

HOME » SPONSORED » TRAVEL » THAILAND HOLIDAYS

Responsible elephant experiences and nature parks

Welfare retreats and parks are in the vanguard of treating elephants in a more humane way, no longer allowing visitors to ride on their backs

[f](#) 5 [t](#) 2 [p](#) 0 [in](#) 0 [s](#) 7 [e](#) Email



Research suggests that at the moment there are possibly fewer than 2,000 elephants left in the wild Photo: Frank Rothe

By Rob Crossan

2:56PM BST 16 Jun 2015

[Love Thailand? Start planning your trip with this guide »](#)

Gently, ever so gently, with her fiendishly long eyelashes fluttering against the gleam of the jungle sun, the elephant takes a crumbling pile of bamboo out of my hand and, with a snort of what I'm determined to interpret as gratitude, begins to gorge herself amid the hiss of cicadas and the odd blurring shout from a gibbon lurking somewhere in the nearby jungle.

The female elephant I'm giving a lunch of bamboo and vegetables from out of a bucket is leading a more dignified life than some of her predecessors. Elephant Hills, in the Khao Sok National Park, is a glammed-up camping experience that gives visitors the chance to interact up close with these gargantuan creatures. Thankfully, though, for her and her fellow inhabitants of this sanctuary, the days of visitors riding on their backs in a wooden box are over.

As more and more elephants are being domesticated in places such as Elephant Hills, we're learning just how much damage this outdated practice does. Elephants don't have backbones that can support the kind of weight that humans inflict by sitting on them. And so, today, an elephant experience in Thailand is changing - with the emphasis on creating spaces where elephants can be physically and psychologically healthy.

The Elephant Hills sanctuary isn't alone. At the Patara Elephant Farm in Chiang Mai, visitors can become a "mahout" (elephant instructor) for a day where, using hand signals and the Thai language, it's possible to control the animal and check that it's healthy and happy - the culmination of which is always leading them to the river for a relaxing mud bath.

“Washing an elephant at mud bath time is one of the most tactile and personal man-to-beast experiences”

Welfare retreats and parks like these are in the vanguard of treating elephants, one of Thailand's national symbols, in a more humane way. This year, both STA Travel and Intrepid announced that they will no longer be offering trips to elephant sanctuaries that allow visitors to ride on their backs. The Tourism Authority of Thailand has also announced that it doesn't condone the practice.

It all seems like justice for the mighty Asian elephant, whose contribution to Thailand can't be over-estimated. Used extensively in the days of logging (banned in protected areas by the Thai government in 1989) and even as transportation during long-distant wars, the elephant remains a striking and vital symbol in Buddhist art, though research suggests that at the moment there are possibly fewer than 2,000 elephants left in the wild.

If domestication is the future for rescued Asian elephants, which cannot survive in the wild, then it's in places such as Elephant Hills, winner of the Thailand Green Excellence Award in 2014, that provide care and help these mighty mammals to recuperate and live safely.

Here the guides showed me how the park has enlarged the elephants' pens and have abandoned the practice of chaining them up when they're not with visitors. Now they can roam free in their larger homes in the jungle.

Scrubbing and washing an elephant at mud bath time seemed like one of the most tactile and personal man-to-beast experiences I'd ever had - and certainly preferable to the former "entertainment" of mahouts forcing elephants to play football or paint pictures.

My guide tells me how these domesticated giants don't have survival skills so their freedom has to be carefully monitored - particularly as these elephants aren't all from a single family group.

As the sky turns a bruised shade of purple and black, night time here involves dining in the open-topped restaurant and watching traditional Thai dance displays.

For the elephants lucky enough to call this community-based eco-tourism venture home, amid this pristine forest they sleep undisturbed and content.

