



THE UNUSUAL & EDUCATIONAL IN THAILAND

Three headed, one tusked and orphaned elephants along with some unusual city sights ensure **Mike Smith** will never forget his educational and recreational trip to Nakhon Nayok and Bangkok.

Amazing Thailand has something for everyone with its fabulous beaches, remote hill tribes, ancient temples, spicy food and vibrant nightlife. It is now expanding its appeal to the school travel industry by combining a few of days of adventure and getting back to nature in Nakhon Nayok with a night or two in Bangkok.

Nakhon Nayok is a small, laid back province 100k east of Bangkok which is popular with Thais because of its national parks, mountains and opportunities to participate in adventure sports at bargain prices. It is rarely visited by foreigners, but has good potential as I found out when visiting the area with a group of travel agents evaluating potential educational trips on a tour hosted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

Wild Elephants & Hornbills

The Khao Yai National Park was our first port of call. Leaving our bus we piled into a Songthaew – the truck with two bench seats on each side – and headed into the reserve. We soon discovered that the Heo Nayok Waterfall is not worth a visit in the dry season – it doesn't even drip! However, our disappointment quickly turned to glee as a large, one tusked, wild elephant strolled down the main road, paused for photos and continued on its way.

More surprises awaited us at the view point; firstly a group of pigtailed macaque monkeys, including some very young babies, were foraging for food, but even more excitingly a large flock of hornbills could be seen flapping around in a distant tree.



Bang Bang

I wanted to spend more time there and will definitely make another visit as there are gibbons to be seen in the mornings, thousands of bats at dusk and wild elephant herds at salt licks. Accommodation is available at campsites and hotels making this a great location for a school trip, or someone wanting to get close to nature.

Boot Camp with a Bang!

The Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy not only produces commissioned officers for the army, but lets the public to experience what life in the military is like including a two day "Boot Camp Programme". Our group blasted away on the firing range, did the tower jump and watched a game of paint ball.

Rafting, kayaking and abseiling are all available nearby at the Khun Dan Prakarn Chon Dam. It is an attraction in its own right and the largest roller compacted concrete dam in Thailand. The All Terrain Vehicles at the adventure play ground were great fun. Even I got used to riding one after a few minutes and loved the challenge of climbing the dusty, steep slopes and splashing through the river.

Message in a Bottle

There are a number of interesting learning centres in the area with emphasis on agriculture and living in harmony with nature, as we found out on day two

I personally couldn't work out whether Uncle Sawai of Uncle Sawai Garden was a genius, an entrepreneur or just having fun. Probably all three! A half hour visit to his garden was both illuminating and amusing. I'm used to seeing "paper bag trees" where the fruit is protected from insects by covering them with bags, but Uncle Sawai goes a step further and uses glass bottles. They keep the fruit insect free, add mystery as the fruit grow larger than the bottle neck, and the novelty factor gets him a higher price!

The gourds are stretched by hanging weights to them as they grow hanging on frames. Yes, thinner and longer gourds sell for a premium! He also has a great orchard of fruit trees including massive jackfruit and the delicious egg sized maprangs, which taste like mangoes.

Agricultural Way of Life

The Nakhon Nayok people preserve their agricultural lifestyle and encourage others to do so. The Bhumirak



Bhumirak Thammachart Learning Centre

Thammachart Learning Centre offers short retreats for school parties to learn about the economic sufficiency theory and environmental management. The centre showcases fruit trees, trees for charcoal and trees for everyday use in addition to plants useful in medication. There are also traditional houses, livestock and brick making, but in my opinion is only worth a visit if on a study trip. I haven't yet found a good use for learning how to make bricks.

Elephant Camp

I love elephants and the visit to the Thai Elephant Research and Conservation Fund Camp was enjoyable, educational and inspirational. Our trip coincided with a school visit and to see the pleasure on the children's faces as they rode, fed and admired the elephants was fantastic.

