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Where the wild things are

MONULKIRI IS CAMBODIA'S LARGEST YET MOST SPARCELY POPULATED PROVINCE, HOME TO EVERGREEN FORESTS AND UNDULATING HILLS. WE VISIT THE JAHOO GIRAFFE CAMP AND THE ELEPHANT VALLEY PROJECT, TWO ECOTOURISM INITIATIVES AIMING TO PROTECT SOME OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST ENDANGERED WILDLIFE AS WELL AS THE INDIGENOUS BUNONGS, WHO HAVE LIVED HERE FOR CENTURIES.

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IT'S half past five in the morning and the chase is on. The rules are straightforward: walk slowly, stay quiet; don't disturb the trees. Climbing through unfamiliar terrain, we try to make the crunch of vegetation beneath our feet for fear of spooking those that hide beyond the canopy, in the tangle of grey stems. It's hard to divert our eyes from the floor but we try, but we are here to look up.

Behind the piercing, scratch of cicadas and the quiet of buzzing insects on their early morning opera, a soporific that awakens sharply to a morning cool. The open eyes of our tour guide, Som, detect the slightest movement above—a sudden halt leaves us stumbling to follow his line of vision and pointed finger. "Gibbon..." says Chae Hie, a project intern helping with translations.

Even with binoculars, only sometimes do we spot the trace of the jet black coat that swings between dense branches. He's singing in distress, we're told—it's unusual to find a gibbon on its own. Most likely, his brothers have been flushed out of their family. We stalk his movements in silence as he flies deeper into the forest.

This is the southern yellow-cheeked crested gibbon, a primate endangered by habitat loss in the north-east region of Cambodia, where there are just 1,000 or so of the creatures left. A guided trek takes us into the heart of the Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary in Mondulkiri province, a 3,300-square kilometer protected area of forest which holds an impressive number of key wildlife and threatened species, including wild cats, Asian elephants and the pondiced-faced black-shanked douc, largest, an endangered monkey.

A community ecotourism project managed by World Vision International in the predominately Khmer-Kabong village is offering visitors the chance to catch a glimpse of these rare primates as well as a colorful biodiversity. While day trips are available, we opted for an overnight stay at the clean and comfortable inn at Jakob Gibbon Camp, ideal for gibbon spotting in the early hours, when the creatures are most active.

One of a number of ecotourism initiatives in the province, its guiding mission is the care of wildlife. The initiative takes money gathered from visitors and uses it to back up the community development fund, a pot that goes towards community projects and which aims to prove that conservation efforts are worthwhile.

Our quest to sight the elusive gibbon would have to wait until the second day of our adventure. Though, on our first day we were given an entirely different array of wonders as we set off from Jakob, around 30 kilometers from where we were picked up that morning in central Mondulkiri, and enter the forests' uncharted arms. Dense clusters of thick bamboo stalks intersect chaotically to form an obstacle course of natural tunnels through the forest. The shoots gurgle and crack in the breeze as we duck to pass under their archways, easily mistaken for the bowels of invisible wildlife.

Albeit, our guide, on day one, is a master navigator through the thick evergreen brush in which we quickly lose our sense of orientation. A gently sloping path takes us past natural curiosities invisible to our untrained eyes. Dimples on the forest floor and mud-stained trunks—natural scratching posts—reveal the trace of the Asian elephant, while countless deep cuts on another tree were probably carved from young sun bears learning to climb. We also encounter bogs, camping out inside hollow bamboo stools as well as a giant black squared pecked precariously on drifting limbs.

Each corner has its own story— we learn about the traditional medicine and rice wine forged from the forest in which the Bumong, known for their folk remedies and knowledge of the forest, have called home for thousands of years. The Essence of Cambodia
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Our lunch is forgathered from the forest. Mberik slices off the tough palm leaves of the rattan plant – popular in Cambodia for wicker furniture – to leave only its stem, whose bark is used as a raw ingredient in Ilouna bamboo soup.

With the help of Chan Leat, Mberik crafts a hollow bamboo shoot he had harvested earlier, with strips of the rattan, along with eggplant and a healthy dose of bright red chilies. Add water, and the tube cooks on the homemade fire before being served in another bamboo flute, this one split through its center to create the perfect serving trough.

For dessert, we eat two crabs hand-picked from a shallow end of a waterfall’s rocky pool, killed by wrenching off a pincer that is then used to stabs its own belly.

Most impressive of the forest’s vegetation is the strangler fig, starting off as a seed dropped by an animal across high up in the canopy, its roots grow downwards, forming together to form an intricate lattice that wraps around its host, literally strangling it to death.

The guardians of the forest, massive roots spill from ancient smoket that cut their neighbors too to one, flooding every sparet pocket of the forest before ending under the carpet. A warm shower upon our return to Sen Monorom, the capital of Mondulkiri, is welcomed with perhaps too much excitement.

We are rewarded by our exertions over the past two days with a stay in what is claimed to be the easiest lodgings offered by the area, the Mayura Hill Resort, a luxury hideaway in the rolling expanses of wilderness that surrounds it.

Each bungalow boasts a private balcony overlooking tropical gardens, and while we are only a five-minute drive from the town, it’s quiet and cozy, ideal for an early night spent cuddled with a book, a well-aged beer, and a dip in the pool. The slight chill is also a welcome relief from Cambodia’s usual sweltering heat.

Our wildlife outings are not over yet though – tomorrow we’ll zoom closer to an equally marvellous yet elusive animal, the Asian elephant. The Elephant Valley Project (EVP) runs the province’s premier elephant sanctuary, a decade-old operation which cares for ten of Cambodia’s population of captive Asian elephants. EVP offers anything in between half-day outings to week-long volunteer schemes to go out to an elephant and make sure they never forget the high of feeding, rolling, or bathing.

A gentle guided hike takes us into the 1,500-hectare forest sanctuary, located a half-hour drive out of town. We walk down into Elephant Heaven Valley, so called because of the richness of vines, tree roots, and other treats for the elephants to feast on as they roam and scavenge. On our half-day visit we meet the three-ton beauties Doe and Darling, as they wander through a clear patch of land into a shaded river. After they are bathed by the mahouts – keepers of the elephants – they fling mud from the pool’s banks onto their backs in a spirited display to protect themselves from the sun.

Were we to confine this story to what we see, we would be missing out on the very meat of the story – the patrolled vines, the large and small that we see, the massive and the minute that nature and tension between them.

To see what we see, we must know where to look, and it is looking for what is hidden, what is overlooked that makes the journey worthwhile.

Keeping with tradition, the community guide Mberik prepared the traditional Ilouna soup, cooked in a bamboo shoot (left). Mberik’s local wife, Chan Leat, bears the scars of the Khmer Rouge (bottom left). An elephant enjoys a bath in a river (right). Elephant Valley Project’s animal caretaker (right).

Where to stay

The Mayura Hill Resort offers the best lodging in the magnificent Mondulkiri, boasting modern villas and a swimming pool and a quality restaurant surrounded by a vista of wilderness.

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