

The Golden Hour

Friendly and welcoming, cultured and curious, Heather Ingarfield discovers that Thailand woos visitors with a smile as golden as its tropical beaches

I figured, I've read everything I need to about Thailand. I know what to expect. I'd heard the anecdotes of overpopulated hot spots and wild beach parties under the smouldering full moon, attracting party lovers from all corners of the globe. Or throngs of tourists lining the beaches, wallowing in skimpy costumes and roasting under the tropical sun. I had watched the Netflix special *Travels with My Father* and all the YouTube food tours. I'd read all about the risqué Bangla Road and its ladyboys. *The Beach* is one of my all-time favourites – and not just for the sake of a young Leo, but for the giant mountains driving out of the ocean like fictional rock fists and the impossibly perfect blue water lining the remote beaches. These tales and preconceived notions didn't disappoint. There was all of this, but to my surprise, it wasn't what I noticed the most. Or, at all.

Fresh off the plane after a 16-hour journey, we struggle to find our driver amidst a sea of cars outside Phuket's compact, efficient airport. Once we find him, we wonder why we struggled. Lowered to just kiss the tarmac, with an impressive air suspension, flashing lights and luminescent ceiling, this transfer was clearly meant for Puff Daddy. We wind our way through the bustling streets, narrowly missing scooters overloaded with anything from fresh veggies to mangled tyres. Bustling it is, but somehow not chaotic. An organised chaos. Everyone has somewhere to be, something to do. There seem to be no rules, yet no one gets in each other's way. It's a type of respect we come to learn is at the forefront of the Thai culture.

Thailand's story begins with migrants moving from southern China and forging their way into a unknown land in search of trade and labour. They settled in villages as farmers, hunters and traders and organised themselves into clusters, called *meuang*, under the rule of a lord. In the 13th century, the various regional empires started to fall away, leaving room for prosperous cities to emerge, with localised power and defence forces. So began the long history that Thailand has had with military interference. Among the different kingdoms, Ayutthaya emerged as a powerhouse, growing in strength through international trade and the deadly Portuguese-supplied weapons. But after 416 years, this was violently and finitely interrupted by the land-seeking Burmese. With Ayutthaya in ruins, the line of succession of kings was broken and chaos followed – leading to years of unrest, uncertainty, the military taking over, the birth of modern Bangkok, and a barrage of absolute monarchs.

In 2014, General Prayut Chan-o-cha and his military overthrew the government, censored most forms of media, threatened



Adored on a global scale, Thai cuisine expresses qualities of Thai culture: generosity, warmth and freshness

WHEN NIGHT FALLS

You can't talk to anyone about Thailand or Phuket without someone mentioning the 'ladyboys'. Transsexuals or transvestites are nothing new, nor limited to Thailand, but the culture of the ladyboy has evolved into a national identity. *Kathoey* (as they are known) may embody gender in ways familiar to cultures outside of Thailand, but when you stroll down Bangla Road or any road in Bangkok, you'll realise that they are vastly different, most notable in that they operate in society in such an open, sanctioned way.



to execute journalists who didn't toe the line and imprisoned anyone who was thought to be anti-King Vajiralongkorn. Then they were mysteriously voted into power in the 2019 democratic elections. Evidence of their power is everywhere, with stoic images of the king and queen – framed by oversized, ornate gold structures and surrounded by floral tributes – decorating the streets. But Thailand's brutal past is not evident in the people. In fact, it seems to have had the opposite effect.

Our driver, under the glow of his luminescent blue ceiling, turns to us and exclaims, 'You're here!' – more excited than we seem to be, although we are thrilled to have arrived at the first of our two stops in Thailand, the Best Western Premier Bangtao Beach Resort & Spa on the most popular island, Phuket.

A geographical marvel, Thailand spans across 513 120 km² of hulking, green mountains, exotic rainforests, picture-perfect beaches and river valleys. Phuket is one the southernmost islands and is a petite 48 km long and 21 km wide. It is home to the famous Patong Beach and the street known to offer you the best party of your life, Bangla Road. Off its shores lies coral reefs, and the breathtaking Similan Islands and Krabi Province, where you'll find Phi Phi Islands and Hat Maya, the location for Leo's coastal shenanigans. We are far from the madding crowd, sitting north of Patong, and feel the sense of calm as soon as we depart the friendliest taxi driver ever and head into the orange-and-green-splattered retro lobby.

