

ISTANBUL

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Detours

WITH SHIRLEY SINCLAIR

DEALS AND SPECIALS

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Jungle bath no mean feat

THE indignity of having to bathe naked in public must only have been exacerbated by the fact her "attendants" were such amateurs.

The first-timers looked more akin to teenagers doing their bit for a charity car-wash, albeit a jumbo-size one. Still, Nab Aok is every bit a lady, and she acted like one.

Though she wore no jewels or lace and finery, she reigned supreme over us, commanding our undivided attention as we fussed over her like ladies in waiting to a princess.

The "bath" is one of the highlights of the Elephant Hills elephant experience at Khao Sok in southern Thailand. The mammoth task requires all hands on deck and is greeted with almost a stampede of willing helpers.

So, just how many journalists does it take to wash an elephant?

Let's see ... one on hose duty and at least one on each side to wash off the mud from the swim in the dam using shampoo and a rag made from coconut husk.

Another brave soul is stationed down the "business end" at the back, where there is a real possibility of being kicked, swatted, urinated on – or worse.

And one has to film the frivolity and offer moral support with plenty of patting and playful scratching of the cheek and forehead.

Mother-of-two Nab Aok was believed to be pregnant but showed no sign of mood swings or grumpiness. Apart from the occasional flap of an ear, she was



ALL HANDS ON DECK: Tom Neal Tacker gives Nab Aok a gentle scrub.
PHOTO: SHIRLEY SINCLAIR

placid throughout, taking our clumsiness in her stride.

She even indicated when to fill her trunk with water so she could squirt her undercarriage to remove stubborn mud or simply quench her thirst. Thank goodness we didn't need to buff and

polish or we'd have been there until midnight.

So how many journalists does it take to wash an elephant?

Too many, clearly! And while we all know elephants have long memories, let's hope they don't hold grudges. – **SHIRLEY SINCLAIR**



PHOTOS: SHIRLEY SINCLAIR

Intimate

Shirley Sinclair visits Thailand's first luxury-tented jungle camp

LIKE a MasterChef contestant, I nervously chop up trays of fruit and vegetables, hoping the quantity and serving sizes will meet with approval. I'm not quite sure how fussy my special guest will be, or, worse still, if she will roar her displeasure and scare the life out of me.

So I dutifully fill my basket to overflowing with watermelon, pineapple, pumpkin, cucumber, bamboo and bananas. The smorgasbord of fresh food will also help the medicine go down.

But I needn't have worried. Moddaeng turns out to be a very well-behaved guest who forgives my inability to serve up each tasty morsel in the correct fashion.

Instead, she patiently rearranges each piece of pumpkin in her trunk as a human would reposition something to be carried in the fold of their arm.

She "sweeps" the dropped watermelon quarter off the concrete floor on to the dirt ground where she can pick it up better for transfer from trunk to mouth.

The "finger" at the end of her trunk expertly grasps the banana I hand her, throwing it on to the massive pink tongue to be devoured in the blink of an eye.

I laugh heartily when she throws her fibre-enriched "med-

icine" package on the ground to eat the good stuff first.

At times, I find myself acting as I did with my own children's first meals; softly scolding her for eating too quickly and hiding pieces of bamboo behind my back until I am sure she has finished chewing everything in her mouth.

Just like everyone else around me, I am amused, entertained and mesmerised by this species-to-species encounter. We can't help but feel we have developed a bond of sorts, if only for a short time.

We are here in Khao Sok ("river in the mountain"), staying in Thailand's first luxury-tented jungle camp, to have a close encounter with Asia's largest land animal.

The 739sq km Khao Sok National Park, once part of a prehistoric inland sea, is characterised by thick vegetation and huge limestone mountains. In combination with three other national parks sitting side-by-side, this is the largest area of rainforest in southern Thailand, covering 4400sq km.

As well as wild elephants, the deep jungle is still home to small numbers of tigers and bears, as well as wild Asian ox, clouded leopards and monkeys.

Elephant Hills takes up about 100ha and includes the main camp with 30 well-appointed safari tents

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- Birth weight: 80-100kg.
- Life expectancy: 65-70 years. They live until their teeth wear out and they can't eat anymore.
- Food: grass, leaves, bamboo, sugar cane, pineapple plants, fruit.
- Daily intake: 250kg of food and 200 litres of water.

- Walking speed: 6kmh.
- Running speed: 40kmh (short distances)
- An elephant's life cycle is very similar to a human.
- The baby suckles milk using its mouth and is weaned between two and four years.
- Young elephants can start working about the age of 16

ALL ABOUT ELEPHANTS

and are fully grown at 20. Their working prime is between 20 and 40 years. The female elephant (cow) begins her reproductive cycle about age 15 and remains fertile until about 50. She can produce a calf every four to five years and have up to five babies in a lifetime. Twins are rare.

