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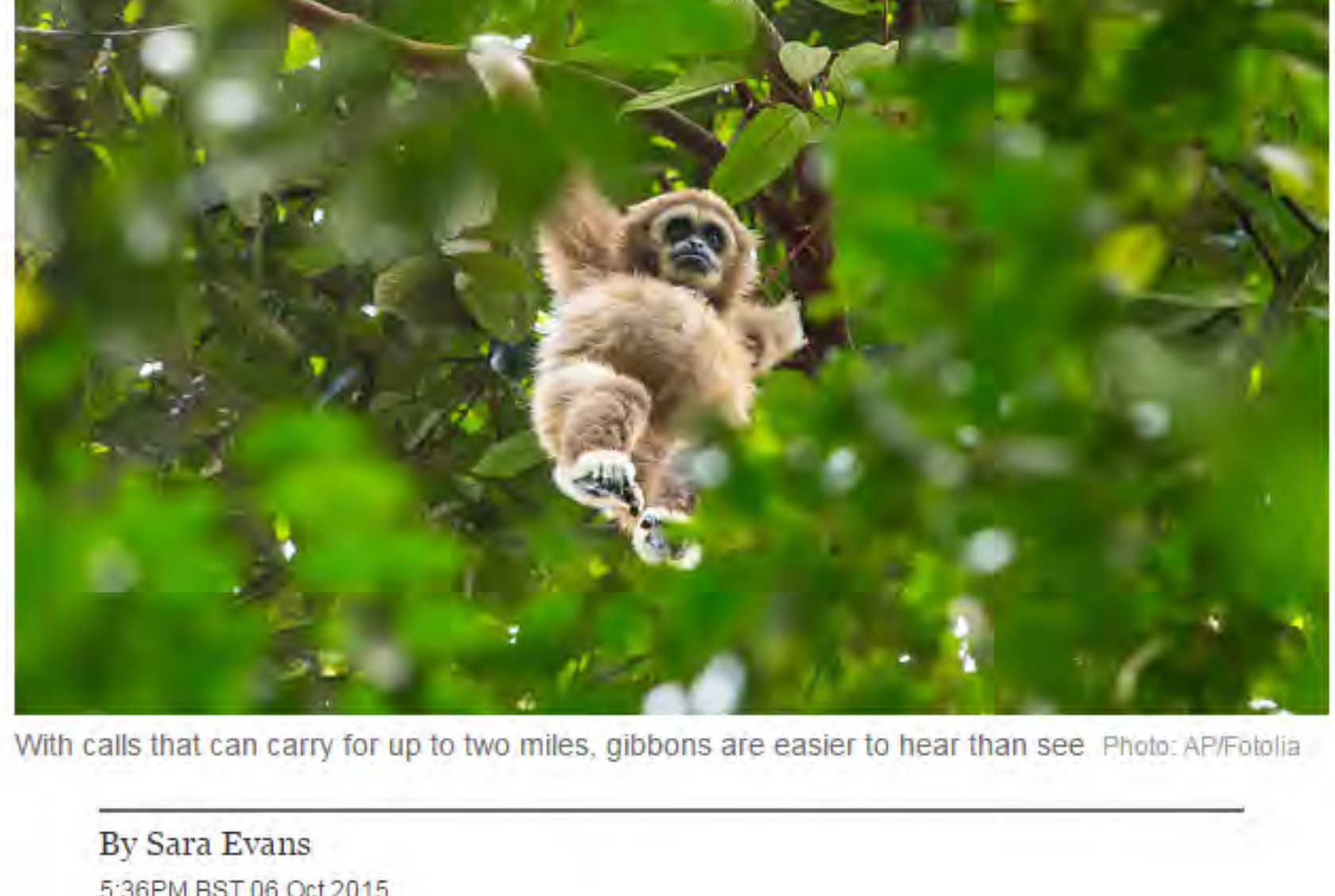
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Khao Sok National Park: All creatures great and small in Thailand's magical rainforest


Sara Evans glimpses an array of exotic species in Thailand's remarkably biodiverse Khao Sok National Park

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With calls that can carry for up to two miles, gibbons are easier to hear than see. Photo: AP/Fololia

By Sara Evans
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 1 Comment

The opera wakes me at 4am. Shriill hoots and delicate whoops – half banshee, half diva – slice through the quiet of the rainforest, filling it with early morning song, both beautiful and bizarre. I peek out of my tent, hoping to catch a glimpse of the gibbons whose eerie arias have kicked off the dawn chorus here in southern Thailand's Khao Sok National Park.

I don't see any, of course. With calls that can carry for up to two miles, gibbons are easier to hear than see. They spend most of their time high in the treetops, swinging from tree to tree in search of sugary flowers and fruits to fuel their jungle acrobatics.

With almost 460 square miles of pristine tropical evergreen forest and rainforest, Khao Sok's landscape provides the perfect habitat for gibbons. Barely changed for more than 160 million years, this rainforest is one of the oldest on earth. It's also home to a staggering number of mammal, bird and plant species that some say make it more biodiverse than the Amazon.

