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Buriram is one of the "12 Hidden Gems" the Tourism Authority of Thailand is promoting to repeat travelers.

DESTINATION | thailand

As it hones its strategy for promoting in the U.S. market, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has what many destinations would consider a nice problem, but a problem nonetheless.

A full 61 percent of the Americans who visit the country are repeat visitors. These travelers (and I'm one of them) find a fascination with Thailand, not so much in its endless attractions or experiences, but in what the TAT calls "Thainess," the cultural spirit of the country and of its people, who carry themselves with such an elegant composure. Nothing sums up that spirit better than the traditional Thai greeting known as the "wai," in which the palms of the hands and the tips of the fingers press lightly together to accompany a bow.

Thai hospitality, which is so much a part of the country's Buddhism, allows American travelers to feel completely relaxed even though they're in a thoroughly exotic destination. The exotic and the relaxed don't usually join together in one destination.

Though Thainess remains a strong attraction for Thailand, TAT is wise to seek undiscovered places and new experiences that give you new ways to sell the country. Packaging Thailand for the first-time traveler generally builds from a well-established and balanced route that combines urban experience in Bangkok and Chiang Mai; ecotourism in the north, usually from Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai; and an island stay in either the Gulf of Thailand or in the Andaman Sea.

The experiential components of

that traditional travel circuit include Thai massage, cooking classes, a klong (canal) journey in Bangkok usually ending at the Grand Palace along with shopping for tailored clothing, a hill tribe visit, an elephant experience and then down to the island of your choice for R&R. What about travelers who have already done these things?

TAT and creative Thai entrepreneurs continue to add new dimensions to tried-and-true experiences, even as lesser known destinations rise into prominence. In its 12 Hidden Gems promotion, TAT is highlighting 12 little-known destinations from four tourism regions defined as North, Northeastern, Central and Southern. Those gems include Lampang, Phetchabun, Isaan, Nan, Buriram, Loei, Samut Songkhram, Ratchaburi, Trat, Chantaburi, Trang, Chumphon and Nakhon Si Thammarat.

KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK

Another destination that you can add to the list includes Khao Sok National Park, a beautiful expanse of virgin rain forest about a three-hour drive from Phuket. The forests of Khao Sok are as old as any in the world and are home to such wildlife as Asian elephants and buffalo, tapir, boar, sun bear, Asian ox, tigers, leopards, long tail macaque, king cobra, eagle and gibbon, which give Khao Sok Lake a mysterious feel when they make their calls from the forest. Birders can find some 200 species in the park including hornbills.

Visitors penetrate the forest by

boat on the lake past the same sort of jagged karst peaks you see in Guilin, China and they're often naturally adorned with a beautiful hanging mist and cloud.

The Elephant Hills Company's (www.elephant-hills.com) operates two camps featuring very comfortable tented accommodations: one in the rain forest and one on the lakeside. Their elephant experience eschews the elephant rides and soccer games and simply allows participants to just help wash and feed the elephants. It's a much more intimate experience and better for the animals. Elephant Hills also runs treks, safaris and kayaking expeditions.

