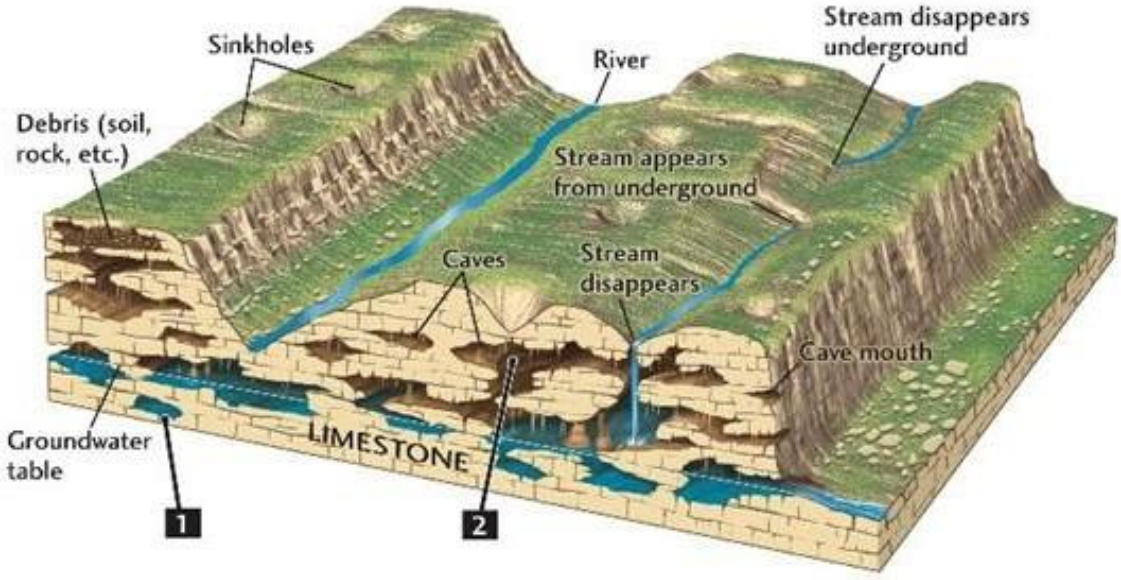
Kanlaya's Activities Guide

The Mae Hong Son Wilderness, a very special place

Price summary at end

All about Mae Hong Son



A wonderful mountain playground with an idyllic climate, Tribal culture, and remarkable geology, carpeted in subtropical deciduous rainforest, features that combine to create a unique ecosystem. It is one of the world's greatest Limestone landscapes. There is lots to see and do on every level in this spectacular region.

Limestone is the predominant rock. The topography has all the characteristics associated with that, riddled with caves, waterfalls, dolines, underground rivers, sheer precipices and soaring mountains. The porous Limestone holds the summer rains to feed its rivers and springs and nourish its forests and karst paving through the dry, sunlit winter until the annual rains return again.

The winter climate is heavenly, dry, bright, sunny days rising to high 20s, chilly refreshing nights with blanket dews at night that water the orchids and ferns and wrap the valleys in downy mists until the morning sun bores through an hour after dawn. March and April are hot, dry and dusty and the drought adapted trees shed their leaves and though they then burst bare leaved into rainbow hued flower, best avoided. The Green or rainy season starts in May and lasts until September, dazzling greens, ferocious jungle growth, stupendous but short-lived electric storms that drop the temperature followed by dazzling sunlight. The intermittent deluge primes the rivers for world class white water kayaking and rafting.

