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Tha'ed are gone to heaven

Article title: Kimberley
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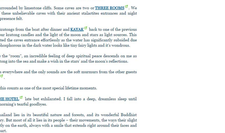

A Buddha statue at the Tiger Cave Temple in Krabi. Thailand. Credit: Rich and Robert Holden

"Wai(ed) you like some champagne today?" The soft, beautifully accented voice of the flight attendant is accompanied by an equally beautiful smile. I nod enthusiastically, smiling back like a Cheshire cat and change from my large glass of orange juice.

Cathay Pacific is transporting us on a 11 and a half hour flight to Thailand via Hong Kong and I feel like royalty. The Premium Economy space feels it was exclusive-less sumptuous, with just four rows in a 2-2-2 configuration. The seats themselves are very comfortable and wide, with a footrest that extends from the seat in front and a footrest that extends from the seat. Eight entertainment options are numerous and varied with some sounding hard pressed for what seems like minutes before an excellent meal is served shortly after take-off – and the drinks options include a very chill premium vodka? The service and food on this airline is the best I have ever experienced and I have flown on four other Asian airlines. I fell asleep in my plush seat and the hours flew by, we presumed.

It is hot and sticky as we slight from our Dragon Air transit flight at Phuket from Hong Kong, and we immediately feel the difference in the humidity and heat. We are in Thailand and we immediately spot our Destination Asia transfer driver, another two and half hours later we stop in front of the beautiful CONTADA AONA RESORT ▶ & Spa in Krabi, our abode for next two nights.

Krabi is on the edge of Phang Na Bay and all along the coast from the airport the green-clad cliffs and towering limestone islands like emerald mountains rise from the ocean. The resort that is located about 3 minutes' walk away from the soft sands of Noppaorthara Beach, and is also conveniently close to the majority of the Krabi Town shops and restaurants.

Our very nice DOUBLE ROOM ▶ on the fourth floor overlooks the beautiful contoured pool, and then like to the Green Bay, the ruin course down to a secluded beach which is only for escape the confusion of the town.

We are offered a dinner special – a two-for-one set choice between a Thai meal and a Western meal. In either words, you pay for one meal and get two. The food is absolutely fantastic. We literally pass out very early after dinner in the gorgeous bed and I sleep the sleep of the innocent all night.

Breakfast the next morning is a lovely buffet affair, accompanied by a Bloody Mary should one choose to start the day with a kick.

The next morning we visit the Tiger Cave Temple in Krabi. This Buddhist temple is one of the most sacred sites in the province with truly breath-taking views. We climb the 1,237 steps to the top and the elements flight of stairs to reach the summit - 1272 small steps to be precise.

That evening we rest street food at one of the many ordinary roadside food stalls and visit THE BOTTLE ▶ and we get right into the spirit of the Thailand Full Moon Party. The night is hot and sultry as we walk along the beautiful sand to the crashing sea and we find a free Bella Beach pub with Bob Marley stories where we linger under the stars, drinking ice-cold beer.

Life is good.

Credit: Jo Kessberg

The next morning we catch a boat from Noppaorthara Pier to CONTADA GRAND ▶ Beach Resort and Villas, about a 20 minute boat ride to a secluded cove with a stunning white sand cove bay. The day is beautiful and the sense of transhumanly blue, blue waters straight out of the movies.

A golf cart takes us up into the hills and our VILLA ▶ is revealed – a vision to behold. We have an unimaginable view of the Andaman sea. Designed in a modern Thai style, the villa is very large in tranquillity.

After a swim in the tranquil, tepid sea we are invited to dinner by the amazing management which presents an an intimate table for two on the beach. We stroll down the delicious starters of spring rolls and dipping sauces but little do we know what is to come.

Tom Yum soup (which could power Eskom with its heat but is also really addictively delicious), vegetable curry, deep fried red snapper, chicken curry, fish, orange salad, pineapple fried rice with cashews... and it keeps coming. Lime Lemgrass is my favourite, sensitizing our surroundings.

In the full moon, the rock formation in the sea below shine even more than the light rest of the black ocean like a silent, popular flame of God into the dark city-lit sky above us.

After a repeat breakfast, we head off back to Noppaorthara Pier by BOAT ▶ the next morning for the approximately two and a half hour drive to our next destination, Elephant Hills.

Situated deep in the tropical jungle of southern Thailand, Elephant Hills is in the Khao Sok National Park. It is difficult to describe the awesome feeling upon discovering the view of the sky-high vertical mountains in this jungle of all jungles.

The pool resort heart the best view in the whole world. The luxury-tented ACCOMMODATION ▶ is so cute and has a fan to relieve the worst heat. After all, there is no mention of the Gordon of Eden being air-conditioned.