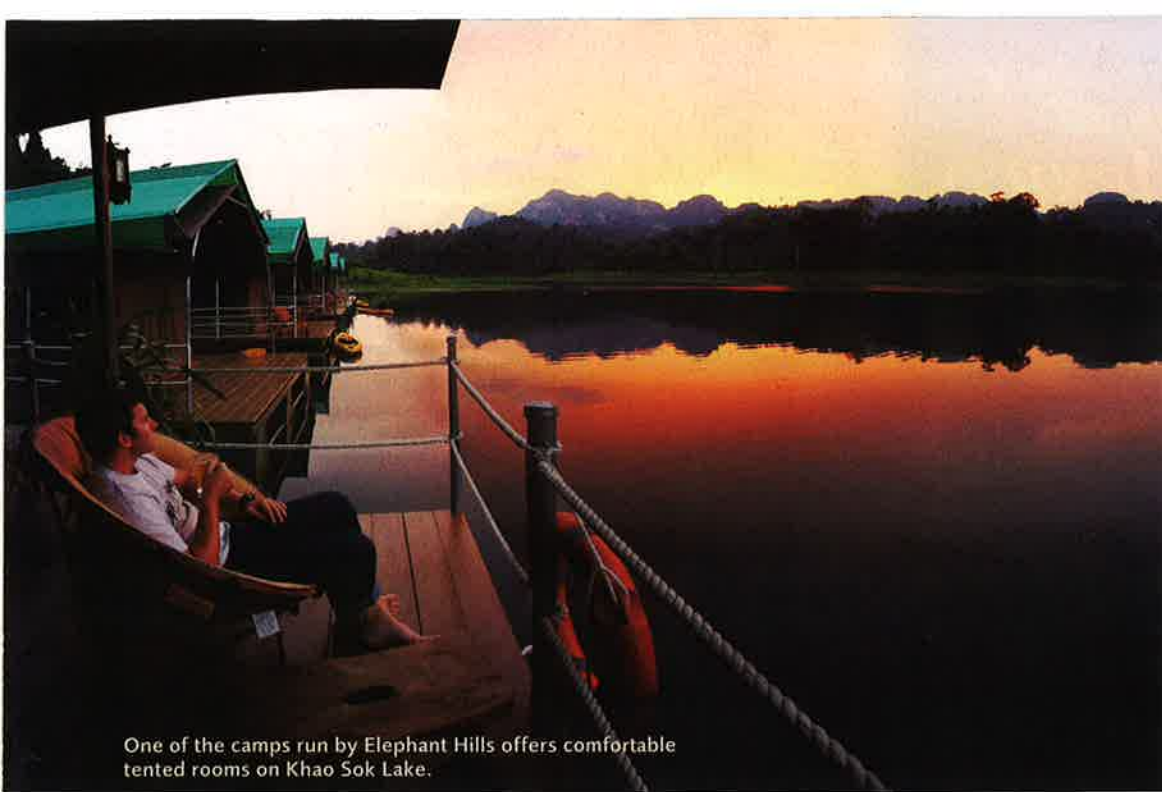
Clients who prefer more traditional lodging can opt for the 338-room SENTIDO Graceland Khao Lak Resort & Spa (www.sentidohotels.com), which recently opened on the coastline of Phang Nga near Khao Sok and Phang Nga National Parks.

THE POW'S RAILROAD

Most Americans know the River Kwai from the classic 1957 film "Bridge on the River Kwai." Opened in 2014, X2 River Kwai (www.x2resorts.com) is located on the river just a couple of hours from Bangkok and near the actual area where Japanese forces used British POWs to build the notorious Thai-Burma Railway. Through October, the resort's Journey to the Past package, priced at about \$160 per person, double, includes accommodations, champagne breakfast, a tour of the historic sites and transfers to Kanchanaburi Station for a train

TWICE AS NICE

There is plenty to offer even the most experienced Thailand travelers



One of the camps run by Elephant Hills offers comfortable tented rooms on Khao Sok Lake.

DESTINATION | thailand

ride on the WWII railway that the POWs built.

You can travel by train from Bangkok to Kanchanburi on a 2.5-hour ride from Bangkok's Thon Buri Station through fine scenery of rice paddies and small villages along the way.

PHI PHI ARCHIPELAGO

An alternative Andaman Sea destination, the Phi Phi archipelago, about an hour by boat from Phuket, is home to many pristine beaches that are much less crowded than Phuket. Six islands make up the Mu Koh Phi Phi-Nopparathara National Park and Phi Phi Don is the only one that is inhabited. The rest are protected by their national park status. The surrounding waters are as peaceful below as they are above, while docile leopard sharks, turtles and sea horses can be spotted by divers and snorkelers near amazing reefs.

