



## BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

What would you rather: camp in the depths of the jungle or sip cocktails by the sea? With Khao Sok National Park less than two hours away from Khao Lak's white beaches, RACHAEL WHEELER discovered she didn't have to choose.

**A**s a Brit, a short break to me was driving for hours up the M6, arriving at a cottage that smelled like your gran and then settling down to an argument over Trivial Pursuit.

So you can see why I was overwhelmed when it came to booking my first short break from Singapore. Choosing between the dozens of options across dozens of countries seemed impossible. Torn between nature spotting in the lush tropics and lying on a stunning beach, I eventually decided it actually was impossible – so I booked both. Rainforest reserve Khao Sok National Park in southern Thailand is two hours from seaside district Khao Lak; both are two hours from Phuket Airport. It's almost like they were created for twin-centre holidays from Singapore.



Inside the jungle tent, with the sound of monkeys all around



### Stay #1: ELEPHANT HILLS

I wondered whether it would be a bit like going back in time as our driver plunged deep into the huge rainforest towards the Elephant Hills tented camp. Yet, as we pulled up the long driveway, my phone blinked into life and connected to the Wi-Fi.

Elephant Hills is a tented camp with accommodation that's nicer than my flat in London and considerably better equipped. The tailor-made tents are totally protected from jungle beasties and

beautifully crafted, with running water, electricity and a king-size bed. There are 30 of them dotted around the camp, each surrounded by a thicket of greenery and with rock formations looming overhead.

While we could have spent three days hanging out by the camp pool, listening to the indistinguishable sounds of birds and monkeys, we had a full itinerary to get stuck into. We'd opted for the Jungle Lake Safari and would be touring in a group of eight, led by our cheerful, knowledgeable guide Nong.

As the camp name suggests, all tours revolve around the Elephant Experience – a great opportunity to spend one-on-one time with Asia's biggest beasts at this quiet sanctuary. The elephants are not trained to carry tourists or perform; the experience is about becoming a *mahout* (traditional handler) for a few hours – feeding, cleaning and interacting with the herd.

The first task was to hack up enormous basketfuls of fruit and cleverly hide health supplements inside tasty treats.



We were then able to hand-feed the elephants and give them a good scratch while they prodded us with their trunks and sprayed us with cucumber slop. At least, I hope it was cucumber slop. Next up, the elephants took a cool swim in the pond, before we scrubbed them down with a hose and coconut rind. I honestly couldn't tell you who enjoyed it more, the old cow with her belly out... or the elephant.

After a big kiss (read: trunk suck to the face), we headed back to the camp in a canoe along the wide Sok River. As we wove through the eerie green cliffs, we spotted a python curled up in a tree, an eagle soaring overhead and a troop of macaque monkeys racing along the bank.

When all the groups came together for a sociable camp dinner, everyone was excitedly sharing their wild tales over a delightfully cheap glass of wine. I was seriously impressed with the all-inclusive buffet (announced each morning and evening with a low, rumbling gong), a mix of delicious options each day.

One thing that did take a bit of getting used to, mind, was the fairly regular occurrence of insects softly crash-landing on my back under the evening lanterns. As we clapped along to a dance by the local school (which Elephant Hills supports), I found myself throwing in my own moves; the moth hop, the beetle slap and the bat twist. But it's to be expected when you're surrounded by rainforest, and the enthusiastic bugs were a small price to pay.

### Stay #2: RAINFOREST CAMP

The next part of our Jungle Lake Safari was at Elephant Hills' second base, the Rainforest Camp. It's one of only a few floating tented camps in the world, in the middle of Cheow Larn Lake. We reached it via a longboat cruise around the huge dam (built in 1982), passing hundreds of beautiful limestone outcrops that rise to heights of up to 900m out of the water.

Chugging into the Rainforest Camp was nothing short of unreal; ten floating tents looked out across the vast lake, with masses of rainforest behind and the Khao Sok mountains all around. Powered by



solar and wind energy, each tent has the same luxuries as the jungle camp, plus a wooden platform over the emerald water.

In the centre bobs the charming communal area, where we wolfed down more fantastic meals and grabbed binoculars and books to swot up on the local wildlife, of which there was a lot. Soaring eagles, curious langur monkeys, colourful hornbills and splashing otters. Barely a minute would go by without hearing a gibbon call out; one vaulted through the treetops as we had breakfast.

Grabbing one of the kayaks, which are at the guests' disposal, we paddled towards the rustling trees and moored

at a nearby island. There, we spent over an hour watching a delightful troop of six gibbons swinging deftly through the upper branches, eventually clambering down to check us out. At one point, we were gazing into the eyes of a youngster ten metres away. We spent the rest of the day sunbathing and swimming around the tent, while the rest of our group headed off for a three-hour hike. With Guy in a leg brace following surgery, it was divine to have the magically tranquil camp to ourselves. I was so emotional when it came to our final morning in the rainforest, that I headed off in a kayak at 6am to enjoy one last paddle around "Gibbon Island".

