

Elephant and mountain adventure in Thailand

Project Overview

What does an elephant eat for breakfast?

You'll find out when you spend 2 weeks working side by side elephant keepers in Surin province, Thailand. Feeding elephants a hearty breakfast full of leaves and branches will be just one of your daily tasks. Then you are off on an action-packed adventure through northern Thailand. You will trek through the breathtaking mountains of Chiang Mai, board a bamboo raft for some awesome wildlife viewing, ride an elephant through the jungle and then even spend the night in a remote hill tribe village where you will have a chance to really bond with the local community and experience their uniquely peaceful way of life.



Trip Highlights:

- Feeding elephants their breakfast!
- Floating down the river on your bamboo raft
- Trekking to a hill tribe village hidden deep in the mountains of Chiang Mai
- Greeting the tree branches at eye level from the top of an elephant
- Touring the bustling capital city of Bangkok

Day 1: Arrival

Welcome to Bangkok. Today you will be met at the airport and taken to a friendly guesthouse. Dinner is included.

Day 2: Orientation

Meet the i-to-i team in Thailand and learn about this amazing country from those who know. Then you will travel overnight to Surin where the elephants will be patiently waiting! Breakfast, lunch and dinner are included.

Day 3: Surin

Today you will meet the elephants and then spend the day settling in. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are included.

Day 4 to 8: Work at the elephant village

Over the next few days you will have an opportunity to really live the life of an elephant keeper. You will spend your days feeding and watching over the elephants. You may want to get involved with teaching the keepers some English or helping to promote the area as a tourist destination. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are included.

Day 9 to 10: Surin and beyond

You have the weekend free to explore the area or just relax. Go for a hike, take an elephant for a walk or just enjoy being in this beautiful area. Why not go to Surin and visit Buddhist temples, the local museum or one of the many Khmer ruins around the city? Breakfast, lunch and dinner are included.

Day 11 to 13: Work at the elephant village

Continue on with your daily routine of caring for the elephants. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are included.

Day 14: Bangkok

Wave goodbye to your long nosed friends and travel to Bangkok. Tonight you can enjoy the world famous nightlife or relax in one of the many trendy restaurants or cafes.

Day 15: Travel to Chiang Mai

Now it's time to head off into the mountains for a week of hard earned fun! You will take a comfy overnight train from Bangkok to Chiang Mai. Enjoy the incredible views as the development surrounding Bangkok fades away into mellow villages and lush vegetation. (Please note that the train journey is unaccompanied but you will be met at the destination station.)

Day 16: Chiang Mai walking tour

Chiang Mai is a lively city full of charming temples and plenty of sites worth visiting. In the late afternoon you will have a short overview of your trek so you know what to bring and can start mentally preparing for the challenges ahead.

Day 17: Trekking and hill tribe village

In the morning you will travel by pick-up truck to Huay Nam Dang National Park, known for its breathtaking mountains and colorful flora and fauna. In the afternoon the real fun begins as you trek 5 to 6 km through forested, hilly terrain. Once you reach your destination, a Karen hill-tribe village, you will enjoy a traditional dinner and experience life as a local. You will even spend the night resting your weary limbs in a small bamboo hut in the Karen village. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are included.

Day 18: Trekking and elephant riding

Wake up in the comfort of your bamboo hut and greet the day. Enjoy a deliciously simple breakfast before setting off on a 7 to 8km trek through the forested mountains. You will arrive at an elephant camp around lunch time. Give your legs a rest and let the elephant do the walking as you ride 3 to 4km to a rafting camp near a Karen village. Cool down with a luxurious swim in the river and lay in the bright afternoon sun to dry. You will spend another night snuggled in your bamboo hut, letting the sound of the river lull you to sleep. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are included.

Day 19: Bamboo rafting

Fill up on a tasty breakfast and then board your bamboo raft for a 20 to 25km jaunt down river. You will stop at several villages along the way for some rest and stretch time. The rafting can take between 3 to 4 hours with fast rapids in the rainy season and up to 6 hours in the dry season when the water level is shallow and the current is slow. After lunch you will set off to Chiang Mai by pick-up truck. Breakfast and lunch are included.

