

Thailand's treasures

IF BANGKOK IS THE COUNTRY'S WILD HEART, THEN PHUKET IS ITS CALM SOUL. ORLA NELIGAN SAMPLES URBAN BUSTLE, BEACHSIDE BLISS AND ANTICS IN THE JUNGLE ON A RECENT TRIP TO THAILAND

PHOTOGRAPHS ORLA NELIGAN/TOURISM THAILAND

As tuk-tuk drivers go, Mr Khen is no Sunday driver. The high-shrill shrieks of my fellow passengers only seem to egg him on. "We go faster?" he shouts, flashing a menacing grin. The steamy clamour of Bangkok whizzes by as he careers around corners, weaving his way through the sea of multi-coloured tuk-tuks that swarm the city like bees.

We are on our way to Suan Lum Night Bazaar via Bangkok's busiest artery when Mr Khen takes a dog leg down a *sois*, or side alley, sandwiched with signs, shrines and stalls and the obligatory Thai massage shops. "You wan massa?" he asks thumbing in the direction of the cheerfully named 'Happy House Massage Parlour'. A chorus of "Noooo" erupts from the back seat. He lights up a cigarette and winks at me in the mirror.

Bangkok's kaleidoscopic swirl is tempered by the occasional Zen moment; a man praying to a miniature Buddha in a congested market, an elephant ambling along a busy thoroughfare, the glint of a golden temple peeking out from behind a shabby street corner; heat, hawkers, temples and mega-malls or, as the moniker goes, 'Bangkok, city of life'.

At Suan Lum the action is in full swing and we enter the realm of

Bangkok-style commerce. Stalls selling all manner of schlock sit elbow-to-elbow, perspiring tourists haggle for that imitation Rolex, harried faces of owners whose role is as much acting as selling shake their heads, offended at the mere mention of 'that price'. Everything in Thailand is negotiable. I settle on a blue leather Marc Jacobs bag but only after I walk away and the owner runs after me waving his hands and his high-wattage smile. We pour over our bargains at one of Suan Lum's many outdoor bars before embarking on another tuk-tuk adventure back to the Shangri-La Hotel or 'the Shang' as it's otherwise known. Mr Khen's replacement must have gone to the same driving school. We arrive reeling and make a beeline for the hotel's beautiful riverside terrace for some stiff drinks and a selection of tasty Thai morsels from the hotel's acclaimed restaurant interrupted only by the pattering of passing boats.

Twenty-four hours in Bangkok and I'm already exhausted but it's an exhilarating attack on the senses and I find myself torn between wanting to explore some more and eager to strike out for the blonde beaches of southern Thailand, the next stop on my itinerary.

Dubbed 'the Pearl of the Adaman Sea' Phuket is easy listening next to Bangkok's

hard rock. Stepping off the plane to a salty breeze, I can nearly hear the dull din of chill-out music and the smell of brawny beer. Half an hour's drive south of the airport and I'm realising my daydream. Sprawled poolside at my private hilltop villa at the luxury Sri Panwa resort, my only dilemma is whether to take a dip in the horizon pool or cool down in the indoor-outdoor shower. Big decisions.

Thailand's had its fair share of tension over the years. While recovery from the Asian tsunami was swift, domestic strife and political unrest in the country's capital has left a lingering anxiety with many travellers. Yet the sparkling Andaman Sea, but for a few fishing boats bobbing on its surface,





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remains lambent and calm, no hint of discontent having reached its shore.

It doesn't take long to fall into Sri Panwa's tropical inertia. A villa butler drops in to check whether the exotic fruit bowl needs replenishing, changes the 'sounds' on the Bose stereo and plumps the pillows on the daybeds (there are three of them). Paralysed by the panoramic views, I only notice she has been after she has left.

It's tempting to just flake out here for the rest of the day but below me, the resort's private beach beckons. The sea is bath-warm. I don my flippers and snorkel and plunge into the electric-blue water browsing the technicolour aquarium beneath me.

An hour later it's back to being paralysed at the hotel's Cool Spa. As I sip ginger tea, a yoga class salutes the setting sun on a platform in the middle of the pool, the backdrop of islands and the silhouette of Big Buddha on a faraway hill dazzle in the amber hue of the evening. I'm entering my own nirvana when I'm ushered into a dark room by a tiny Thai woman. "Enjoy your massage," says the girl behind the

reception, "she's got lots of these," she adds holding up her hands. I'm a little puzzled until I wake in a soft butter-like state and notice the six fingers on each hand of my therapist. That explains it.

Rather handily, the hottest new eatery on the island happens to be the resort's Baba restaurant where we dine that evening. Tucking into tiger prawns, hot curries and lychee cocktails at tables eye-level with the surrounding pool, it's no wonder the place is a Gordon Ramsay favourite and a honeymoon hotspot.

We set off early the next morning for Khao Sok National Park, an hour's drive north. Countering Sri Panwa's narcotized vibe is Elephant Hills – a luxury tented camp in the rainforest jungle that specialises in the full elephant experience. Since logging is no longer legal, the Asian elephant has become jobless and thus endangered. Shockingly, there are only 3,000 elephants left in Thailand compared to a staggering 100,000 at the start of the last century. Elephant Hills' aim is to help the animals' survival through tourism.

