

Travel



Late Deals

UK/IRELAND

■ **SCOTLAND:** Wilderness Scotland (01479 420 020) offers guided canoeing break departing May 20 from Fort William to Inverness to discover the new 60-mile Great Glen Canoe Trail, through Great Glen, including Loch Ness. Package at £575 includes four nights' camping accommodation, all meals, all transport from Fort William, five days' canoeing with guiding and instruction, use of canoe and camping equipment.

■ **GUERNSEY:** Fly Guernsey (0845 230 3240) offers four nights' B&B for price of three – £319 in four-star Bella Luce Hotel in St Martin, for stays until April 23, ex-Gatwick, airport parking and car hire. Other regional departures available.

■ **EDINBURGH:** Hand Picked Hotels (0845 458 0901) offers B&B with three-course dinner at Norton House Hotel and Spa from £139 per room, as part of offer at its 17 country house hotels running until May 4. Edinburgh Zoo nearby and historic city of Edinburgh just 20 minutes by car.

SHORT BREAKS

■ **BRUSSELS:** Travelzoo (020 3327 3599) offers three nights weekend B&B until July 31 at four-star Mondo Hotel Leopold in the centre of Brussels from £169 per person, saving more than £100, including return Eurostar travel. Book by April 4.

■ **MOSCOW:** Regent Holidays (0117 921 1711) offers three nights' B&B at Radisson Royal on Moskva River from £610, saving £165, for stays July 9-September 2, if booked by April 10. Package includes direct BA flights ex-Heathrow, but visas not included.

■ **ROME:** Citalia (0844 415 1956) offers three nights' B&B at three-star Augustea Hotel from £249, saving £140 per couple, including flights ex-Birmingham on June 30. Ex-Gatwick from £315.

SHORT-HAUL SUN

■ **SICILY:** Citalia (0844 415 1956) offers seven nights' B&B at charming Villa Paradiso, Taormina, with views of Mount Etna, from £695, saving up to £300 per couple, ex-Gatwick April 16 and including transfers.

■ **SORRENTO:** Citalia (0844 415 1956) offers seven nights' B&B at four-star Jaccarino Hotel from £539, with free Amalfi Coast tour, with return flights ex-Gatwick May 2, saving £260 per couple.

■ **CORFU:** Sovereign Luxury Travel (0844 415 1936) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at Marbella Beach Hotel from £579, including return flights ex-Gatwick May 2 and private transfers, saving up to £544 per couple.

■ **IBIZA:** Escapades (0844 412 5970) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at two-star Punta Arabi in Es Cana from £322, ex-Stansted May 16.

LONG-HAUL

■ **RED SEA:** Travelzoo (0800 953 9397) offers seven nights' half-board at Ritz-Carlton in Sharm el-Sheikh from £499, saving £368, with Egypt Air flights ex-Heathrow on selected departures in May and June, if booked by April 4.

■ **WESTERN AUSTRALIA:** Austravel (0800 988 4834) offers 14-night Apollo Motorhome holiday from £959, saving up to £300 per couple, including return Qantas flights ex-Heathrow to Perth on selected dates in May.

Everyday stroll for an elephant

Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take but the moments that take our breath away, says Heaven on Earth travel writer and television presenter, SARAH SIESE. Here, she relives one of her most magical travel moments yet

ONCE in a while I experience something which will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Although I'm in a job which punches above its weight when it comes to accessing out of the ordinary activities, I can count those special days on two hands: picnicking with penguins in Antarctica; diving with manta rays in the Maldives; and chanting with monks in Bhutan being among them.

On the do-before-you-die scale, I've probably hit the jackpot.

So I wasn't expecting to add to that peerless list on this trip to the Phang Nga province of Thailand.

"If you can imagine it, we can organise it," says the Sarojin Hotel's aptly named 'imagineer', David Koegelenberg before casually mentioning we can go elephant riding — bareback.

I can hardly believe my ears.

Riding skin to skin like a mahout is a world away from trekking on one of those sloping thrones you see harnessed to elephants; it provides a whole new level of intimacy.

The full span of my arms barely covers the massive prehistoric-looking skull and while her head is covered with bristly broom-length hairs, the soft pink skin behind her ears, where I'm asked to tuck my dangling legs, is as smooth as marble.

My mount slightly tightens her sensitive ears around my calves as my toes hook themselves into the



BAREBACK: Heaven on Earth travel writer and presenter Sarah Siese riding elephant Bua bareback with her 'skilful mahout'

lower groove of her speckled pink ears.

I'm told that 35-year-old Bua, meaning lotus, is a single girl yet to find her destiny.



AL FRESCO: Dining on the sandy beach at The Sarojin, Phang Nga, Thailand SARAH SIESE



HOTEL: The Sarojin Ficus Restaurant THE SAROJIN, THAILAND

Factfile

Where

■ Sarah stayed at The Sarojin Hotel (www.saroin.com) based north of Khao Lak and at the heart of an 11km-long beach.

Khao Lak is just north of Phuket in the unspoilt Phang Nga province.

What

■ Something of a sanctuary, The Sarojins 56 rooms are built in a horse-shoe design on a 10-acre plot surrounded by a perimeter of feathery casuarina trees and palms.

Its direct access to the beach is a benefit but many guests choose to relax in the oasis around the pool.

