

# "Elephant backs and bamboo rafts in Umphang"

written by Michel GÉRARD

**On the Burmese border, the national park of Umphang offers everything that we can expect of an excursion in the jungle: abounding nature, dirty trails, bathing at the foot of the cascades and small forgotten villages.**



**It is an incomparable adventure that I wish to share with you today in presenting the national park of Umphang, one of the most beautiful regions of Thailand classified as World Heritage by UNESCO. A lot of activities amid greenery are possible like trekking in an amazing environment, bamboo rafting and elephant riding. I certainly carry a very good souvenir of my four-day stay in this magnificent place of dreams situated in the province of Tak.**

The starting point of this journey was Mae Sot a city situated at the Burmese border in the north west of the country. I arrived there with my companions after a one-hour flight from the capital. A mini bus took us for a 164 kilometre drive on a sinuous road in the mountain, named "The road of death" because of the guerilla conflict that prevented all usage in the past. But it is without any danger nowadays and gives us time to admire nature before arriving Umphang for dinner. The silence of nature reminded us that it was time to sleep and we spent the night in a charming bungalow very close to the Huai Mae Klong.

Early in the morning, we were ready for a three-day trek in the national park that started with the descent of the river on rafts made of bamboo. Sailing gently southwards to join Ta Sai, we had time to admire the green strands of the river. For people who might have an apprehension, the descent of the river is absolutely without danger and every raft is always framed by 2 local helmsmen.

After a while, we arrived at Ti Lo Jo, a splendid cascade flowing out of a cliff with stalactites and stalagmites covered by ferns. The group enjoyed bathing in this place before riding the rafts for the second discovery not far from there. At the side of the river where we stopped to have lunch, we saw small geysers springing intermittently and we relaxed in nature's jacuzzis. The descent to Ta Sai was full of beautiful sites like Phaluat, a very high precipice with varieties of trees on its top and hives of bees. After our arrival in Ta Sai, we went for a short, healthy walk of about four kilometres towards the jungle to Ti Lo Su waterfalls. This little walk on the first day, where each one can go at his own speed, is a manner for the guides to judge the participants' level of fitness, in order to adapt to the difficulty of the trek for the following days. At the end of the day, we admired Ti Lo Su, the most spectacular waterfall of Thailand that is also the sixth largest in the world with ninety-eight distinct cascades, 400 metres wide. We arrived there at the end of the day trip, dined and slept overnight in tents.

After very refreshing, early baths, our group was then ready for a walk of a few kilometres away from the footpaths through the jungle. From Ti Lo Su to Khota, we had time to ask our guide, Bouchuay, questions concerning the fauna and flora of the place, and also take some photos. The villagers' way of life in Khota is very close to nature. They grow rice and weave cotton with their hands. They also raise elephants that are essential for transportation in the jungle. We started from there to trek in the jungle on the back of the elephants. The animals and their mahouts helped us to discover places impenetrable by other means, rocking us from left to right then back to front along the distance. We were also in charge of taking care of our own animal, giving him food and a bath in the river at mid-day. We became more intimate with our pachyderms that continued their heavy walk through spectacular vegetation, as we headed towards our camp for the night. We had the opportunity once again to take care of our elephants, after they had taken care of us all day during this long journey through the forest. It was then time to sing songs and tell stories under the stars before sleeping.

Early in the morning on the third day, after a copious breakfast in the jungle, we rode our elephant to Pahlatha, a Karen village. There, we handed them over to their mahouts, and after having observed the way of life of some natives and conversed with them, we settled in for the night in traditional bungalows by the side of the river. After dinner, we enjoyed traditional Karen songs with our guides around a camp-fire.

The following morning, after a short trek in the jungle, it was time to return to Umphang by a local vehicle, then to Mae Sot, where our journey ended. None of my friends was disappointed by this environmental and adventurous journey that revealed to us this exceptional sanctuary and also let us share in the life of the Karens and their elephants.

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