

Family THAILAND



Pachyderms in the mist

A trip to a Thai national park means elephants and much, much more, writes **Danielle Teutsch**.

Elephants are highly intelligent animals. They have good memories, they grieve and they have moods. It also happens that they are quite particular about their food. We're at Elephant Hills camp in Thailand's Khao Sok national park, and it's feeding time.

And my daughter is amused that the bananas and pineapples she keeps offering to her pachyderm are being tossed aside.

The sugar cane, however, is a different story - the elephant's trunk curls deftly around the stalks and demolishes them with a crunch.

My son's elephant, on the other hand, is crazy for the small, sweet bananas and tosses the sugar cane to the ground with disdain.

This is the "elephant experience" offered at the camp. It doesn't involve riding on their backs; it's rather more hands-on. After feeding time the kids rub the elephants' skin with coconut husks and hose them down, under the watchful eye of the "mahout" elephant trainers.

At a time when ethical treatment of elephants is in focus - the week we were in Thailand, a YouTube video of two teenage mahouts mistreating a baby elephant had gone viral - it's good to know the elephants at this camp



are well cared for. They include two-year-old Ha Ha, the baby elephant born at the camp, who stays close to her mother, as she should - elephant babies drink their mum's milk for at least three years, and need close nurturing for five. (If you ever see a baby elephant on its own, on "display" for tourists, you need to be asking some serious questions about why it has been separated from its mother.)

The Elephant Hills camp was set up as a sustainable eco-tourism destination offering a comfortable life to domesticated elephants no longer needed for the logging industry, as well as employment for their mahouts, who traditionally come from the Karen hill tribe.



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Thai treat: The Elephant Hills experience in Khao Sok national park offers close encounters, comfortable, catered camping, canoeing and spectacular scenery. Photos: Dantello Teutsch, Alamy

We're here for three days, and though the elephant encounter is a highlight, the trip is worth it for the scenery and nature alone. Limestone peaks of 900 metres surround the camp, exposed flanks contrasting with tumbling rainforest vegetation.

Over breakfast, we watch in awe as the morning mist reveals shifting outlines of the cliffs, and marvel at a giant Atlas moth landing on a palm frond. Later, on a guided canoe trip down the rapids of the Sok river, we spot a monitor lizard, mangrove snake and kingfisher.

Accommodation at the camp is in tents modelled on those of an African safari. They are large and comfortable, the linen is changed daily - and we all sleep like babies

In the cooler night temperatures.

Dinner involves a Thai dish buffet and a dance performance by girls from the local school, to which we're invited to make a small financial contribution.

One of the highlights of a trip to Elephant Hills doesn't involve pochyderms but a day trip to Cheow Larn lake, a man-made reservoir. The lake was formed when a large area of virgin rainforest teeming with wildlife including tigers and elephants was flooded to create Ratchaphrapa dam, making 100 tiny islands. The effect of the limestone peaks jutting out of the emerald lake is otherworldly and spectacular, similar to Guilin in China.

We take a long-tailed boat to Elephant Hills' rainforest camp,

where you can stay in tents on the lake's edge (we only went for a day visit, as the deep water makes it unsafe for young children), and are rewarded by the sight of a colony of

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dusky langur monkeys swinging and crashing through bamboo. Donning lifejackets, we kayak through the channels in a light mist of rain, looking out for hornbills and sea eagles.

The day trip includes a stop at a truly local - and tourist-free -

market, an unexpected treat. There are immaculate rows of Thai eggplant, ruby-red guavas and snake beans, plus pigs' heads, turmeric root and tiny heads of garlic, chicken feet, jellied eggs and - yes - insects, ready to be crisped.

We buy coconut pancakes and nibble on longan fruit, which is like a small lychee. My daughter, who was allowed to have her pocket money for the week in Thai baht, buys a statue of King Rama V from an amulet trader, while my son is thrilled to get his first pair of locally made thongs.

That night, in our tent, my daughter finds a tiny frog poised on her pillow, the way one might find a complimentary mint. Theatrics ensue as we try to catch it and, ultimately, fall asleep wondering

where it's going to resurface. But it never does.

The final day of our stay is a jungle trek, an hour's hike through the rainforest near the camp to admire rattan palms, giant figs, bamboo and cut rubber trees with milky latex sap dripping down the trunk, ready for collection.

We stop at a hut and watch lunch being prepared. A coconut is split and the flesh grated and squeezed to make a fragrant soup, while pork marinated in turmeric, garlic and lemongrass is cooked over a flame. With tired muscles and the sound of the jungle around us, we devour it. It's the best Thai meal I've eaten in my life. **T**

The writer was a guest of Holiday Specialists.

TRIP NOTES

MORE INFORMATION
holidayspecialists.com.au
elephant-hills.com

GETTING THERE

Thai Airways flies to Bangkok daily from Sydney and Melbourne, with connecting flights to Phuket. Elephant Hills camp is in the Khao Sok national park in Thailand, about 3½ hours' drive from Phuket. The camp organises minibus transfers to and from Phuket, Krabi

and Surat airports as well as hotels

STAYING THERE

Holiday Specialists specialises in family travel in Asia, and can organise a child-friendly Thailand itinerary including a stay at Elephant Hills camp. A three-day camp visit is ideal

combined with a stay in one of Phuket's many beach resorts. A two-day, one-night stay at Elephant Hills camp starts from \$359 an adult and \$60 for one child to share a room with parents, departing from Phuket or Koh Samui including return transfers, one night accommodation in

luxury tent, meals and activities. See holidayspecialists.com.au, phone 131 381.

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