**Clockwise from top:**  
The floating Rainforest Camp on Cheow Larn Lake

Inside the luxury tent at Rainforest Camp, surrounded by water

It doesn't get more relaxing than reading a book on this floating deck







**Stay #3: THE SAROJIN**

That's not to say I wasn't looking forward to the second leg of our trip - which was of the "pretending to be a celebrity on the beach" variety at boutique resort The Sarojin. As we were picked up by a private 4x4 and offered complimentary drinks, a choice of music and an iPad to play with, we knew the next three days were going to be superb.

Pulling up to the beachfront hotel was like walking into a bubble. A charming five-star bubble that I became incredibly content inside and felt no desire to pop

at the end of our stay. The plush, open lobby looks out across the intimate grounds - and that first glance across the traditional pond, cute low-rise chalets, endless greenery and lazy river had us grinning like Cheshire cats. There were personal touches all over the place, too, flowers and furnishings all coming together in some sort of chic, happy accident.

Our suite was no different: something special in every corner and a huge, beautifully designed bathroom. With The Sarojin's **pool** looking like something

out of an MTV video, we had chosen to stay in a garden residence. Fortunately, 80 percent of the other guests were honeymooners who had splashed out on pool villas, so we were often the only ones taking a dip in the main pool. The beach was also wonderfully quiet, a huge expanse of white sand stretching out towards a lush cape in the distance.

While The Sarojin does offer a number of **excursions** for romantics, adventurers or spa-lovers, we mostly sat and lapped up the fabulous scenery and glowing service. We divided our days

between snoozing in the pool cabanas and reclining by the sea, keeping an eye out for clouds to pick the perfect time for brunch.

Which brings me to my favourite thing about The Sarojin: the magnificent **all-day breakfast** with free-flow sparkling wine. As part of the package, guests can stroll along to stylish restaurant **The Edge** at any time until 6pm and order as much food as they like off the menu. During one wet afternoon, we spent hours watching a storm approach from the ocean, sipping on bubbles

and tucking into banana loaf from the on-site bakery.

We only dragged ourselves out of the resort twice, the first time for a bike ride to the nearby **Rainbow Waterfall**. Along the way, we passed dozens of tsunami escape routes; Khao Lak was one of the areas hit worst by the 2004 disaster. All that remains is a sobering memorial in the village. We visited this during our second excursion and saw an enormous police boat left untouched on the hill since the tragic day it was swept two kilometres inland.





From here, we stopped off at **Hill Tribe** restaurant, a local favourite that produces unbelievable sizzling seafood platters. Be sure to have a look at the kitchen; it's completely open and bursting with hundreds of ingredients like something from a children's book.

Our last evening at The Sarojin was unforgettable. During our stay, we'd seen handfuls of newlyweds chatting to the hotel's "imagineer", **Dawid**. His role is essentially to be a modern-day genie, granting wishes and making dreams come true, whether big or small. One husband was able to whisk his wife off to a deserted island, before surprising her with a beach barbecue. Another asked for a waiter to hide in the bushes with Champagne during a sunset stroll.

And upon hearing that my boyfriend Guy was somewhat less than romantic

(cue an indignant gasp, followed by a resigned nod when he reads this), Dawid decided to take action. We were summoned to the pool, which had been transformed into something out of a Mills and Boon novel. The water was twinkling in the glow of hundreds of white candles, and the central cabana had been draped in flowers and silk, ready for a romantic dinner. We were even entertained by a massive and angry crab that tried to puncture our private waiter with an oversized claw.

We left the next afternoon with heavy hearts, pockets rammed with banana bread and an astounding number of memories from our six-day trip. Plus, we were back in time to enjoy an evening in Singapore and ease ourselves back into reality.

**Plan your trip**

With so many flights between Singapore and Phuket each day, you can choose the time that suits you best. We nabbed a great deal in a Tiger Airways sale, but you can also try Jetstar, Bangkok Airways, SilkAir, Singapore Airlines and more.

**Where to stay**

**Elephant Hills** offers seven packages of various duration with differing activities. The three-day Jungle Lake Safari costs \$684 per adult and \$342 per child. Each package includes accommodation, all meals and every activity on the itinerary. All tours also include pick-ups and onward transfers from Phuket Airport and the surrounding area. Book soon to make the most of the family promotion – half price for kids at \$171. [elephant-hills.com](http://elephant-hills.com)

We stayed in a garden residence at **The Sarojin** for \$560 a night, which includes all-day à la carte breakfast with sparkling wine. A romantic dinner at the pool is \$60, plus your à la carte order from Ficus restaurant. [sarojin.com](http://sarojin.com)



*The hotel's private dinner experiences are a huge draw for those in search of romance*