



THAI TRAILS

Norah Casey gets up close and personal with majestic Asian elephants, cycles, kayaks and canoes her way around southern Thailand while dodging tarantulas and munching on crispy crickets - along the way she unearths another side to Phuket.

Thailand and I go way back. My first visit was many moons ago and I still remember clinging petrified to the seat of a tuk-tuk in Bangkok as it darted, daredevil style, between seven lanes of traffic and the odd elephant during rush hour. I loved it. Since then, I have been back many times and marvelled at the varied landscape, cultures and encounters of this complex country. It's big and no two parts are alike. Thailand is twice the size of Britain, bigger than Germany and a bit smaller than Texas, but it is also one of the most populated countries in the world, with 67 million people. I went back and forth to Bangkok many times to build relations with magazine publishers, helped enormously by the vibrant and growing Irish ex-pat



community. But I have also escaped to some of the lesser known islands, including a magical visit to Railei Beach, near Krabi, where a very lucky friend has a beautiful house of interconnecting rooms among the treetops. One of my favourite places to dine in the world is the lantern-strewn river terrace at the Mandarin Oriental in Bangkok, where Somerset Maugham famously staggered into the lobby in 1923 suffering from a severe attack of malaria. He also fell in love with the place and returned many times - there is a suite named for him and another famous guest, Graham Greene.

This time, however, I was going to the one place I had always avoided. Straight to the heart of the biggest of Thailand's 1,430 islands and a mecca for tourists. Phuket was my destination. Set aside any pre-

conceived notions you have, because I am about to reveal a different side.

This 10-day trip was a rip-roaring rollercoaster of activity. Don't feel you have to do everything we did, but I think you'll find something that will lure you to follow in our footsteps. We stayed in palatial villas with pools (the stuff of dreams), had lessons in Thai boxing, learned to cook Thai food from a master, had divine down time in stunning spas, dined in one of the best jazz clubs on the island and had hair-raising excursions cycling in and around local villages. We ate like kings and one memorable evening we chomped on crispy crickets on the beach (yikes). We strayed into Southern Thailand to visit an elephant sanctuary, canoed down a river overshadowed by dramatic *Avatar*-style mountains, stayed on floating tents in an enormous lake, kayaked to find wild



Canoeing up the Khao Sok River at Elephant Hills

“If you are ever tempted to ride an elephant in Thailand, please don't, these beautiful animals were never meant to carry your weight”

gibbons, climbed a mountain and ventured into a cave in the rainforest – a huge, dark one with white catfish and deadly snakes.

So, step on board a ten-day adventure, Norah Casey-style, and I guarantee you will be booking flights there for your next holiday.

Firstly, I have to tell you about the elephants. I love elephants. I could watch them for hours and I have. When I am in Africa my absolute favourite time is in the early evening, sitting quietly among a huge herd chomping on grass and calling to each other. But I also have a healthy fear of them. We have been charged more than once by young males that we startled unexpectedly and protective matriarchs who let me know I was too close for comfort. So, when you get right up close to an elephant who remains docile you have to wonder how that happened. If you are ever tempted to ride on the back of an elephant in Thailand – please don't. These beautiful animals were not meant to support your weight along with a howdah (chair) especially when some have to bear that weight nine hours a day, all-year round – it causes spinal problems, blistering and wear and tear of their feet. So, take it firmly off your bucket list please.

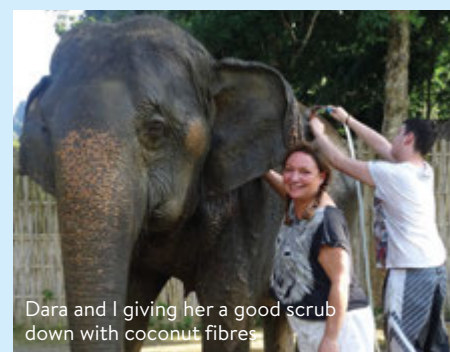
The reason so many elephants have to work in tourism in Thailand is ironically because the Government banned the logging industry in 1989, where the majority of domesticated elephants were employed to systematically destroy their own habitat.

