

MY THAI

WITH THE HELP OF LOCAL GUIDES, *WINQ* TRAVELS THE LENGTH OF THAILAND TO DISCOVER WHY IT CONTINUES TO BE SO POPULAR

TEXT & IMAGES > MARKUS BIDAUX

looked around at the kaleidoscope of electric and neon signs that were lighting the crowds in Bangkok's longest street market. The pavements of China Town were filled with locals and tourists alike choosing where to have their evening meals from the myriad of restaurants and street vendors. Luckily for me I had Noom by my side who would be my guide for my time in Bangkok. He took me down a side street where we tried a stir-fry dish called Saki Yaki, which was as tasty as it was fun to say; and Kua Gai, which is chewy flat rice noodles with chicken. On a narrow slab of pavement we sat at a rickety old table and took our pick from a selection of demonically hot sauces. The sound of pans rattling on stoves, tuk-tuks zipping by and the murmur of various foreign voices all jumbled together in my ears as we tucked into our meal. Even though this was only the start of my trip, I felt completely immersed,

and my appetite was whetted for my ten-day adventure around Thailand.

We ventured down another side street and sat at a table to order Bua Loy Nam Khing (ginger tea with black sesame balls). Noom promised me the hot spiced tea, with three dumpling-like balls filled with a sweet sesame paste, would help me cope with the night's still sweltering heat, but I wasn't convinced the hot sauces hadn't already set me on a course of night sweats. After a few more dishes we finished the tour with a crispy pan-friend Roti with bananas and coconut.

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WAT CHEDI LUANG, CHIANG MAI





ELEPHANT HILLS, CAVE EXPLORING IN KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK

At the bottom of the path we stepped onto the rocks beneath the waterfall. It wasn't in fact sticky, but the rock was oddly soft which allowed my feet to get a grip even with the water flowing down. As we neared the top, I was thankful to find a rope banister which helps visitors climb the steeper parts. Once at the summit, I grinned my appreciation to Panya and rushed back down to swim in the pool of water at the bottom of the waterfall — and then climb up it again. It was enormous fun but also a totally peaceful experience, with butterflies fluttering about as the sound of cicadas hummed in our ears. In the time we were there I only saw a few other tourists.

After we left the waterfall, Panya pulled two bicycles out of the van and we rode through the countryside, passing small villages, orchards and flooded rice fields. At the end of our journey we arrived at Mae Ngat Lake Reservoir, where we ditched the bikes and jumped on a long boat, which took us to a large floating bamboo raft with a restaurant on it. We ate a coconut curry and took a kayak out to paddle among the fish farms dotted around the lake. After a spell of sunbathing we headed back to Chiang Mai, where I had an early night in anticipation of my next hop across Thailand.



A very early flight took me to Phuket in the south of Thailand in time for my transfer to Khao Sok rainforest. It was a three-hour car journey but with my headphones in and the mountainous landscape sweeping by, the time didn't matter. My journey brought me to Elephant Hills, Thailand's

first luxury camping and elephant experience. I was welcomed by Bamboo, my group's guide for the next three days. There was a large, partially open-air lobby, bar and restaurant area, at the end of which was a small swimming pool and sun loungers. Concrete walking paths led to 35 safari tents that were generously spaced. Each tent had a large bed, lights, a fan, tea and coffee, and a western-style bathroom.

I met the rest of my group in the main recreation area and we were taken to the river, where there were a dozen inflatable kayaks and — thankfully — a man to do the paddling for us. We rode down the river and a few minor rapids before coming to a stop at our main destination.

Bamboo explained the safety guidelines and the history of Elephant Hills, which rescued many of its elephants from the logging industry, in which it is now illegal to use animal labour. The camp doesn't allow guests to ride the elephants and has been awarded the Thailand Green Excellence Award for Animal Welfare for three years running. We walked into the elephant's enclosure, which was not really enclosed at all, but rather a massive field surrounded by stunning mountains. We watched as three elephants played in a muddy pond blowing water from their trunks and trumpeting loudly.

Next, we followed the dirty elephants and their mahouts, or elephant handlers, to a set of cleaning stations and helped give the gentle giants a clean and scrub with a hosepipe, buckets of water and rough coconut fibres. This was followed by a feeding frenzy. We were led to a roofed area with a low fence to stop the elephants entering. On a long



ELEPHANT HILLS' FLOATING TENTS ON CHEOW LARN LAKE



table were massive piles of fruit, which each guest chopped up with a machete, and then we fed the pieces to a dozen elephants that were surrounding us. Their trunks would gently wrap around our hands until they got a grip of the food, which they'd then sling into their mouths. It was magical to get so close to the elephants and to feel such a connection with them.

The following day my group was taken on a bus to the second camp on Cheow Lan Lake. At the end of the lake, we boarded and rode on a long boat past majestic limestone mountains jutting out of the water and covered in lush green trees, before reaching the floating campsite. A long bridge connected a main reception area to 20 platforms, each holding a safari tent. The tents had the same facilities and features as the previous camp, but with the added bonus of being surrounded by emerald green water, which was enticingly warm. That afternoon we all boarded another long boat and motored across the lake to enter a trail into Khao Sok National Park. A local guide joined Bamboo and led us up a steep trail, pointing out indigenous trees, termite mounds and claw marks left by bears. When it started to rain, it was a sweet respite from the humidity of the rainforest, even if our trainers did get muddy. We continued ascending until we reached the shelter of a large cave. With torches lit, we explored the cave and saw snakes, spiders, and hundreds of bats. It was such a vast space that it even

“ON A LONG TABLE WERE MASSIVE PILES OF FRUIT, WHICH EACH GUEST CHOPPED UP WITH A MACHETE, AND THEN WE FED THE PIECES TO A DOZEN ELEPHANTS THAT WERE SURROUNDING US”



Arriving at the Banyan Tree Phuket was a very different experience from arriving at its sister hotel in Bangkok. In the capital city, the Banyan Tree is one of the tallest buildings around and has a single outdoor pool, whereas the Phuket resort is made up of a series of villas each with its own private pool. I was given a Spa Sanctuary Suite featuring a lounge, a shower that doubled as a steam room, and a bedroom with glass walls and a water-lilied pond that surrounded it and made me feel like the Frog Prince. Outside was a large pool, at the end of which was a pavilion overlooking the lake, where I could have unlimited massages as part of the package. It's a shame I only had time for one.

I spent my last day in Thailand on the waters of Phang Nga Bay with John Gray's Sea Canoes. I met a huge group of tourists who were also on the day trip, but luckily we were split between two large boats. Already sitting on my boat was John Gray himself, an American who the kids on the tour nicknamed Santa Claus. John pioneered the Thai sea kayaking industry in the early 1980s, after starting similar business in places like Hawaii, Fiji and the Philippines. He walked with a limp from his days playing American football and told us the tales of a man who's lived three lifetimes in one. After a buffet lunch on board the boat, we ventured out onto the banana

BUCKETS OF FUN AT THE ELEPHANT CLEANING STATION



CHEOW LARN LAKE