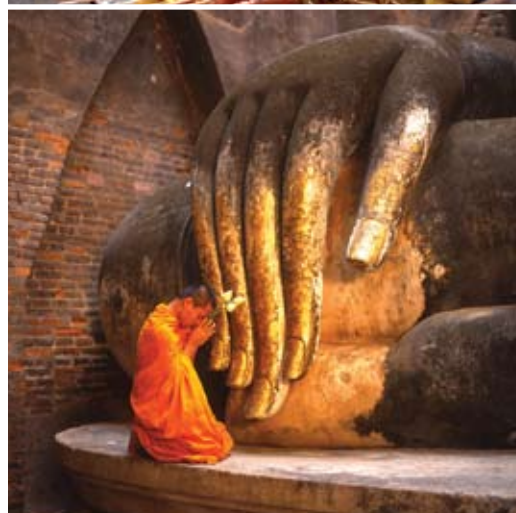
Our first day is spent washing, feeding



and riding these gentle giants. Akin to being aboard a gently rocking ship, riding an elephant involves a lot of swaying, stopping every now and again so they can snack and deforest large swathes of rainforest with their trunks. It's a thoroughly serene experience. As Jonathon Chell, international marketing manager of Elephant Hills tells me, "The trek is not SAS survival but really a chance to experience the tropical rainforest in a gentle way." The afternoon is spent kayaking down a river past children splashing in the cool water, interrupted only by a game of pass the spider, SAS survival style. We never did find the little blighter.

Wilting from the heat, it's back to camp for a swim in the pool surrounded by hulking limestone rocks. The semi open-air design, consisting of a large wooden structure, open on all sides with a soaring roof, is perfect for savouring the view, beer in hand. Wherever you are in the camp you can hear bullfrogs croak, cicadas sing and from your cosy and surprisingly bug-free tent in the morning, the alarm-call of gibbons rousing you from slumber.

Opposite page: Bangkok bustle. **This page, clockwise from top left:** Tuk-tuk, Bangkok; Cooling off; Elephant Hills; Refreshments at the local market; Fried crab, food market near Elephant Hills camp; Monk prays at the giant Buddha, Phuket; Luminous pink eggs, food market near Elephant Hills.



Our last day and we're slicing through the emerald waters of Khao Sok lake on a long-tail boat, dwarfed by the surrounding karst formations, floating over sunken villages below us and squeezed into the last patch of shade under the boat's canopy. Only our driver braves the heat, occasionally referencing how pale we are by touching the luminous white tarpaulin and then pointing at us and laughing.

To paraphrase Robin Williams in *Good Morning Vietnam*. "It's hot, damn hot, real hot. So hot, I could put food in my shorts and do a little crotch pot cookin'." Good thing we find a restaurant. Lunch consists of, quite possibly, the tastiest omelette I've ever eaten (cooked in the kitchen, thankfully). Add to that tempura chicken, Massaman curry, sweet and sour prawns and fresh pineapple and we've slipped into subdued sublimity.

Back on the boat, we leave the chain of ramshackle floating huts and hightail it back to shore and on to camp, stopping at a food market on the way. The seminal role food plays in Thai culture can not be underestimated, I learn, when greeted with 'gin kao ruu yang' a standard colloquialism translated as 'have you eaten rice yet?' which really means 'hi how are you?'. Street cuisine is perhaps most popular; a quick al fresco option for Thais, a lesson in the rituals of Thai life for the visitor. Everything from fried crab

and jellied eel to barbecued bananas is cooked on road-side carts. Vapors waft, some tantalising, some bracing, but always delighting the taste buds. I spot luminous pink eggs, chillis the size of parsnips and a jurassic-looking fish that would scare a small child, eventually settling on some sticky rice with mango – a sweet Thai staple – sugar cane juice and a few bananas for the monkeys up the road. Monkeys who I learn, are well attuned to the art of retrieving dinner, sweeping in from their treetops and virtually yelling at you to give them the damn banana. So much for 'the wild'.

Dawn in Khao Sok is something special. The first rays of light imbuing the sky with a pink hue that stretches out over craggy mountain tops; it's a scene worthy of a screensaver. Driving the empty roads back to the airport we pass elephants and their mahouts and the flash of orange robes as monks make their morning alms, retrieving food parcels donated by locals. Two hours later I'm back in a bustling Bangkok standing in front of the towering Platinum shopping mall, on the periphery of a rising street protest. "You wan tuk-tuk?" shouts the Thai man nearly running me over. I ponder the thought of riding the sleek, modern Sky Train. "Why not," I nod, stepping in, holding on and praying as he takes off through the pulsating city streets on another Bangkok adventure. **✎**

travel file

STAY
Shang-ri-La Hotel, Bangkok. Comfy and cutting edge with a riverside location, acclaimed CHI Spa, peaceful gardens and two outdoor pools overlooking the Chao Phraya River. shang-ri-la.com/bangkok

Sri Panwa, Phuket. Private luxury hideaway on Cape Panwa with hilltop villas that offer panoramic views, private infinity pools and a host of other lavish amenities – the ultimate indulgence. sripanwa.com

Elephant Hills, Khao Sok National Park. Thailand's first luxury tented camp in the heart of the beautiful Khao Sok National Park has all the comforts of a hotel room with the rainforest right outside the door. At night by the cosy campfires, resident cooks demonstrate local dishes and school children perform traditional dance. elephant-hills.com

GO
 Etihad Airways flies from Dublin to Bangkok via Abu Dhabi from Tuesday – Sunday. Flight time is approx. 13 hours. etihadairways.com



This page, above: Aerial view of the Shang-ri-La Hotel, Bangkok; Hilltop villa at the luxury Sri Panwa resort, Phuket. **Opposite page:** Young monks take a break; Friendly welcome, Elephant Hills; Long-tail boat, Khao Sok lake; Shrine at Bangkok's Grand Palace; Kayaking in Khao Sok jungle.