Day 20: Chiang Mai to Bangkok

Today is reserved for exploring Chiang Mai. Why not take a Thai cooking class, visit the Doi Suthep or spoil yourself with a relaxing Thai massage? Optional activities are not included in the tour price. In the evening board the overnight train to Bangkok where you will catch some rest in comfortable, air-conditioned sleeping berths. Breakfast is included.

Day 21: Bangkok

Can you believe you are almost done? Today is your last day to explore this incredible country at your own pace. Do some last minute shopping, visit one final temple and have a final Thai meal.

Day 22: Departure

Today you will be taken to the airport in time to catch your flight home or onto your next adventure.

What the project does and why it needs you!

This well-respected elephant foundation is in the Tha Toom district of Surin (around 60km north of Surin). The village was established in 2006, under the supervision of the provincial government in order to put into practice the philosophy of "bringing the local elephants home for the development of their hometown". The aim of the foundation is to encourage mahouts (elephant carers) from various parts of Thailand to return to their home town with their elephants. Currently, the foundation houses over 80 elephants. It is believed that around 1300 elephants have left Surin province due to lack of traditional work as a result of the extensive de-forestation in the region. Some of these elephants are now working and living in the busy streets of Bangkok - used as a tool for 'begging'. In Surin, the provincial administrative organization has opened the Elephant Village in the village to encourage mahouts bring these elephants back to their home province. The elephants and mahouts are re-trained to demonstrate various techniques to show to visitors and also for the Surin Elephant festival, the biggest elephant festival in Thailand. International visitors are needed to raise the profile of the village and volunteers are required to help reach the village's goal to be the biggest 'elephant village' in the world and to provide a sustainable place for humans and their elephants to live alongside each other. Volunteers will be working with the elephants and also teaching English language to the mahouts.

Who is it for?

Anyone with a love of wildlife and yearning to see one of Asia's most beautiful destinations. Conservation volunteers need to be hands-on people who love the outdoors. You must be prepared for some relatively hard physical work, and you must be flexible and pro-active, as this project involves a variety of activities. English teaching skills may also be utilised during your conservation placement. This placement would suit someone with bags of initiative who is prepared to work hard both individually and in a team.

What you'll be doing

As a volunteer you may assist with daily activities such as feeding, cleaning and caring for the elephants. You could, and probably will, also be asked to teach conversational English to the mahouts which can be invaluable in their interaction with tourists.

Where you'll be staying

Bangkok: shared room in guest house or hostel

Surin elephant camp: shared room in home stay

Trekking: shared basic bamboo huts, you will sleep on a floor mat with a sheet

Hill tribe community: shared room in basic home stays or at the school

Advice and what to bring

The project is based outside Surin, capital of Surin Province situated approximately 450km North East of Bangkok. Surin is famous for being home to the annual elephant roundup, normally held in November, a huge celebration of these majestic creatures. Please be aware though that due to the sheer size of the animals they can be dangerous and it is not uncommon to see the elephants chained to ensure safety.

When you arrive

Please book your flight to arrive into Bangkok (airport code BKK) on the advertised arrival date to ensure your airport pickup.

Fast Facts

Project Information

- Project Duration: Min 3 weeks
- Project Costs: £1099.00 for 3 weeks
- Location of project: *Surin, Thailand*
- Arrival Airport: *Bangkok (airport code BKK)*
- Activities: *Trekking, rafting, elephant ride, working with elephants and their keepers and touring Bangkok*

- Working Hours:*Flexible; usually Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm at the project and full days on the tour*
- Getting to the project:*on site*
- Requirements:*Minimum age 18*

What's Included

- Accommodation:*Shared room in guesthouse, bamboo huts, basic home stay*
- Food: *Meals included as per itinerary*
- Airport Pickup:*Included on arrival date. Ask us for details if you're arriving early!*
- Training:*In-country orientation*
- Support:*Pre-departure helpdesk, Local in-country team and 24hr emergency support*

What's not included

- *Flights, Insurance, Visas*
- *Meals not mentioned on itinerary (budget approx. \$5 USD per meal)*

Country Guide - Thailand

A little bit of history...