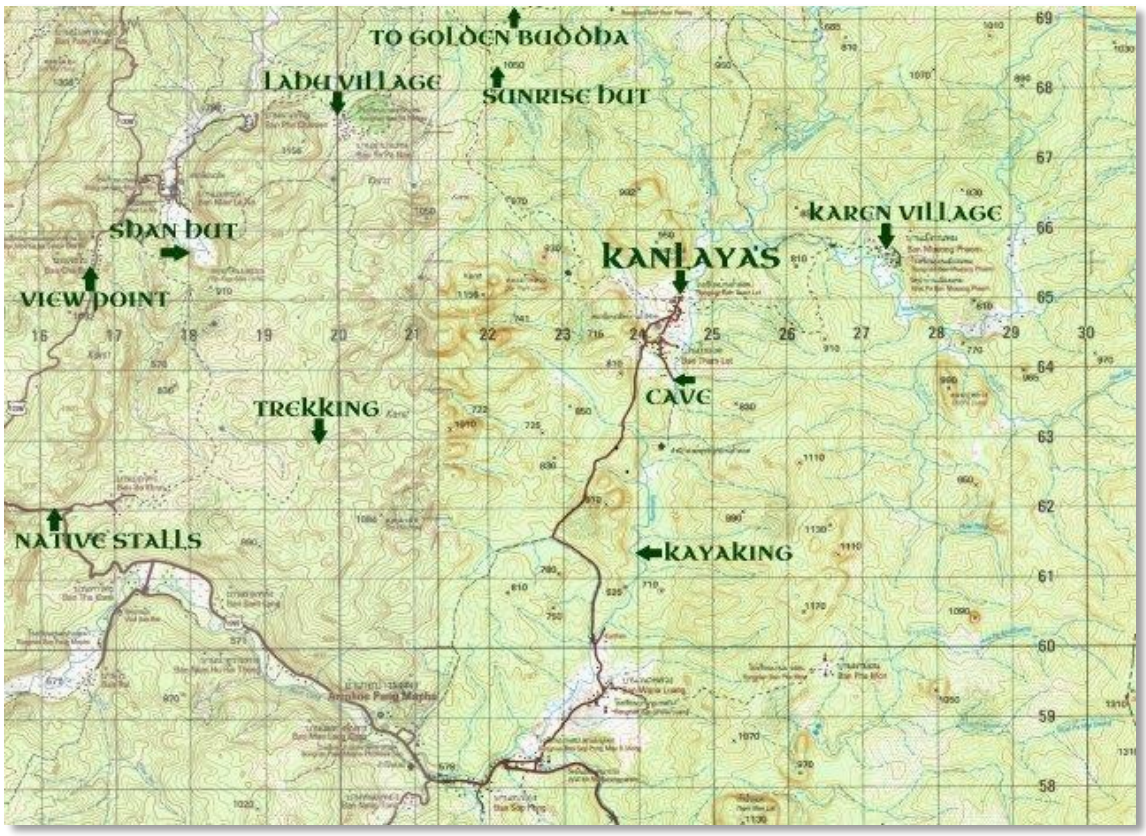
Karen, Lahu, Lisu and Shan Hill Tribes comprise 80% of the population, living in isolated mountain villages. Each still follows its own unique traditional culture, practising subsistence farming in cultivated pockets amongst the forest and foraging a wide range of seasonal jungle food. They wear colourful home woven costumes, speak their own languages and practise ancient religions, dignified but ever welcoming.

Sub-tropical deciduous rainforest clothes the mountains. In turn they support myriad epiphytes, wild orchids, ferns and bromeliads, scintillating with brilliant butterflies of every hue. The jungle flourishes during the rainy season and freewheels through the rainless winter drawing underground water.

Kanlaya's lies at the very centre of this magical area, within a day's march of the most exciting and beautiful features of the region, Thailand's least developed, sparsely populated and most heavily forested. Use us as your incomparably luxurious base camp to explore it all.

1. **Rest and relax**. We have a lovely site with wrap around views of mountains and jungle. The garden is spectacular, secluded and private, falling to the river which skirts our boundary far below. Enjoy a book, a massage, our local cuisine and walks on your own. The Jungle starts at the bottom of the garden
2. **Wellness.** Meditation, Yoga, Temple visits, local organic and foraged foods, tribal market, cooking, Karen Animist Beliefs and Rituals, Spirit House prayers.
3. **Active sports** including kayaking, caving, trekking, mountaineering and rock climbing. Keen photographers have a huge number of challenging subjects and changing light, sunrise, full moon, caving, kayaking, trekking, tribal faces and villages, tribal New Years, fauna, flora, markets and food.

4. **Culture**. Hill Tribe villages and crafts, languages, costumes, skills and beliefs, ethnic dancing, New Year rituals and celebrations, festivals like Loi Kran.
5. **Expeditions**, especially our unique off-road day through the orchid forest, starting with mountain top Sunrise Breakfast in our Lahu Native Rice Hut, surreal, huge and seldom visited Golden Buddha on the Burmese border, organic Lahu Arabica Coffee village and Lahu lunch. Short trek around mountain locked magical Mae Lanna Valley, a patchwork of exquisite paddy fields 250 years old



Scale - 1 square = 1km

Active Sports

Caving

More than 250 caves have been located, explored and detailed in the area, and many more still lie undiscovered by modern man. It is one of the world's great caving centres. The caves exhibit all the classic geological formations and support sensitive and sometimes unique ecosystems and species, including cave adapted swifts, numerous bat species and blind fish. Many were inhabited by Stone Age people and contain Iron Age coffins of great archaeological significance.

