



Jungle Journeys

Trekking through Khao Yai National Park, away from the crowds, offers some amazing natural attractions—just watch out for the leeches!

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Let's face it, when most Bangkokians think of **Khao Yai**, they imagine boutique stays, Tuscan themed estates, laid back folk festivals, vineyards and wine tastings, and leisurely sipping gourmet coffee while checking in on their latest Instagram postings. While these endeavours may serve as a solid slice of Bangkok detox, they aren't my cup of proverbial coffee or tea. I go to Khao Yai to get sweaty and dirty, and to partake of one of Thailand's greatest natural attractions—that of the magnificent national park responsible for all those resorts being right outside the gates.

Most folks forget that less than half a century ago, Khao Yai served as a haven for fugitives and criminals, primarily due to its thick forest cover and flee-able distance from the authorities in Bangkok. The park has come a long way since then, becoming Thailand's first national park, then an ASEAN Heritage Park, and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site as well (part of the greater **Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex**). Home to more

than 3,000 plant species, over 300 types of birds, and abundant wildlife, about the only trouble you'll run into here these days is elephants not taking kindly to your car blocking their route—as a famed couple witnessed and photographed last year—as well as the aggressive beasts about one ten thousandth the size of elephants... the lamentable leeches.

I started my Khao Yai sojourn by hooking up with **Greenleaf Tours**, a budget travel operator based out on the park entrance road that features a rather drab guesthouse aimed at the backpacker crowd, but makes up for the lack of good accommodation by offering over a decade's worth of touring experience with some knowledgeable guides who get you into the jungle, as well as providing you with a pair of military duty-worthy leech socks to accompany your outing. While they don't look pretty, the socks are highly effective in keeping the bloodsuckers at bay, especially considering the alternatives (some trekkers wear pantyhose, while others



wear nothing and end up resembling the cast on a vampire film set). While cool season trekking is pretty much leech-free, the rest of the year will be spent in the company of the harmless, yet annoying pests.

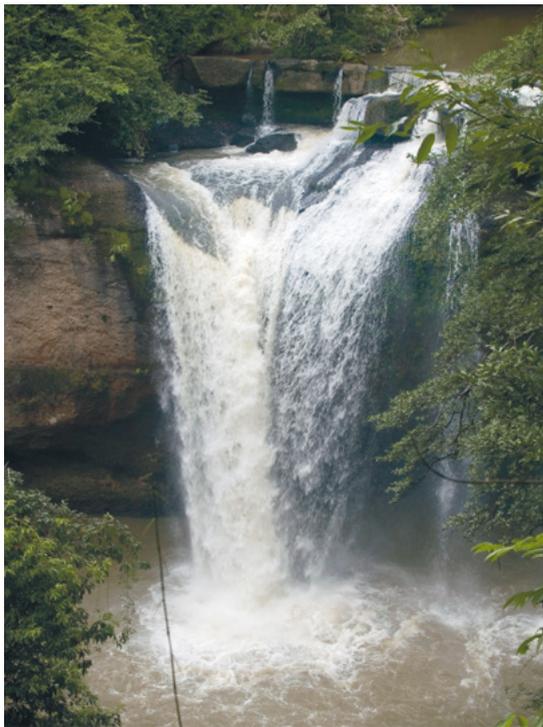
Mr. Nine, Greenleaf's premiere birding expert, is a guide extraordinaire. With his ornithological knowledge you'd think he was a zoology student, but he actually was a businessman in Bangkok who tired of the urban rat race, came up to Khao Yai to help out a friend, learned about the jungle, and took to it like wildfire—becoming a crack photographer and birder in the meantime as well. He arrives on each tour laden down with camera equipment, binoculars, and even has a telescope which he utilizes to help guests take photos through the scope, getting some magnificent bird close-ups.

Within minutes, Nine is helping us spot bulbuls, broadbills, jungle fowl, coral-billed cuckoo's, and the star attraction of the Khao Yai birdlife, the Great Hornbill. Not only are the hornbills easy to spot, especially with the aid of binoculars, but you stay relatively unscathed in doing so, not having to crawl, get into the underbrush, or mess up your post-trip latte drinking attire, as the birds stay up in trees and along cliff walls.

