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[JAMES RUGGIA](#) | JUNE 12, 2015 3:00 PM ET

## Khao Sok: Where the Gibbons Sing

As you cruise in from Rajjaprabha Dam across Cheow Larn Lake on your longboat, penetrating deeper into Thailand's Khao Sok National Park, your eyes scan long rows of mountains thrusting skyward out of the moist green forest through a long lateral sediment of hanging mist and cloud. It's an especially Asian beauty, recalling silk paintings and wave-like calligraphic strokes of black ink.

Taken individually, each starch white precipice, cracked by small trees and salmon-stained with swaths of clay, has the complex character of driftwood, grained and knotted. And like driftwood, when you first encounter this incredible lost world of a place, you can't help but feel that it has arrived in front of you after a long and powerful journey. In the case of Khao Sok that's exactly right.

The mountains themselves are what remain of what was the world's largest coral reef, larger even than the Great Barrier Reef. As the seas retreated from this area some 250 million years ago, they left these giants. The forests of Khao Sok, believed by many scientists to be even older and more diverse than the Amazon, have for the most part been impenetrable to human beings until only recently. It defies belief that this 280-square-mile tract of ancient rainforest managed to survive in a region and a time when logging buzz-sawed through old-growth rainforest in Southeast Asia as voraciously as dragnet fishing is annihilating the ocean's fish today.

The forest did suffer one modern intrusion when the Thai government dammed up the Klong Saeng River in 1982 to create the massive 65-square-mile Cheow Larn Lake. When the dam first closed the flow of the river, several villages were submerged and hundreds of animals, who in retreating from the rising waters, found themselves isolated on about 100 newly created islands. Authorities did their best to capture and relocate those animals back in the main body of the forest.

It only adds to the mystery of this setting, that beneath the serenity of the waters in the depths of the lake, a skeletal forest remains. Sitting on the porch of a floated tent at the [Elephant Hills Company's](#) Rainforest Camp, the call of the forest's gibbons, eerily reminiscent of city sirens, yet rich in a plaintive bluesiness, echo out on the lake from the forest. Naturalists from Elephant Hills say there are five families of gibbon living along the lake shore, but that only scratches the surface of the wildlife in the park where other species include Asian elephants, wild buffalo, tapir, wild boar, sun bear, Asian ox, tigers, leopards, long tail macaque, king cobra, eagle and seven different species of hornbills. Birders can find some 200 species in the park.

The density of the forest made it a perfect refuge for animals and it was only first inhabited by human beings in the 1800s when many Siamese retreated into the area during one of Burma's military incursions into the kingdom. It wouldn't be the last time that Khao Sok's impenetrability made it into a political refuge.

In 1976, the Thai military suppressed demonstrating students at Bangkok's Thammasat University, with many fatalities. About 170 dissident students exiled themselves into the forest, much as the Maroons did in Jamaica, and joined a communist insurgency. Between 1975 and 1982, the forest insurgents prevented the police, the military or the logging firms from entering the forest. And so the lasting legacy of the insurgency is the survival of a genuine tract of wilderness just three hours north of Phuket.

In 1980, it became Thailand's 22nd national park, thus protecting a vast [RESERVE](#) of ancient rainforest. When combined with Sri Phang Nga National Park immediately to its west, the area of preserved wilderness extends to almost 1,550 square miles.

The Elephant Hills Company operates two tented camps in the national park and runs treks, safaris, [KAYAKING](#) expeditions and its signature experience of feeding and caring for their 13 Asian elephants who were rescued from logging companies. Rather than have the elephants do the usual routine of playing soccer or re-enacting battles from the Ramayana or painting, (that's right, certain elephants have been trained to paint), the visitors are encouraged to participate in scrubbing then feeding the elephants. It's a far more respectful interaction with tourists and you can feel the difference in the playfulness of the elephants.

Khao Sok is bringing something very important to Thai tourism. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), some 61 percent of American visitors to the kingdom are repeat visitors. To keep those visitors coming back and back again, the TAT is looking to emphasize new dimensions into a market that has almost exclusively seen Thailand as a place to visit cultural monuments in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Chiang Rai, and to hit the beaches on the island [RESORTS](#) in both the Andaman Sea and in the Gulf of Thailand. Khao Sok adds a completely revitalizing aspect to Thai tourism, and you certainly hope that tourism plays a role in protecting this area rather than damaging it.

The towering limestone cliffs in Khao Sok National Park Lake have given the area the predictable nickname of Thailand's Guilin, but for me at least, the mountains of Khao Sok are more dramatic than either Guilin's karst mountains or those at Vietnam's Halong Bay. Unlike those two, Khao Sok remains utterly wild, and their rainforest setting and the morning mist that hovers around their shaggy shoulders elevates their painting-like beauty to heights that are unmatched, especially when the gibbons are singing.

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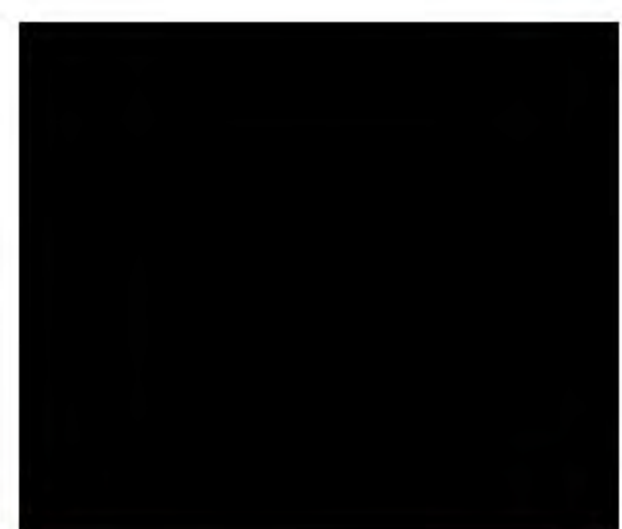
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