

The high life

Northern Thailand is a world away from the tropical beaches of the south, finds Jennifer Morris



“Jennifer, come back!” There was a moment of gut-wrenching panic before the instructor – having just sent me hurtling on a zip line through the tree canopy in the ‘Superman’ position – burst out laughing.

Notwithstanding that jolt of fear, I looked out at the rainforest and wondered whether Thailand could possibly get any better, before being brought firmly back to my senses as the end of the line approached.

This was just the start of a Thai Airways/Tourism Authority of Thailand fam trip, leaving the better-known beach parties and palm tree-lined islands of the south far behind in favour of rainforests, ancient culture and

adrenaline-fuelled experiences around the northern city of Chiang Mai.

▶ SEE: TREETOPS AND TEMPLES

Chiang Mai “seeps into your soul”, according to World Travellers consultant Linda Welch, and my lasting impression was how much it has to offer thrill-seekers. In just one day, Treetop Asia had us hurtling around the 33-station Flight of the Gibbon zip-line course, an hour north of the city, then zooming through Chiang Mai on a Segway tour of the old quarter.

The longest single zip-line ‘flight’ in Mae Takhrai National Park is a terrifying 800m, accompanied by screeching



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gibbons in the treetops, but the instructors’ reassurance made us feel pretty invincible. Before we knew it, we were crying out for longer lines, filming ourselves throwing our arms and legs out like starfish and asking whether we could do the course backwards – the answer to which was a firm ‘no’.

“The instructors made us feel so safe,” adds Welch. “I would definitely advise customers of all fitness levels not to be put off by the ‘activity’ label.”

Little did we know that the Segway tour would prove almost as hair-raising as the morning’s activities, although once we had negotiated a few busy roads, we were gliding through quieter streets and stopping off to look around temples.

Flight of the Gibbon, sold through suppliers such as Viator or Do Something Different, costs about £73, including transfers, while the Segway tour starts at £37. Combination tickets are £85.

Ryan Amos, international travel consultant at Flight Centre, says: “I absolutely

→ loved Flight of the Gibbon and the Segway tour. Chiang Mai is underrated as a destination. I will be recommending it much more now.”

There are shining Buddhist temples and shrines everywhere, tucked away at the edges of winding mountain roads or slap-bang in the middle of bustling towns and cities.

Once the capital of the ancient Lanna kingdom, Chiang Mai’s distinctive identity reflects that heritage, but with a modern edge thanks to stylish bars and luxurious spas aplenty.

Some religious sites such as Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, set high above the city, are always busy, but others, such as the recently excavated ruins of Wiang Kum Kam, are more tranquil. The former costs less than £1 for entrance to the temple and a cable-car ride up to it, with the latter less than £4 for the museum and horse-drawn carriage tour.

A visit to a hill-tribe village is also worthwhile. We went walkabout in local dress at Doi Pui tribal village, a



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short taxi ride from Suthep temple (less than £2 for museum entry and costume hire). Operators such as Hayes & Jarvis offer pre-bookable options such as a full-day excursion to Doi Inthanon National Park (£25).

For those looking to veer completely off the beaten track, G Adventures has a trek that visits three indigenous communities, helping to generate employment and sustainable income in remote areas. The four-night Northern Thailand Hilltribes Trek starts at £199 on a land-only basis.

▶ STAY: OASIS IN THE CITY

Chiang Mai’s two Dusit hotels are popular with Western & Oriental and Premier Holidays customers. We stayed at the 198-room Dusit Princess, at the heart of the popular night market, which had an added touch of glamour courtesy of its recently refurbished lobby bar. The sleek 130-room sister hotel DusitD2 Chiang Mai is set back slightly from the market and has more facilities, including a spa and gym overlooking the city.

Hayes & Jarvis customers rave about the ‘authentic’ experience at the 45-room Tamarind Village. Set around garden courtyards and an impressive outdoor pool, its tranquil atmosphere offers no indication that it is right in the heart of Chiang Mai.

Other popular choices include the tranquil 84-room Anantara Chiang Mai Resort, and its sister hotel, the 63-room Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort, on the border with Myanmar and Laos.



ASK THE EXPERT



→ **Chris Lee, UK and Ireland head of marketing, Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT):** “What’s important to us is how much money people are spending on the ground in Thailand and where they are spending it. We must ensure, as a tourist board, that we encourage people to visit the whole country and not very small pockets. TAT has had a policy for some time to help promote our neighbouring countries, as Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia don’t have tourist boards in the UK. We take the view that promoting combination holidays with our neighbours is an important part of our own strategy.”



FAR LEFT: Visiting a hill tribe

LEFT: Segway city tour

BELOW: Tamarind Village

→ SELL: PACKAGE IT UP

With regular connecting flights from Bangkok and Phuket, the north is viable either as a standalone destination or within a multi-centre trip. Premier Holidays' six-night tour, Lanna Thai and The Golden Triangle, focuses solely on the north, visiting temples, elephant camps and hill tribes (from £1,039 full-board, including flights). If clients are short on time, Travel 2's Essential Chiang Mai tour is just three days, but covers the highlights of Buddhist temples, the night market, Chiang-Dao elephant camp and rafting along the Ping River.

Chiang Mai can also be paired with a beach break - Western & Oriental's 10-night Cultural Chiang Mai & Samui Beach starts at £1,739 - or with cultural adventures elsewhere in the region.

One of the tourist board's key marketing messages for the coming year will be using Thailand as a building block for multi-centre trips across southeast Asia. Wendy Wu Tours has already tapped into this



ABOVE: Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort

market. The operator's 15-night Northern Thailand and Laos Adventure takes in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, including bamboo rafting along the Ping River, before crossing the border to Pakbeng (from £2,390).

Thai Airways operates up to 10 daily

flights from Bangkok Suvarnabhumi airport to Chiang Mai, while Bangkok Airways has between three and six services a day. No-frills carriers such as Air Asia, Nok Air and Thai Lion Air also serve the city from Bangkok's Don Mueang airport. 



Premier Holidays has three nights' B&B at Dusit Princess Chiang Mai with eight nights' room-only at the Regent Cha Am Beach Resort from £1,099, including flights. premierholidays.co.uk

Hayes & Jarvis has seven nights' B&B at Tamarind Village in Chiang Mai, from £849, including flights. hayesandjarvis.co.uk

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