

Walk on the wild side: at the Elephant Hills camp, in Khao Sok National Park, guests can scrub down and feed the pachyderms. Opposite, prawns with a spicy dip at Khao Lak

Trunks & bikinis

Jumbos in the jungle. Sunbathing on the softest sands. Together they make the ultimate Thailand trip – and **Andrew Eames** knows a secret place that's home to both

Photography: **Cedric Arnold**



On a plate: starter at Casa de La Flora in Khao Lak; the pool at the Elephant Hills resort; Khao Lak beach; corn on the cob costs pennies at street stalls

Deep in

the lush heart of the Khao Lak Lam Ru National Park there's a forest hike that picks its way between soaring hardwoods and giant stands of bamboo to end at a perfect little sandy bay...

And stamping through the jungle, I came across a sign promising, intriguingly, that the beach 'will impress most forgettly'. The rainforest is sweet with heat and thick, moist air. The chance to leave behind the trailing lianas and palm leaves to hurl myself into the sea was a moment of pure joy. Forgettly? It impressed me most rememberly.

It's also an almost entirely unique experience in Thailand, a country sparingly with its beauty to visitors: normally you can have rainforest or sea, but not both in one trip. Not, that is, unless you're on a rucksack-lugging gap year or you have plenty of money for internal-flight tickets. For jungle adventure, you turn left at Bangkok and fly north to Chiang Mai, where there are elephants, mountains and hill tribes. For islands and beaches and lazy days in the sun, you turn right and hop south.

Yet here I was, in south Thailand, up to my eyes in vegetation, with just two weeks away from the office to take it all in. An hour north from the island of Phuket, where I'd landed and motored over the causeway to the mainland, I was cooling off in a sparkling sea that lapped densely verdant shores. Khao Lak, a beach resort devastated a decade ago by the Asian tsunami, is a mere 6km from the sprawling jungle, rearing up behind.