A quick buffet lunch and it's time for a KAYAK ▶ trip on the Sok River, cooking our way through the jungle. A river guide covers you in some bug juice (very deep deet, stinging every one in a while to have a look at or make us jungle-free. Our official guide here at Elephant Hills is an amazing young man who comprises slip of a girl called Tik, and she accompanies us to the elephant sanctuary nearby.

There are 15 elephants here, all female and all rescued from logging camps. They are retired. There is one little one, about three years old and the largest mum of Hills. Completely adorable of course with many little hats on her head and everything. We wash and scrub down as they lie down and, joked, rolled and tumbled-and, spunk tourists transform into jumbo, laughing people in front of my eyes. Like magic.

We then prepare meals for them with 50 whopping bananas and other fruit and feeding it to them. Clever people, these Thai – making tourists pay to do their labour for them and loving every second. Tour operators like Bamboo Jungle Tours also trash and feed elephants because babies we know it, we are back at the LODGE ▶ – sipping a long cool drink in the heat.

Credit: Jo Kessberg

The rainforest is always hot and humid – which I know – and responsible for our out of every four sandwiched products we buy at the pharmacy, we are told – which I didn't know.

It is the night of the 6th of November and the entire country is celebrating Loi Krathong, an annual festival. The name means "to float a basket", and comes from the tradition of making krathong or banana, decorated baskets, which are then floated on a river.

On the night of the full moon, Thais launch their krathong on a river, canal or a pond, making a wish or their do, my parents' wish for the same thing. We go to the river with our krathong in tow then place a coin and a lock of hair or nail and we all go down to the river and launch our floating, candlelit wish boats. The ritual is in honour and purity in deeply touching.

After a magnificent buffet dinner – Thai cooking Internet are also offered to guests – I sit in the dark and watch the fireflies dance and the stars twinkle in the night sky. The sounds of the jungle and especially of the macaque monkeys and other creatures of the night are. There are very few places left uncultivated by the necessary evil of mass tourism and this is one of them.

We stop in a small town the following morning, perusing the local fish and fresh produce market and we visit the Wat Tham Sua Temple. The temple is located in a cave in the enormous slide-like called Buddhaisawan Chaisiri. The limestone outcrops protruding from the hills reach a height of an astonishing 1000 metres.

The hike covers an area of 50 square kilometers and is located about 7kms from Surat Thani. The flooding of a valley of dense rainforest formed the lake. Our next destination, Elephant Hills, Rain Forest Camp, is situated in the middle of the lake and takes about an hour by BOAT ▶.

And then to? Where is this vision I see before me? All I can advise you to do is imagine all the most entire greatest fantasies you have ever had. Then multiply this by ten. And then I will see you and raise you Elephant Hills Rainforest Camp.

It is a floating bungalow paradise, unsurmountably and calmly buoyant on the emerald green water, surrounded by tropical rainforest mountainous jungle.

Like a chameleon, the camp is the colour of its surroundings and completely sober and wind powered as well as boasting a unique and eco-friendly waste management system.

There are only two tents ACCOMMODATION ▶ two people each. The entire camp is set on a fertile seaweed island by four underwater cables. The seaweed is grown in pontoons.

The circular/ diameter, semi-sounds cosy and and solar is the closely, but and humidity and the darkness, we are the only people on earth. After lunch, alone first people, including my wonderful guide, we go for a swim in the lake. The water is fresh and alone and swim in the ethereal, ours, brilliant by the invisible inhabitants of the rain forest.

I feel that familiar Swedish furniture creeping up on me. You know the one – being crossed by overwhelming boxes in carrier. I have along, trapped swim in the cool green, pristine lake. There is also the option of kayaking on the lake in your own personal KAYAK ▶, owned by your tent, which rules the of course.

I always thought the phrase "one with Nature" very trite but all at once I learn exactly what that means... The impressionable rainforest hold their own secrets – pristine and most of it never penetrated by Man. In a place like this, God cannot be very far away.

Every now and again a cold "pika" splashes the lake, looking for a bite. The highly endangered Indochina tiger can still be found here but numbers are very low. It is said in the locals that the tiger's lone mating call can still be heard around May. There are less than tigers in the world and two of them can be found here.

The smoke rest up again in the growing dusk, ringing across the vast body of water. Disease and high jinks follow into the night as we compare stories with other guests. A soft, penetrating rain pours my sleepy gaze the next morning as I pass out once paradise.

The rain does actually subside later and we go for a long KAYAK ▶ ride, just the two of us, speculating what might be to well behind the dense trees in the mountains on the float by. We are tired towards to the inscrutible Wait and her team with remarked promises to return soon. Back at the LODGE ▶ we have a delicious lunch and we head off back to Surat Thani and the Tourath and love for the environment will always stay with me, almost five hours later we enter the busy, chaotic touristy town of Pattaya in Phuket.

Credit: Jo Kessberg

We finally arrive at CONTADA GRAND BEACH RESORT PHUKET ▶ and what a place! Up until this point Thai food (which is great, don't get me wrong) was one staple diet so to be introduced to various dining options such as Italian and real steak makes us giddy with delight.

