

Pack your trunk

A multi-centre trip to Thailand offers a multi-layered adventure for Robin Murray



Elephant Hills,
Khao Sok

“Oh, don’t worry, we’ll probably only see a few snakes,” says our guide, Pond, her beaming smile meant to allay my obvious apprehension ahead of our three-mile trek through the Khao Sok rainforest.

Considering I don’t even like removing house spiders using a glass and card, her attempt to reassure me doesn’t have the desired effect. But as we walk through the national park, my fears melt away and I find myself growing in confidence, channelling my inner Bear Grylls with each stride.

That’s because Pond – real name Kitiya Rartniyoum – assures us that if we were to encounter anything we’d rather avoid, she would deal with it. And luckily

there isn’t a snake or a spider in sight as we make our way to what turns out to be the highlight of the expedition; a shack in a clearing where a man is slicing a coconut with a machete.

“Say hello to your chef!” says Pond, as we take our seats to watch him at work. We learn that the ‘jungle man’, as Pond affectionately refers to him, is rustling up a feast for us, with roast pork, Thai green curry and mango sticky rice on the menu, all freshly prepared and cooked over an open fire. Pond tells us that our chef, whose name is Wirat Chotchaikusuma, had woken up at 6am to transport the many ingredients and utensils required to make this delicious lunch to his makeshift kitchen on his back.

DESTINATIONS

ASIA | THAILAND

3
OF THE
BEST

ELEPHANT HILLS ACTIVITIES

Canoeing down the Sok River

Guests staying at Elephant Hills' Rainforest Camp can take a guided canoe trip down the Sok River, which winds its way through the world's oldest evergreen rainforest. The giant limestone cliffs that line the river provide a majestic backdrop and explorers can expect to see monitor lizards on the banks, monkeys in the trees above and fish swimming beneath the surface.

Cheow Lan Lake boat tour

Surrounded by scenery that wouldn't look out of place in *Avatar* or *Jurassic Park*, the 70sq mile Cheow Lan Lake is a sight to behold and the best way to experience it is via a tour in a traditional longtail boat, which includes a stop at Elephant Hills' Lake Camp for lunch and activities such as stand-up paddleboarding and kayaking.

Kayaking at Elephant Hills



Cooking demonstrations

Evening activities offered at Elephant Hills' Rainforest Camp include cooking demonstrations, where chefs teach guests how to rustle up popular dishes including pad Thai and papaya salad.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Koh Panyi floating village; Sofitel Krabi Phokeethra Golf & Spa Resort; jumping off a boat in the Similan Islands; Robinson Khao Lak

PICTURES: Tui Nederland; Tui



ELEPHANTS NEVER FORGET

It's one of several memorable adventures I have during my stay at Elephant Hills, a tented jungle camp in the heart of Thailand's Khao Sok National Park. The property sits alongside its own elephant sanctuary, home to a herd of endangered mammals rescued from around the world.

When I visit, I find the elephants roaming the vast expanse of land, each with their own dedicated *mahout*, who care for these previously mistreated animals.

"Now it's lunchtime," says Pond after I've acquainted myself with the herd gathered before me, and my belly starts rumbling as I recall Wirat's slap-up lunch from the day before. But it's the elephants' dinner time, not ours, and Pond informs us that we will be their chefs. We head over to the feeding hut where I prepare a tamarind ball wrapped in a bamboo leaf, before presenting it in my outstretched hand to the first discerning diner.

"Oh look, she likes you!" beams Pond as the six-foot trunk unfurls in my direction. The sensation of warm suction from the vacuum-like nose against my palm is bizarre at first, but the more I do it the more I grow accustomed to it. Eventually I find myself loving the experience and ensure all nine hungry elephants benefit from my culinary prowess.

THAI TRIO

This unforgettable experience comes at the midway point of my multi-centre trip with Tui. Prior to departure, I didn't think seven days would be long enough to explore the

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country and sample the best of what it has to offer, but the seamless transfers between the three hotels – the Sofitel Krabi Phokeethra Golf & Spa Resort in Krabi and Robinson Khao Lak in Phang Nga sandwiching the popular Elephant Hills – made it a breeze.