With over 250 rooms, two restaurants and an itinerary that could keep you busy from sunrise to sunset, the Best Western didn't feel like a commercial resort that churns busloads of weary travellers in and out. Between checking in, reviving our airplane-slicked hair in the pool-facing deluxe suite and the spread of local food on our first night, it's already obvious that the special attention you receive here will leave everyone else feeling like hazy onlookers to your experience.

Comfortably decorated in coastal style, the suites are equipped with everything

In between prawn courses and Gin Fizz refills, the sound of an interesting 'Candle in the Wind' rendition floats through the fragrant air

you'd need on a tropical island: air-con, minibar and a spacious balcony, complete with unabated views of the sapphire ocean and lofty palm trees. You won't be spending much time in your room, though.

Over the next week, our days consisted of the same glorious routine of a cheese omelette and dragon fruit salad, then poolside for swimming and lolling and more swimming, followed by prawn pad thai at the Seaside Seafood Kitchen when the afternoon downpours washed out the loungers, and finally a casual stroll around the narrow streets lined with bright 7-Elevens and curio shops. When we weren't enjoying the live entertainment and bountiful dinner buffet at the resort, we ventured out.

With tattered flags dancing in the wind, plastic tables jammed into a tiny courtyard, and a bar basking in the fluorescent tint of the tube lights wrapped around its weathered wooden frame, Italay Bangtao Restaurant doesn't look like much. The menu promises everything, from authentic Thai cuisine to European specialities and seafood, and the happy hour specials scribbled on the chalkboard at the entrance make this an obvious choice. After decoding the picture-book-style menu, we order some tempura prawns, sweet and sour prawn, and prawn pad thai – next to pork, prawn is the cheapest, with beef or lamb being the most expensive. The food arrives quickly and searing hot, with puffs of lemongrass and chilli wafting into my nose. It is the kind of food that you are grateful to experience, but leaves you dreading the days when you will be a million miles away, craving the mysterious, spicy flavour blends that only someone with years of cooking in a kitchen in the middle of Thailand can create. Adored on a global scale, the local cuisine expresses qualities of Thai culture: generosity, warmth and freshness.

In-between prawn courses and Gin Fizz refills, the sound of an interesting 'Candle in the Wind' rendition floats through the fragrant air. On the damp street outside, a man stands patiently with a basket overflowing with plastic toys, while red horns blink on his head. If you make eye contact, he'll dig out a prized offer and demonstrate its functioning, but he doesn't talk or haggle you – like every other person we've come across in Thailand, he has this air of serenity about him. But make no mistake, they hustle hard. Shops are fashioned out of tiny crevices along the side of the road, with everything and anything on sale; jobs are created, probably unsolicited,

BEST WESTERN PREMIER BANGTAO BEACH RESORT & SPA

BANGTAO BEACH CHEUNG THALAY
THALANG DISTRICT
bangtaobeach.com

Perfectly located on the white-sand beach of Bangtao Bay, the Best Western has everything you'd need for a relaxing, fun and, of course, romantic getaway...

- The Sun Spa, sitting just a stone's throw away from the beach, has a wide range of treatments on offer, from Thai aromatherapy and oil massages, facials and body scrubs, to soothing cleanses and treatments. Afterwards, spend some quiet time wallowing in the hydro spa pool.
- They have a very handy scheduled shuttle service that goes to Patong and Phuket Town daily. Just book at reception. We used it to explore Patong and Bangla Road, and it couldn't have been easier.
- They have two restaurants – the beach restaurant is where you'll enjoy the breakfast and dinner buffets. The dinner buffets are themed (such as Italian, Thai, European and Barbecue), and come with live entertainment. The second restaurant, the Seaside Seafood Kitchen, is open for lunch or à la carte dinners – they even deliver pizza in a chic takeaway box poolside!



ELEPHANT HILLS

TAMBON KLONG SOK,
PANOM DISTRICT

elephanthills.com

One of the first of its kind, Elephant Hills is a unique, unforgettable experience in Thailand. Aside from meeting, greeting and feeding the elephants, the camp prides itself on offering a luxury tented, all-inclusive experience, so that means that once you're there, you don't need to worry about anything.