Today's Thailand, formerly called Siam, is the product of a plethora of peoples, cultures and kingdoms, culminating in a 10,000 year history of human triumphs and tribulations. Long before the Thais established the kingdom of Thailand in the 13th century, bronze and iron Age civilisations existed and the following centuries saw the Mon, Malay and Khmer kingdoms stamp their presence on the land. The founding of the modern Thai nation, however, is marked by Thai chieftans overthrowing the Khmers in 1238 to establish the city of Sukhothai as the first Thai Kingdom. During this period other Thai kingdoms were established and alliances were made that enabled Sukhothai to expand and prosper. From 1350, Ayutthaya grew to become the dominant kingdom, and most powerful force in Southeast Asia, as its borders grew to represent the Thailand of today. By the 16th century, Burma's invasion ended Ayutthaya's reign and it was eventually destroyed after the Burmese attacked again in 1767.



Today, the country is ruled by the Chakri Dynasty, which have been in power since 1782 and is the only Southeast Asian country to have avoided colonisation. The Chakri achieved economic and social progress, increased foreign trade and consolidated its territorial boundaries. The monarchy's stable position was uprooted when in 1932 a bloodless coup rid the monarchy of its absolute powers and it was converted into a constitutional monarchy and a mixed military and civilian government gained power. For most of the 20th century the country was under military rule who gained the upper hand over brief periods of civilian rule, sometimes via coups and counter coups. In the 1980s the country enjoyed economic growth and employed democratic civilian rule. In 1997, Thailand adopted a new Constitution set out to enforce ethical electoral procedures, strengthen the political party system and promote human rights. Its political stability, however, remains to be seen following the bloodless military coup in September 2006.

Thailand's economy has also been tested to the limit, it hit a low point in 1997 as economic crisis hit Southeast Asia and the Thai currency lost mightily against the US dollar. In recent years, it has achieved economic growth. The Asian Tsunami of December 2005, however, hit the country hard in many ways, but it has bounced back and is on the road to recovery.

Sights and Sounds...

The delights of Thailand are as diverse as they are abundant. From relaxing with total abandonment on its fine beaches to exploring its temples and beyond, it caters for city dwellers, culture vultures and beach bathers.

In the North:

Northern Thailand is an historical and cultural mecca and is home to the nation's first capital Sukhothai. On the 'to do' list of many, a visitor must take a trek through the northern hills to explore the region's tribal groups. This popular pursuit offers a unique insight into the distinctive dress, language and customs of various tribes and the treks can last anything from a few days to a couple of weeks on an organised tour. The tours have gone upscale in recent years with elephant rides and plush accommodation thrown into the equation by some tour operators. While Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai are popular starting points, treks in the Mae Hong Sorn and Tak provinces are relatively uncharted territory, though growing in popularity, and are worth exploring.

Sukhothai offers a look back at the past and features a host of ruins and temples. Be sure to go to Old Sukhothai not New Sukhothai which has few, if any, authentic features. In the old city, you'll find plenty of wats (Buddhist temples). Rakhamaeng National Museum offers an insight into the city's ancient cultures with an array of ancient finds, while Wat Mahathat is the largest in the city and includes original Buddha images offset by a large ornamented pond. For a slightly less touristy experience, the old city of Si Satchanalai has well preserved ruins such as Wat Chang Lom which features Buddha and elephant imagery.

Bordering with Laos and Cambodia, the north eastern region (known as Isan) isn't as tourist heavy as other parts of the country but nonetheless it has historic sights together with a mix of Lao and Khmer cultural influences. One of the area's highlights is Prasat Hin Khao Phanom Rung Historical Park which sits on the rim of a volcano and is known for its range of Khmer ruins; the restored temple dates from between the 10th and 13th centuries.

In the South:

With beaches and tropical islands galore, the south of the country harbours a series of extremes from party atmospheres to chill out zones, tourist traps to secluded gems. Phuket and Ko Samui have long been two of the main hotspots in the south. Thailand's largest and most developed island, Phuket, is a top travel destination for its beaches, nightlife and general easy going, friendly attitude. Ao Patong is the island's liveliest beach and also the most developed, though there are some secluded beauty spots to be had on the island. Although relatively close to the airport, Nai Thon beach is one of the few undeveloped beaches remaining on the island and is ideal for a stress-free sunbathing session. Ultimately, the south's best kept secluded secrets can be discovered by venturing out to the many islands that are easily accessible on ferries and long boats that leave from the main islands like Phi Phi Island and Phuket.

