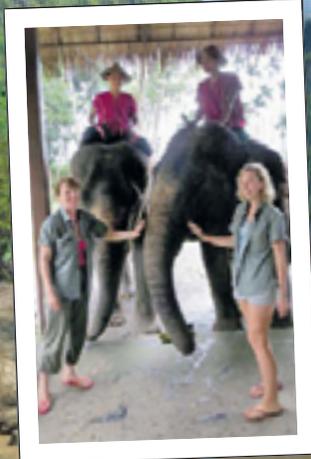


Thailand bridges the gap



UNFORGETTABLE: Tina, left, and Hannah meet the elephants. Right, Phang Nga Bay



TINA MORAN and her globetrotting daughter enjoy a luxury resort and meet the wildlife at a rainforest camp

NOT many young people took a gap year when I left school back in the Seventies, so when my teenage daughter Hannah packed her bags for six months of travel earlier this year I was just a bit envious.

So while she was backpacking across three continents I hatched a plan to join her for her final weeks. I reckoned that after all those months of hostels, crowded buses and dodgy food, she deserved a bit of pampering and I fancied a trip to an exotic location.

Which is why, after a tearful reunion in Bangkok, I whisked her off to Thailand's west coast for a stay at Le Méridien beach resort and two nights at Elephant Hills, a luxury rainforest camp.

No sooner had we arrived for our three-day adventure in Khao

Sok National Park than we were slipping on life jackets for a canoe safari down the Sok River. We soon spotted snakes, owls and lizards along the steep-sided river gorge.

Back on dry land we were driven to meet the stars of the rainforest camp, a herd of former working elephants that now enjoy a life of good food, love and care thanks to doting keepers and enthusiastic tourists. As it was feeding time we were quickly put to work chopping sugar cane, pumpkin, pineapple and other goodies. Our hungry guests arrived with their mahouts, or keepers, on their backs.

Hannah and I fed Ngam Ta. She tucked into the pineapple and cucumber but turned up her big nose at pumpkin and green bananas. Her pal Chom Poo was far less fussy and ate anything we offered. Then it was bath time.

After a dip in the mud pool the

hoses were turned on and we all grabbed cloths made of coconut

husk and set to work scrubbing down our new-found friends.

We then returned to camp for a delicious Thai curry and a night in our comfortable twin-bedded tent on its raised platform.

It was the perfect way to sleep close to nature without the usual discomforts of camping.

On day two we took an hour-long drive deeper into the park to Cheow Larn Lake, created when the impressive Rajjaprabha Dam was built in 1982. We boarded traditional long tail boats and motored across the vast 165sq km waterway to our floating campsite of 10 tents gently bobbing on their wooden decks.

After lunch in the floating dining area, we set off on a three-hour jungle trek. Energetic guide Chris



led us up steep paths, over fallen tree trunks, and into a vast, deep cave where our torches lit up squealing bat colonies, slumbering snakes and huge spiders. The sticky heat meant we were all ready for a swim in the lake when we got back, leaving us refreshed for cocktails and dinner.

The next morning Hannah and I were up at 6.30am to jump into our two-seater canoes for a tour of the lake's wildlife including monkeys and exotic birds before the next part of our Thai adventure.

While Elephant Hills scored top marks for its eco credentials and stunning scenery, Le Méridien Khao Lak got our vote for its idyllic beachfront setting, elegant rooms, teak flooring and plush fabrics.

We could pick and choose from the myriad activities available to guests. Hannah signed up for beach yoga and Thai boxing, I opted for less energetic pampering treatments in the spa, which included a lotus seed body wrap, before trying my hand at Thai cookery classes and a course in napkin folding.

But it was the amazing sights of the country we wanted to see more of, including Phang Nga Bay, famous for its spectacular limestone islands which rise out of the sea. We took a boat from Phuket to the rocks then climbed into inflatable canoes to negotiate the tiny tunnels to the centre of the islands where mangroves grew in open-air lagoons. It was most definitely a highlight of the trip.

The last two days of our mother/daughter adventure were spent chilling on the terrace of our lagoon villa room at Le Méridien and catching up on Hannah's amazing six-month travels.

Perhaps it's time for me to plan my long overdue gap year, starting with a return trip to Thailand.

● GETTING THERE

Premier Holidays (0844 493 7080/ premierholidays.co.uk) offers 12 nights in Thailand from £1,439pp (two sharing). Price includes return flights from Heathrow to Phuket via Bangkok with Thai

Airways, three nights at the Royal Orchid Sheraton (room only), two nights at Elephant Hills (full board), seven nights at Le Méridien Beach and Spa Resort in Khao Lak (B&B) and transfers. Tourism Authority of Thailand: tourismthailand.org.



PLUNGE IN: The pool at Elephant Hills camp, encircled by jungle