So the ban was a wise decision. However, it meant that thousands of elephants and their mahouts were out of work, and many ended up in the tourism industry out of necessity. There are about 3,000 or more elephants working in the tourism industry in Thailand, many more than there are in the wild (there are no official estimates but less than 2,000 elephants live in densely forest areas making them hard to track). So when I heard about an elephant sanctuary in the protected rainforests of Southern Thailand, I wanted to make a special effort to go there. And I am so glad I did.

Elephant Hills is home to a group of elephants who were rescued from the logging industry in Northern Thailand. Now, they roam free and are living their lives out in a blissful setting being cosseted and cared for, which is what they richly deserve after such a harsh life. I have never in my life stood next to an elephant – the closest was patting the trunk of the elephants in Dublin Zoo growing up. So when I stood right next to Moddang (her name means small red ant) I knew that the only reason I was able to stand so close to her, my head resting against hers, to touch her trunk, lay my hands on her neck and feed her morsels of tamarind was because of what she had endured. She was beautiful and placid and my time with her was one of the most incredible elephant encounters – woman to woman, I have had. After hours of washing her down and rubbing her with



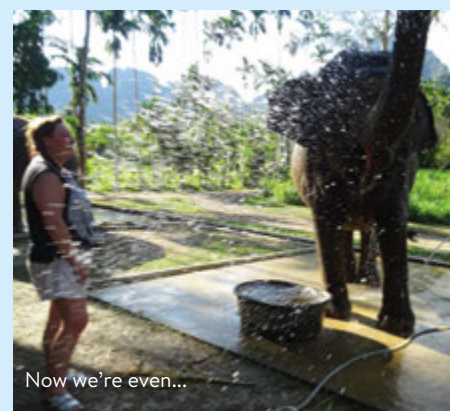
Elephant carwash: shower time for Moddang



Dara and I giving her a good scrub down with coconut fibres



Moddang has her own ideas on who is showering who



Now we're even...



Preparing pineapple, sugar cane and tamarind sweets as a post-bath-time treat



“The virgin rainforests of Khao Sok are 160 million years old, more diverse and ancient than the Amazon”

coconut fibres and feeding her sugar cane, bamboo and fruit she rewarded me by showering me back. A wonderful moment. Spending time with the elephants was definitely the highlight of our three days with the Elephant Hills team, but we had many more adventures besides.

The team picked us up from our hotel in Phuket and drove us north to Khao Sok, a protected primary rainforest region in South Thailand. After a day of canoeing on the Sok River, meeting the elephants, feasting on local Thai food and being entertained with traditional Thai dancing by local school girls, we returned to our tent exhausted. Apart from a battle of wits with a very determined and hungry lizard searching for food in our backpacks, we slept well and woke ready for the journey north to Cheow Lan Lake.

The virgin rainforests in Khao Sok are 160 million years old – more diverse and more ancient than the Amazon. Before

nature took its course, this area was also home to a huge coral reef five times bigger than the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. The dense forests provide protection to at least five per cent of the world’s species, including many of the most endangered; tigers, Asian elephants, boars, tapirs and white-handed gibbons. Over time, nature and man have changed the landscape to dramatic effect. When we arrived at Ratchaphrpha Dam the enormity of that change was evident. Work began on the dam in 1982 to provide a steady water supply into the south of Thailand, flooding this mountainous area including many homes and village temples. Local people were relocated, over 100 tiny islands were formed and a gigantic 165 square foot lake replaced the rural landscape.



As we hopped on board a long-tail boat to take us to our floating tents in the more remote area of the lake, I was conscious of us gliding over all those dwellings, farms and sacred places deep below us.