This all changes however once you enter the jungle. The forest cover becomes dense, and as it had rained the night before on my trek, much of the trail was a quagmire, with my companions and I soon caked in mud once we'd made the inevitable slip. Navigating through a section of small trees, Nine pointed out a rock at the side of the trail, and looking under it, camouflaged by its moss-coloured skin, was a pit viper, one of the most deadly snakes around. Giving the venomous reptile plenty of space, I tiptoed my way down the trail, only to be frightened out of my wits by a chilling scream from the back of our party. Fearing the worst, I turned around, wondering if our guides were carrying any venom extraction kits. To my relief, as well as to the entire group's amusement,

it was our youngest female member doing the yelling, staring at her bloody toes, evidently penetrated by a few squiggling leeches. Assured that she wasn't in any danger of expiration, she cleaned herself up, piped down, and we moved on.

Officials claim that Khao Yai has the odd tiger hidden somewhere, but none have been spotted in years. You have better chances of seeing Asian black bears, Indian elephants, and even higher chances of seeing sambar deer, gaur, and the entertaining pig-tailed macaque monkeys which pose endlessly near the roads, thinking that if they strike a handsome enough pose, they might get something to eat. We came across several Lar gibbons, with beautiful white skin and long slender white hands contrasting with their dark black faces, swinging through



several tall trees in search of food. Too fast to photograph, they are the consummate forest Tarzan, with one of the highest forelimb to hindlimb proportions of all the primates—truly mesmerizing to watch in flight.

We failed to spot any elephants from the viewing tower that allows visitors to look out over the jungle and the open savanna-like expanse of grass that surrounds it, but you have to be lucky—as well as probably spend at least two-three outings in the park—to start making any kind of fauna tick list. Khao Yai isn't only about the animals though, as the landscape is quite impressive on its own. In the morning and late afternoons, the area can be covered with a light mist, giving the trees and rising mountains an eerie and “lost world” look.

We stopped to check out **Haew Suwat**, the waterfall famed for the scene from the film *The Beach* in which Leonardo DiCaprio leaps over the top. Park rules prohibit you from doing the same, but the streams of water cascading over a circular pool are impressive nevertheless, and a nearby boulder you can walk out on makes for some dramatic (and wet) photo-ops. Further up the river, several of us jumped in and washed off all the forest mud, while performing a final leech inspection—lest we bring any unwanted souvenirs back to Bangkok.

While the tours in Khao Yai don't take in some of the attractions that lie further out, if you've got your own transport, and are willing to use your own steam, do make the effort to hike up to **Haew Narok**, by far the park's most stunning waterfall. From an observation platform here you can watch the dramatic thundering muddy brown falls plunge over a 150 meter high cliff, most impressive during the height of the summer rainy season.



Further on, you won't find any crowds at **Pha Diao Dai**, a viewpoint up on a mountain ridge that overlooks the surrounding forest and mountains. You've got to trek 500 meters up a wooden walkway trail that the park service has constructed here, and despite the convenience, you will understand why they named the place as they did (*diao dai* translates to “solitude point”), as not many folks make it out to this tranquil spot.

From my vantage point, I took in the misty jungle scenery, massaged my aching knees, and figured that trading lattes for leeches, at least for a day or two, was well worth it. ■

TRAVEL TIPS: Khao Yai is accessible via train from Bangkok's Hua Lamphong station (head to Pak Chong station). From Pak Chong, public *songthaew* run along the park road to the gate, but further transport to park headquarters must be arranged in advance if you don't have your own wheels. Entry to the park is B40 for Thais, and B400 for non-Thais.

The **Khao Yai National Park Headquarters** manages several campgrounds, which rent tents and bedding, plus has maps, and can assist with guides for going trekking. Call 04 429 7406, or 04 424 9305, or visit www.thainationalparks.com/khao-yai-national-park.

For guided trips, **Greenleaf Tours** is at km 7.5 of the park road and does free pickups for all tour joiners from the Pak Chong Railway Station. Call 04 493 6361, or visit them online at www.greenleafour.com.