

In Thailand jungle, elephants enjoy a second career

By Shane Nelson

Having seen elephants only on TV and a handful of times behind thick walls at the zoo, I grew up thinking their skin was pretty coarse and cold. I guess I just figured something that looked so wrinkled and gray had to be rough, and nobody ever told me any different.

It took about 45 minutes at Elephant Hills, a luxury jungle camp in the Khao Sok National Park of southern Thailand, to set me straight.

A two-and-a-half-hour drive from Phuket Airport, Elephant Hills is home to 16 adult Asian elephants that either worked in Thailand's now-banned rain forest logging industry or are the offspring of mothers that did.

"When the logging ban came into effect in the 1980s, there were a lot of elephants who didn't have any jobs," said Jonathan Chell, the international marketing manager for Elephant Hills. "Now it might sound silly to talk

about elephants without jobs, but they eat 250 kilograms of food a day, and if you own these huge animals, how do you feed them if they're not making any money? ... So tourism now plays an important role in helping to take care of these animals."

Throughout Thailand, many of these retired loggers or their offspring are now entertaining visitors from around the globe, and at Elephant Hills guests have a chance to get incredibly close. One of the camp's absolute musts, an activity simply called the Elephant Experience, enables guests to stand eye-to-eye with these remarkably gentle creatures.



Small benches are strapped to the elephants' backs for visitors' treks through the southern Thailand jungle.

The experience begins with all 16 of the camp's elephants lined up behind a short, wooden fence, intently eyeing a long table surrounded by piles of papaya, watermelon, ears of corn, lengths of sugar cane, pumpkins, pineapple, and stout bunches of mostly green bananas.

Guests wash the produce in nearby buckets of water and then chop the fruits and vegetables into bite-size portions with a machete-like knife about the length of one's forearm. The chopped-up portions go into large baskets that are later carried over to the elephants, all of whom greet you and the baskets with a frenzied extension of trunks. From there the goal is to quickly offer each animal as many fruits and veggies as possible.

Made up of more than 100,000 muscles, an elephant's trunk is a miraculously dexterous appendage, and as I quickly discovered, incredibly strong. Most of the fruit and vegetable chunks were taken carefully from my hands and swung gracefully up into the elephant's mouth. Occasionally, however, the trunk grabbed more hand than melon, and I found myself struggling not to fall over.

Many in our small group of guests had never been that close to an elephant before, and I was amazed at how warm their trunks were and how soft their skin was. They were also covered with bristly little hairs, another revelation for me.

A grinning and giggling cast of mahouts, or elephant trainers, sat nimbly on top of the elephants throughout the feeding.

Karen tribesmen from the north of Thailand, the mahouts come from a generations-old culture and tradition of working side by side with these animals.

"Generally an elephant has one mahout throughout its whole life, and they build a very strong bond between each other," Chell said. "If, for example, the mahout doesn't wash it in the morning or doesn't feed it properly, the elephant won't work with him. It won't walk, it

final step is a playful, full-body dip in a deep, nearby pond, where the elephants have a blast while the mahouts do their best to just hang on.

A great deal more than just a pachyderm spa, Elephant Hills serves as a launching point for a wide range of visitor adventures, including guided nature hikes through the rain forest, canoeing down the nearby Sok River, a full day of swimming and sight-seeing at stunning Cheow Lan Lake or expeditions through the mangrove forests of Takuapa.

And there's always the elephant trekking, where guests crunch through the jungle on small benches harnessed snugly to an elephant's back.

"They're amazingly strong animals," Chell said of the bench's impact on the elephants. "And they're used to dragging huge trees strapped across their chest behind them, so for us to ride on top of them is kind of like they're carrying a backpack."

Guests stay in one of the camp's 30 impressively appointed and tremendously comfortable tents, featuring en suite, modern bathrooms; running hot and cold water; 24-hour electricity; and full-size, double beds. Traditional Thai meals are generally served buffet-style at the camp's soaring, open-air lodge, which houses a full bar and hosts nightly Thai cooking classes.

Four-night stays at Elephant Hills, which include all transportation, meals, activities and accommodations, are priced at \$560 for adults through October and at \$275 for kids ages 4 to 15.

Visit www.elephant-hills.com.



Accommodations at Elephant Hills feature modern bathrooms, 24-hour electricity and full-size, double beds. Meals are served at an open-air lodge, which houses a full bar.

won't want to do anything. So it's very important that they build up a strong relationship."

Once snack time is finished, guests walk with the elephants and their mahouts to a collection of hoses near large concrete pads. With a series of verbal prompts — elephants apparently can learn more than 100 commands — the mahout talks his partner into kneeling on all fours while guests soap up a coconut husk and get ready to scrub. Not unlike washing your car in the driveway, the soapy scouring is followed by a thorough rinse with the hose. The

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