For more information, visit tourismthailand.co.uk

Discover more of amazing Thailand:

- [Thailand: a country of cultures and contrasts](#)
- [Ecotourism and national parks in Thailand](#)
- [Thai cuisine: fragrant art of beautiful food](#)

[f](#) 5 [t](#) 2 [p](#) 0 [in](#) 0 [s](#) 7 [e](#) Email

In association with **amazing THAILAND**

Activities



Thailand festivals and events: turn out for festival fun

You've tried the cultural sites, now join the celebrations by attending one of the many festivals across the country



The sky's the limit with outdoor adventure holidays

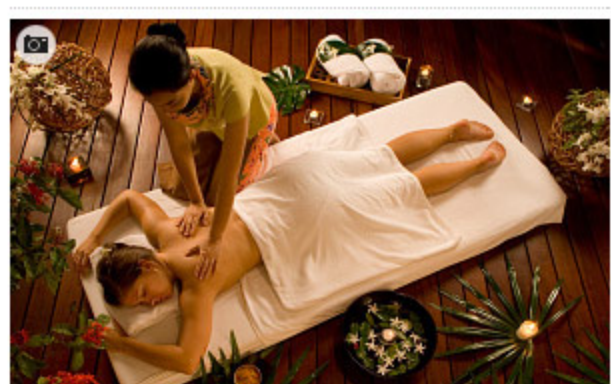
Land, sea and air all offer a wide selection of thrills and spills, allowing you to immerse yourself in adventure in Thailand



Cycling in Thailand for an authentic experience

With a wide choice of trips and packages available, cycling is one of the best ways to see some of the country's greatest sights

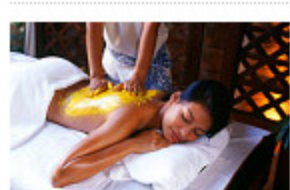
Picture gallery



Thailand in pictures

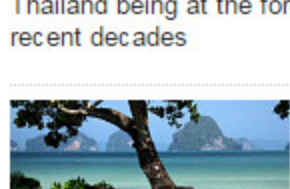
From private dining in Sarojin to relaxing with a Thai massage, here are some of the best experiences in Thailand that you simply must try

Indulgence



Spa experiences to boost fitness

Health tourism is an industry in which Thai therapists excel, with Thailand being at the forefront of the spa revival in recent decades



Relax in the lap of luxury at a perfect hideaway

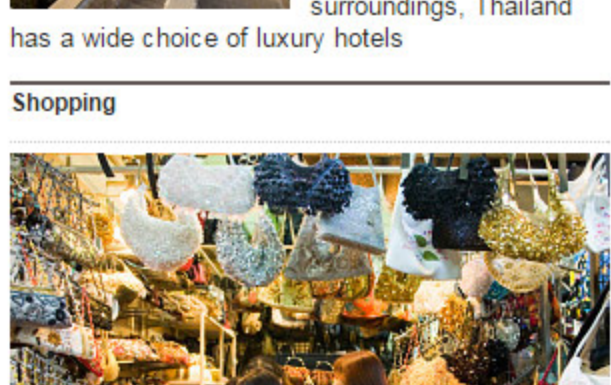
For those wanting a taste of hedonism, the choice is huge in Thailand, whether you're looking for a luxury hideaway or a chic cosmopolitan retreat



Thailand luxury hotel round-up

Offering high levels of customer care in opulent surroundings, Thailand has a wide choice of luxury hotels

Shopping



Shopping in Thailand

With a huge variety of shopping malls, markets and specialist shops, have wallets in readiness for the onslaught of goods available to buy in Thailand



Tourism Authority of Thailand

Thailand is a land of smiling people, gorgeous beaches and a fascinating heritage, and there is always something new to explore



Fly away with Thai Airways

The first choice carrier with Airways of Thai, from July 1, the airline will fly its latest super jumbo between London Heathrow and Bangkok



Book a holiday with Dial a Flight

Thailand is the best destination, whether you want beach bliss on an exotic island, family fun in the sun or peace and pampering in a serene spa

[Back to top](#)