

>> Ecotourism in Asia

GREEN OP

When it's time to head out of the house and travel to a place others call home, with low impact and some benefit to local communities, ecotourism is the way to go. It can include five-star lodgings where guests help protect elephants, volunteer work for community outreach, or a day's hike through three steep gorges. To minimize encounters with greenwashing—eco-friendly talk without the environmentally sound walk—the following short list of Asian ecotours should help you stay green as you go.

THE Go



IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

Story & Photographs by Karryn Miller

Thailand's capital and the country's northern territory are no strangers to tourism. Bangkok's concrete canopy hosts millions of visitors each year, and the jungle cover around Chiang Mai gets a lot of foot traffic. At both locales, tourists are privy to an increasing number of ethical tourism options.

Bangkok-based tour company **SpiceRoads** trades air-



conditioned buses for bicycling trips ranging from half-day expeditions around Bangkok to 17-day explorations of the country. The Bangkok Jungle trip takes visitors across the Chao Phraya River to a less-frequented part of town. In Bang Kra Jao, cyclists make their way through a patchwork of tropical jungle, temple paths and slender alleys—with the city's skyscrapers as a backdrop. Longer trips like the River of Kings Ride between the capital and Chiang Mai span several hundred years of history, mixing the ruins of the Kingdom

interacting with the country's dwindling elephant population. The **Anantara Elephant Camp** works closely with the Thailand government's Elephant Conservation Center to create a sanctuary for these previously mistreated animals. Anantara guests can visit the 31 elephants living at the camp or take part in a three-day "driving course," where they act as a *mahout* (elephant

keeper), bathing, training, feeding and learning to drive an elephant. The **Elephant Nature Park**, also in northern Thailand, educates guests about Asian elephants and their plight. Volunteers and locally hired workers rescue elephants



of Ayutthaya with modern metropolises. For all excursions, SpiceRoads' small groups avoid the average tourist beat by dining in small family-run establishments and learning about rural industries. "We like to stop at many points of interest along the way—be it a historical site, temple, or sometimes just a local school at lunchtime—that can provide a great experience," adds tour leader, Struan Robertson.

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Five-Star Sanctuary

In Thailand, ecotourism doesn't necessarily mean roughing it. Visitors to the Anantara Resort & Spa Golden Triangle get to stay in five-star accommodations while





from the logging and trekking industries and provide a new home along with medical care. The natural flora and fauna and the locality's cultural identity are sustained through a tree planting and cultural integrity project also run by employees. Visitors can choose a day trip or an extended stay, with most packages including elephant feeding, bathing, and elephant education, as well as observing the animals in their natural habitat.

Lessons in Sustainability

Most tourists may boycott goods made from endangered animals, but they might not consider the impact their exotic meals can have on the region. A class or a meal at **May Kaidee's Vegetarian Restaurant and Cooking School**, in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, introduces Thai recipes using local, seasonal, organic ingredients like *pad thai*, *tom yum*, and ginger tofu.

Also in Chiang Mai is **Pun Pun**, an organic farm, seed-saving operation, and sustainable living/learning center—all in one—cultivating rare species of produce and medicinal herbs, which are then shared among area farmers. The restaurant then buys their crops and serves up the locally grown produce for lunch and dinner. Foodies dine under a bodhi tree watching saffron-clad monks walk by. Hands-on people can learn to build earthen shelters, work on the farm, or take a sustainability tour around northern Thailand.



Handy Info

SpiceRoads: tour dates/times vary. +66-2-712-5305, www.spiceroads.com

Anantara Elephant Camp: open all year. +66-5-378-4084, goldentriangle.anantara.com

Elephant Nature Park: open all year. +66-5-381-8754, www.elephantnaturepark.org

May Kaidee: morning/afternoon classes; restaurants, 9 A.M.–11 P.M. Bangkok: +66-8-91-373-173. Chiang Mai: +66-8-77-175-275, www.maykaidee.com

Pun Pun: restaurant, 8 A.M.–7 P.M., www.punpunthailand.org