Evidently, I'm not the only person impressed with this multi-centre offering. Tui commercial director Phil Iveson says the operator has seen strong appetite for such trips in Thailand – some also taking in Bangkok or Koh Samui – and is tipping demand to rise. He describes the country as a "key focus area" for Tui, with the operator being the only airline to offer direct flights from the UK to Phuket, and the introduction this winter of a second weekly charter flight to Phuket from Gatwick, in addition to its weekly Manchester service.

The nature of the trip meant I could experience the many different sides to Thailand in a short time. While Elephant Hills put me in touch with Thailand's rich, vibrant nature, Robinson Khao Lak – just over an hour's drive away – offers a slice of beachfront luxury, and in my case, a bungalow with a spacious garden, terrace and ➤



ABOVE: The 20-metre limestone tower Koh Tapu, also known as James Bond Island, featured in *The Man with the Golden Gun* PICTURES: Shutterstock/Preto Perola

private pool. I could easily have spent my three days at the resort without leaving the bungalow, but the wider facilities – three swimming pools, six restaurants, a bar hosting regular live music, a gym, spa, tennis courts and watersports – were too enticing.

WATER WORLD

As if that wasn't enough to keep guests occupied, there's also the option of adding excursions to explore the surrounding areas. We choose a catamaran tour of the Similan Islands (£97), about 35 miles from the mainland, which includes two snorkelling stop-offs so we can meet some of the Andaman Sea's marine inhabitants.

Getting up at 5am would not usually be my idea of fun, especially the morning after a few punchy cocktails, but as soon as we board the high-speed catamaran to our remote archipelago and the sun begins to rise, I know the early wake-up will be worthwhile.

Visiting the group of five

“A snorkelling trip finds me swimming just metres above giant turtles and alongside colourful schools of fish

islands and their jaw-dropping beaches one-by-one is pure bliss, as we witness the kind of mesmerising landscapes I have only ever seen on screens. I feel like Robinson Crusoe as we scale Sail Rock on Koh Similan Island, before a snorkelling trip finds me swimming alongside colourful schools of fish and just metres above giant turtles – a surprise encounter I will never forget.

We also tested out another Tui trip – to the so-called James Bond Island – during our stay at Sofitel. Phang Nga Bay is known for its limestone cliffs and dramatic rock formations, and a speedboat tour

(£97) gives us a peek into authentic Thai life. We stop off at Koh Tapu, a popular spot that featured in *The Man with the Golden Gun*, before continuing our tour to Koh Panyi – a floating village that should be on everyone's Thailand to-do list.

The small fishing village is a maze of souvenir shops, market stalls and restaurants alongside a school, a mosque and health centre. It even has its own floating football pitch. While Koh Tapu feels like it has been somewhat tarnished by overtourism, with just 1,500 inhabitants, Koh Panyi offers something more akin to a real slice of Thailand.

Like the Robinson, the Sofitel is located right on the beachfront and has plenty of draws – not least a nine-hole golf course and southern

Thailand's largest swimming pool, 400 metres in length and with a swim-up bar. The family-friendly hotel prides itself on the private experiences it offers, including a barbecue on the beach and poolside dining experience for special occasions.

Before heading home, I try a Thai cooking class, where I rustle up a range of traditional Thai dishes under the tutelage of the hotel's chefs. I'm presented afterwards with an apron personalised with my name embroidered in gold lettering which is a lovely memento from the trip, but somehow, I don't think the hotel chefs – or Wirat back in his Khao Sok shack – will be taking me on as a sous chef any time soon. **TW**

BOOK IT

Tui offers a 14-night Elephant Hills Tour and Khao Lak Stay, with two nights at Elephant Hills and 12 nights at Robinson Khao Lak, from £2,702, including flights from Heathrow on February 2, 2025, 23kg of luggage allowance and all transfers. tui.co.uk