Thum Lod Cave is the most renowned, must see, spectacular cave. Managed by the village community, this is ecotourism at its best. A mile downstream from Kanlaya's the River Lang, which skirts our boundary, plunges into a series of huge cathedral like caverns, soaring 200 feet above the water. See spectacular formations, faint prehistoric cave paintings, coffin burials, bat colonies and the roosting and nesting place for 250,000 Swifts. Witnessing their evening return after a day on the wing is one of the great biological phenomena of Thailand. Entrance is on a bamboo raft with raft-man and local guide, beaching three times to climb high into the vaults above. Ideally visit an hour and a half before dusk, waiting at the cave exit to see the Swifts return in their thousands as the Bats fly out on night patrol. Just turn up and visit when you wish, checking in at the Visitor Reception area. Or we will transport and guide you ourselves and provide head torches and information. Allow two hours. Inclusive charge for up to 3 visitors is 600 Bahts

Swift Roost the easy way Prefer to see the roost the easy way? Run your Jacuzzi for 5.30pm. Ease into the bubbling water and soothing aqua massage, call for an ice-cold beer and gaze ahead up the valley to the hazy Burmese border. Exactly 15 minutes before sunset tens of thousands of swifts wing their way back to the cave, passing directly overhead, even ducking through the Jacuzzi pavilion for low flying insects. The upstream Lang River watershed is one of their principal flyways; a large percentage of the cave colony takes this route. One can only imagine their relief to be freewheeling downhill to bed after a round trip of 300 miles and 10 continuous hours on the wing; nearly as good as Jacuzzi and Beer. Cost: zero, calories expended: zero!

Serious & intermediate cavers can explore a vast range of seldom visited caves displaying every type of formation, ranging up to 14 km in length and of varying difficulty. We can arrange for you to join up with group

tours or organize a bespoke expedition with expert guide and full equipment. Through caves can take 24 hours to transit.

Kayaking & Rafting on the Rivers Lang, Khong & Pai

The rivers of Mae Hong Son drain the mountainous watershed south of the Burmese border, most flowing from North to South as tributaries to join the Pai River which tracks at right angles from the East to the Burmese Border west of Mae Hong Son town. They run all year, in the rainy season as ferocious spate torrents, often unnavigable and dangerous, to placid winter reaches. They flow through wild Tribal areas, seldom visited and the Pai itself for 70 km cuts through sparsely populated virgin jungle before reaching Mae Hong Son. At the very border with Burma sits a long-established riverside Karen Long Neck settlement. There are numerous rapids and gorges. The rivers teem with exotic birdlife, kingfishers, egrets, and duck, shimmering insects and abundant butterflies. Wild animals, buffalo and cattle come to drink at the banks and native Tribesmen fish the teaming waters using traditional methods.

The Green Season, October and November are the best months for world class white water rafting and kayaking on the Lang below Kanlaya's, the Khong and Pai rivers. After that the waters are placid and by Christmas the Lang is shallow. Even in the dry season the rivers offer a unique route into the wilderness and jungle. For the adventurous there are two-day expeditions down the Khong and into the Pai, overnighting in jungle riverside camps far from the nearest human civilization, disembarking in Mae Hong Son town.

Safety and experience are paramount. We work closely with expert guides from our own village Thum Lod, and Pai to organize either bespoke adventures or arrange for guests to join others more economically as a group. Fun and easy to fit in at any time is kayaking through Thum Lod Cave for 6 km or on down to the gorge which bypasses Soppong 12 km. Disembark to visit caves and jungle shrines on the way.

Two-day expeditions are best tagged on after or before staying at Kanlaya's. We can plan that for you and coordinate your logistics depending on starting point and end destination. We know the whole region intimately and all the people and places involved.

Trekking, Hill Tribe Villages, Culture & Jungle cooking

At Kanlaya's the jungle starts literally at the bottom of the garden, and Kanlaya herself grew up in her family's Hill Tribe village just a few miles upstream. That makes us the perfect starting point to trek the rivers, mountains, villages, forests, temples and caves in the region. There are easy river walks you can follow alone but for the jungle an experienced official guide is required. Depending on your stamina, fitness and wishes there is a wide range of more or less challenging routes. All pass through the mountains, with soaring views to distant peaks, through verdant jungle, alongside teeming rivers and with traditional Hill Tribe villages en route. You will see subsistence farming, maybe river fishing, jungle foraging and local tribespeople wearing traditional home weaved clothes and speaking their own languages. The villages range from truly remote, rudimentary, built of bamboo and thatch, without power and running water to more favoured with road access, new power supplies, piped water, schools and even phone coverage in places. We take a packed lunch or arrange to eat in a village house.

Routes can be tough and demanding, with big vertical ascents, or gentler and even all down-hill, taking in a variety of features and settlements. Take a simple packed lunch wrapped in banana leaf. Or Kanlaya's family who live in the Karen village two hours trek away, will cook a traditional Karen Hunters Lunch in green giant fresh-cut Bamboo tubes over an open fire beside a river teeming with fish. Kanlaya's father is the hereditary keeper of the old Animist religion in his village. Celebrate the ancient Karen Wrist Tying Ceremony in his house, whilst eating sacrificial chicken, drinking home brewed rice whiskey and listening to the Burmese drums.

You need good walking shoes, hiking sticks, and a qualified Guide from the village, either Kanlaya herself, or one of her innumerable cousins. Treks are tailored to your wishes, how far you want to walk, what you want to see, jungle, foraging, village weaving and culture. From the Karen village it's an easy shady trek downriver right to our boundary. Car back up and flexible duration, from 4 to 7 hours as you wish.