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To stand a better chance of seeing the gibbons and the other wildlife here – including sun bears, leopards, tigers, tapirs, Asiatic wild dogs, gaurs, monkeys and deer – I join a trek that takes me farther into the rainforest.

After recent rain, the emerald vegetation glitters brightly. Huge diamond-shaped raindrops drip from densely packed trees on to the track below, now more like putty than path. Around me, fig trees, palms and giant ferns, in a thousand shades of green, glisten and glow. Thick liana vines thread themselves between them, a living rope stitching the forest together.



An Asiatic wild dog. Photo: Alamy

Buttress roots spread out like huge swollen fingers securing towering trees to the earth. On mossy fallen trunks, mushrooms sprout next to fungal growths, shaped like dissected sections of brain.

A prettier sight, though, is the occasional splash of colour from mauve and blue orchids blooming behind thickets of bamboo. Although a favourite food of Khao Sok's 100 or so wild elephants, these bamboo stems have been missed by the forest's pachyderms and grow tall and strong, wide as plates.

Butterflies skim by, held aloft by inky black wings with a startling centre stripe of fresh green. I watch them flit from stem to stem until one of them floats to the ground and settles on the print of a catlike animal.

It's far too small to belong to a tiger; and with just around 10 tigers left in the park, their secretive lives are played out in much less accessible areas of the forest than here. It's more likely to be the print of a marbled cat, a south Asian, mainly tree-dwelling species of cat not much larger than our domestic equivalent. Its coat is an alluring patchwork of amber, beige and chocolate brown – very similar to that of its larger cousin, the clouded leopard, which also slinks quietly through the undergrowth here.



The tree-dwelling marbled cat. Photo: Alamy

As I speculate on the owner of the print, there's a commotion above. A large bird, with a huge yellow bill, spreads out its wings and takes flight. With a wingspan of around 60 inches displaying bands of black, yellow and white feathers, it makes a colourful spectacle as it ascends. It's a great hornbill, the heaviest of its type in Asia, and just one of 300-plus bird species that beautify Khao Sok with their feathery glamour.

Exotically christened birds, such as the orange-bellied flowerpecker and ruby-cheeked sunbird, dart in and out of trees, presenting exquisite flashes of exotic colour as they look for nectar or insects. Birds of prey, including owls and kites, are here too. As are fish eagles, sea eagles and osprey which swoop majestically over the fish-packed waters of the Cheow Larn Lake in the heart of the park.

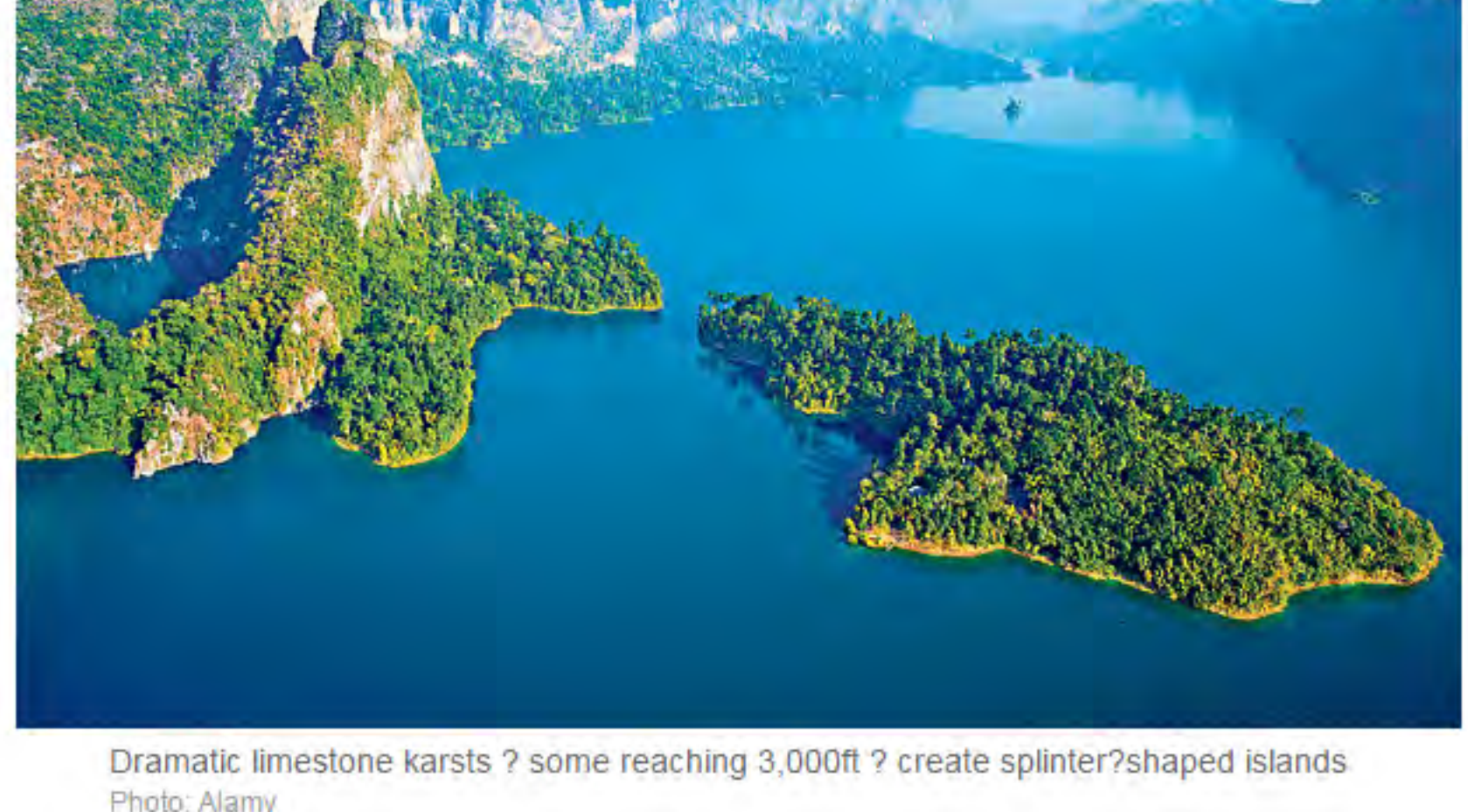
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It's at Cheow Larn, under the flight path of these birds, that I end my trek and board a long-tail boat. As it chugs away from the shore, ripples break over the lake's turquoise surface. More than 17 miles long, Cheow Larn is a watery tangle of forested inlets, winding canals, and steep cliff faces punctuated by tumbling waterfalls.