Jagged, chalky limestone karsts erupt out of tranquil, green waters creating a surreal backdrop as we skimmed over the lake’s surface to our new home at Rainforest Camp. Finally, a line of green floating tents tethered together, each with a small deck and bright yellow kayak, came into sight – quite possibly the best

‘room’ with a view I have stayed in. After a quick lunch at the floating pontoon dining area we jumped into our kayaks to try them out. Dara managed after a couple of starts however I fell out, scrambled in again and fell out the other side, drank a fair bit of the lake and, with as much dignity as I could muster, lowered myself gently into the seat and managed to stay balanced.

We headed off for a jungle climb in the Khlong Saeng sanctuary – a five kilometre hike in 35-degree heat and high humidity. The forest was dense at times, but our guide, Siang, always found a way through the bamboo and ferns, stopping occasionally to point out a 300-year-old Sompong tree towering above us, or the exoskeleton of a cicada he spotted on a leaf. Every now and then he raced ahead as he spotted a tarantula scurrying back to its burrow, a flying lizard or a flock of hornbills flying low over the trees. After about an hour’s climb we reached the steep downward opening to Pron Pet Cave and stopped to draw breath and put on our head torches. This was a first for me. We scrambled over jagged stones and skirted around rocky outcrops, clinging to the wall, and finally we reached the sandy floor of the outer cave area immediately encountering a dark pool with a white catfish. I wouldn’t have been hugging that wall quite so closely if I had known what lurked in the shadows of the crevices. Vim, our Elephant Hills guide and constant companion, shone her



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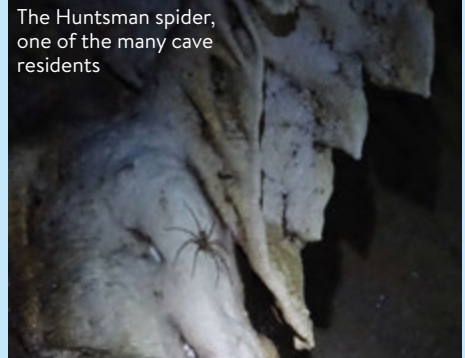
torch this way and that to reveal ever more frightening, but also fascinating inhabitants. Huntsmen spiders (whole families and expectant mothers) were in residence along with the strange Whip spiders – also known as tailless scorpions (pictured opposite). Cave Racer snakes were curled up contentedly (thankfully) and way above us was the distant drum of thousands of fruit bats. “Turn off your torches,” she said. And we did. I have never known such blackness. If someone had kidnapped us and left us in the middle of this cavernous space we would never have got out alive. Heart hammering, we flicked the light back on and I watched a white scorpion scuttling off a few feet from us. It was an experience!

The journey home was eventful – we

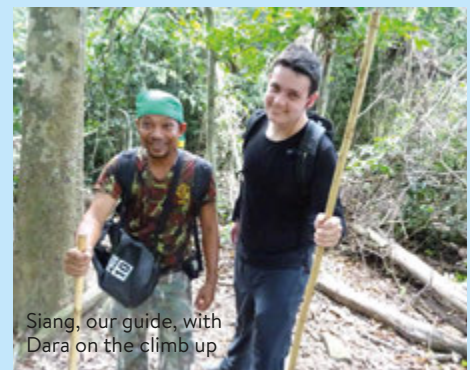
could hear the rare white-handed gibbon calling in the trees and stopped to watch a troop of langur monkeys frolic in the branches. A beautiful white belly sea eagle soared above us and in the distance we could see a herd of wild bison grazing in the dusky evening.

After a hearty Thai buffet dinner with a small group of fellow adventurers we called it a night, the lapping of the water rocking us gently off to sleep in our floating bedrooms. There couldn’t have been a more perfect day.

For full details of Elephant Hills safaris see ElephantHills.com or email info@elephanthills.com



The Huntsman spider, one of the many cave residents



Sjang, our guide, with Dara on the climb up



Pron Pet Cave – home to spiders, scorpions, snakes and thousands of fruit bats