Elephant Hills offers two main tours: the rainforest nature safari and the jungle lake safari (both of which you can choose two-, three- or four-day options). The rainforest nature safari is the one we experienced, with glamping tents situated in the middle of the forest. The jungle lake safari takes you to the one-of-a-kind Rainforest Camp on Cheow Lam Lake – one of the few floating luxury tented camps.

The transfers are all arranged by Elephant Hills, and follow specific times. They'll fetch you in the morning from your previous hotel, and drop you off at your next stop after your adventure. If your next stop is the airport, try to get a late flight, as the transfers only leave the camp at 2 pm and it's a good three-hour drive to Phuket's airport.

You're in a forest, so don't take your fancy Pringle shorts and crisp-white trainers. There will be hikes, mud and insects.

with a little imagination. Everyone is doing something, and doing it cheerfully. Perhaps it's the language barrier, or maybe I just have vacation-tinted glasses on, but the Thai are such happy people.

'Yup, that's why everyone calls it "The land of smiles",' a Russian tourist had chirped to me at the egg station at breakfast one day. Proudly showing off layers of sunburn, a linen sundress bought from the sidewalk boutique and an inextinguishable smile, she too was clearly feeling the effects of the ready-to-smile, peace-loving Thai people.

And the best smile was yet to come – in our guide at the next stop, Elephant Hills.

A four-hour shuttle ride took us up north, into the impossibly green Phanom District. Outside the cluttered towns lies Thailand's rural heartland, a mix of rice paddies,

tropical forests and villages where life is built around the ticking of the agricultural clock. We drive past rugged limestone cliffs and extensive farms, and finally roll through the mottled iron gates of the park.

As Thailand's first luxury tented camp, Elephant Hills has been offering a unique, natural and ethical elephant experience for the past 10 years, attracting travellers with their two-, three- or four-day adventure tours, all of which happen under the canopy of Khao Sok National Park's tropical forest. I'd always heard about the myriad of elephant experiences offered in Thailand, but was more sceptical than curious. Animal-centric tourism turns dangerous when gimmicky offerings like elephant rides are splashed everywhere, with naive tourists handing over wads of cash for such experiences, with handlers using unscrupulous methods of ensuring the elephants listen to their every command. Like I said, sceptical.

But Elephants Hills strictly do not offer rides, and their focus is firmly on elephant welfare because, as we find out, elephant conservation and tourism is crucial for the future of Asia's largest land mammal and Thailand's national symbol.

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Elephants have an ingrained place in Thailand's culture and identity. Over the centuries, they've been used in battle to win disputes for the royal family (so much so that in 1921, King Vajiravudh ruled that all wild elephants were to be considered the property of the Thai government), drawn on to the flag several times, and worked as draught animals, pulling ploughs and hauling timber. As cities and populations expanded, ivory and trophy hunting boomed, the elephant numbers plummeted – and now, there are only around 6 000 elephants in Thailand, with 50% of those domesticated.

Those domesticated elephants faced a new problem when the government shut down all the logging mills: since they were unemployed, their owners were unemployed and unable to feed them the 250 kg of food they needed a day, and there wasn't enough habitat for them to roam freely. As mahouts (trainers) looked for new ways to earn money, many of them travelled with their elephants into the cities and gave passers-by the chance to feed them or watch them do a trick. Thankfully, in 2010, laws were stamped into place that made begging and street acts illegal – and places like Elephant Hills opened their gates to forge a new path for ethical tourism.

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Under the shadow of a mighty mountain, covered in such a dense layer of emerald trees that it leaves a green tinge on the camp, we meet Tao, an elephant-loving local and our guide. He takes us through the two-day itinerary, which includes a river paddle, elephant experience and jungle trek. But first, exploration. Ringed in by lush mountains and the flowing waters of the Sok River, the camp has 66 luxury, beautifully crafted tents, complete with white-linen beds, wooden finishes, natural stone showers and a spacious veranda, deck chairs and hammock. Through the giant mesh windows wafts the sounds

and smells of the forest, although any sound cannot hope to compete with the acoustic spectacular permeating from the cicadas' tiny insect bodies.

