

Sarah Lipman: Welcome to the jungle

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CHIANG MAI, Thailand -- As we hit our month mark of travel, I was put the furthest out of my comfort zone yet. We entered the city of Chiang Mai, culture capital of Thailand, which is filled with opportunities to learn to cook traditional Thai dishes, meditate with Buddhist monks or master the art of the Thai massage.

And trek through the jungle.

Let me start by saying the only jungle I've ever trekked through is the "concrete jungle" that Jay-Z and [Alicia Keys](#) refer to in their hit "Empire State of Mind," Manhattan. I grew up outside of New York City in the suburbs of Long Island, so needless to say, the concept of hiking and sleeping in the jungle for three days and two nights was foreign to me. However, it did not stop me from giving it a shot.

Jungle trekking in Chiang Mai is a popular -- if not the main -- tourist attraction in the city. Multiple treks enter the jungle daily via different companies and can last from one day to more than a week. They all follow the basic route and include the same excursions: elephant riding, visiting minority hill tribe villages, sightseeing at major waterfalls, bamboo rafting and lots of hiking.

The best trekking organizations take groups no larger than 10 and are conscious of the footprints they leave behind. There are multiple elephant camps throughout the jungles surrounding Chiang Mai known for bad treatment of the animals (drugging and abuse) and there are organizations that do not share the profits with the poor villages visited.

Our trek began on a Thursday morning with a trip to the local market to buy food for the next three days. We then visited an elephant camp for a ride through the jungle. The elephants at this camp appeared to be treated well -- unlike the camel farm I saw in Israel last summer, where the camels were scarred and burned.

The actual trekking was broken up into manageable blocks of three to seven hours per day with breaks for lunch and water. Despite being out of shape and unused to the idea of hiking, I handled it much better than expected. The hiking was challenging, but in a good way, and I got only a few scrapes and bruises from falls.

The most interesting part of the trek was spending the second night in the minority hill tribe village at the top of the mountain. According to our guide, the villagers -- about 17 families totaling 50 people -- survive solely on the resources around them.

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During the day, they share work; men hunt and care for the livestock, while the women handle childcare and farming tasks such as picking crops and separating corn and rice grains. The villagers do not have electricity and use the sun and moon as their concepts of time. It's a simple lifestyle, but one that works for the tribes, our guide said. Most residents never leave their village, except to move to neighboring villages for marriage and childbirth.

After returning to the city of Chiang Mai, I'm sore from all of the exercise, but feel accomplished and enlightened. I feel like I've finally learned something important on my trip, both about myself, and how most people in northern Thailand once lived, and some still do.

Next week I journey into Laos, a country that is somewhat of a backpacker's legend, yet flecked with political instability and a history unknown to most who visit it.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world. For photos from the Chiang Mai jungle trek, visit her blog, [Passport: The World](#), on The Advocate Web site.

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