This U Tube clip filmed in Gail's Karen village and featuring her cousins and nieces, gives a flavour of Karen cooking in the jungle and beside the river https://youtu.be/Bv4B3vvjNsg

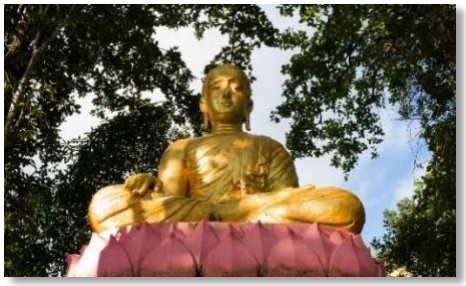
Trekking on Moto Cross Bikes

For the adventurous we arrange adventure-filled, thrilling moto-cross expeditions, off road, along giddy tracks that shadow the militarised border with Burma that runs along the lofty watershed between the two countries. Led by an ex-Army major who patrolled these borders for years, he knows every track and border post in the region. It's off road from the moment you leave Kanlaya's. Riding adapted 250cc bikes expect to cover up to 150 km a day of challenging tracks and vertiginous gradients in magnificent countryside as wild as you can find anywhere worldwide. You will visit remote settlements that seldom see outsiders, but greet you and your leader like old friends and ply you with home-made hooch.

Expeditions

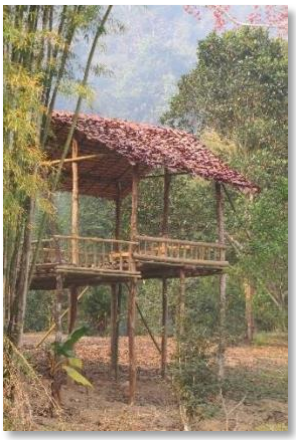
4 x 4 Off Road Expedition, Sunrise Breakfast, Golden Buddha, Lahu Organic Coffee Farm & Mae Lanna Valley

Magical, Mystical, Marvellous. Using our Chevrolet 4-wheel drive 4 door pickup and driver/guide. Leave Kanlaya's an hour before dawn, climbing steeply through the mist, into thin air on the mountain top, with giddy views stretching 80 km on a clear day. Here we have had our very own enchanting Mountain Rice Hut built and maintained by the local Lahu Chieftain. We make an annual contribution to his village school in his village in return for the privilege. Witness the dawn over the mountains, valleys filled with mist. Peaks appear as islands in a sea of white. Whilst the sun rises above the most distant mountain ridge, bacon and eggs, croissants and fresh brewed Arabica coffee. The most romantic breakfast ever.



After breakfast, on to the truly surreal Golden Buddha. Pitched on a hilltop gazing into Burma, reached by an exciting series of giddy switchbacks, the huge Buddha rises over 20 meters above the surrounding forest. Extraordinary, remote, far from habitation, seldom visited, sits this mystical, deeply moving and highly improbable religious statement of great faith. Irrational, surreal and amazing. The climb to the Golden Buddha is flanked by an avenue of 40 subsidiary Buddhas, each in different pose. Strike each of the nine great bronze bells whilst making a wish at each peal. Kanlaya's own Buddha, the second largest, is the sole effigy facing inwards to Thailand across the mountain tops to the South.

Track back off-road from the Buddha following a series of mountain ridges. For the best views sit outside in the back of the pick-up. Remarkable sub-tropical rainforest flora, especially trees totally encrusted with orchids, which survive the rainless winter thanks to the dense nightly dews which bathe them in moisture. We pass the untouched Black Lahu village where our hut landlord lives, before reaching the Organic Lahu Coffee village. For foodies and farmers, stop to see and taste the Coffee story, husbandry, cropping, drying, removing the "parchment" and finally roasting. Lahu Johns will show us his heavenly farm, avocados, coffee, tea, passion fruit, pomelo, gourds, cherries, plums, papaya, limes, oranges. Organic heaven; taste if for lunch cross legged in Lahu John's village house



Drop down 350 meters into the magical valley of Mae Lanna, described in Lonely Planet as "Set in an incredibly picturesque mountain valley, this tiny Shan village feels like a lost corner of the world. Some of Mae Hong Son's most beautiful scenery, and several Red and Black Lahu villages, lie on the half loop between Thum Lod (Kanlaya's) and Mae Lanna." Kanlaya's apart, this is the most beautiful, though seldom visited valley in Mae Hong Son. Entirely enclosed with high jungle covered mountains, the exceptionally fertile valley floor of maybe 1000 hectares is watered by a river that rises on the Burmese border. At the tail of the valley a sheer barricade of rock hundreds of feet high bars the river's exit. In response, it dives underground (see diagram at beginning of guide) down through a swirling sink hole to join the longest through cave, in South-East Asia. The valley is terraced in intricate and beautifully constructed rice paddies, where after harvest herds of hump backed cattle and buffalo graze. It's one of the few places where the calls of the Gibbon can be unerringly heard after dawn each day.

