



TRAVEL

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 wills 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 Ratchaprapha 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



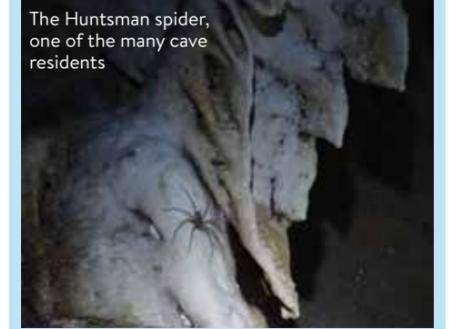
“Jagged, chalky limestone karsts erupt out of tranquil waters, creating a surreal backdrop as we skimmed over the lake’s surface”

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



Siang, our guide, with Dara on the climb up



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



Sampling the local cuisine



ANANTARA PHUKET LAYAN RESORT & SPA

There are lots of great reasons to choose the Anantara Phuket Layan Resort & Spa and I discovered most of them during the three nights we spent there. Apart from the gorgeous villa with our own private pool, which was divine – a sublime spa indulgence, some high-energy Maui Thai boxing and the best Thai cooking lesson ever, there were three things that stood out for me. One was the beautifully secluded, private Layan beach. The resort is tucked away on a little oasis on the north-western coast of Phuket, looking out over the Andaman Sea – a tranquil haven on an otherwise beach-busy island. Thai people are always polite, but the impeccable and friendly service from the staff at the Anantara was a step above. And finally, their Executive Chef, Umberto Piccolini who is funny, charming and passionate about cooking.



Peter and myself, cooking up a storm

And he's very persuasive. Who else could tempt me to chomp down on spicy fried cricket and sea cicadas (sea worms) one glorious evening as the sun was setting. Umberto is a no-nonsense Italian from Bergamo who was not impressed with my girlie squeals and prancing about as I tried to put that cricket on a stick into my mouth. "Just eat it, it's good protein and you really only taste the spice," he told me firmly. By now his booming Italian accent had attracted the attention of most of the other staff so, out of embarrassment that I might cause offence about my squeamishness at eating something that they considered a Thai delicacy, I closed my eyes and bit into some legs and the head. He was right, I could only taste the spices. But the idea of what I had in my mouth made it very hard to swallow

– especially as Umberto was laughing so much there were tears rolling down his face – joined by all the other onlookers who couldn't believe some eejit Irish woman had fallen for his trickery. The waiter quickly put a cocktail in my hand and whispered... "We'd never eat those things, they're really only for show." The cocktail helped, a mix of Thai whiskey, Sake, melon cordial and apple juice (surprisingly good).

That evening he hosted a farewell dinner for us in the Anantara's Dee Plee Thai restaurant. We had spent a few hours the day before learning to cook Thai food with Chef Peter Srichan. Our Thai taste buds were more honed by spending time tasting various herbs and spices. Thai food is a rich fusion of many cultures, some borrowed wholesale, but most adapted to suit local tastes. Traders from India brought tamarind, Massaman curry came from Persian influences, the Chinese and Vietnamese brought the noodles, rice and coconut milk.

The Dee Plee serves an interesting drink as you arrive which is a marvel. It's a Butterfly Pea Flower juice and it arrives as a vivid blue drink. We never tired of the next bit... a mini-chemistry experiment takes place as the waitress adds lime and, hey presto, the drink turns violet right before your eyes.

Our Thai meze included papaya salad, chicken rice balls wrapped in pandan leaves, deliciously light raw tuna garb, spicy beef and prawn fish cakes. I made the traditional chilli paste for the table – a workout between courses that involves a mortar and pestle with onion, lime juice, fish sauce, and chilli, spring onion, sugar and tamarind juice with lots of pauses for tasting during the ritual.

The table was soon laden with another



round of incredible dishes chosen especially by Umberto. We chatted on into the night as a fiery moon rose behind us and the perfectly matched robust malbec lowered in our glasses. A great night.

My lasting memories of our three days at the luxurious Anantara Layan were a mix of supreme relaxation and high energy. The challenge of enjoying time away is to unwind and de-stress in those first few days. As I wandered along the beach in the early morning, I could feel my mind clearing and the beauty of the sea always works a special magic. It was beyond lovely to wander from the bedroom to the pool at the villa and just enjoy a solitary swim in the bright sunshine and, for over two hours, I put myself in the capable hands of an exceptional therapist at the spa who soaked me in a milky bath with purple royal orchids and massaged all the jet lag, muscle aches and tensions away.