Thailand is also a divers' paradise with the marine national park of Koh Similan renowned as a world class diving site. It comprises nine islands with lush forests, picturesque sandy beaches and a mix of marine life including Manta Rays. There are no regular boat services to the islands but it's possible to get a day trip boat from Phuket or Khao Lak that can take anything between 45 minutes and 3 hours depending on the type of boat. Also, trips to the island can be restricted and sometimes cease altogether from May to October due to weather conditions. Ko Tao is also a popular divers' haunt and can be reached by boat from Ko Pha-Ngan and takes around 3 hours.

A complete change of scenery can be found at Khao Sok National Park, located in the province of Surat Thani, which boasts the largest area of virgin forest in Southern Thailand. Its huge limestone cliffs, lush jungle and flowing rivers are home to a range of species including gibbons and barking deer. A good way to enjoy it in all its glory, including the noise of the rattling jungle, is by staying in a tree house.

One of the country's biggest and most loved parties is the Full Moon Party at Haad Rin on the island of Koh Pha Ngan. Enjoyed by over 10,000 people every month, this all night beach party has Djs spinning a mix from techno to reggae, while fire-eaters and fireworks add to the hedonistic atmosphere.

Best time to go...

Generally, Thailand's seasons can be categorised as hot (March to May), rainy (June to October) and cool (November to February), though the best time to go can depend on the area of the country you plan to visit. The north of the country is at its most glorious during the cool season when the scenery is accentuated with flowers in bloom and the climate is cool and dry; mountainous regions, however, can see temperatures dip to as low as freezing.

The centre and east of the country, including Bangkok, are witness to hot temperatures year round and can reach over 40 degrees during the hot season; April tends to be the hottest month. Although the south doesn't have a cool season as such, it makes up for it by having the most rainfall in the country during the rainy season. Areas lying close to the Thai Peninsula, such as Phuket and Koh Samui, are best visited March and April to avoid the monsoon season. However, there are differentiations between east and west of the peninsular outside of these months; the west (Phuket) is best November to April to avoid the monsoons, while May to October is better for the east side (Koh Samui).

The peak seasons are July and August, November and December, and January to March, during which the most tourist driven areas like Bangkok, Phuket and Chiang Mai, experience high visitor numbers, though it's still possible to find less crowds in off the beaten track areas. April to June and September to October are the best times for solitude seekers.

Currency and living costs...

Thai currency is the Baht; 1B makes up 100 Satang. The current exchange rate is \$1 to 37.2469 THB. Check www.xe.com or equivalent for the most up to date exchange rate.

The average costs of life's little essentials are as follows:

- **Meals** – Street food is the cheapest with satay at around 10B; a main meal and a soft drink at a small restaurant is around 40B to 70B, a tourist orientated restaurant charges around 150B – 300B, while 300B to 500B is the price range for high quality Thai restaurants.
- **Beer** – Depending on the brand, a small bottle of beer ranges from 50B to 90B.
- **Water** – A litre bottle is typically priced 7B to 12B
- **Taxi ride** – The average fare across central Bangkok is 70B.
- **Accommodation** – Budget accommodation such as guesthouses on Khao San Road start from 150B for a room with a shared bathroom; 3* hotels range from 800B to 1200B
- **Internet café** – An hour surfing the web can cost anything between 30B to 180B

Highlight: Chiang Mai

Chiang Mai is the capital of the north, a major visitor hotspot and home to over 300 temples. From gold plated shrines to stone carvings, there's a lot to see in the city's temples with some dating back to the 13th century; highlights include a 500 year old bronze Buddha at Wat Suan Dawk, while Buddha Sila and the Crystal Buddha are housed at Wat Chiang Man, the oldest wat in the city's walls. One of the most visited temples is the hill-top Wat Phra That at Doi Suthep, which takes in some of the best views of the city.

Retail therapy is one of the country's biggest draws and Chiang Mai's Night Bazaar is happy to satisfy the urge to spend. It runs from around 7pm to midnight at Chang Klan road between Tapee and Loh Kroh roads and has stalls selling everything but the kitchen sink, from tourist trinkets to clothes you might actually want to wear.

One of the liveliest times to visit Chiang Mai is during Songkran (Thai New Year) which takes place in April over several days. Processions line the streets with Buddha statues from each wat on parade and it's seen as a time of cleaning and renewal which has traditionally been symbolised with the sprinkling of water. In Chiang Mai, water is thrown left, right and centre in a celebratory fashion and if anything, gives you sense of the community spirit.