Settled over 250 years ago this is a rich and beautiful village. Every house has a verdant garden of flowers, fruit and veg. The Temple, Burmese in style, is extraordinarily beautiful and seats the whole village. From the village shop trek across the paddy fields to a stand of immense flowering trees at the point the river disappears. From November to January see the rice harvest, truly a Bruegelian mediaeval scene.

From Mae Lanna the road improves and climbs out of the west face of the valley with great panoramic views back towards the mountains behind Kanlaya's. It's become must see, Instagram essential Ban Jabo Viewpoint, seething with tourists, the only ones, I promise, that you will see today, an obligatory half-way stop en route from Pai to Mae Hong Son. On the way home we pass a row of Native food stalls with exotic, challenging and intriguing things to for culinary adventurers to try for dinner. From here the road drops back into the Lang Valley and branching off the main road we follow the River Lang back to Kanlaya's through the National Forest Park. The whole expedition takes 8 or nine hours and covers around 70 Kms, mostly back and off road.

Sunrise Breakfast

Short of time and other plans? We can have you back at Kanlaya's before 9 AM after the most romantic sunrise and scrumptious breakfast, and sighting the Golden Buddha, something you won't ever forget.

Day out in Pai

Pai is a town like no other in Thailand. Now the most popular highland destination in the country, it lies about 50 km east of Kanlaya's, on the other side of the highest pass on the famed Mae Hong Son Loop. In a verdant valley, with the eponymous Pai River running through, the town is encircled by jungle clad peaks. From its early days as a Muslim trading post, on the Hippy Trail of the 70's and 80's, it has morphed into a relaxed, largely alternative, low key destination for free spirits of all ages. Famous for its live music, laid back bars, tattoo parlours, alternative lifestyle opportunities, recently legalized Cannabis, it's especially popular with long haul back packers from all over the world. Recently though it has also been "Discovered" by a well-heeled rich young generation from Bangkok, a bit of the Wild West in their own back yard. The demographic is changing too as more discerning foreign visitors are increasingly drawn to the culture and topography of Mae Hong Son, the great Northern Wilderness, the Province with the lowest population density, the greatest forest cover and where 80% of inhabitants are Tribal.

There are masses of things to do in and around Pai, Elephant camps which specialize in river walks and splashes, piping hot springs to wallow in, waterfalls to visit, numerous trekking tours, abundant open-air bars with excellent live music, numerous cheap restaurants and eateries, two of real merit, and a lively, colourful, nightly Walking Street with native stalls and scrumptious street food. Hill Tribe weavings, edgy clothes, tattoo parlours, street food and lively bars.

The bars mostly close at midnight but two on the other side of the river, Don't Cry and Bamboo, are the edgy late-night spots, with funky and reggae music till nearly dawn, colourful clientele and often an astonishing Fire cabaret or similar. Even in Chiang Mai nothing comes close.

We can devise a trip to suit your wishes, the afternoon sightseeing, an elephant river ride and the hot springs, followed by Walking Street and supper and a nightcap listening to live music. Or go for the late option, arrive early evening and sit it out at Don't Cry, and let us drive you home while you snooze in the back.

The Road to Mae Hong Son

The road from Kanlaya's to Mae Hong Son town and airport passes through the finest scenery of the whole Mae Hong Son Loop, road of a 1000 bends (1,650 in fact for purists!) Towering mountains and verdant forest crowd in on the road which climbs some three passes on the way, plunging downhill to cross each of the rivers draining the watershed along the Burmese border to the north. About 90 km, a leisurely two hour's drive. On the way are many fascinating and inspiring places to visit.

Three options, as a day trip from Kanlaya's or on arrival on arrival at Mae Hong Son on the morning Bangkok Air flight around 10.00am after a brief 30-minute low level flight from Chiang Mai (currently suspended), there is the choice between a transfer straight back to Kanlaya's in time for lunch or making a day of it and taking in as many of the stops as you wish, decisions that can be made on the day. Or there is a 5pm departure from Mae Hong Son to Chiang Mai so this can be done in reverse the day you leave. (Routes still not fully reestablished post Covid as of Xmas 2022)

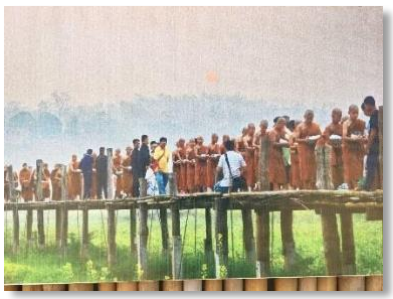
Here is a list of the options. I have placed an * besides those which can be grouped comfortably for a round trip or en route to or from MHS Airport

1* Karen Long Neck Village

This is an authentic long-established village community on the banks of the Pai River downstream from Mae Hong Son and just above the Burmese border. It is cut off by high water and unpassable tracks during the rainy season. The people are subsistence rice farmers, fishermen and weavers and visitors also bring in useful revenue in the winter and provide a market for their weavings. The village is reached by an exciting ride downriver in a fast scorpion long tail boat in about 40 minutes, and the village visit takes an hour or so. See video clip Long Tail Scorpion to the Burmese Border and Karen Long Neck https://ulozto.cz/live/!hIktBB0HRQGa/longtail-to-longneck-2-mp4

2.* There is an excellent restaurant with impressive rainforest water garden, best in Mae Hong Son, en route to the boat station.

