

DISCOVER THE REAL CHIANG MAI

BY: JOANNE CHRISTIE

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Some things look much easier than they actually turn out to be. In Chiang Mai I discovered riding an elephant is one of those things. I’d signed up for a day trip involving an elephant trek followed by bamboo rafting down the Mae Taeng river, just under two hours from Chiang Mai. While both the elephant assigned to my husband and I and his ‘mahout’ – or elephant keeper - were incredibly amiable, it proved very difficult to position myself so I didn’t constantly feel I was about to fall off.

Once I got reasonably settled, it was actually a rather majestic way of exploring the lush green countryside, although strangely, I found it easier to get my balance on the narrow bamboo raft we were given to travel down the river. These look a little flimsy, but the strips of thick bamboo secured together with ropes are surprising sturdy and made for a rather rustic river journey.

The country is often referred to as the land of smiles and it’s an apt description, nowhere more so than Chiang Mai, as the Thai people always have a smile on their face. The city is Thailand’s second-largest, which is somewhat misleading as it’s tiny compared with Bangkok and feels more like a small town with its friendly locals and thriving cultural scene.

Because of its size and the fact most of its attractions are located within the two kilometre square bordered by its moat, it’s a very manageable city to explore. It’s also a very easy city to get out of if you’re looking to get up close and personal with nature. One of the big draws for visitors is the opportunity to visit the many hill tribes in the vicinity.

These include the Padaung subset of the Karen tribe, famous for their neck ring-wearing women, and the Hmong, distinguishable by their embroidered outfits and ornate silver jewellery. To really see how these mountain communities live and visit a reasonable number of them, a multi-day trek is the best option.

There are other villages, albeit more touristy ones, you can visit on daytrips and trips to Hmong villages are often combined with tours of the temple at Doi Suthep, a mountain about 15 kilometres north-west of the city. According to our guide, a white elephant was given an important Buddha relic to carry in the hopes it would find its rightful new home. Legend has it the chosen elephant climbed the mountain, trumpeted three times then died, which was taken as a sign the relic belonged in that spot, thus the temple was built around it.

On a clear day, the views from the terrace are unbeatable, but you might want to think carefully about your answer when your guide asks if you want to take the cable car or the steps. There are more than 300 of them, which can be hard going when it's almost 30 degrees. On the flipside, a dip in your hotel's swimming pool afterwards feels much more refreshing when it's almost 30 degrees.

Joanne Christie booked her expeditions via a travel agency or her hotel, when she was there. If you book through the latter, the operators usually collect you and take you back to your hotel.

For further information go to:
www.tourismthailand.org/Where-to-Go/Chiang-Mai/Tourist-Info-Centres



ELEPHANT TOURISM

Riding or trekking on an elephant has long been a part of the Thai holiday experience, but the activity has come under fire of late for contributing to the mistreatment of animals. If you're planning on interacting with elephants, make sure you use a reputable tour company and if you feel uncomfortable about any aspect of the elephants' care, do walk away.

There are two elephant refuges within reach of Chiang Mai which look after previously abused or abandoned elephants and a visit is a good way of contributing to efforts to improve the plight of Asian elephants. The Thai Elephant Conservation Centre offers day tours with elephant shows, along with mahout training courses that run from one to 30 days. It's a bit tricky to get to due to its location on the road to Lampang. Closer to town is the Elephant Nature Park, which offers overnight and weekly volunteering opportunities as well as day tours.

www.thailandelevator.org/en

www.elephantnaturepark.org