



IF YOU GO
 ■ Siam Safari : www.siamsafari.com.
 ■ We stayed at the Le Meridien Khao Lak Beach & Spa Resort about an hour-and-a-half from the elephant camp. www.lemeridien.com/kaolak.



Mahouts give tourists a taste of Thailand as they take them aboard elephants.



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Graceful guide on jungle trek

Swaying through untamed jungle on top of 4000 kilos of elephant takes a little nerve.

But the elephant is a surprisingly graceful and gentle creature and, besides, I had a travelling companion next to me.

Her lack of fear was infectious and our mahout (elephant driver and guide) was perched tightly on top of the elephant's head, guiding her with his knees and a rather fearsome stick.

We were in Khao Sok, part of the largest area of rainforest in southern Thailand, trekking through spectacular pristine jungle on top of an elephant that might have been graceful but also had a determined mind for a feast followed by a feel-up of the elephant in front of her.

She kept veering off into the thick jungle to snatch up enormous trunkfuls of growth and, in between chewing, with her long, lithe trunk conducted investigations of the undercarriage of the elephant leading the way.

Elephants eat between 200-300kg of foliage and drink 150 litres of water each day. No wonder she kept veering off to munch.

Elephants are an important part of Thai culture and this particular herd at the Khao Sok elephant camp were once worked for logging (now banned) and are used now to give us tourists a true jungle trekking experience.

With an agility not normally associated with such a large mass, our elephant picked her way up and down steep embankments while we held on as though our lives depended up on it. Perhaps they did.

When our mahout supplely slid down the elephant to take our photo from the ground, the thought of this giant elephant, gentle though she may be, suddenly taking off randomly



TRAVEL

Ann Rickard climbs on board an elephant for a unique experience in Thailand.

into the jungle with no driver had us shrieking for our mahout to forget the photo and climb back on board.

All around us the jungle-covered mountains and vast peaks of the cliff faces gave a feeling of being in a lost, prehistoric time. It was more than wonderful.

At the end of the unforgettable trek we rewarded our sturdy carrier with baskets of fruit – mangoes, bananas and bamboo – favourite elephant food.

Being lightly sprayed with slimy elephant fluids each time her boneless trunk snaked towards us to gently grasp yet another banana, was all part of the experience.

Clothes and faces could be wiped down later, but never the memory of having a huge elephant eat gently from your hand.

After a generous Thai lunch at the nearby Elephant Hills luxury jungle camp, we took a canoe trip down the Sok River, our

guide paddling us as gently and quietly as the elephant had carried us.

With Superman-style eyesight, he spotted little reptiles and creatures that we would have otherwise missed on the river banks and in the trees.

"Look up," he said, pointing his paddle up to a large mass of trees.

It took many minutes for us to find the snake he was pointing to, curled in a ball on a branch, looking more like a sleeping owl than a snake.

But we didn't hover beneath it too long in case it woke and dropped off its perch. Lizards and frogs – camouflaged and undetectable to us – were all spotted by our guide, who paddled over to stop and point out the wildlife.

This area of Thailand is not so well known as the favourite tourist locations but it offers an understanding of another side of Thailand that will always be remembered.

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