

My six-day guided trek through Northern Thailand was far from a relaxing retreat. Elephant rides, meetings with tribal natives and marathon hikes in the rain forced me to test my personal limits and experience a world I could have never imagined.

Getting started

Upon arrival at Chiang Rai airport, our guide, Kai, spots us immediately – clueless Americans aren't exactly common in this neck of the woods. With a handmade sign and ear-to-ear grin he leads us out to the van. He attempts to figure out who's who according to the questionnaires we filled out before the journey. I'm travelling with my best friend Dawn; we have everything in common, so it's difficult to tell us apart. I finally admit to being older. "Erika!" he proclaims.

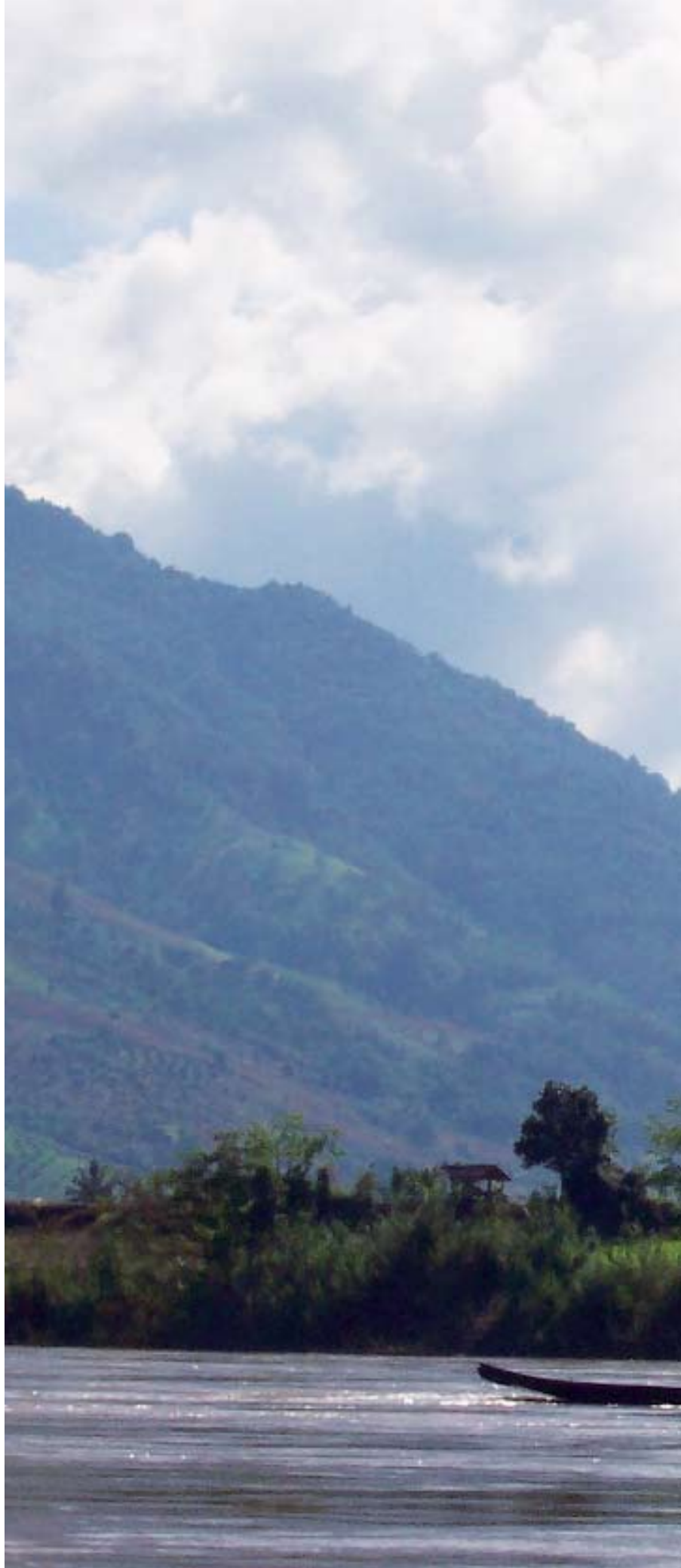
At the Legends Boutique hotel, the night air is moist and filled with the shrill sound of cicadas – unobtrusive reminders that we are in a rainforest. We trot behind

Kai and sip fresh juice as he points out the spa, pool and breakfast area. In our room he demonstrates a traditional Thai shower by scooping water from a large stone basin with yellow flowers floating on top. I try this later — too cold! Fortunately, there's also a modern waterfall shower in the bathroom complete with hot water. Dawn is positively giddy, and our excitement makes it difficult to sleep.



I love to arrive in a new place at night and wake up to a whole new world full of possibilities. In the morning, we get up quickly and enjoy a breakfast of traditional rice porridge beside the Kok River where we met John, a fellow traveller on the tour. As we finish, Scott, one of the founders of Smiling Albino adventures from Canada, appears to give us the first of many morning briefings. We're in for a thrilling day.

We take a quick bike ride to a long-tail boat that will deliver us to Ban Ruammit elephant camp. "We think getting there should be half the fun," Scott explains as he secures the bikes. We hop in, don our sunglasses and sit back as the meadows and hills roll by. It's the rainy season but there's not a drop in sight; in fact, we spend most of our time slathering ourselves with sunscreen.



