

# Travel

Don't let life lose its Edge: Barry Egan's diary, back page

## Pack your trunk for a trip to Thai banquet

Delicious, fat-free food, shopping bargains and elephant rides in the jungle are all on the menu of a luxury holiday in Thailand, discovers **Triona McCarthy**

I HAVE always longed to go to Thailand — or Toyland as I like to call it — because being a beauty, fashion and food addict, I've had hundreds of Thai beauty treatments here in Ireland, I have a thing for Asian-style outfits and my local Thai takeaway sends me Christmas cards, I order that much from them.

So stepping onto my Etihad Airways flight to Bangkok via Abu Dhabi, I had high hopes. Now I'm a gal who loves flying: the longer the flight the better, as I get a chance to catch up on the hottest celebrity gossip in the magazines as well as seeing all the latest films. So I was royally entertained on the eight-hour trip all the way to Abu Dhabi. The short stopover there gave me just enough time to stretch my legs, grab a coffee, then have a goo in all the fancy stores such as Chloe and Cartier before it was back aboard.

Six hours later, I landed in Bangkok and it was off into the neon-lit night to the Shangri-la Hotel, or The Shang, as those in the know call it. Centrally located and on the banks of the Chao Phraya River, the city's

major transport route for goods and people, it is however a peaceful, posh place. I watched the river traffic float by from my bedroom window and the city's magical mix of skyscrapers, shacks and temples was awesome.

The hotel has undergone a recent refurbishment, so facilities are first class. There was a choice of restaurants or a dinner cruise, but I decided to try tasty traditional Thai food while gazing at the waterfront.

But you didn't know that a lot of Thai food is fat free — I didn't — so to keep my curvy figure, I had every dessert going at the to-die-for dessert buffet, resisting the urge to stick my tongue in the chocolate fountain. Anyway, I needed all the energy I could get as I only had 24 hours in Bangkok, and I intended to shop myself silly.

So after dinner and a quick ride in one of the bumpy but fun tuk-tuks, a three-wheeled motorised bike, I was at Suan Lum Night Bazaar which comes alive just as the sun goes down.

With more than 3,000 stalls selling all kinds of every-

thing from flip-flops to furniture, and of course high-fashion "inspired" finds at next-to-nothing prices, I was dizzy with delight.

Next morning it was time to pamper myself pretty at the award-winning Chi spa in the hotel which was spacious and spaubulous, before heading out shopping again to Platinum, a huge shopping mall, with floor after floor full of fashion, accessories, shoes and much, much more. You can get your shopping orgasm here, I tell you!

The prices are very tempting and the best thing is the more pieces you buy, the cheaper they are as it's predominantly a wholesale haven. One item of clothing may be 200 baht — about €5 — but three items are only 500 baht, €12.

I have two sisters who now have T-shirts and dresses in different colours just like mine. We should start a girl band — The Mad Macs.

All too soon I was checking out of The Shang, and back at Bangkok airport as I was on a short flight to Phuket for the relaxing part of my trip. A

half-hour drive after the flight I was checking into Sri Panwa — a mountaintop hideaway in a remote corner of Phuket. The view was breathtaking and so was my villa, with its own infinity pool, Jacuzzi, steam room and a butler.

I'm engaged, and Joe, if you're reading this — this is where you have to bring me on your honeymoon! I thought it couldn't get any better until I tried out a treatment in the Cool Spa. I was welcomed with lychee tea and then offered a range of fabulously fragranced skin scrubs and oils to choose from for my massage.

Lately I've found it very difficult to relax, but the next two hours were spent in absolute, hedonistic bliss and — minor miracle — I actually managed to doze off. That evening I dined at Baba, the hip hotelier. Next morning, I reluctantly checked out of paradise but not before I kissed all four walls of my villa as this is what you're supposed to do if you want to return to a place.

Then it was off to Khao Sok National Park where I checked in to Elephant Hills, a luxury



**SUDS UP:** Triona McCarthy scrubs down an elephant on her holiday in Thailand. At Elephant Hills campsite her luxury tent had a comfy bed, a fan, a kettle and a bathroom with a shower

is down to Vorasit Issara, the tented camp. If, like me, you never got to do the whole gap year thing, this is the place to go to do it. Basically you get to try out all the stuff backpackers do — but in luxury — which is what you need when you're aged nonetee!

My tent was more like a hotel room as it had a comfy bed, a fan, a kettle and a bath-

room with toilet and shower. Jonathan Chell, international marketing director of Elephant Hills, who is both gorgeous and passionate about his job, told me how the camp cares for the environment so the furniture was all handmade by local craftsmen using natural materials.

The swimming pool nearby

was the perfect place to cool off or catch the sunset and people-watch.

At the centre of the complex is the semi-open air main camp within which is the restaurant and bar. Every evening there is something on, such as a cookery demo or traditional Thai dancing.

I went on a canoe safari down the River Sok but the best part of my trip here was the Elephant Experience, where I got to feed and wash the beasts and trek through the rainforest — princess-style on a seat on an elephant.

Asian elephants are an endangered species. They were once used for logging, it's now illegal so there are hardly any ways for them to earn their keep. Yes, even elephants are losing their jobs, these days. Elephant Hills' goal is to provide a new source of income through tourism to help them survive. So now I can say to my younger sisters who've all done the year-out thing that I did it as well — but in luxury!

Pack that in your trunk and smoke it!

**GETTING THERE**  
Triona travelled to Thailand with Etihad Airways which has return flights from Dublin to Bangkok from €620.69, see [www.etihadairways.com](http://www.etihadairways.com). For more on Thailand, [www.tourismthailand.co.uk](http://www.tourismthailand.co.uk). [www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com). [www.sripanwa.com](http://www.sripanwa.com). [www.elephant-hills.com](http://www.elephant-hills.com)

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