- An elephant's tail ends with a brush of stiff bristle that is used to swat insects.
- The trunk or proboscis (Greek for "before the

mouth") is the elephant's most important feature. Its 100,000 muscles help it to twist and turn in any direction along its length and can hold 8.5 litres at a time.

- The trunk has evolved by joining the nose and upper lip, and also acts as an arm.
- The "finger" at the end is

subtle enough to pick up individual blades of grass.

- One of the world's most majestic and intelligent animals is on the verge of extinction, with only about 3000 elephants left in Thailand today, and 35,000 to 45,000 in South East Asia. They are classed as "endangered".



ELEPHANT HILLS

Elephant Hills Main Camp is like a hotel room in the heart of the jungle. Each tent has beautifully crafted and handmade furniture made from natural materials including the solid timber queen-size bed. The mosquito-proof tents also have their own ensuite bathroom with western toilet and hot/cold shower, electricity, fan, tea and coffee-making facilities. Two to four-day packages include all activities, accommodation, set meals and transfer from Phuket, Khao Lak, Krabi, Surat Thani and Samui. Khao Sok is 87km (one-hour's drive) from Khao Lak and 160km from Phuket (2.5 hours). Visit www.elephant-hills.com or email info@elephant-hills.com

elephant encounters

and an open-air communal dining, entertainment and lounge area plus swimming pool. The large, airy, mosquito-proof tents are very comfortable, boasting a Bedrock-style ensuite of stone and concrete and hand-crafted solid timber furniture, with a queen-size bed and plenty of lighting.

A total of 17 elephants (13 female and four male) call Elephant Hills home. Most of them are aged 40-45 years, except for the latest addition, a 13-year-old female, which came down from northern Thailand about five months ago.

Elephant Hills' international marketing manager Jonathan Chell took his own "scenic route" here, arriving six years ago after studying biodiversity and conservation management, working in Australia for a while, and studying parrots in South America.

The camp at that stage had only opened a year earlier with three tents. The elephant experience began in 2009. Tourists from all over the world, but especially the United Kingdom, Germany, Scandinavia and northern Europe, have now enjoyed a stay here.

Many have been to Thailand before and had an elephant ride or trek, but this experience aims to go one step further in interaction.

"There's nothing bad with elephant trekking if the elephants are cared for, but we wanted to offer something different," Jonathan, a former Londoner, said.

The Elephant Hills' experience



ASIAN V AFRICAN ELEPHANTS

ASIAN ELEPHANTS:

- 3-5000kg.
- 2-3.5m height.
- Highest point = top of its head.
- The head bulges on top with a dished forehead.
- Small ears, tops not higher.
- Smoother skin.
- Only males have proper tusks;

- females have smaller tusks.
- The trunk has fewer rings, is more rigid and has one "finger".
- Toes = four or five.

AFRICAN ELEPHANTS:

- 4-7000kg.
- 3-4m.

- Highest point = top of shoulder.
- Head has no bulges and no dish.
- Large ears and tops are higher than neck.
- More wrinkled.
- Both sexes have tusks.
- More rings, less rigid and trunk has two "fingers".
- Toes = three, four or five.

also includes rafting down the Sok River. The river was part of an ancient trade route between India and China, and is "guarded" all around by limestone mountains that reach for the sky - from the

smallest at 300m to the highest at 970m. And with our personal river man doing all the work in each vessel, we glided down the shallow waters and tiny rapids, and soaked up the serene, green spectacle.

As moody, grey clouds engulf the mountains, the area takes on a Jurassic Park-like spookiness and we pile into troop carriers just as the torrential rain hits. When the rain lifts, we finally arrive at our

destination to be greeted by the sight of two-storey bamboo mahout huts and several elephants going about their daily work.

This is how Elephant Hills is tackling the jumbo problem of elephant welfare in Thailand.

Of the 3000 or so elephants left in the country, about 1500-2000 are in captivity in zoos, camps and treks, and 1000 in the wild. But Thailand is running out of jungle.

In 1960, 85% of Thailand was rainforest. Now less than 15% is available. Jonathan believes that is not enough to increase elephant numbers in the wild without them starving. He believes the answer is to create more "jobs" for domesticated elephants.

Jonathan said Elephant Hills aimed to raise awareness of the animal and to show that if well cared for and not abused or exploited, elephants could thrive in captivity.

Camps such as Elephant Hills helped get elephants off the streets, where they had been exploited in the past, and into meaningful employment, while also ensuring a future for the mahouts who had spent almost their entire lives with the animals.

"In future, there's going to be nowhere else to go," he said.

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