3*. Su Tong Pae Bridge, or “The Bamboo Bridge,” is about 6 km north of Mae Hong Son. It is a unique bamboo causeway about 1 km long over lovely paddy fields either side of the river it spans. At the far end is a pilgrimage destination in the form of a revered Buddhist temple complex, increasingly revered and still evolving. We drop you in the village at one end, meeting you at the other. Less than an hour’s detour.



4*. Mud Spa, about 15 km north of Mae Hong Son, higher up the river spanned by the Quaking Bridge. Remarkable hot spring with rare black liquid health giving mud. A range of spa treatments, all a bit scruffy but good value and invigorating. All involve caking you in the alluvial mud. Spend from an hour or all day depending on enthusiasm for the spa experience. It is quite feasible to make this a day trip whilst staying in Mae Hong Son.

5. The Chinese Village at Rak Thai. Remote Chinese enclave on the Burmese Border, remnant of the defeated Chinese Nationalist Army, for years opium smugglers. Granted amnesty and Thai nationality, they reinvented themselves as tea planters. Very recently another evolution, now a seething, rapidly expanding destination for throngs of Thais of Chinese origin. En route the Queen’s Summer Palace, a beautiful highland lake community and impressive waterfall. The detour climbs a beautiful valley to the highest village in Thailand. Only feasible from the airport when the early flight from Chiang Mai is reinstated. Otherwise, a fascinating day trip from Kanlaya’s.

6*. Fish Cave, about 20 km east of Mae Hong Son. Not really a cave at all but a beautiful crystal-clear wide river which erupts from the mountain (and that point is called “The Cave” and is in fact a holy shrine). The river skirts a near vertical mountain behind it and is a preserve for legions of lovely wild river fish which can be clearly seen. It takes maybe 45 minutes to stroll around and there are excellent cheap BBQ stalls at the entrance. Tickets are only about 100 Baht.

7*. Forest Monastery is one of the most revered meditation centers in Thailand. Devotees from all over the world may enroll there for as long as they wish, joining the simple monastic routine for a few days. It is a serene, spiritual and deeply peaceful setting midway from Kanlaya’s to Mae Hong Son. Nestled in a ring of towering, near vertical limestone mountains where the little valley broadens out into a sublime green oasis criss-crossed by pure mountain streams, beautifully planted and with magnificent temples, assembly rooms, seminary, dining hall, spartan but meticulously clean guest bungalows, dotted around the campus. Visitors enrolling just sign in, don the white cotton uniform provided and join the daily routine. That begins at 5 AM when alms are given to the Monks, followed by chanting, meditation and breakfast. A 11 AM the very charismatic, multilingual, and widely travelled Abbott delivers a sermon, devotees sitting in parallel rows cross-legged for the duration, not so easy on the bare tiled floor. The second and last meal all strictly plant based, is at mid-day. Much of the afternoon is given up to ritual sweeping of the whole site, the leaves composted and recycled into the food chain. The Monastery food supply is entirely self- sustaining. The sexes segregate by night, no drinking, music, smoking, fornication or loud

speech. On departure no word of money but departing guests give according to their means. Respectful guests, conservatively dressed, are welcome to walk around and It is possible by arrangement to join the day's devotions

and meditation early one morning.

8. Souza Waterfalls. Just opposite Forest Monastery a dirt road plunges into some of the finest jungle I have seen, superb trees and undergrowth. The track roughly follows the Kong River for about 12 km, fording tributaries several times, to a final clearing beside the river. The falls themselves are a bit of an anti-climax at the end of the road. What is interesting is for visitors to walk in the last part of the road, as many or few kilometres as you like, to see the forest on foot. We can go on ahead to the clearing and can make a picnic there (no other facilities, it is deep in the jungle). This can take about two hours by car or add an hour for a walk and another if we had lunch there. Modest entry charge.

9*. Stop at Pangmapha Viewpoint, the second highest on the Mae Hong Son Loop, with great views and native stalls. Say 15- minute stop

10*. Native stalls on the roadside, which we always shop at when we go past. Jungle foraged and village grown specialities, quite fun to choose and try later for dinner. 10 minutes

You can choose any or none of these side visits on arrival at Mae Hong Son.

