach the top. A long-awaited plunge in the lake follows, clothes and all, before its time for that first beer as we relax in front of our tent listening to cicadas and gibbons having fun in the jungle.

On our last morning here, we get up bright and early and head out on kayaks to see if we can find a few monkeys. We can certainly hear them, but they're somewhat illusive (what with the jungle being so dense and all).



Kayaking on Cheaw Lan Lake. Photo: Deborah Dickson-Smith

After about 30 minutes paddling we do eventually find a family of gibbons, and from that point on, they seem to become easier to find. We spot a few little dusky langurs next and several hornbills fly overhead, making a sound that could be mistaken for pterodactyls. So this is how our last morning is spent, paddling (slowly) around a few nearby islands spotting wildlife before our last lunch on the lake. A peaceful few hours before returning to the hustle of Phuket.

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About Blended Family Travels:

Deborah plays the mother role in a blended family of seven. She's a travel blogger, diver and passionist eco warrior. She has lived in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Edinburgh, London and now resides in Sydney's northern beaches with her Brady Bunch-style family of 7 - all seasoned travellers.

Follow Deborah on Twitter [@where2nextblog](#) or visit her blog, [Where to Next?](#), all about travelling with teens and mid-life style.

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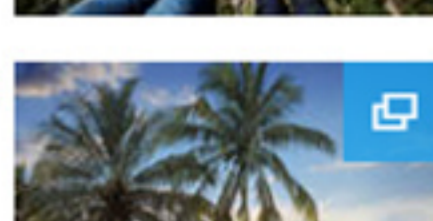
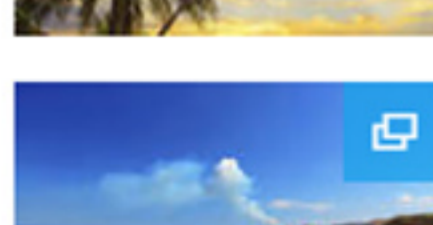

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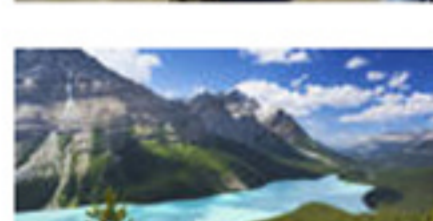



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