

Up the River Kwae with the kids — a jungle adventure



An enthusiastic salesman in a Bangkok night market, trying to sell me 'top quality' DVDs, explains to his colleague, "Kanchanaburi — this is where in war number two loads of the English, they die building the railway. Japanese kill them all. So the English now, they come here all the time to be sad."

Not a bad explanation of why the area is so famous. Not for the town, but its river, and more precisely, the bridge across it. One of the first things I'm told when we arrive after the two-hour drive from Bangkok is that Hollywood actually got it wrong: this is the River *Kwae*, not *Kwai*.

As you've likely not heard of Kanchanaburi, located near the Myanmar border in Thailand's west, it might not be on the top of your list for the world's best family holiday destinations. A couple of hours in this extraordinary place will hopefully change your mind, like it did mine.

The history is awe-inspiring, and when you visit the sites of POW camps along the so-called death railway and hike up and down to the spots that soldiers wracked with disease and malnutrition were forced to work, you'll wonder how they managed. How they even trudged up the hills in this heat, let alone carry out the hard labour they did for up to 14 hours a day, is mind blowing.

But while the kids will have fun with the self-guided audio-headset tours at this beautifully appointed memorial for about 30 seconds, the memorial isn't the only attraction here for visiting families.

The accommodation here *really* is special. You'll stay on rafts, floating just off-shore, way up river in the middle of the jungle. There's no electricity (so no TV) and no internet connection; it's a total escape from everyday life. (How will the kids survive this one!)

The setting is beautiful, on a fast-flowing river surrounded by thick jungle. The **floating hotel** is staffed mainly by the local community of Mon — a ethnic minority who have escaped across the border from Myanmar. Oddly, they speak English with an English (and almost cockney) accent, and are incredibly hospitable.

Prepare to be greeted on arrival by elephants bathing in the river literally at your room's back veranda. Their *mahouts* (or "drivers") lead them to the kids' outstretched arms in greeting — an experience that's sure to stick with the little ADD knee-biters for a lifetime; they're completely sold. Xbox? What's that? Mum — can we stay longer?!

One of the most popular activities here is to float down the river from one end of the long line of rafts to the other, clamber up, run the length of the hotel and jump in again. As we thunder past the other guests (who are trying to relax during a Thai massage) we're told that Thai women are clipped around the ankles by their mothers for not 'walking lightly'. Possibly it's a good metaphor for us Western travellers ... and the concept of responsible travel?

On day two we decide to visit another jungle retreat, the River Kwai Resotel, perched on the river bank about an hour's float downstream. We're given the option to float on a bamboo raft, but that sounds a bit too sedate for us so we just don a life jacket and jump in. We're closely watched by our guides, of course, one of whom jumps in with us, but it's an awesome experience floating through the jungle.

The resort has thatched cabin-style accommodation, a gorgeous pool and free pushbikes so you can explore their vast (and mainly flat) property, and cycle up to the enormous Lawa Cave, only discovered about 40 years ago.

All in all, it's a real jungle adventure — one that any kid will relish, and really, the area has something to please the whole family:

- Massages and lazy days in the hammock for a parent
- A rich historical and cultural experience for everyone
- Elephant rides, kayaking, rafting, bike rides, speed boats and swimming (which suits the kids but is fun for everyone)

Waterfalls, amazing scenery and caves to explore in every direction.

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