'They're the size of a paper clip, but can make a sound so loud, it can damage your eardrums,' Tao tells us, as he gives us a waterproof bag for our first adventure on the river. He's said, but not promised, that along with the cicada anthems, we may also hear monkeys and spot lizards, frogs, snakes and birds. We venture down to the river with our group, find our two-man kayak and set out into the tea-brown waters – Tao did promise, however, that we could sit back and relax as guides control the oars. We glide our way through the river's channels like royalty, stopping to watch an inky black snake doze on a branch. At the end of the route, we trudge up the muddy bank and into the overlander.

'Next, the elephants!' Tao announces.

We're all eager to see the elephants – like the main act of a concert that's been hiding away while you sit through seven opening acts, we hadn't clapped eyes on a real elephant yet, and weren't sure where they were. We soon figured out that they were on a separate camp, one with more space, water and elephant-sized sleeping



Elephant conservation and tourism is crucial for the future of Asia's largest land mammal and Thailand's national symbol

quarters. We roll into the viewing area, and are immediately welcomed with the sight of five elephants padding through the grass.

Smaller than their African cousins, the Asian elephant is distinct, with their petite ears, M-shaped head and mottled skin – and just like the culture of the people who protect them so fiercely now, their presence is calming and peaceful. We chop fruit and offer it on outstretched palms, giggling in amusement as their greedy trunks seek out scraps. In less than a minute, the fruit is devoured and the elephants are ushered off to a different section, where we're given coconut husks and a hosepipe and, under the watchful eye of the trainers, scrub down their tough (and surprisingly hairy) skin. Our elephant gets bored and moves on and



we watch her stroll away while Tao explains that they don't force the elephants to do anything – no tricks, riding or gimmicks. This natural, hands-off approach has put the camp on the map and won them awards, including the Tourism Authority's Green Excellence Awards for Animal Welfare and *National Geographic's* World Legacy Award for Sustainable Tourism.

It's easy to believe that the awards are coming in thick and fast, and that under their watchful eye, the elephants are flourishing. We shuffle into the viewing area and settle on the wooden benches in front of a small dam. The elephants file in slowly and plonk down, submerging most of their body under the murky water. Thunder cracks and the clouds blacken, threatening to break open any minute now. One of the elephants finds a hardened section of the bank and loudly scratches her bum against it. The others roll around and splash playfully, eventually getting distracted by the second (but not last) batch of fresh produce to emerge from the feeding area.

The sky crumbles under the pressure of the brewing downpour. We pile into the overlander and slowly drive out through the mud, watching the elephants trundle through the rain. I hadn't read about this anywhere, nor had I read about the welcoming culture.

Perhaps I wasn't well-read, but one thing was clear: If I thought I knew what to expect from Thailand, I was so terribly mistaken. ♥

THE DETAILS

DO I NEED A VISA?

Nope, just a valid passport.

AVERAGE COST OF THINGS

Thailand is punted as being an affordable destination, not only in accommodation rates, but also when it comes to food and drinks. Expect to pay around 180 THB (about R88) for a meal, and 40 THB (R16) for a bottle of the local beer, *Chang*. You can't drink the water from the tap – a big bottle of water will cost around 20 THB (R10). Taxis cost around R2 per km, and are easy to find – always ask for the meter to be switched on before you start the journey.

WHEN TO GO

There's no bad time – there's just a dry and wet season, really. High season (coolest and driest) is from November to March, while hot season is from April to June. Temperatures can be unbearable during this time. So if you plan to travel then, be prepared for soaring temperatures. The rainy season is from July to October. It's still warm and exciting though, so don't be put off by a little drizzle...

WHAT TO PACK

Well, definitely not jeans. It's unlikely you'll need anything too warm, but make sure you have a waterproof bag and rain jacket. Other than that, don't forget swimming gear, sunscreen, a universal plug adaptor, mosquito repellent and walking shoes.

WHEN I SWIPE MY CARD, DO I PAY IN RANDS OR BAHT?

Paying in your home currency will result in a roughly 3% conversion fee. If you have a card that charges international fees, that could be on top of the conversion fee, or instead of it. However, if your card doesn't charge international transaction fees, always pay in the local currency.