



An Honest Review of Chai Lai Orchid Elephant Sanctuary

Is Chai Lai Orchid an Ethical Elephant Sanctuary?

From the moment we arrived, we were genuinely impressed by Chai Lai Orchid's purpose and mission. Not only do they provide a safe and loving environment for rescued elephants, but they're also deeply committed to empowering at-risk women and girls through fair-wage jobs, education, and hospitality training.

Chai Lai Orchid was founded in 2013 by the Daughters Rising nonprofit organization. We were happy to learn that 100% of the resort's proceeds (including room bookings, dining, and tours) help fund anti-trafficking initiatives, health workshops, and skills training for indigenous women.

As for the elephants, the sanctuary is currently home to 22 elephants, all rescued from heartbreaking pasts. Many of them were involved in logging, circus performances, and the tourist riding industry. Here, they get a second chance at life with no chains, no cages.

The elephants are allowed to roam freely around the 3-acre property during the day and are only safely enclosed at night. Each one is cared for by a dedicated mahout from the local Karen hill tribe, and all guest interactions are designed around the elephants' comfort and well-being, never for entertainment. That means no riding, ever.

You'll see plenty of tours offering elephant experiences in Thailand, but not all are ethical. After spending time here, we can confidently say Chai Lai Orchid is one of the good ones.

Where is Chai Lai Orchid Located?

Chai Lai Orchid is a remote jungle retreat tucked into the foothills of Mae Wang, about 1.5 hours southwest of Chiang Mai.

The sanctuary is tricky to find, so we recommend arranging a car transfer directly through the sanctuary. (They don't suggest using the Grab app as drivers often get lost in the backroads.)

We booked our transfer when we made our reservation, and it cost 1,000 THB (about \$30 USD) each way. If you're joining one of their jungle tours, transportation is included, but keep

in mind it runs on a set schedule.

What are the Accommodations Like at Chai Lai Orchid?

Staying at Chai Lai Orchid is more of a rustic glamping experience, rather than a luxury stay. The accommodations are basic but charming with handcrafted bamboo and thatched huts, mosquito-net beds, and open-air bathrooms.

There's no air conditioning, but you do get running water and electricity. Wi-Fi is available in the common areas, and we had a decent phone signal in our bungalow.

Just be prepared for bugs, they come with the jungle territory! They do have complimentary mosquito spray in each room that you can take with you.

When [booking your accommodations](#), you'll have a few different lodging options to choose from:

- **River View Bungalows** are set about a half mile from the cafe and reception, right along the river. It's a peaceful spot where you might see elephants splashing in the water just outside your room! The walk back uphill is steep, but there's a shuttle truck that runs every 30 minutes.
- **Garden Homestays** offer a more immersive experience with rooms hosted by Karen hill tribe families. This is a great option if you want to connect with local culture.
- **Mountain View Bungalows** (where we stayed!) are located closest to the Mountain Cafe and reception area. They offer sweeping views of the jungle canopy and easy access to everything.

We stayed in the Mountain View Orchid Bungalow #4, which felt a little more rustic than we were expecting. The bed was comfy, but the gaps between the floorboards invited a few too many creepy crawlies, including a giant spider that made a surprise appearance on our bed!

The mosquito net helped, but if you're squeamish, just be aware. Our bungalow cost 3,200 THB (about \$98 USD), though prices vary depending on the season. Each bungalow is a little different, so take a close look at the photos before booking.

What are the Dining Options at Chai Lai Orchid?

One of the absolute highlights of our stay was the Elephant Room Service Breakfast—and yes, it's exactly what it sounds like!

In the morning, you'll receive a beautiful tiered tray of fresh fruit, pastries, and a local breakfast dish delivered to your porch.

Shortly after, a caretaker will walk the elephants over to your bungalow with a basket of bananas. You get to feed them right from your front porch!

The elephants hang around for a bit, then you're left to enjoy your breakfast while watching them roam the grounds. It was such an unforgettable experience, and that baby elephant completely stole my heart!

The Elephant Room Service is included with your stay at no additional cost.

For lunch and dinner, the Mountain Cafe serves flavorful Thai and Burmese dishes using locally sourced ingredients. The open-air seating has a cozy vibe with sweeping jungle views.

We also lucked out to have some elephants roaming around the cafe during lunch. One of my favorite moments of our stay was watching the baby roll in the grass while eating the most delicious pad Thai noodles!

Every afternoon from 4–5 pm is Elephant Happy Hour, where guests can enjoy discounted drinks and appetizers while feeding sugar cane to the elephants. Honestly, every mealtime felt like a fairytale experience!

What Activities are Offered at Chai Lai Orchid?

After our breakfast with elephants, we set off on a half-day Elephant Jungle Adventure Tour. This turned out to be the highlight of our stay as we had the chance to interact and care for some of the resident elephants.

They offer a full-day tour, but unfortunately, we were flying out of Chiang Mai that evening and only had time for the half-day tour.

To begin the tour, we hopped into a songthaew (a local truck with bench seating in the back) and headed to the river for feeding time.

Elephants eat for 20 hours a day and only sleep for 4 hours, so they are always hungry! We fed them a variety of food, and even mixed up natural supplements for their daily dose of herbal "elephant medicine".

After feeding time, we took the elephants on a jungle walk. It was such a surreal experience to walk alongside these gentle giants in their natural habitat.

They would meander along, stopping ever so often to scratch up against a tree, or throw some dirt on their back to cool off. It was so fun getting to know their different personalities!

We even lucked out to have two babies at the sanctuary while we were there, and I was completely smitten! The youngest was 11 months old, and the oldest elephant currently at the sanctuary was 65 years old! There are only 2 males at the sanctuary, and they breed naturally with the females.

As an interesting side note, our guide told us that there are currently about 2,000 wild elephants in Thailand and about 4,000 domestic elephants.

After the jungle walk, we headed down to the river where we had a chance to bathe the elephants. They were living their best lives, just lolling in the river while being washed with cold water and rubbed with coarse sand. They waved their ears, raised their trunks, and acted like toddlers in a swimming pool!

If you book the [Full-Day Elephant Jungle Expedition](#), you'll also get to go bamboo rafting, hike to a waterfall, and visit the local Karen hill tribe village.

Tours are not included with your room, so be sure to book ahead. You can find a full list of their [activities and tours](#) on the Chai Lai Orchid website.

Before we left, we also booked a 1-hour traditional Thai massage, which you can do in your room or in an open-air hut. This was our first Thai massage, and it was intense! There was a lot more pulling, stretching, and acupressure than I had expected. Next time, I would opt for the oil massage for a more relaxing experience!

Final Thoughts

Staying at Chai Lai Orchid was such a unique and memorable experience! Being able to interact with the elephants in a natural setting was nothing short of magical.

That said, the accommodations were a bit more rugged than we anticipated (although it might have just been the bungalow that we stayed in). If you're not used to glamping or prefer more polished stays, you might want to temper your expectations. But if you're up for an adventure and don't mind a few bugs, it's absolutely worth it!

We stayed just one night, and it felt like the perfect amount of time. If you're planning your visit, I recommend checking in by 4 pm to catch Elephant Happy Hour. Then enjoy an outdoor dinner and book an evening massage. The next day, schedule the Elephant Room Service Breakfast for 8 am and the full-day tour at 9 am. After your tour, you'll take a songthaew back to Chiang Mai.

Chai Lai Orchid really is such a special place. If you're looking for an ethical elephant experience in Thailand, this is the one to choose. I hope you get a chance to experience it for yourself, it's something you'll never forget!