Highlight: Bangkok

Bangkok (known in Thai as Krung Thep) is a full on experience. On the surface it can seem like a diluted westernised Asian metropolis with never-ending traffic jams, pollution and bright lights. But beneath its tourist heavy veneer, the city and its surroundings have managed to hold onto their cultural allure. With over 400 temples, it's possible to find calm in the sometimes intrusive urban sprawl. The city's oldest and largest wat is Wat Pho which is renowned for its huge reclining Buddha. The one-time royal residence, the Grand Palace, is a major visitor spot, and deservedly so. Dating from the 18th century, the palace complex offers a step back in time and also includes Wat Phra Kaew which contains the sacred Emerald Buddha. It's best to visit later in the day to avoid the crowds and the queues.

Bangkok also promotes the temptation to delve into the purse strings. Chatuchak Market is the largest market in the country, if not the world, with over 15,000 stalls selling everything you could possibly need or want, at low prices with bargaining banter thrown in. There's almost everything on sale from food and clothing to pedigree pooches and plants; Saturday and Sunday are the main market days and over 200,000 shoppers arrive daily. While the busy crowds and heat are not for the faint hearted, it offers a genuine insight into Bangkok life.

For an alternative shopping experience, floating markets may do the trick. Although once a traditional way of life, these canal and river based markets are now mostly billed as a tourist experience but it does serve as a reminder of how the Thais bought their wares before the supermarket giants took over the city. One of the most popular floating markets is Damnoen Saduak, around 2 hours driving time from Bangkok, which is serviced by regular buses. There are less populated floating markets in Ratchaburi, which is under 2 hours away from Bangkok by train, and the markets can be reached by hiring a long-tailed boat for a few hundred baht depending on your bargaining skills.

Cruising down the city's waterways is also one of the best ways of experiencing Bangkok. A good route is to take an express riverboat from the Wat Ratchasingkhon pier to Nonthaburi which takes in life along the Chao Phraya River. A river bus from Bangkok to Bang Yai also provides a look at how Bangkok used to be when canals were the mainstay of the city.

As the country's transport hub, Bangkok is the best place to explore from; it has a host of gems within an easy day's reach. Highlights include one-time capital Ayutthaya which is entrenched in history with an array of ruins and old temples. Close to the Burmese border, Sangkhlaburi offers a real taste of Thai country life. The town lies on the scenic Vajiralongkorn Lake and is a popular weekend retreat amongst Bangkok based Thais. The laidback lifestyle of the town also takes in trekking, rafting and elephant riding.

Getting Around...

A host of domestic airlines serving the country's main cities and resorts makes flying a popular and attractive option. Some of the most popular routes from Bangkok are to Chiang Mai, Phuket and Ko Samui. The country's main carriers, Thai Airways International and Bangkok Airways, serve major routes, while other smaller carriers serve specific areas such as Air Andaman which flies to southern cities only. When budgeting for flights, it's also worth noting that Thailand charges a departure tax for international flights, currently 500 Baht, which is not included in the ticket price and is charged upon departure.

Buses also provide a convenient long-distance mode of travel. The major routes are served by private, air conditioned buses. As well as running throughout the day, long haul journey's also run through the night, such as the 13 hour journey from Bangkok to Phuket. Although not as extensive as its bus system, Thailand has comprehensive rail links. Prices vary according to which class you choose. Second class is more than adequate but if open plan berths are a turn off, first class has berths in compartments for two people only. Third class doesn't have the luxury of air conditioning, just the fresh air of an open window, but it is suitable for short distances of a couple of hours of less.

Local transport is readily available throughout Thailand, from bicycles in rural areas to water taxis on the Chao Phraya river in Bangkok. Tuk-tuks, motorised pedal rickshaws, are noisy little run-a-rounds that feature in large towns and cities like Bangkok. As is applicable for taxis and other unmetered forms of transport, it's best to negotiate a price before you set off. Samlor's are the non motorised version, while songthaew work on the same principle as tuk-tuks but have a row of seats down each side. In larger cities, these forms of transport tend to be used by tourists rather than locals as they're not always the quickest or cheapest way to get to where you want to go. Aside from its boats and river taxis, one of the best ways to avoid the traffic in Bangkok is to take the SkyTrain. It's an elevated metro system covering over 23km with 23 stations.