

Trawl

BY THE SEAT
OF YOUR
PANTS



Last minute travel

It's a myth that booking a flight within two weeks of flying is insanely expensive; in fact, it can be cheap. If you can be flexible with times, dates and destinations, undersold flights often sell their seats for low prices in the days before departure.

Abu Dhabi's families are adventurous by nature but are you brave enough to ditch the maps, itineraries and five

star hotels? Liz Totton reveals how to make last-minute and stress-free backpacking trips to destinations unknown...

Not everything in life goes according to plan. It's an asset to turn into the direction of any curveball and utilise its momentum rather than duck and miss out. So how can parents help their kids to adapt, accept and embrace the twists and turns life takes?

Try travel. Travelling enlightens you, forces you to confront aspects of yourself, and enables you to see yourself and the world with new perspective and clarity. And in Abu Dhabi, as we are lucky enough to be surrounded by the beauty of Asia, from Sri Lanka to Bali, Goa and Tibet, Singapore and China, there is a wealth of wild experiences beyond these desert lands to share with your family.

But these exotic destinations are expensive, dangerous and unpredictable right? Wrong. Our Travel editor, Liz Totton, is a (most unusual) mum incapable of planning and booked a last-minute, mother-daughters holiday to Thailand.

But rather than purchasing tickets well in advance and reserving a villa in a respectable family oriented resort, she booked tickets two days prior and had no destination: just three airline tickets, three pieces of hand luggage and two sceptical teenagers preferring order to the great unknown.

This might be your cue to shake your head or face palm, and it may sound crazy to travel this way – but here's how Liz backpacked in Thailand, and how you can travel cheaply and safely in the low season with your family in a whole host of wild places not too far from here.

Choose Thailand

Thailand is the perfect place for your first foray into painless, plan-less travel. Home to the kindest people I've ever encountered, the country is so accustomed to tourists, you can't help but think of it as the world's holiday house; your country away from country. In 2013, Bangkok trumped London as the most visited city in the world, yet the Thailand I know still manages to feel unspoiled and you don't have to travel far to have some of the world's prettiest and deserted beaches. August to September is the off-season. There are ample accommodations, and the very worst that could happen is that we might end up in a beach bungalow without A/C.

Plan the first night

We land mid evening, but our bus to the island of Koh Chang, the only thing I had loosely planned, isn't leaving from Suvarnabhumi Airport until 8am, so we have to find a hotel near the airport. I book a 'superior room' with two beds nearby that include a round trip taxi fare and breakfast for three for a mere \$35. We arrive at a fleabag motel that shall remain nameless; it's only virtue being a relatively strong Wifi signal. The kids are unimpressed, but too tired to protest.



No visit to Thailand is complete without trying the street food



Golden Buddha, Thong Chai



Loving the local cuisine

Travel FAQ

Should you unplug and leave your kids' electronics at home?

Electronics make the long airport waits tolerable. They are a nice link to friends and family left behind and how else will they take trip pics for Instagram?

Is travelling 'plan-less' safe? This is subjective and destination specific. For me, there are few places I feel safer than in Thailand. For you, this might not be the case. Do your research.

How likely is it that you will turn up with nowhere to stay? Avoid travelling 'plan-less' in the high season, such as during school winter or spring breaks. This kind of travel is far better suited to the low season. It's inexpensive, and you may have the place to yourself.

Thanks but I'll stick to Europe. Developing nations are scary? You could backpack in Europe in the low season, last-minute, but this kind of travel is great in developing countries.

Talk to strangers

My weather app shows a black sky with bolts of lightning and, scrolling further, it doesn't let up. Our dream of Koh Chang, the eastern side of Thailand is squashed. 'Change of plans. We are not going to Koh Chang anymore,' I say meekly bracing for attitude.

'What?! Where are we going?' 'I'm not sure.' I can tell by their faces this is not the answer they crave. 'But, we'll find a new place to go. Don't worry!' I stammer, offering them Starbucks conciliations at the airport.

We find ourselves taking advice from a possibly unscrupulous stranger. Instead, a kind Thai lady assures us the weather in Koh Chang is dreadful and, armed with an unfolded tourist map, and a ball-point pen, she circles the eastern city of Hua Hin where it's sunny and warm. We head to the bus station.

'So... where are we going?' my kids plead.

'Hua Hin,' I reply.

'Where IS that', they demand.

'I don't exactly know, but it's in this circle,' I say pointing to the map.

'Dad is not going to like this.'

'I know,' I say half smiling. 'It's good that he's not on this trip.'

Be prepared to change plans

Through the bus window, we see life spilling out on to the streets and the canals and markets teeming with people and produce. The city

soon thins. Concrete and glass give way to deep green rice paddies. Golden temples and elephant sculptures replace skyscrapers; the girls' faces are glued to the window.

We arrive in Hua Hin – a very busy Thai beach town. At the bus station, throngs of taxi drivers surround us. 'Where you go? You take my tuk tuk?' they squawk. Hua Hin's a bit too zealous for our liking so, seeking relaxation, we are forced to change plans. We walk to a café for lunch and Wifi, to search for paradise.

Both girls are wary. They want to trust we have this in control, but it's not looking good. I stumble on a place called Dolphin Bay, 45 minutes to the south. This is the place!

'Why can't we just stay here? I'm tired,' they both say.

'Because there are other things to see beyond city beaches.'

'But this place is fine, sunny and there's a Starbucks,' they point out.

'My point exactly,' I reply.



Getting there

AUH-BKK – Etihad offers three direct flights (6h40min) per day to Bangkok for approximately Dhs1,500.

