

# Beauty in the East

Leave the crowds behind and explore the beaches and temples of Thailand that only the locals know, says **Lee Hayhurst**

Remember when overtourism used to be the biggest challenge facing the industry? Long before Covid-19 brought international travel to a grinding halt, destinations had been keen to spread the impact – and the benefits – of tourism beyond their holiday hotspots.

Thailand is no exception, and while the likes of Phuket, Krabi and Koh Samui will always be popular destinations, we decided to buck the trend and spend our family holiday introducing the kids – Millie, Seth and Zac – to some of the country's less-visited areas.

## CHUMPHON

Our journey began early at Bangkok's Hua Lamphong station to catch an 8am train along the Malay Peninsula to our first destination, Chumphon. A new fast line is under construction but on the existing track, the train rarely hit top speed, so we ambled along enjoying views of the Thai countryside from our comfortable second-class recliner seats.

Our research into Chumphon hadn't thrown up many enlightening results, so on our first day we hired a car to explore independently.

At Thung Wua Laen Beach, we parked near a magnificent golden temple and spent the day as pretty much the only people enjoying this idyllic stretch of golden palm-lined sand.

The following day we took a tour to the Nong Yai development, a water and wildlife leisure park popular with locals, before we carried on to Mu Koh Chumphon National Park, a mangrove swamp inhabited by all manner of wildlife.

Finally, we visited Sairee Beach, another spot popular with Thais because Admiral Prince Abhakara Kiartivongse, the 'father of the Thai navy', died here. We joined locals sticking gold-leaf on a statue of the admiral to request relief for any ailments.

Chumphon is typical of many small Thai cities. There's a great night street-food market where we ate for about £1 each, a larger covered market, a few modern shops and some bars and restaurants catering for tourists in transit to the islands, our next destination.

## KOH TAO

As we waited for the ferry from Chumphon to Koh Tao, the clouds parted and the sun came out, and ➤

# DESTINATIONS

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### THE KIDS' view



#### Millie on beaches:

"Thailand's beaches are some of

my favourites. Shark Bay in Koh Tao was perfect – the sea was warm, crystal-clear and it was never too busy. In contrast, Sairee Beach was backpacker heaven."



#### Seth on culture:

"Taking the train out of Bangkok was

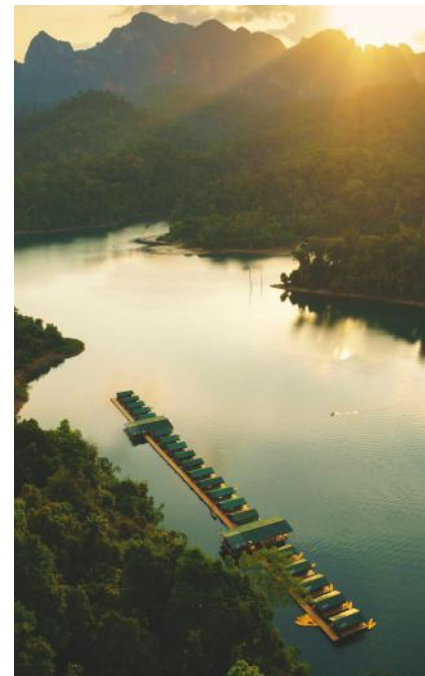
our first taste of local life, and in Chumphon's night market, we watched our food being cooked – I loved the barbecue chicken skewers, but passed on the giant bugs!"



#### Zac on wildlife:

"I'd love to be a marine

biologist, so snorkelling among coral reefs in Koh Tao was really amazing."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Coral at Koh Tao; Elephant Hills floating encampment at Cheow Larn Lake; Lee and family at Elephant Hills PICTURES: Shutterstock; Lee Hayhurst

## WHERE TO STAY

**Chumphon:** Loft Mani Boutique Hotel, a clean, modern property with a small swimming pool.

**Koh Tao:** Haad Tien Beach Resort, where we had large interconnecting rooms with amazing views of the bay.

**Khanom:** Aava Resort & Spa is a tranquil and stunning low-rise Scandi-style property with single-storey rooms.

**Khao Sok:** Elephant Hills Nature Reserve is more glamping than camping – drift off to a jungle soundtrack of insects, birds, frogs and gibbons.

our excitement about the next leg rose with the temperature. Koh Tao, little sister of better-known Koh Samui and Koh Phangan, is renowned for its marine wildlife and more-authentic beach holiday vibe. Its corals team with tropical fish so, while the island is a magnet for divers, snorkellers can also experience its world-class underwater world, and our long-tail boat excursion was a real highlight.

Our stay coincided with full moon, so we booked a taxi to main town Sairee Beach for a taste of its laid-back, beach party atmosphere. In keeping with Koh Tao, everything in Sairee is built to the island's small scale, and where better for a sundowner at a beachfront bar as fire jugglers set the scene for the night-long partying to follow?

### KHANOM

Having retired at a reasonable hour, to the disappointment of our teenage daughter, the next day it was time to move on. Like Chumphon, Khanom is seen as just a transit hub and is even less

It's venturing through unspoilt areas that makes the best holiday memories

developed for tourism – though that is a major part of its charm.

We stayed at Aava Resort & Spa, built by a Finn who discovered this beautiful beachfront spot when backpacking and never left. Our two-bedroom apartment was the ideal base to explore the area, including one of our most-anticipated activities – seeing pink dolphins. They are extremely rare but resident year-round at the mouth of the Khon Nom river, so trips just about guarantee sightings. We also visited Monk Island, where 16th-century Buddhist monk Luang Pu Thuat is commemorated, and watched the sunset from a nearby vantage point.

### ELEPHANT HILLS

Next came the four-hour minibus journey to Khao Sok National Park,

where the Elephant Hills tented camp is nestled among spectacular rainforest and limestone escarpments.

This wildlife experience is superbly managed and offers an up-close elephant encounter you'll never forget. All the animals are retired working elephants and live in a large reserve a short safari-truck ride away. They give every indication of being happy and well-looked-after, with no unethical rides or gimmicks.

As well as the elephant encounter and river canoe ride, there are trips to a mangrove forest and walking tours of the nearby rainforest. But the real standout was a day trip to Cheow Larn Lake, where Elephant Hills' floating encampment allows for overnight stays and kayak trips to spot rare gibbons and other primates.

Longboats take you into the depths of an awesome untouched jungle ecosystem. Unforgettable! It's those quiet moments, venturing through the unspoilt areas of Thailand that few tourists take time to explore, that make for the best family holiday memories. **TW**