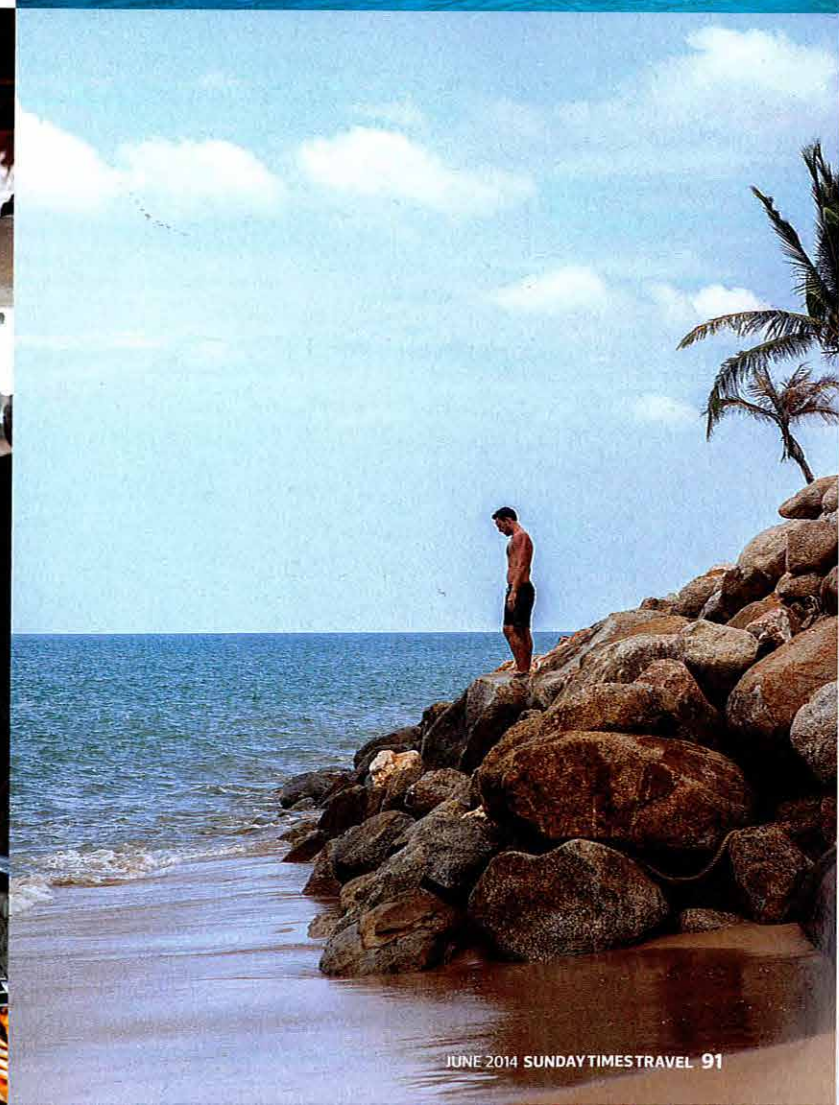
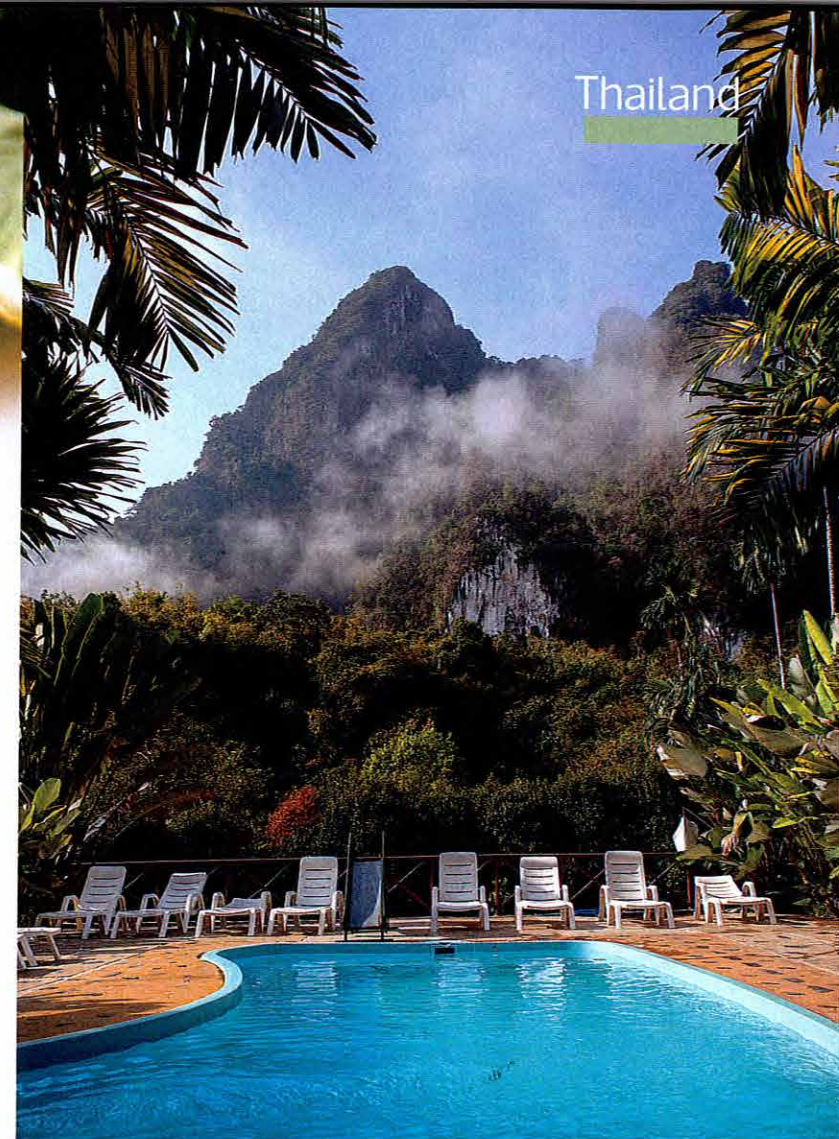
I'd long wanted to come to Khao Lak. A Thailand admirer for donkey's years, I'd read more than once of its special dual attributes. But nothing had prepared me for the sudden change in landscapes as we drove from Phuket airport. Ahead, through the windscreen, the flat countryside, covered in plantation, rose suddenly, soaring buttresses of hardwood trees and statuesque palms folding-in together to create a canopy that all but blotted

out the daylight. My chauffeured car swung through the forest, and I opened the window a crack. Nature swept in, a deafening chorus of cicadas, like an orchestra of chainsaws and kazooos.

Before we knew it we were through it, and the sea stretched out before us, a promised land of golden beaches liting northwards for several kilometres. It felt vaguely surreal, as if I'd strayed over the outstretched hand of a green giant reaching to trail his fingers in the sea.

