



amazing
THAILAND

It Begins with the People...

Experience Thailand & Beyond



WHERE THE **WILD** THINGS ARE

THAILAND'S ELEPHANT
HILLS CAMPS BRING
VISITORS TO THE HEART
OF THE RAINFOREST

Christina Newberry

It's a hazy, grey day on Cheow Lan Lake in Thailand's Khao Sok National Park, but I can hardly believe my good fortune. I'm kayaking in one of the lake's many fingers, just a short paddle away from where I'm staying at Elephant Hills Rainforest Camp.

The water is calm, and I can safely stop paddling to just float along. It's eerily quiet and yet incredibly 'noisy', all at the same time. I feel like there's not another soul on earth, but the forest is screaming. The bugs and

birds and who knows what else in Southern Thailand's largest protected rainforest are as loud as rush-hour traffic back in the real world. But this does not feel like the real world.

And then I hear the monkeys.

I see them, too – just a glimpse, really, but I shout it right out loud, to myself: "Monkeys!" I scramble for my camera, but they're gone. Still, I'm giddy. As I paddle back to camp, I'm grinning ear to ear. →

PEOPLE ENJOY SEEING THAT THE ELEPHANTS ARE HAVING FUN

— Chris Kaiser,
Elephant Hills'
marketing manager

Turns out, the creatures dangling from the trees are actually gibbons, and I'm not the only one who's seen them. A fellow kayaker points me in the direction of another group he spotted nearby. I head off into another of the lake's little fingers, and there they are, a family of them. I sit and watch, completely spellbound. There are at least three of them up high in the trees, and they don't care about me at all. We're 12 kilometres away from civilization, and it's forbidden for humans to venture onto the land in this part of the lake. The gibbons know I'm no threat. After 20 minutes, I think I'd better head back to camp before the others start to worry about me, and I can't wait to tell them what I've seen.

The Rainforest Camp is the kind of place where stories are shared. Its isolation – 10 floating tents accessible only by longboat, with no access to or from land – brings guests together. The common area, where exceptional Thai meals are served, features long tables that remind me of Girl Guide camp. There's no WiFi or cell reception, so guests have to talk to each other instead of tuning out of the moment to tune into life back home. There's no campfire, either, but the solar- and wind-powered lights under the canopy create that same atmosphere, and guests who met just that afternoon are soon trading stories of favourite places, travel plans and the love we're all developing for Thailand.

My story begins, "It was almost as great as the elephants!"

Because, of course, there are elephants at Elephant Hills and just yesterday, we got to bathe them.



Elephant Hills is home to 12 Asian elephants, which live in a large, free-roaming pen a short drive away from the outfit's 37-tent Jungle Camp, where we stayed last night. Most are former work elephants that lost their livelihoods when Thailand banned logging in 1989. Domesticated elephants live up to 70 years, and are very expensive to keep and feed. Many logging elephants wound up being used to beg on the streets. Others became part of the problematic tourist trade, in which elephant welfare is often disregarded in favour of tourist thrills.



concerned about animal welfare – since 2010.

Chris Kaiser, Elephant Hills' marketing manager, says the camp has since had "overwhelming feedback," as guests prefer the chance to interact with the animals face-to-face rather than climbing onto their backs.

Driving from camp to the elephant area in an open-air jungle truck, the landscape is overwhelming. When I picture Southeast Asia in my mind, I see this. There are mountains everywhere, and everything is grey and green. It's been raining hard, and mist hangs in the crevices.



As we drive, Kaiser tells us about the elephants. He says that the plan is for us to bathe the elephants and then feed them. He explains the elephants like getting muddy in their giant bathing pond, and then being scrubbed clean with coconut husks – and that it's never very difficult to convince an elephant to eat. But, he says, these elephants are never forced to do anything. If they don't feel like getting muddy, having a bath, or eating the

But ethical elephant operations do exist in Thailand. Elephant Hills is one of the best, having won several awards for its treatment of the animals, including the Thailand Green Excellence Award for Animal Welfare in 2014, awarded by the Tourism Authority of Thailand and Wanderlust Magazine. The elephants are never chained, and Elephant Hills has not allowed guests to ride the elephants – a practice that has faced growing scrutiny by those

pineapple and sugarcane we'll prepare for them, we just have to enjoy looking at them. It's an arrangement that makes for happier elephants, and happier guests.

"People enjoy seeing that the elephants are having fun," Kaiser says. "We have excellent occupancy rates because of the way we treat the elephants. Guests rave about the experience and promote it." ➔

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LOOKING AN ELEPHANT IN THE EYE, YOU KNOW WHAT THE ANIMAL IS ABOUT. THEY'RE ALL DIFFERENT CHARACTERS

— Chris Kaiser,
Elephant Hills'
marketing manager

Thailand is the perfect hub for travellers who wish to also discover some of the many ASEAN countries in close proximity such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, & Vietnam.

Fortunately, the elephants do feel like getting dirty. They rub against the muddy walls of the pool, munch on grass from the banks and seem to play with one another. It's one of those moments that I know if we turn around and went back to camp right after this, it would have been an amazing day.

But dirty elephants need to get clean. We're all a bit shy at first – and a bit nervous – approaching the elephants with caution and deferring to one another. Within a few minutes, though, we're up to our elbows in the bucket of coconut husks, scrubbing away at the elephants' thick, leathery skin, covered in mud and having the time of our lives. I'm cleaning Ngam Ta, "Beautiful Eye." Asian elephants are much smaller than their African counterparts, and that puts their eyes right at human eye level. I can't help but think that this beauty is aptly named.

"Looking an elephant in the eye, you know what the animal is about," Kaiser says. "They're all different characters."

As I hose Ngam Ta down to spray off the last of the mud, she turns her trunk so the nostrils are pointing straight up, like an upside-down cane. I glance over to Nan, our guide, who explains that Ngam Ta wants me to give her a drink. I point the hose into her trunk, and she sprays it into her mouth. She wants more, so I fill her trunk again, and this time she splashes herself (and me, a little) for a final rinse.

With the elephants clean, it's time for them to have a snack. We chop up bucketsful of pineapple, sugarcane and grass, but all of this is barely an hors d'oeuvre. Each of these elephants eats up to 200 kilograms of food per day, most of it grazed from the jungle. Ngam Ta is paired with someone else for feeding, so I set my bucket down in front of Tor Por, "Wealthy."



She reaches her trunk toward me and I hand over half a pineapple. She's dignified at first, plucking it out of my hand with the "finger" on the end of her trunk. But soon she's cramming three or four pineapple halves and hunks of sugar cane into her mouth at once, all while holding two more in her trunk. She's picking up the bundles of grass the elephant next to her has rejected. I've clearly got the garburator of the group, and I can't stop laughing. When the food is finished, we take a group photo with the elephants, and then we say good-bye.

Elephant Hills' jungle camp, thank goodness, has WiFi in the common area, because if there has ever been a moment worthy of Instagram, this is it. With the requisite pictures posted for those back home, we settle in to watch a group of local schoolchildren perform a dance routine they've choreographed themselves, then get a quick lesson in Thai cooking.

I look up and catch a glimpse of a stunning sunset through the thatched palm roof. I tell the others, and we rush out into the open parking area to get a better view of the pink and orange mist hanging in the sky. It's a fitting end to a day we'll all remember – what Kaiser calls "an adventure you take home." ■

This experience was provided to PAX courtesy of Elephant Hills and the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Learn more at elephant-hills.com.