PLACES TO GO

QUICK GETAWAYS

The Elephant Experience

Everyone scrubbed and washed the elephants.

The tour allows people to get up-close and interact with the elephants.

By Sandy Zimmerman
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Photos by Sandy Zimmerman

As I walked to my tent there was a feeling of adventure, the jungle began just on the other side of this path. So close to the jungle, yet guests did not have to rough it. The Elephant Hills Resort is the first luxury tented jungle camp in Thailand. The owner went to Borneo, Kenya and South Africa to compare their luxury safari tents and found South Africa had superb quality tents. These are waterproof, flame- proof, and moldproof military spec canvas with special material developed in South Africa. Everyone is comfortable inside the tent with a hot shower, electric lights, hair dryer, plug-in coffee pot, safe, bathroom, bed and other furniture, and an external roof on top. The flaps zip open during the day and close at night. We needed flashlights going back to our tents after eating dinner.

Luxury Safari Tents

Khao Sok is the largest area of rainforest in Sothern Thailand. You do not have to be a young back packer to enjoy an adventure; everybody can enjoy nature if they do it the right way. At the Elephant Hills Resort, the staff does all the work. I joined the "Elephant Experience," a jungle tour which claimed we would get up-close to the Asian elephants, interact with them, and learn the secrets of their mahouts (trainers). The tour's name did not exaggerate how close we would be! First we took a boat to the elephant camp. Then they gave us baskets of raw vegetables, fruit and other foods for us to wash and cut into small pieces. After filling a large basket, it was brought to one of the elephants. Each of us fed our elephant until all of the food was gone. The mahout explained, "Elephants will not work until they are fed and bathed." I never expected to wash an elephant! This was much closer than I thought I would ever get to an elephant. The elephants were brought to a clearing where we scrubbed and washed them. As long as the mahout was there, I felt safe. I have heard of elephant safaris, but this goes beyond the other tours! The elephants were friendly and used to people.

The "Elephant Experience" is usually combined with one of their other treks and safaris. You can choose one of their tours or have it customized for you. The Elephant Hills Resort is located in Khao Sok, just 2-1/2 hours from Phuket, a one hour plane flight from Bangkok. info@elephant-hills.com www.elephant-hills.com

Best Value for Travelers

CNN recently announced their online customer survey which chose Thailand as representing the best value for travelers' money in the Asian Pacific region. There is so much to see in Thailand. Special tours are being offered for transferring passengers making stopovers for 12 hours or less at Survarnabhumi International Airport from June, 2009 to May, 2010. The new Bangkok Sky train links Bangkok's business districts to the west bank of the Chao Phraya River in just minutes.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand announces The Amazing Under Water Wedding Package at Anantara Koh Samui Resort & Spa, on Koh Tao Island, for scuba divers. This wedding can be arranged for certified scuba divers and also those who have never dived before. New divers will have to take an introductory lesson before the ceremony. For the latest specials, discounts, and information on resorts, restaurants, tours, unique settings for weddings, spas, attractions, and places to go, see the website: www.tourismthailand.org/la

Reasons To Travel This Year- This is likely to be the best year in many years to travel, especially overseas, according to the U.S. Tour Operators Association. The organization, whose members book vacations for 11 million people a year, feels Americans should seize the opportunity now to travel abroad. Travelers are seeing average savings of 20% over last year on travel arrangements. "The dollar's stronger buying power, combined with the need to increase business revenues during the recession has led to any number of good deals," says Bob Whitley, USTOA president.

The Trip before You Arrive

To experience Thailand ahead of time, travel on Thai International Airways. The stewardesses are dressed in colorful, traditional Thai silk fitted blouses, sashes and long skirts. The airline's motto "Smooth as Silk" lets you know the flight and service will be flawless! A touch of silk feels wonderful and so will you. As Thai Airways proudly brags, "Our service lifts your spirits. Our network carries you everywhere. Nothing unites the world like the smooth travel experience of Thai Airways." Whatever your reason for traveling, fly Thai Airways to the world. Thai whisks you away to 70 cities in 5 countries. Flights are available from Los Angeles to Bangkok.

For additional information, call (800)-426-5204. or visit their website www.thaiairways.com.

Feeding the elephants.

The food had to be cut in small pieces before we could feed it to the elephants.