Travelling in style

Biking in Sam Roi Yot

Venture off the beaten track

We hail a tuk tuk – otherwise known as a small taxi with the engine of a lawnmower – and our driver introduces himself as Mr. Lord.

Hua Hin's grey city beaches give way to asymmetrical blue limestone cliffs poking out of the cultivated fields and jungle-topped islands part azure waters. Mr. Lord stops at a roadside stall and buys us homemade coconut ice cream.

The highway thins into a one-lane country road. The tuk tuk speeds along giving way intermittently. Prehistoric-looking cliffs loom over us as we wind our way through the jungle until we reach the quiet beach town of Sam Roi Yot.

Mr. Lord helps us out. 'Thank you for the ice cream!' say my kids. Mr. Lord replies, 'kob khun ka' or 'thank you' in Thai. He clasps his hands, enunciating each syllable until the girls elicit a passable version.

Don't book a hotel, and make big savings

The Green Beach hotel offers accommodations to suit the budgets of both princes and paupers. We choose something in the middle. Frangipani trees drip with sweet scented flowers, and exotic birds dip and dive poolside.

We grab three of the hotel's complimentary bikes and hit the neighbouring beaches. We take long rides up and down the coast, stopping for exotic snacks and drinks at seaside roving stalls, and we hike up to golden temples.

In Thailand, wherever sand meets the sea, superb restaurants pop up every evening. Sand between our toes, the three of us sit at a table and listen to waves break, carefree. Dishes that brim with fresh, local ingredients – pungent lemongrass, searing chilies, plump seafood and fresh fruit – abound the table. We feast like kings for the cost of one Starbucks coffee at home.

I decide to follow this itinerary for three solid days and then we visit the Phraya Nakhon – a cave that can only be trekked into, located in Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park.

Don't give into the fear

As the trip progresses, both girls are less anxious about what awaits, because so far everything has been beautiful, tasty, friendly or fun, so we hop in a tuk tuk and head south at 5.30am.



By the pool on the last night in Bangkok

A rosy fingered dawn blooms over the Gulf of Siam as we weave through country roads. An enormous, twisted knot of limestone pokes out of the horizon by the sea. Our driver explains that in Thai, Khao Sam Roi Yot means 'mountain of 300 peaks'. This park is vast. The approach reveals a multitude of sea caves and viewpoints, hidden coves, long-standing sandalwood trees and wetlands teeming with wildlife.

I purchase three entrance passes at Dhs11 each. Thai boat captains swarm us, offering rides on their boats to the cave, but we are up for the hike despite the hot, humid temperatures.

A langur monkey jumps around playing with his tail as we trek down the other side of the hill to find a long beach, bungalows, boats and a small café. Our muscles aching and drenched in sweat, we see we are not even half way there. Morale is low, but we carry on. Even my inner voice shouts, 'This temple better be good'. The girls' inner voices are on speakerphone.

We're in a cave alone and this could be dangerous. What if there's an earthquake? What if there's a tsunami? We all know the potential 'what ifs' in any situation. Here, they seem exaggerated, but we carry on to Phraya Nakhon cave. We stumble along a dark dirt path through a cavern, only to find a small but colourful golden temple on a pavilion. Long green vines drift from the cave's ceiling where a small circular hole offers a peek at the sky.

There is a lot to see: shrines to the Buddha, plants, stalactites and mossy stalagmites. We are all waiting for the sun to shroud the temple, but it's early and it's still slightly cloudy.

We don't see the temple revealed in the exact way I've seen in photos, but I see the way my daughters behold it. They are wide-eyed, still radiating an enchanted 'where are we' kind of glow. Who knows where we'll be tomorrow? We haven't planned that far ahead.

What we learned

I don't travel for all-inclusive five star resorts, Starbucks coffees and to mingle with people like us. I travel to see a country, share food and stories and to learn. The Thai people shower us with gifts, food, attention and affection. We share a quote en route home: 'You get a strange feeling when you're about to leave a place, like you'll not only miss the people but you'll miss the person you are now at this time and in this place, because you'll never be this way ever again.' [Azar Nafisi, reading *Lolita in Tehran*]. Going off the beaten track has made us understand the essence of being a traveller as opposed to being a tourist, and my work here is done.

Destination unknowns

Goa, India

Some people are terrified by the notion of travelling to India, but Goa is an exception. Nearly everyone speaks English well. Goa's beaches are divine, the people are friendly and there are accommodation choices to suit everyone's style and budget. It's a three hour flight from AUH and the tickets rarely cost more than Dhs500.

First night pit stop: The Majorda Beach Resort is located in south Goa and is 20 minutes from Goa International airport. www.majordabeachresort.com.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lankans are full of warmth and love children. The island is safe and small enough to travel around without spending hours in the car, and it's full of beaches, jungles, flora and fauna to satisfy your thirst for adventure. The Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage is sure to tug at your tyke's heartstrings.

First night pit stop: Cinnamon Gardens, located in Hikkaduwa near the larger city Galle. It's close to the airport, family friendly and inexpensive. (+94 77 360 1469).

Bali, Indonesia

Travelling here with your kids is magical. Ubud has a burgeoning agro-tourism business. In this Balinese jungle, your kids will be mesmerized by the spice farms and enchanted by animals. Kids especially enjoy feeding the civet cats and learning how they 'produce' Kopi Luwak coffee.

First night pit stop: Contact Bali Pulina Agro-tourism Company for help with finding a place to stay. (+62 361 901728).

Philippines

Pandan Island is a perfect spot for families to unwind and enjoy lush tropical surroundings. Wake up to the singing of colourful birds and be steps from a stunning beach home to turtles.

First night pit stop: We recommend the Phaidon Beach Resort for your 'get away from it all' family holiday. www.island-dreams.com.