Since we are only here for one night we opt for both a minute in their wonderful Italian restaurant and a steak dinner in the Steak House. The food is delicious, the service is attentive, meaning meet, meet and meet! Wait, the Italian restaurant is the best in Pattaya I am told. After a portion of their spaghetti carbonara and four-cheese pizza I absolutely concur!

Driving in design Green Mile, the classic Mediterranean architecture that characterizes the resort, we head to the Green Mile Golf Course. Our tee-off time is at 11:00 – the perfect time for a green fee, and prepaid around in very water park which looks like a natural, meandering river.

Our hard Tour with Jonathan is over the next morning to take us the five minutes up the road to our next HOTEL ▶ ? The sight, some prospect Centura Villas. The minute we step into the gazebo reception and observe the view, tranquillity takes on its home in our hard-hard heart. Looking out over the entire bay, Centura Villas is located high in the hills above Karon Beach.

The view of the sea is spectacular and all the villas are built into the tropical, lush hillside. The 2nd inspired decor of the KITCHEN ▶ infinite pieces and the voodoo floor is set off in the bathroom and a white and burgundy colour scheme.

The sun colours the sea a shade of green green as we enjoy lunch at the poolside restaurant. The cute stops at about 3pm and we go up to the main restaurant for dinner with a stunning view of the twinkling lights over the bay. The night is velvet and heavy with sentiment.

Soft lighting, ordered music and some of the most meticulously fantastic food in my life set the tone for the next couple of days. The menu is expansive but better yet, you can order off menu, which is a sign of a very clever joint indeed.

We have dal toasted tuna and poached lobster or starter respectively and it is such so much delicious on both counts. The Angus beef rib eye steak (for me) and the steamed calamari with chilli and lime (for partner) is a sublime culinary victory.

We arrive at our final destination after about of about 5 or so the following day.

CONTADA GRAND ▶ Phuk Resort & Villas Phuket is set in 47 acres of lush tropical gardens and is the ultimate in luxurious accommodation. Situated on the Mai Khao Beach, the largest and quietest stretch of sand on Phuket's magnificent west coast.

The resort is well very close to Phuket International Airport, 45 minutes by car. So says their website and it is all true. It is the size of a small country and our ACCOMMODATION ▶ up to seven people.

But the water park must be the biggest attraction and suffice to say it could make Disney World envious.

We take to the road again with Destination Asia after breakfast on our second last day in Thailand – this time for a boat trip and KAYAKING ▶ with a company called Atha Grey. It is the perfect opportunity to canoe to Phang Nga and get the best of both worlds – by day and night.

After lunch we explore the bay's limestone caves, which can only be entered by canoe when the tide is just right. Our guide is called Ray and he traverses the narrow caves with the skill of a master.

I assume classical, claustrophobic fear and my heart beats like a drum as we have to be completely flat while vaulting through the pitch black, barnacled cave tunnels, fragments of stalactites and stalagmites. Ray assures us that we are safe and that the tide is still relatively small is overpowering. But my trepidation quickly gives way to the most incredible feeling of awe as we emerge into the inner "rooms" with the sun bright above us. The limestone caves are two million years old, we learn.

We find ourselves in a green lagoon or "lungs" – inner lagoon caves inside the limestone rocks that are accessed through the small tunnel openings. Once inside the lungs, inner small and the only sound is the gentle splash of our paddles and the calls of nature.

We are totally surrounded by limestone cliffs. Some caves are called "THREE ROOMS" ▶. We explore a few of these unbelievable caves with their amazed stalactites extensions and night slowly makes its presence felt.

We retrieve our kayaks from the boat after dinner and KAYAK ▶ back to one of the previous caves with only our trusted candles and the light of the moon and stars as light source. This time Ray organized the caves entrance effectively so the caves has significantly subsided due to the tide. The phosphorescence in the dark vaults looks like tiny fairy lights and it's wonderful.

Once back inside the "room", an incredible feeling of deep spiritual peace descends on me as we lower our kayaks into the sea and make a walk to the inner sanctuary.

There are candles everywhere and the only sounds are the soft murmurs from the other guests in their KAYAKS ▶.

In all my travels this counts as one of the most special lifetime moments.

We return TO THE HOTEL ▶ late but exhilarated. I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep until almost the next morning a tearful goodbye.

The magic of Thailand lies in its beautiful nature and forests, and its wonderful Buddhist culture and history. But most of all it lies in its people – their movements, the warm their slight bodies tend lightly on the earth, always with a smile that extends right around their faces and deep into your heart.

So I invite you to come to Thailand and learn about the incredible lightness of being...

Jim

In Kimberley would like to thank The Tourism Authority of Thailand for coordinating our entire trip, for bringing in partners such as Destination Asia, Centura Resorts AND HOTELS ▶ and Elephant Hills. You can find them on their website.

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