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News

THAILAND: ELEPHANT HILLS LUXURY JUNGLE CAMP

By Robyn Bayes on 20 June 2011 0 comments

In the early afternoon, deep in the rainforest of Khao Sok National Park, a monsoonal storm had just swept in. It drenched not only the jagged, jungle-covered limestone peaks surrounding us, but a hungry line of swaying elephants waiting impatiently for their lunch of fresh fruit and vegetables.

The rains, followed by rolling mists, had cooled everything down, including the elephants, though anticipation was still running high as lunch is one of their biggest daily meals. So, with choppers in hand and baskets at our feet, we got to work making a huge lunch of bamboo, pumpkin, watermelon, pineapple, cucumber and bananas — each elephant consumes at least 250 kg of food a day.

We lugged the baskets over to the hungry residents —

Misty, Cloud, Sea and Pipapee — small Asian elephants that are very much the symbol of Thailand. Swaying from side to side, their huge trunks (made up of over 100,000 muscles) stretched out and demolished hundreds of kilograms of fruit and vegetables within minutes.

They are beautiful, well cared for animals — the mahouts (handlers) on their backs spending most of their lives with their own elephant, developing a close and loving bond. After lunch they headed for a warm, muddy bath, and rolled and trumpeted in delight before we and the handlers got up close to give them a good hose down and a scrub. It was the standout moment of the Elephant Hills experience, which is packed with highlights.

Elephant Hills is located in the largest area of rainforest in southern Thailand — densely green and lush — and is the country's first luxury jungle camp based on those operated in African national parks. Overlooking a mass of jungle and limestone cliffs, and the winding Sok River, the property melds home comforts with nature but still retains the feel of real adventure.

and an adjoining stone inlaid bathroom with flushing toilet, hot shower and amenities. The tent is also completely covered with strong mosquito netting. An outside hammock was ideal for a lingering afternoon snooze surrounded by a garden of orchids, palms and ferns, with the birds and distant calls of wildlife providing the only noise.

Our luxury tents, set under sturdy roofs, incorporated all hotel comforts — large beds, fresh sheets, reading lights

In the morning we took a long canoe ride down the Sok River, surrounded by white karsts and rainforest, where we met local fishermen and children who swam on the river's edge. In the evening we assembled at the camp's Jungle Explorer Club for a few cool drinks before dining on a smorgasbord of southern Thai dishes. It was a comfortable way to commune with nature. Stretching out in bed you could hear the ambient chatter and noise deep into the night.

The next day we moved on again, this time to the Elephant Hills Rainforest Camp, a new floating tented camp anchored in a serene, incredibly green corner of Cheow Larn Lake in Khao Sok National Park. The 10 modern tents, built on a steel floating raft, are solar powered and utilise cutting edge waste management technology. They have large beds, fresh linen, hammocks, bathrooms with hot showers, and all are netted. It's as comfortable as any well-appointed hotel room.

Right outside was the vast stillness of Cheow Larn Lake, and in the far distance a rising wall of the jungle home to elephants, tigers, monkeys, Malaysian sun bears, enormous Atlas moths, plants such as the Rafflesia with its giant red flower (the largest in the world) and a myriad of birds. We lapped it all up; swimming in the fresh, green water, canoeing kilometres into rivers edged by rainforest and watching birds effortlessly skim across the water while fishermen waited patiently to snare one of the giant catfish that flourish there.

After sunset and a few quiet drinks at the bar, we headed out into the darkness of the lake on a safari looking for jungle night life. Speeding through the blackness, we mused that it should have been called the night star safari as the stars, shining in their thousands, were brilliantly clear and sparkling — a massive swathe untouched by pollution and city lights. It was definitely a Zen moment for all.

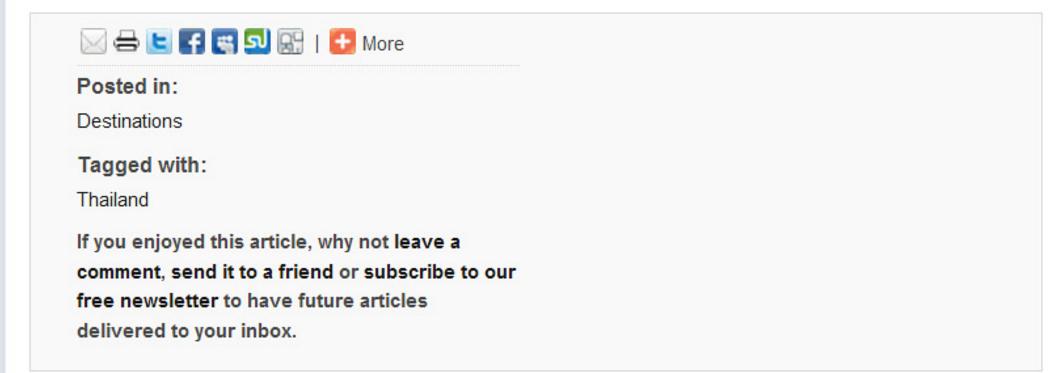
We rose early the next morning. Sitting by the water's edge, we watched and listened as the jungle slowly came to life. Across the water, gibbons swung through the treetops, emitting their loud whooping cry. Birds and other wildlife joined in the chorus. It would be hard to imagine getting closer to nature than this.

GETTING THERE

Elephant Hills offers pick-up services for guests from both Phuket and Krabi airports, as well as a number of hotels in Phuket, Krabi, Khao Lak and Surat Thani. Bangkok Airways operates six daily services between Bangkok and Phuket, while it operates four daily services between Bangkok and Krabi.

The writer travelled as a guest of the Tourism Authority of Thailand and Thai Airways

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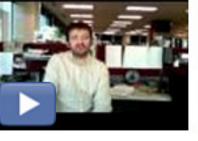
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