The director of the camp gave a very interesting presentation on elephants which are held in awe by Thais for both their bravery in historic battles and their hard work in the timber industry. Unfortunately, many have had a tough life with mistreatment, being orphaned or mutilated by ivory hunters and only the lucky few, including the 11 living here with their mahouts, end up in elephant camps.

The camp is spreading the conservation message at local schools and encourages both half day visits and overnight stays.

Pull the Udder One!

It was time to leave Nakhon Nayok and make for the city. On the way to Bangkok we stopped at Farm Chokchai, a dairy farm set in a hundred acres of forest, promising boutique, luxury camping to school groups and families. You can see hundreds of cows, perhaps even milk one, enjoy the mini zoo and ice cream making before retiring to your air conditioned tent with a proper bed – Not like in my youth!

One Night in Bangkok

Our organized tour in Bangkok included a visit to Madame Toussauds and the obligatory shopping mall, but I was determined to find some new places. Turning to the Internet I Googled for the 10 most unusual attractions and managed to comfortably visit four of them the next day.

King of the Swingers

After a brief photo shoot at the Grand Palace, which never fails to impress me, I ventured out alone and took a short tuk tuk ride to Wat

Suthat, which is one of the largest and oldest temples in central Bangkok. It is beautiful, peaceful and off the tourist beat. In the street opposite was my first objective; a giant red swing standing 21.5m tall made from teak. It must have been a thrilling, but dangerous ride when youngsters rode it as they tried to grab bags of money. Not surprisingly the practice was stopped 80 years ago.

A Farewell to Alms

Walking a few hundred metres from Wat Suthat I knew I was near my second target on hearing a regular pounding noise. The craftsmen of Ban Bat! A few skilled artisans still hammer out steel alms bowls by hand. Alms bowls are used by Bangkok's many monks to collect their food and money from generous supporters. As most young monks have turned to cheaper manufactured products the craftsmen have gained new customers including me!

Tourists buy a significant number of the smaller, decorative alms bowls which make lovely souvenirs. The narrow alleyway was a hive of activity with workers cutting and moulding steel sheets before welding, shaping and firing the bowls, surrounded by playing children, babies in cradles and the



Clockwise from top: **Lady Gaga Madame Toussauds; Elephant friends; Rafting; Nai Lert Shrine**



ubiquitous stray dogs sniffing at everything and everyone.

Three-Headed Elephant.

The Erawan Museum is best got to by going to Bearing the last stop on the BTS sky train Sukhumvit Line and then taking a short cab ride. The highlight of my third unusual sight was the huge 29m tall three-headed elephant statue made of copper and weighing 250mts. The museum showcases a collection of antiques amid a dreamlike setting in which the eccentric founder, Lek Viriyaphants, stated, “The essence of arts and four major religions have been preserved.”

The museum is set amid pleasant, quiet grounds, but it’s the elephant I won’t forget.

Sex in the City

Back on the train I headed to Ploenchit BTS skytrain station searching for something completely different. It was time to see the wackiest shrine in Bangkok. Located off the car park of the 5-star Swissotel Nai Lert Hotel it looked like an open air adult shop. There are hundreds of wooden, and a few concrete, phalli standing tall and proud. Donated by women seeking fertility they surround a spirit house dedicated to

Goddess Tubtim.

Thus, I completed my unusual and enjoyable day out in Bangkok and it was time for some Tom Yum Goong soup and, of course, a large, cold Chang (elephant) beer.

I agreed with the travel agents that packaging Nakhon Nayok with Bangkok makes a lot of sense for school groups looking for nature and adventure, plus a bit of city life. The Khao Yai National park and elephant camps are two highlights and of course Bangkok has infinite possibilities. **AJ**

INFORMATION

Nakhon Nayok – Royal Hills Golf Resort and Spa
www.royalhillsresort.com

Novotel Bangkok Platinum
www.novotelbangkokplatinum.com

Thai Airways and many other airlines fly daily to Bangkok from Singapore

