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Elephant Hills Truck Safari to Thailand's rainforest will float your boat ... and tent

BRIAR JENSEN ESCAPE JUNE 14, 2014 12:00AM

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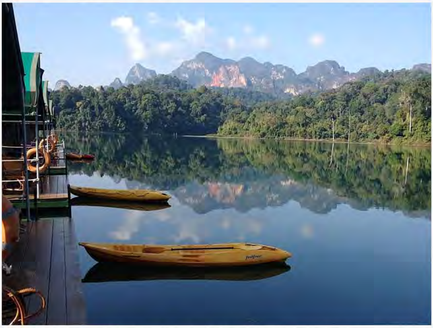
Two-year-old elephant HaHa looks for a banana at Elephant Hills, Thailand. Picture: Briar Jensen *Source:* Supplied

OUTSIDE my floating tent, in the stillness of the pre-dawn darkness, fish breach the lake surface with a plop.

The moon has slipped from view through the insect screen windows and the stars, earlier so brilliant, are slowing losing their sparkle.



Elephant Hills Rainforest Camp floats on the man-made Cheown Larn Lake. Picture: Briar Jensen *Source:* Supplied

I linger between the crisp white sheets of the comfy double bed savouring the morning coolness, hypnotised by the mellifluous melody of the rainforest — an a cappella chorus of insects and birds.

"Ooop ... ooop." The call of a white-handed gibbon beckons from across the lake. It's the sound

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we've been waiting for.

Leaping out of bed I quickly change, grab my dry bag and camera, and rendezvous for the 6.30am paddling safari. Our yellow kayaks slice through the dark, glassy water as we paddle silently across the lake.

Tourists enjoy an early morning kayak on Cheown Larn Lake, Thailand. Picture: Briar Jensen *Source:* Supplied

Like a quick-change artist the sky slips off its silky blackness and shimmies into a silver hue. Mist lingers in the mountain's cleavage, draping the rainforest in its damp caress.

Nature's embrace humbles us all, silencing us by her beauty. Now if only we could spot those gibbons.

Cheow Larn Lake is in Khao Sok National Park, southern Thailand.

We're here as part of a Truck Safari, a new initiative by the Elephant Hills Company.

We meet our guides Chris and Bua in Phuket for the three-hour drive to Takua Pa. Transport is an 18-seater, airconditioned, all-terrain vehicle with big windows and comfy seats.

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Who's the hottie with Warnie?

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'I will miss you everyday', Sammi Jade posts tribute to Mum

LIKE lyrics from a heart-rending ballad, Samantha Jade posts a moving tribute to her mother, saying she will miss her everyday "especially on my wedding day."

A Gibbon provides the perfect photo opportunity at Elephant Hills Rainforest Camp. *Source:* Supplied

After lunch on the riverbank in Takua Pa we explore the historic part of town, where crumbling Sino-Portuguese buildings allude to its life as a trading port and tin-mining town, before we continue on to Sri Phang Nga National Park.

The faded glory of the old town of Takua Pa. Picture: Briar Jensen *Source:* Supplied

An easy 500m walk through the bush leads to a natural amphitheatre where Tamnang Waterfall tumbles 63m into a swimming hole.

Moist moss and verdant creepers cling to the surrounding rocks and ephemeral rainbows play hide and seek in the delicate spray.

I wade through the carp swarming in the shallows and lunge into the crystal clear water, sluicing off the day's heat.

Home for the night is the national park camping ground, where our two-person dome tents and camp stretchers are set up beside the river, a short walk from the dining pavilion and ablutions block.

Unfortunately, we're within earshot of the rangers' quarters, where they party into the night.

However, Elephant Hills is building its own tented camp, which should open next year.

Next morning we drive to Elephant Hills' sanctuary in Khao Sok National Park.

Ready to roll ... the transport for an Elephant Hills Truck Safari in Thailand. *Source:* Supplied

Fourteen elephants, rescued following the 1989 logging ban, live here with their mahouts (handlers). Last time I visited, the "elephant experience" included a ride in a chair strapped to the elephant's back. It felt unnatural and impersonal and has thankfully been dropped in favour of more hands-on interaction.

First up we meet two-year-old "baby" HaHa, who scoots comically around the enclosure she shares with her mother, inquisitively poking her trunk through the timber rails to elicit a banana from our hands.

At the swimming hole Mae Tong Dee rubs her back on the muddy bank before wallowing in the water, rolling this way and that, reluctant to get out.

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You can get up close and personal with the elephants at Elephant Hills. Picture: Briar Jensen *Source:* Supplied

I hose her down afterwards, scrubbing the mud from her coarse, wrinkly skin with coconut fibres, so close I can see my reflection in her eye.

It's a privilege to be so close to an Asian elephant, now an endangered species.

Gentle puffs of air tickle the back of my legs as I split fruit and sugar cane with a giant cleaver. It's Mod Dang stretching out her trunk, trying to reach the basket of chopped fruit at my feet.

I share her anticipation — the sweet smell has me salivating.

Guests on the five-day safari spend two nights at Elephant Hills' luxury camp nearby, taking in a canoe trip, jungle trek, cultural performance and cooking class.

Guests can prepare fruit for the elephants. Picture: Briar Jensen *Source:* Supplied

But our three-day sample itinerary sees us continue on to the floating rainforest camp.

Cheow Larn, also known as Ratchaprapha Dam, is a man-made lake, formed after the damming of several rivers. Villagers, whose homes were flooded, have the right to fish the lake and drive the tourist boats. It's possible to dive here and see old village temples.

A long-tail boat skims us across the lake. Jagged limestone karsts rise out of the water, their ochre, pink, and chalky cliffs reminiscent of China's Guilin.

Tucked into a quiet corner of the lake the eco-conscious rainforest camp consists of 10 luxury tents with ensuites, attached to a dining pontoon.

Elephant Hills Rainforest Camp on Cheown Larn Lake. Picture: Briar Jensen *Source:* Supplied

Swimming out from my veranda in the 25C water the lake feels bottomless below my feet. Kayaking the ravine nearby, it's just me and the untamed wilderness.

After dinner in the open-sided dining room Chris shows us footage taken from hidden cameras in the park. It's exhilarating to know these wild elephant, boar, tapir, gaur and sambar deer are roaming the jungle surrounding our camp.

The gibbons, however, remain elusive on our morning paddling safari but we do spot spectacled langurs — long-tailed monkeys with whimsical white-circled eyes. One cradles an infant of saffron-toned fur like a colourful toy.

While we breakfast on bacon and eggs a lesser sea eagle snatches a fish from the lake.

As we prepare to leave white-handed gibbons appear in the trees behind camp. A farewell gift from the rainforest.

■ *The writer was a guest of Tourism Authority of Thailand. See Briar Jensen's travel blog at briarstravelbeat.com.au*

Tamnang Waterfall tumbles 63m into a swimming hole. Picture: Briar Jensen *Source:* Supplied

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