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Hongs – collapsed, open-air caves – are found within the dramatic limestone islands of the emerald green Andaman Sea. Each hong is distinct with an ecosystem of jungle flora and fauna, including birds, fish, monkeys and everyone's favourite: bats.

# Four must-dos from Thai bucket list

FROM MYSTERIOUS CAVES to cooking schools, jungle treks and swimming with sharks, diverse paradise offers many choices

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POSTMEDIA NEWS

Thailand is a majestic and geographically diverse paradise that tops the bucket list of many travellers. Our four weeks in heaven took place in southern Thailand, exploring the beach vacation hot spot of Phuket Island and ecologically diverse Krabi province. Thailand is a special and unforgettable place and, we have narrowed down our list of experiences to the following, which really must be enjoyed.

### Discover the world of hongs

The mysterious hongs are collapsed, open-air caves found within the dramatic limestone islands of the emerald green Andaman Sea. Scattered throughout Phang Nga Bay and Krabi Province, these island hongs can only be reached at low tide by canoe or long tail boat. Each hong is distinct with an ecosystem of jungle flora and fauna, including birds, fish, monkeys and everyone's favourite: bats.

We booked the John Gray's Seacanoë 'Starlight Hong Trip,' which is a once-in-a-lifetime adventure everyone should experience. This nine-hour excursion includes a round-trip boat ride to Phang Nga Bay, delicious lunch and seafood dinner, and friendly paddle guide to regale you with local legends, and laugh away any fear of bats or monkeys you might have. The real magic happens when the sun sets and you paddle in silence, under a blanket of stars, through the hongs to play with the glittering phosphorescents.

### Get cooking

There is no better way to experience Thai cuisine than rolling up



Kata Beach is one of the many stunning beaches where visitors can swim, people watch and stretch out in the sun.

your sleeves, donning an apron and hammering spices with a mortar and pestle. While Thai food has gained popularity throughout North America and made its way to the pour-and-stir world of grocers, absolutely nothing compares to the taste of traditionally-prepared curry chicken with freshly made chili paste.

Taking a cooking class is one of our favourite ways to experience a destination, as there is so much to learn about a country's history through its cuisine. Thai food beautifully blends the Eastern and Western worlds. Stir-frying cooking methods came from China, curries from India and the infamous Thai chili was introduced in the late 1600s by Portuguese missionaries who brought them from South America.

Our amateur chef event took place at the beachside cooking school Time for Lime in Ko Lanta, where we prepared and devoured

a Thai feast of chicken satay, seafood curry and spicy lime soup with prawns; all washed down with far too many mojitos.

Most tourist destinations in Thailand offer cooking classes, which are easy to find through travel guides or your hotel concierge.

### Jungle trekking

While it is sometimes difficult to trade an afternoon on the beloved beach chair for more taxing activities, Thailand's countless unspoiled national parks offer a pretty compelling reason to try. Our grand excursion, which took place north of Phuket in Khao Lak, started



Island hongs can only be reached at low tide by boat.

with a jungle hike to a secluded waterfall. After surviving the somewhat precarious trail, wearing highly inappropriate footwear and not an ounce of sunscreen, we floated down a peaceful stream aboard a bamboo raft and stared in awe at the tropical birds, hand-sized spiders and mildly-poisonous mangrove snakes resting in the treetops.

Following a beachfront Thai lunch and swim in the sea, we got up-close and personal with nature once again and 'boarded' an elephant to trek through the lush jungle and a rubber tree plantation.

If you want to plan your tour in advance, we recommend using

internationally recognized Die-thelm Travel, as they provide exceptional service and are extremely professional.

### Island hop and swim with sharks

Exploring the small uninhabited islands sprinkled throughout the Andaman Sea was a definite highlight for us. From Ko Lanta in Krabi, we travelled 30 kilometres by boat to the unspoiled white sand beach and crystal clear waters of Ko Rok. Our day was spent lounging on the secluded beach and snorkelling in the offshore coral reefs, where we spotted barracuda and countless clown, parrot and leopard fish.

Perhaps our most memorable snorkelling trip was a one-day tour around Phi Phi Island. Throughout the day, we stopped at numerous bays and reefs, including Maya Bay, where The Beach was filmed, Monkey Island, which is home to a family of mischievous apes, and the rather intimidating Shark Point. Upon arriving at the ominous "Point," we were instructed to hop out of the boat and swim 100 metres to a large rock face. It was there that we came nose to nose with the black-tip reef sharks. These harmless sharks were more than a metre in length, and although we were somewhat petrified, it was incredible. The popular snorkelling points around Phi Phi Island tend to be quite congested, so if you hope to encounter these shy creatures, your best bet is before 9 a.m. or after 5 p.m.

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