

The TRAVEL EDIT

WHO'S GUIDE TO THE MOST LUXURIOUS DESTINATIONS HERE AND ABROAD



NORTHERN DELIGHT

We visit a luxurious tented camp in
Thailand's mystical Golden Triangle



Amy's tent featured a freestanding bath and handcrafted furniture.



Fresh coconuts by the pool with views over the Ruak River.



The luxurious private pool at the Explorer's Lodge.



Rustic yet elegant safari-inspired decor features in the breezy superior tents.



Amy takes in the jungle view after her Ruak Bamboo massage.



Enjoy Thai, Laotian and Burmese cooking at Nong Yao restaurant.



AMY MILLS
WHO Travel Editor

Stepping into a traditional long-tail boat in Thailand's Golden Triangle, the uniqueness of my destination, where northern Thailand, Myanmar and Laos intersect, is not lost on me.

We arrive at the jetty in the province of Chiang Rai after a four-hour drive from Thailand's second largest city and cultural mecca, Chiang Mai. Many visitors to the Golden Triangle opt to fly direct to Chiang Rai International Airport but I thoroughly enjoy the scenic drive, stopping to visit the famed White Temple (Wat Rong Khun) en route.

Now, as we sail down the Ruak River to the Four Seasons Tented Camp, we watch water buffalo bathe in the Ruak and local fishermen check their rattan fishing baskets, which are sprinkled along the riverbank.

With Thailand on one side of the river, Myanmar (formerly Burma) on the other and the mountains of Laos looming in the distance, I feel a sense of excitement that I haven't felt in some time, knowing I'm experiencing one of the world's truly unique locations.

We arrive at a jetty and climb a set of narrow stairs where we are each encouraged to hit a gong three times for health, wealth and luck.

Ebullient camp manager Tobias Emmer warmly greets us and we sit down in the camp's main restaurant, Nong Yao, for a sumptuous Thai lunch.

The decor features a 19th century safari-adventure theme with its open-air, thatched-roof pavilion, rustic floorboards and customised handcrafted touches.

The delicious lunch dishes are created with seasonal, fresh ingredients sourced locally where possible and we share vegetable spring rolls, grilled tiger prawns and a pomelo Thai salad. For a main, I opt for steamed fish with chilli and lime sauce and a signature lemongrass martini, which, Emmer informs me, you can't leave the premises without trying.

The camp is all-inclusive, which means all meals and beverages, including house wines and spirits, are included in the tariff, so if you fancy a martini at lunch, the staff will whip one up.

After lunch, a vintage Land Rover is on hand to transport fellow guests to their tents, while I am told mine is only a five-minute walk away.

There are a total of 15 luxury tents – superior and deluxe – positioned throughout the 200-acre property, each with a different theme.

There's also a two-bedroom Explorer's Lodge which has a private swimming pool.

I follow a paved path through the lush jungle setting and walk over a suspended bridge.

The idea of staying in a luxurious safari-style tent in an exotic location under the stars is a romantic one – think Meryl Streep in *Out of Africa* – but my deluxe Bird Watcher tent exceeds expectations.

Designed by prolific Bangkok-based architect and landscape designer Bill Bensley – renowned for designing resorts with minimal impact on the environment – my elevated jungle abode was inspired by top-tier safari lodges in Africa and Thailand's hill-tribe villages.

There are hardwood timber floorboards, lanterns for pendant lights, brass basins, a

king-sized bed, my dream writing desk and handcrafted furniture.

The pièce de résistance, though, is the freestanding bathtub in the centre of the room.

On the right, there's a separate toilet and an outside dual-head rain shower looking out over the grasslands.

I walk out onto my private balcony and can't resist slipping into the timber hot tub, taking a moment to admire the view of the grasslands and native wildlife.

The camp works closely with the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation, which rescues overworked elephants from city streets and rehabilitates them, and I spy one of the four-legged residents taking a stroll through the trees below.

Sundowners are enjoyed at the Burma Bar, where fellow guests are also enjoying the hospitality and glorious view.

When the sun disappears behind the mountains, we enjoy a three-course private dinner and classical Thai music under a plethora

of lanterns and baskets woven with fairy lights.

We end our evening by releasing khom loy lanterns into the sky and making a wish, although, in this moment, I already feel exceptionally lucky.

The following day after breakfast, we spend time with the rescue elephants learning how to ethically interact with these magnificent creatures including Yuki, who spent years performing in Thailand's crowded tourist strips such as Pattaya before being rescued and brought to the camp.

Returning to my luxurious tent after each activity, meal or dip in the main pool is always a highlight as is a visit to the spa, which comprises of two isolated open-air salas looking out over the bamboo forest.

There's no music to allow you to really reconnect with nature and listen to the sweet songs provided by the native birds.

My therapist Yommi gives me the best treatment I've had in Thailand, the 90-minute Ruak Bamboo, a full-body massage using

a combination of local herbal oils and natural bamboo sticks.

Walking back to my tent to pack, I think about the experiences I've had and how this property is so much more about creating memories than just being a luxurious place to sleep – a must for today's discerning travellers who are seeking out imaginative hotel concepts.

"Today's luxury traveller wants to experience hidden gems," Emmer tells me.

"We cater to foodies, glampers, adventurers, hikers and bikers, animal lovers, culture seekers ... all topped up with the Four Seasons world-famous service." I have to say, the connected, intuitive and committed service Emmer and his team provide is impressive and I leave feeling unreservedly pampered.

In this fast-paced, digitally connected world, this natural oasis is an idyllic place to slow down, relax, enjoy some truly unique immersive experiences and an obligatory lemongrass martini – or two.

fourseasons.com/goldentriangle

A traditional Thai long-tail boat passes water buffalo on the Ruak River.

GETTING THERE

We flew from Sydney to Bangkok with Thai Airways business class, which offered flawless service and comfort. From there, we flew to Koh Samui for a few days of rest and relaxation and then to Chiang Mai with Bangkok Airways.



EXPLORING THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

Notorious for once being at the heart of South East Asia's opium trade, the Golden Triangle certainly has a colourful history.

For that reason, The Hall of Opium, just 10 minutes from the camp and close to the very fields where millions of poppies once bloomed, is definitely a must while in the Golden Triangle.

It is both informative and harrowing as the interactive displays and presentations detail the history of opium growing and trade in the region, the British Opium Wars and the economic and social cost of drug addiction.

We also enjoyed Four Seasons' four-hour Burma Discovery Tour.

After driving 30 minutes through the countryside, we arrived in Thailand's northern most district of Mae Sai and crossed the border into Myanmar. One-day passes for non-Burmese nationals crossing into Myanmar are issued at Myanmar customs in Tachileik.

After jumping in tuk-tuks in the border town of Tachileik, we visited two temples and some local markets brimming with local produce and handcrafted items.



Explore the markets in Tachileik for local produce.