Secret Waterfall Expeditions

We have two quite exceptional, remote and very beautiful Waterfall destinations. One is never visited by anyone else, the second very rarely. Each is something of a major expedition, far off-road, in deep jungle and spectacular mountain scenery. Long days and the last legs on foot with guides and porters. There is something rather special about having a destination both beautiful, seldom visited and remote. At the foot of the falls the guides make a fire and cook a memorable meal in a magical setting. The falls themselves comprise a series of Travertine lips, over which the water cascades down to the next level, pooling between each before spilling over to the next lip. The air sparkles with spray mist and the vegetation is pristine, lush, ephemeral, vivid green and alive with butterflies and dragon flies. It could be the Garden of Eden. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdw8NaNSZ3Y&feature=youtu.be which is a compilation of both waterfalls

Manora Falls

Manora is a very remote Karen village of 47 houses, traditional and friendly. The Headman and his brother are cousins of Kanlaya's father. They dress in Tribal clothes, the houses have rare wooden shingle roofs. The village has no power or phone coverage. (We led a scheme to install a PV electricity installation for each house. funded by the German Embassy). The track in is 19 km from the hard road, and takes over an hour very scenic drive, stupendous cliffs rearing hundreds of meters and some of the highest peaks in the Province. It is unpassable in the rainy season. Not a place tourists ever visit or are remotely aware of and a destination in its own right.

First call is green tea in the Cousins' house, buffalo, pigs, chickens and dogs in the yard, maize hanging to dry and weaving loom in the corner, a Gibbons skull and Hornbill's beak on the wall, fishing nets on the balcony.

Then it's off down-stream, crossing and re-crossing the fast, clean water that flows all year, channeled off in places to little paddy fields. The Cousins carry in the lunch and lead the way. After a mile or two strike off up quite a sharp uphill, scale that and then down to a subsidiary stream running through immense virgin trees festooned with creepers, alive with birds, maybe a troop of monkeys and home to Gibbons. Trekking on the sound of the distant falls can be heard and the guides stop to cut bamboo shafts, maybe 4/ 5" diameter, to be used to cook in. The walk in takes up to a couple of hours, less on the downhill return. At the base of the biggest fall, we pitch camp, the guides light a fire and guests can plunge into the limpid pool and shower beneath. Lunch won't be forgotten. It is cooked by filling bamboo shafts with pork, chilies, , garlic, tomatoes, all manner of vegetables, foraged and cultivated, filled with crystal water from the falls and plugged with squash leaves. The tubes are planted at an angle close to the fire which has them steaming surprisingly quickly. More bamboo is cut in half lengthways to fashion readymade plates into which the cooked contents are poured together with mountain rice. Beer cooled at the foot of the falls helps to wash it down.

Quite a long day, about ten hours. To bring income to the Village we are encouraging high class but limited ecotourism at Manora, comfortable Homestay, traditional crafts and exceptional trekking and ecology. Your comments and advice can contribute greatly to that.

The Secret, or Magic Waterfall

Over the last five years to the best of our knowledge we have been the only visitors to this quite exceptional destination. No wonder, it is far from the beaten track in challenging terrain and under military control because it's a sensitive border area. From Kanlaya's, we follow the main road for nearly an hour towards Mae Hong Son. After breasting the main pass, striking off northwards following the Khong river up the valley towards its source on the Burmese border. After several check-points we pick up an army guide and second vehicle to guide us in. The road gives way to a difficult track through dense jungle, the guide takes the wheel for the last few kilometres. It peters out completely, in view of the Border. It is tough country, not the place for a breakdown or to ground the axle, and machetes may be needed to cut through an overgrown track seldom used. Its good to have local support and to carry in supplies and cook the lunch at the base of the falls in fresh cut green bamboo tubes.

Abandoning the cars at the point a Hut was built for the Queen's visit many years ago (and a Royal Loo too). Sadly, she never did see the falls, the downhill path was just too steep. From the Hut a path winds on through the forest before zig zagging down a steep defile for hundreds of feet as the crescendo of the distant roar falls builds. The jungle is so dense they are heard long before the first glimpse and finally come into view. Much grander and larger than Manora, and set in a narrower, steeper valley, the falls are quite spectacular and the whole setting is overwhelming. The mist from the falls creates a permanent micro-climate so that the vegetation is exceedingly lush, mosses cosset the rocks and lichens and orchids festoon the trees and the insect life is prolific.

Formed by a ladder of great bulging buttresses of limestone, each maybe 10 metres high and twice as wide, reminiscent of the laughing Buddha's fat rippling belly, tiered one above the other, festooned in creepers, covered in deep moss and lichens, a flight of over twenty in all. And over each palisade crashes a surge of white water, bouncing off and down to the next rim, then on and down again, the volume growing at each tier. One can only imagine at the height of the rainy season how awe-inspiring, indomitable and stupendous the flow must be. The combination of the journey in, the geology, the exotic vegetation and the sheer majesty of the falls themselves, coupled with its privacy and serenity make it for me the loveliest place I know on earth.