The Khao Lak resort was in the early stages of creation when the tsunami struck on 26 December 2004, sweeping most of it away - local topography meant that the impact was most deadly on this stretch of coast, and thousands were killed. But if I'd had any qualms about visiting, they were soon dispelled by what I encountered: gleaming new hotels clustered along the beach and an almost palpable mood of optimism. Apart from signs indicating the 'Tsunami Evacuation Route,' the only consequences of that awful event appeared to be extra-strong sea defences on beachfront properties.

I fell for my hotel, Casa de La Flora, the upmarket sister of a Khao Lak original, La Flora. It's a three-year-old boutique-y place of cube-shaped suites with hardwood floors, plunge pools, bathtubs in polished stone, and enough technology to keep the most fidgety teenager mesmerised. Personally, I was more interested in the big windows that drank in undisturbed views of the Andaman Sea. Every night the horizon came alive with colonies of bright lights, as if a secret city had risen up to the surface under cover of darkness - fishermen at work. >



OUT OF DANGER

The 2004 tsunami was caused by the third-largest earthquake ever recorded. An early-warning system has since been setup to detect them and sound an alarm giving people time to evacuate



Shore leaves: the jungle is never far away in Khao Lak – even on this beach
by Casa de La Flora

I OPENED THE WINDOW A CRACK.
NATURE SWEEPED IN, A DEAFENING CHORUS OF
CICADAS, LIKE AN ORCHESTRA OF CHAINSAWS

I settled into the rhythm of the classic Thai beach holiday: swimming; submitting to a massage in one of those beachside bamboo shelters for £6 an hour, with the sound of waves to mask my occasional gasp of pain; soaking up the small joys of Thai life – the smiley nature of the people; the way they take money with a little bow; the pungent smell of durian fruit, garlic and spices; the street food that is simultaneously forehead-slappingly cheap and eye-wateringly hot. But all the while the rainforest was there, reaching out to tap me on the shoulder. Four days in, I couldn't ignore it any longer.

I hired a taxi to take me back for a closer look at that 'speed-bump' of jungle we had passed through on the way here from the airport. It was an arm of the Khao Lak Lam Ru National Park, with a visitor centre on the road, and the hike that led down to the beach that impressed me so 'rememberly'. Plunging in, I got talking to a German hiker, who recommended my second forest sortie the following day, which also ended in a swim.

I rented a scooter and wound inland through a village world of rubber plantations and lily ponds, amid forest-covered karst trying to muscle its way through to the beach. After 20 minutes, I found a gate into the Lam Ru National Park and walked a couple of kilometres up to the Chong Fah waterfall. Here was a series of cascades, drowned in green and filled with the kind of fish you find in Japanese foot spas. They came rushing for a peck the minute I put a foot in. By the time I was in deep enough to swim, I realised I was in for a whole-body nibble.

Brief forest flirtation over, next day came the full-on embrace. Collected by minibus, as arranged, I was whisked an hour inland for three days of total immersion. Elephant Hills, which styles itself as a safari-style luxury tented camp, sits at the heart of the huge National Park of Khao Sok, merging with adjacent wildlife sanctuaries to total 4,000sq km of unblemished forest – the largest area of tropical rainforest in southern Thailand. There are wild elephants here, along with clouded leopards and even, apparently, the odd tiger.

The setting is cinematic. Khao Sok was once a coral-covered seabed, until shifting tectonic plates forced it upwards 160 million years ago. Today, huge fists of limestone rear up in craggy shapes, sheathed in glossy forestation, wreathed in early-morning mist. Elephant Hills is dwarfed by a couple of these outcrops, almost twice the height of Rio's Sugarloaf and, while you'd love to climb them, staff will tell you it's well-nigh impossible.

Never mind – the camp's star attractions are its 14 Asian elephants and their hill-tribe mahouts. Down on the banks of the Sok river I met Mae Sri Nuan, a three-tonne teenager who was to become my charge for the morning. Like many teenagers, she needed a thorough wash with a hose, before a scrub with the husk of an old coconut. She >

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Thailand

Fast karma:
above, a Buddhist
monk hitches a ride
in a truck in Khao
Lak; the pool at
Casa de La Flora

TENTS AHOY!
The Rainforest Camp
is one of only a
handful of floating
tented camps in the
world. It's powered
by solar and wind
energy to reduce
impact on the
surrounding forest

then needed to be fed with a mix of coarse grass, pineapple and sugarcane, which I had to chop up for her first. She also turned out to be a fussy eater, dropping most of what I offered between her feet, where the others vacuumed it up. I was assured this was her normal behaviour, not because she was objecting to me. It certainly didn't look as if she was wasting away.