**by Erika
Kelsey**

Our first stop is a temple inside a cave. Kai encourages us to emulate his Buddhist ritual as Scott lights candles and incense for each of us. “I hope this will be an amazing trip,” I think to myself and bow before the golden Buddha three times.

The Jungle Book

I’ve never been near an elephant in my life, let alone sat atop one. About ten grey beasts stand munching leaves by the riverbank. As we approach they stretch out their long, rough trunks to sniff our pockets. Kai and Scott pass us each a bag of corncobs, bamboo and bananas. The elephants shake their massive heads and stamp impatiently. The ends of their trunks are like giant lips, but, thankfully, their teeth are way back in their mouths. After I bribe our elephant to be nice, Dawn and I clamber aboard the basket and adjust to the rocking gait; it feels like trying to ride a tiny canoe on the open ocean. Our fingers wrap tightly around the rickety saddle as the *mabout* taps our elephant on the head to move him along.

While we are lunching by the river and watching the elephants bathe, Scott gives us two options on getting back. The first is a ten-mile bike ride along main roads. The alternative is a 26-mile, rocky, hilly jaunt through the rainforest, by Karen hill-tribe villages and across a rickety bridge.

“You mean kilometres?” I ask.

“No, I mean miles,” he replies, raising his eyebrows. “The rainforest is a tough ride. It can get pretty muddy.”

Despite Scott’s warnings, we enthusiastically accept the challenge. “Whatever I say in the next few hours,” I tell Scott, my legs already tiring at the halfway point, “I will never regret going the long way.”

Tales of **Thailand**



Hidden Treasures

We spend the next two days touring the countryside on motorbikes. Scott gives Dawn riding lessons while I sleep in, having opted to ride behind Kai. I'm happy clinging to his windbreaker, free to gaze about. The busy streets of Chiang Rai soon give way to the gentle slopes of terraced farmland. I lose count of the gleaming temples, which grow more and more numerous as we head deeper into the wild. "Don't worry about stopping for pictures here," Scott says. "It gets even more beautiful as you go."

It was obvious from Day One that the Smiling Albino boys were going to take care of us. The motorbikes stop frequently at roadside stands for us to have snacks, drinks and bathroom breaks. Scott and Kai know everyone. They recognize the importance of supporting the local economy, and the locals appreciate it, especially as chain stores like 7-Eleven make their way into the hills.

We begin to pass by clusters of thatched houses. People are trudging down the roads with babies tucked into slings, baskets strapped on their backs or bamboo poles balanced precariously on their shoulders. "I wonder how long these villages are going to be here,"



Scott muses during one of our breaks. "I mean, who doesn't want electricity and paved roads? I think we're at the tail end of a time when you can see this."

Because Dawn and I are avid hikers, our guides arranged a special trek in Doi Mae Salong. As we make our way into the hills, Kai stops to explain the local flora. "Smell this one," he says. "It's medicine used by the hill tribes to clot blood." As we near the top of the hill, the clouds roll in and rain pours down so hard we can barely see. I expect the group to seek some sort of shelter or to turn back to camp. As we press on without even slowing our pace, I have to chuckle at what a wimp I am.

We soon come upon an Akha hill-tribe village of only a few houses. An old woman waves and invites us into her hut, while her grandchildren crowd around. They lose interest quickly, but the old woman sits patiently and smokes her long pipe. We marvel at the deep creases in her face, the softness in her eyes, her tattered headdress and weathered toes. Kai doesn't



speaking much Akha, but teaches me how to say hello. Dawn turns to me and whispers, “I feel like I’m in one of those documentary films.”

Later, as we take off our sopping shoes and socks, a rainbow appears. I look at the group, laugh out loud and shake my head before excusing myself. “I have to go write this up in my journal. But no one is going to believe me.”

Winding down

Our high-speed longboat cruises the Mekong River on this, our fifth day; the surface is like a sheet of glass. This morning, we toured the Hall of Opium near our Golden Triangle hotel and lunched on the riverbank while a local fisherman cast his nets and tiny kittens scampered underfoot. We also wandered around a giant Buddha; Kai and I tossed some coins into his belly and made wishes — he for his newborn daughter, me for my mother. This trip has given me incredible experiences, lasting memories, and new friends; I can’t think of any more wishes.



Sometimes I find myself just watching Kai and Scott. Whether they’re sharing their vast local knowledge or just sitting back, enjoying the view with us, they always seem content. It must be wonderful to have a job teaching other people to love what you love.





The pace slows down after our 60-kilometre-per-hour boat ride. Dawn opts for a Thai massage in Chiang Khong, which John describes as “part massage, part sumo wrestling”. I wander through the village with no particular destination, just soaking up a lifestyle that once seemed so strange, yet already feels so familiar.

The following day we park our long-tail boat on a sandy island. We play Frisbee in the sun, grill fresh catfish and let the cool river wash over our tired bodies. We’re sad to go, but Northern Thailand is not the kind of place you leave behind. Two weeks later, having travelled back to Singapore and on to New York, I am still in awe of everything I saw and experienced. What a great way to live life.

Visit www.smilingalbino.com to learn more about travel adventures in Thailand, Cambodia and Nepal.

This photo of Dawn and Erika on an elephant is courtesy of John Berns, www.travelphotographer.com.