But we also had great fun and tried out new things. Maui Thai (boxing) is a great work out, we are much better Thai cooks now thanks to Peter at the Spice Spoons Cookery School, and I even tried crispy fried cricket and survived. Above all, I remember the incredible food served with diligence by Peter and described with passion by Umberto. You'll love it.

Anantara Phuket Layan Resort & Spa; Anantara.com; Tel: +66 76 317 200 or email phuketlayan@anantara.com



BANYANTREE PHUKET

After scaling mountains, trekking jungles and living in tents it was beyond surreal to find ourselves in a villa bigger than our house, at the luxurious Banyan Tree Phuket. The villa was spectacular. Dara hardly left his personal 'mini-apartment' with his own sitting room, bedroom, outside shower, indoor shower, a pristine white bathtub and all the technology a boy of 16 might require after time in the non-wifi wilderness. I must admit it was hard to wrench myself away from my own opulent suite of rooms, but I did manage to saunter out to the pool and the hot tub at regular intervals. We were winding down after a hectic few days and neither of us wanted to do much other than laze about and enjoy the serenely beautiful surroundings of our own personal space.

We availed of the free bikes at the resort about an hour after we checked in – the place is so big that you need buggies to get anywhere, so we had the freedom to



roam about and explore the village and the beach. We enjoyed an amazing breakfast on our first morning – a spectacular diet-challenging spread of Asian and international dishes and we ate our way through a fair portion of it, returning to sample treats and delights even when our

tummies were full. We wobbled back to the Villa and had to lie down to recover. The award-winning Ayurveda Spa is not to be missed and I needed some intensive work on aching muscles from the mountain climb the day before. My



Luxurious finishing touches

60-minute, deep tissue, Balinese Massage was exceptional. All of the staff undergo intensive training and my therapist had a miraculous touch using thumb and palm pressure and skilful strokes to ease out the muscle tension from the jungle excursions.

One lunchtime I met up with Ludo Gallerne, sales and marketing for the Banyan Tree, and we enjoyed world-class Japanese cooking by Master Chef Shiraishi Kikuo at Tamarind (one of the many restaurants at the resort). Ludo talked through the renovations currently taking place. While we were there some areas and restaurants were closed for the refurbishment and the big unveiling is expected later this year. He gave us a great recommendation for a supper club with live jazz music that tempted us out that night. And we were so glad we did. He told us the food was great and the atmosphere fantastic, but the real draw was the larger than life owner, a man by the name of Sean Power (Malaysian-born, Canadian-reared and of Irish heritage, of course). He was right on all three.

Sean commanded the restaurant from

his perch at the bar and as we entered he shouted across the music – "you must be the Irish ones?" Was it that obvious I wondered (not a red hair between us)? He jostled us both to the bar, shouted for two Proseccos as I meekly pointed out that my boy was only 16. "More for you my dear," he bellowed, giving me a hug and clapping my hand as though we were long lost friends. I felt we were too. We ate wonderful chicken with truffle and honey and Dara enjoyed great spaghetti Bolognese. The decor is 20s-inspired, black and white, with flashes of chrome. The band was great and silently on the wall behind them there was a young debonair, Stewart Granger, passionately embracing Ann Blyth in the 1953 movie *All The Brothers Were Valiant*. If you go to Phuket, book it, it's a little gem of a place. (The Siam Supper Club; Tel: +66 76 270 936 info@siamsupperclub.com; Siamsupperclub.com)

The Banyan Tree regularly scoops Condé Nast Traveller awards and is currently listed eighth in the Top 100 Resorts of the World, and with good reason. It is nestled within the Laguna Phuket village, a community of residences, restaurants and bars which enjoys a long sandy beach looking out over the Andaman Sea. The resort also boasts an 18-hole golf course, tennis courts, children's club and much more besides. The Banyan Tree Phuket is a classy, sumptuous resort the only problem is... you may never want to leave. ■

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Travel from Dublin to Phuket with Etihad who have daily flights via Abu Dhabi and you can also fly via Hong Kong; etihad.com