Dramatic limestone karsts – some reaching 3,000ft – create splinter-shaped islands, some topped with trees, birds and monkeys.

Pale golden frogs with bulging eyes stare back at me from huge lily pads, occasionally drifting under houses built on stilts at the water's edge.

While this warm-watered paradise feels like it has been here forever, it is actually recent and man-made. In 1982, 100 square miles of valley here was flooded, creating a reservoir and hydroelectric dam to provide electricity for southern Thailand. In the process, an idyll was created.



Dramatic limestone karsts? some reaching 3,000ft? create splinter-shaped islands. Photo: Alamy

We steer into a small inlet, mooring by the edge of the lakeside and turn off the engine. The high-pitched sound of millions of male cicadas, singing to females, desperate to mate after spending 17 years under the earth, drowns out the calls of the forest's birds and frogs.

High up in the trees I spot a long black tail dangling from a branch. Farther along, a couple of other tails drop down. They belong to a family of spectacled langurs, a small species of monkey. Reaching up for leaves, their Disney-sweet faces come into view. Bright globes of white circle their dark eyes, giving them a look of constant surprise.

As the light starts to fade, I hear the haunting refrain of the gibbons start up. Somewhere in the forest, they are shimmying through trees, calling in glorious abandon, hoping to attract a mate for some arboreal love in the twilight. Or maybe it's a ballad to the moon, starting to appear above the treetops, lighting the way for the just waking creatures of the night as they make their way through the early evening shadows.

Getting there

Thai Airways (020 7491 7953; thaairways.co.uk) offers flights from Heathrow to **Phuket** via **Bangkok** from £562 return. From Phuket airport hire a car. **Take Route 401**. Roads are good and well signposted. Journey time is around two and a half hours. Avis (0808 284 0014; avis.co.uk) offers five days' hire from £128.

Or catch the airport bus to Phuket's bus terminal and then the Phuket-Surat Thani public bus (mornings only), which makes a stop less than a mile from Khao Sok. By local bus, total journey time is around six hours. A single ticket costs around £4. Private transfers take around three hours.

The park is also easily accessible from Krabi and Surat Thani airports and other popular destinations including Koh Samui and Khao Lak.

Package

Sara Evans travelled with Audley Travel (01993 838115; audleytravel.com), which offers an 11-night package to Thailand from £2,180 per person, including return flight, transfers, three nights in Bangkok, three nights and activities in Khao Sok at Elephant Hills (see hotels, below), plus four nights at the beachside Ramada Khao Lak.

The inside track

The park is most visited during the region's dry season (December-April) when flash flooding is less frequent and leeches aren't so prevalent; although during the wet season (June-November), the chances of seeing the park's larger animals may be better as their range increases.

Some trekking routes close during the wet season – the best way to see wildlife at this time is by boat/canoe on Cheow Larn.

Whatever the season, take waterproofs – the park is Thailand's wettest place.

Where to stay

Elephant Hills

Well-appointed jungle camp with swimming pool, offering mosquito-free luxury tents with en suite bathrooms and rainforest views (0066 7638 1703; elephant-hills.com); doubles from £330 per person for two nights including transfers, meals, and hands-on interactive Elephant Experience).

Elephant Hills Rainforest Camp

Ten eco-friendly, raised mosquito-free floating tents, with en suite bathroom, with a pristine jungle backdrop on Cheow Larn Lake in the park (0066 7638 1703; rainforestcamp.com); minimum two-night stay for two including one night at Elephant Hills (see above), transfers, all meals, canoe safaris, and jungle trek from £370).