Elephantine antics like these are what draw guests to Elephant Hills' main camp, but my big seduction lay ahead, at Rainforest Camp, the subsidiary, on Cheow Larn Lake, where I'd chosen to spend my last night. Actually, 'lake' is an inadequate name for this vast waterworld, a 165sq km aquatic mirror, born when a dam was built across a network of forested valleys.

It's where Khao Sok reverts to that time, 160 million years ago, when the region was completely under water, and a primeval feel pervades the place. It has a beauty reminiscent of those Chinese silk landscape paintings: steep limestone outcrops rising sheer from shimmering water, creating luminous shapes, some softened by greenery, some craggy. It hasn't (yet) thrown itself open to tourists, although the authorities do allow some intrusion.

A handful of floating encampments are secreted up lonely backwaters (*khlongs*), served by longtail boats, such as those used by fishermen and park rangers. In one such boat I was delivered some 12km to the Rainforest Camp: 10 safari-style luxury tents with bathrooms, on floating rafts either side of a reception and restaurant.

Just being allowed to be here was something special. Sitting on my deck in front of my tent I had

a 180° panorama of karst backdrop, forested layers and open water that changed its reflective quality depending on the time of day and strength of the breeze. It was noisy out there, but these were not the sort of noises you'd complain about. Ripples lapped against the raft. Gibbons whup-whimpered at each other across the water. Hornbills creaked overhead, like the antediluvian creatures they are. In the forest behind, a pair of langurs up a strangler fig monkeyed around in the branches. This was their territory, and they were unafraid of the likes of me – they knew I wasn't allowed on the land. I could, however, go into the water, which turned out to be warm, soft, deep and clear – and refreshingly free of nibblers.

I could also paddle across the water, thanks to the canoe outside my tent. In it I ventured out in the quiet of my last dawn, when a film of mist still lay over the water's surface, and the monkeys and birds were starting to feed before it got hot. Unlike on an African safari, I could see little sign of the animals I knew were there – the forest was an impenetrable wall. But then, in the African bush, I wouldn't be allowed to be out there, listening to the creak and sizzle, brushing aside giant floating water snails, and watching rose swallowtail butterflies dance out towards me. Eventually I drifted into the end of the *khlong*, where the trees started to overhang – and turned back pronto (I didn't want snakes dropping down the back of my neck). Besides, it wasn't just the chattering monkeys and jewel-bright birds who wanted to feed. Back at the Camp, it was coming up to breakfast time.

Make mine a Full English. ■

Park and ride:
sailing into the
sunset of Khao Sok
National Park

THE WATERFALLS WERE DROWNED IN GREEN
AND FILLED WITH THOSE FISH YOU FIND
IN JAPANESE SPAS. THEY CAME RUSHING FOR
A PECK THE MINUTE I DIPPED MY FOOT IN



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go packaged

You can make the journey as featured with **Trailfinders** (020 7368 1200, trailfinders.com): its 'Ultimate Thailand' tour includes three nights in Bangkok, eight at the Casa de La Flora in Khao Lak and three at Elephant Hills. It costs from £1,799pp for 14 nights, with some meals, and includes return flights to Bangkok and flights on to Phuket. Try also **Audley Travel** (01993 838 000, audleytravel.com) for trips combining Khao Lak and Elephant Hills.

Go independent

Several airlines fly from London to Bangkok. Expect to pay from £578 return from Heathrow with **EVA Air** (evaair.com), or from £606 with **Thai Airways** (thaiairways.co.uk). **Bangkok Airways** (bangkokair.com) flies daily between Bangkok and Phuket from £26 one way. Discount centres such as **Flight Centre** (flightcentre.co.uk) often have good fare deals.

Where to stay

Casa de La Flora (00 66 76 428 000, lafloraresort.com) is a big, family-friendly place, with rooms priced for all pockets, from beachfront villas at the front, to pool-access villas at the back; doubles from £76, B&B. **Gerd & Noi** (00 66 76 486 810, gerd-and-noi-resort.com) is an elegantly simple place set back from the beach, with villas in gardens around a pool; doubles from £37, B&B. A two-night stay for two at **Elephant Hills** (00 66 76 38 1703, elephant-hills.com) starts at £566, full board.

Get around

You can pick up taxis in Khao Lak, but negotiate the price. Expect to pay around £3 a head for the journey to Khao Lak Lam Ru National Park. You can rent scooters from streetside agencies, for £2 to £6 a day. Anyone booking a jungle trip (including a stay at Elephant Hills) will have their transfer included.

Further information

See uk.tourismthailand.org.