

DESTINATION Feature :

Elephants, Lakes, and Lazy Days

It's only 9p.m. in paradise and, sadly, I'm propping up the bar alone, with the only person to keep me company a pleasant young Thai lady across the counter who doesn't speak much English

Everyone else has gone to bed exhausted-- and I'm not far behind them.

We've driven nearly three hours north of Phuket (from noisy beachside sunset drinks one day to silent jungle cocktails the next).

In that time we've helped prepare dinner for, and hand-feed, 17 elephants without losing an arm, scrubbed and shampooed them with hairy coconut husk, drifted in a canoe for two hours down the Sok river into a monsoon storm, and failed spectacularly on a night rainforest safari to see anything except a big moth.

No tigers, monkeys, barking deer, bear, guar, banteng, serow, wild boar, pig-tailed macaque, langur, white-handed gibbon, squirrel, or even a rampaging wild elephant as advertised.



I guess we first need to find out exactly what some of these critters look like, and then pull on a pair of boots.

Or perhaps not, because we're already seriously out of our comfort zone of salt water and sunshine, and into the dark mysteries of Khao Sok national park, one of the most important tracts of primary rainforest in Asia.

Specifically on this calm, friendless night, we find ourselves at the Elephant Hills Luxury Floating Tented Camp -- billed as the first of its kind in Thailand -- on Cheow Larn lake, a spectacular man-made reservoir which, at 162 sq km, is three times the size of Sydney Harbour and the stunning centrepiece of Khao Sok national park.

Curiously, this less-travelled part of Thailand so comparatively close to the tourist meccas of Phuket, Krabi and Khao Lak, is one of its best-kept secrets now being revealed through the efforts of the company Elephant Hills (www.elephant-hills.com)



DESTINATION Feature :

Packages include at least one night at its land-based Elephant Experience camp (treks, river canoeing and feeding/washing the elephants) and a second night at the new floating rainforest lake camp about 40 minutes drive down the road.

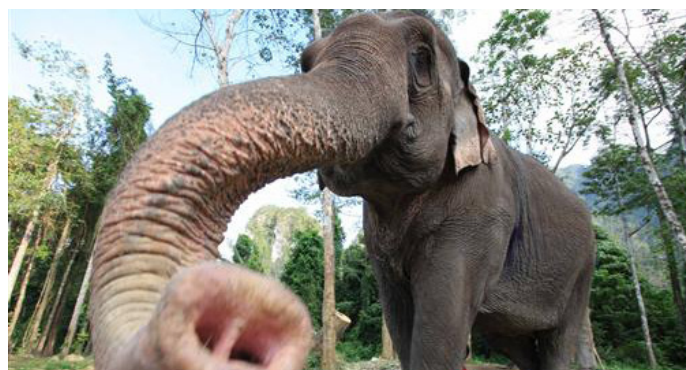
Accommodation in both places is in luxury safari-style fully screened tents complete with double beds and en-suite bathrooms (no radio or TV).

On the lake, there's a canoe tied to your balcony if you feel the urge to go exploring, and you can swim simply by stepping off the balcony.

We've reached this Shangrila-on-the-water by a decidedly circuitous, yet interesting, route:

- A couple of nights in Bangkok at the Cape House Serviced Apartments in a three-roomed suite from around \$250 a night in a swish part of town. www.capehouse.com (check out also www.capecollection.com)

- Bangkok to Phuket on Thai Airways International, for two nights at Cape Panwa Hotel, a secluded hilltop resort at the southern southern tip of Phuket Island with



panoramic sea views. For decades, famous people have graced it lobby including Elizabeth Taylor, Bryan Adams, Oliver Stone, Geena Davis, Kristy Swanson, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Pierce Brosnan, and Leonardo Di Caprio. www.capepanwa.com

Don't miss a day trip on Cape Panwa's luxurious 22m motor yacht Panwa Princess to nearby Racha Island for snorkelling in some of the clearest water in all of Phuket.

- A two-hour drive north from Cape Panwa takes us across the Sarasin bridge linking Phuket and the mainland and into the heartland of Khao Lak, a 60km stretch of splendid Andaman Sea coastline boasting white-sand beaches, crescent-shaped bays, and a string of resorts from backpacker level to five-star international.

Devastated in the 2004 tsunami with the loss of more than 4000 lives, Khao Lak is today fully recovered and basking in its growing popularity as a quieter, relatively undiscovered resort alternative (or add-on) to Phuket.

Ninety minutes by speed boat off the southern

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end Khao Lak are the of the world's top 10 dive destinations.

Several operators offer an exhilarating ride out and back (depending on the seas) tempered by a lazy day cruising to five islands for swimming and snorkelling and a memorable beach-stop for lunch.

- On the northwards (and eastwards) drive towards the Khao Sok national park, Cheow Larn lake (and the Elephant Hills tented camp) a stay at Khao Lak's new Kantary Beach hotel, a villa-styled family resort right on the beach, is highly recommended www.kantarycollection.com



- As the highway snakes east for about three hours through the picturesque valleys of the Phuket Mountain range, the determined traveller can eventually dip his toe into the Gulf of Thailand.

From there it's only a one-hour ferry ride to Koh Samui. Alternately, turn right at the town of Surat Thani and head down the east coast to Phuket to complete the circle.

And onwards, around the clock-face to elephants, lakes and lazy days.



Written by **Glyn May**