Koh Phi Phi also features a vibrant nightlife on Tonsai Beach where dozens of beach bars and restaurants are active into the deeps of the night. Ferries leave three times a day from Phuket and twice a day from Krabi. In 2012, the 156-room Outrigger Phi Phi Island Resort and Spa (www.outrigger.com) opened giving you a five-star option for your clients.

NEW BANGKOK EXPERIENCES

Klong or canal tours and Thai cooking classes have become major experiential components in almost

every visit to Bangkok. Most klong tours end at the Grand Palace for a tour of its glittering temples and to see the most important work of sacred art in Thailand, the Emerald Buddha. Now you can combine a klong tour and cooking class in an interesting intimate and delicious experience with the Amita Cooking School (www.amitathaicooking.com). The school is owned and operated by Tam Piyawadi Jantrupon who offers very personal cooking classes in the canal-side home she grew up in — and she is half the experience.

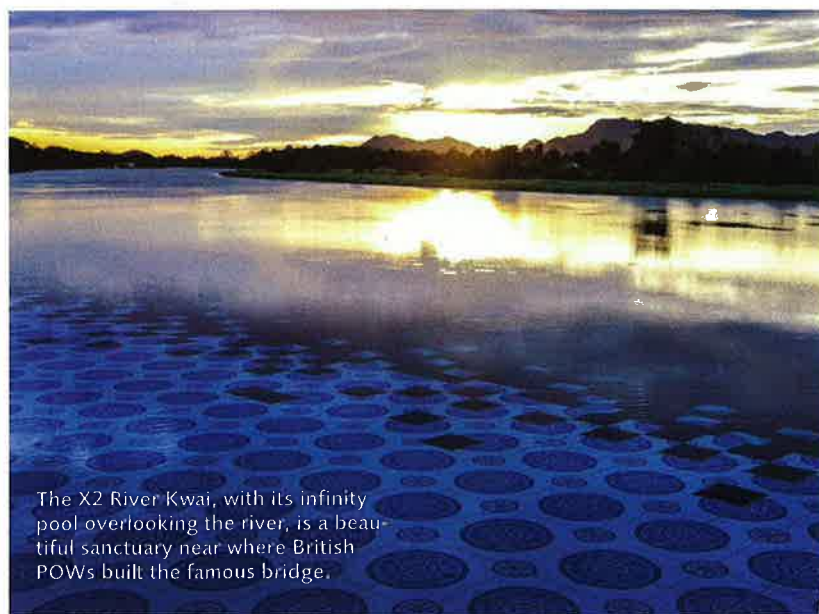
Her home is a teak wood compound connecting six houses that have been in her family for four generations. "In

the old days, the klong was Main Street and I still remember when the food used to come to us on boats," Jantrupon said. The stories go on from there and give you a real feel of essential Bangkok. She also takes you around her herb garden explaining how each different plant has its own medicinal and culinary qualities.

The program begins with a long-tail speedboat pick-up at the Maharaj Pier on the Chao Phraya for a ride on the river into the Sanaha Klong and Jantrupon's home. She leads participants through the cooking of four Thai dishes, which tour they eat during a four-course dinner that they themselves cooked. The classes take a maximum 12 people and cost about \$85 per person. Taught in English (Jantrupon spent a couple of years in California), they run from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. daily, except Wednesdays. Amita will also send a van to the major hotels for pick-up and drop-off.

Another traditional activity, Thai boxing, known as Muay Thai, is a staple for travelers visiting Bangkok. A fight card at Bangkok's old Lumpinee Arena followed by a meal at the neighborhood's Night Market has always been one of the best times you can have in the city, even if you're not a boxing fan. Bangkok's new 5,000-seat Lumpinee Boxing Stadium (www.muaythailumpinee.net) also features the Muay Thai Training School, as well as shops and more modern facilities.

For more information, visit www.tourismthailand.org. @



The X2 River Kwai, with its infinity pool overlooking the river, is a beautiful sanctuary near where British POWs built the famous bridge.