"It never feels busy, even at full occupancy, as guests choose how to spend their day from a long list of options including beach picnics under a sea almond tree just a short stroll along the beach; to sunset cruises that hug the northern coastline into picturesque mangrove collared bays," says Sarah.

Of course, they don't seem to bother her at all, that leathery pink and grey skin is as impenetrable as it feels to touch.

And so we continue — now with a sense of perilous expectation.

It takes a little while to regain some sense of internal composure and I urgently fight to recover a centre of gravity that feels seriously wobbly.

My eyes scout for anything that might resemble a forthcoming elephant temptation.

All the while, the skilful mahout (who I like to think of as my safety belt), is perched nimbly on Bua's rump calling 'hun hun' (on on), as he taps relentlessly with his tiny legs.

Mowgli and madam continue on. Bua senses the refreshing coolness

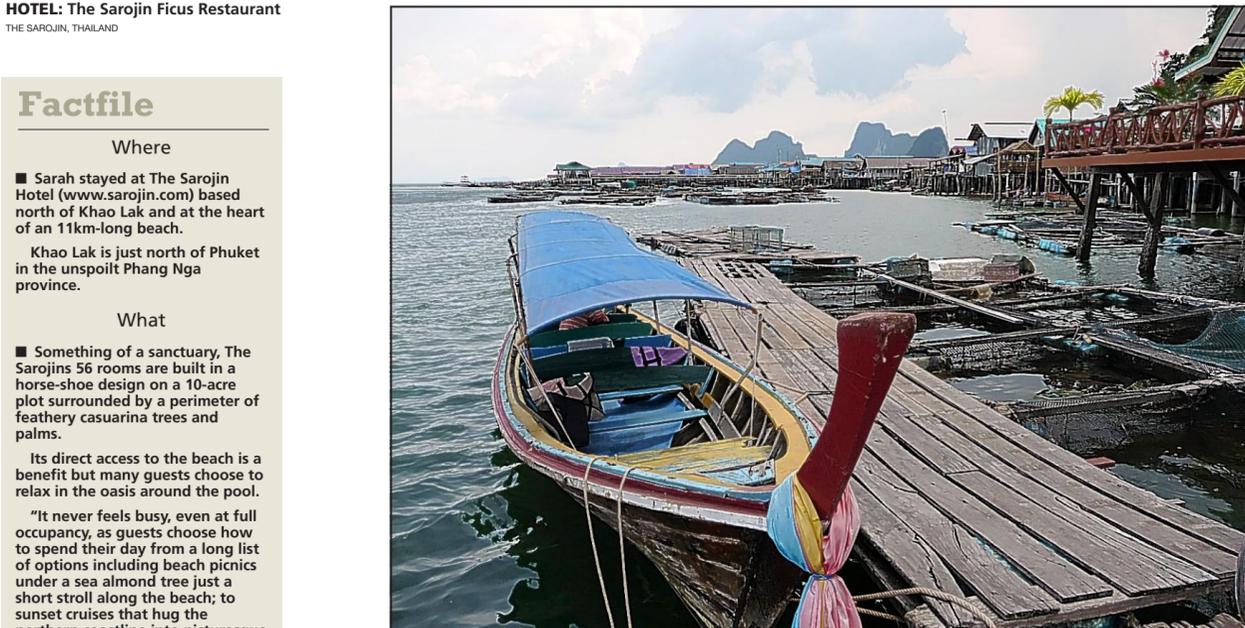
of the lake long before it comes into view and raises her trunk to rumble her internal delight of anticipation.

It feels like a Goliath cat's purr of pleasure with a confusing paradox: I feel cat-sized, perched high, and at times vulnerable, on this massive creature's neck.

Travel



but it's a complete adventure for me



BOAT: Phang Nga Bay in Thailand SARAH SIESE

I'm doing it without much thought and no training, and once in situ began the journey without even knowing if there was a handbrake available.

I realise that the immediate trust and respect we hold for these benign matriarchs and patriarchs is as

intuitive as our relationship with, say, our pet dogs.

I expected the intimacy to hold some kind of energy or vibration, such is the apparent wisdom and intelligence of pachyderms, but feel nothing but my own awe.

As each steady slip-slip of slipper-

silent foot transfers its weight forward to its destination I sway ever so slightly with the natural motion of an elephant on the move.

Then I spy the lake — a massive clearing giving way to a vast expanse of sparkling tropical waters.

It rains generously in Thailand



BAY: Phang Nga Bay, Thailand SARAH SIESE

resulting in dense swathes of rubber and palm oil forests — the number one and two earners for the region followed by tourism in third place — and the surrounding hillside is a picture of shiny greens morphing in all shades and hues.

Quite a dazzling vista but the elephant had only one thing in mind: water.

We effortlessly enter the lake and then plunge with tangible relief into its depths.

Bua's trunk fills and empties gallon upon gallon of the cool refreshing

liquid. With no fear of falling or injury, I sway this way, that way, and rocked with delight on my elephant rodeo.

She is having fun and so am I; leaning forward to stroke the bridge of her elongated trunk, then back to rub her ears and splash water across her brow.

We move in a relaxed kind of union with an equal sense of utter joy and contentment.

They say elephants never forget — neither will I.