As at Manora, we settle at the foot of the largest cascade and light a fire, cook a memorable lunch, bathe in the limpid pools and store a lifetime memory. The way out is dramatic, by way of scaling the falls themselves, upwards to the highest tier. From there a steep single file path leads upwards to emerge from the forest not far from the cars.

Difficult to say which is the better destination. Manora is easier to organize, comes with a family and cultural Tribal bonus and the warmth and village experience, in wonderful mountain scenery, unspoilt forest and the best jungle lunch there is. The Secret Falls are quite magnificent, equally remote but in hazardous border country, and a backup team is needed which adds to the cost. Best to give us notice if you wish to visit either.

Tribal New Year - Unforgettable Experiences

In Thailand, New Year runs and runs, from the end of December right through to mid-March. Everyone is welcome from Western parties in Pai, Thum Lod and Chiang Mai, to remote Tribal rituals Westerners seldom see. It's a great way to make friends, have fun and experience Tribal customs as one of the family. The season kicks off with the Western New Year on December 31st. A much bigger deal than Christmas, fireworks, feasting and dancing are the highlights. There is always a party to join in. The Chinese New Year is especially big in Chiang Mai. You can see how large the Chinese presence is by counting the shops closed for the duration. Wild dancing, prancing Dragons, fire crackers, music and laughter, traditional Chinese street food and magic. But the real thing is the series of Tribal New Years, Karen, Lahu, Lisu, Aka and Shan. Each lasts a week and as the nights pass, a wild crescendo builds, rhythmic dancing, ancient music, Tribal rituals.

As much as anything, whilst celebrating the spirits of the mountains, rivers, seasons and elements, New Year is a time for matchmaking and young love. Every Tribal Village girl and matron is adorned with magnificent hand-made Tribal costumes, often festooned with ancestral family silver jewelry of great beauty and extraordinary value. Hair is set, traditional makeup and manicure all contribute to the young girls of the Village showing off to their very best. The Dance is led by menfolk on traditional stringed instruments, horns and pipes. They beat out a shamanic, repeated trance-inducing rhythm whilst circles of magnificently attired girls and older women-folk gyrate around the central totemic focal point in the Village Square. These dances can last for an age, 30, 45 even 60 minutes. In flickering single gas lights or meagre and sparse PV bulbs, since few of these remote settlements have electricity yet, and flashes of light from the sparks of great bonfires, the whole scene is quite extraordinary. Remote in time, rich in tradition, steeped in ritual, the pervading sense of excitement mounts as the nights heap up.

Eyes flashing, shy smiles, sidelong glances, the romance and traditional pairing up that brings essential new blood to these remote and inward-looking communities creates an almost tangible sense of excitement and promise, coming as it does on the cusp of another new season as Nature renews itself after the cold chill of the mountain-top winter.

Each Tribal New Year is separated by time from the others, set by the phases of the Moon and ancient traditions. We know where and when the most traditional, most inspiring and most exuberant of these celebrations take place. In extraordinarily remote mountain villages, reached with some difficulty off-road, journeys the more romantic and exciting for happening in pitch darkness, over almost impossible gradients, through deep jungle tracks, just getting there is an adventure. And it's not just us and our guests who make the trip. Invariably the back of our pick-up has a dozen of our neighbours, all in costume, hitching a lift, chattering and laughing.

Tribal hospitality at New Year is legendary. As visitors you will be welcomed into every house, from Headman to humblest abode, to sit cross-legged on the floor while being plied with New Year specialities and almost certainly super strong home distilled rice whisky, colourless and fiery. If you don't down it with one toss you lose the ardent respect with which all Farang are endowed, so honour dictates you swallow it like a man and suppress the fire that scorches your gullet. Every eye will be watching how you drink it. Top marks go to those who, by not even a flicker, betray the sheer pain as the liquor burns down their screaming throats. Don't expect to come home sober, or to join the rhythmic circle without the Dutch courage this hospitality demands. We ourselves load the pickup with crates of beer and other goodies to contribute to the party and preserve our honour in the face of unstinting hospitality.

So, if you are at Kanlaya's in the New Year and want to see a vanishing, but still perfectly intact, ethnic celebration dating back through centuries of tradition and sustained through nomadic wanderings right down the Himalayan Massif from Mongolia and Gobi Desert, join our Tribal New Year expeditions back in time and up to the mountain tops.

Kanlaya's Activities Pricing Guide

Please note that prices involving third parties are subject to change Baht

Caving

Thum Lod Cave. Public entry prices including local guide and raft man,
Fixed price for party of up to three 600
Kanlaya English speaking guide/driver. Cave visit at cost above. Accompany guests through cave and wait for Swift Roost and guide back. Each way transport. Provide head torches, flat fee for up to five guests. Can self-guide or keep Cave Guide on 1000

Intermediate caving, bespoke or join a village group.
Prices on application depends on numbers and itinerary. World class caving with experiences qualified guides

Serious speleology, 2 experienced guides, all equipment. Advance notice required
Deep penetration 4/5 hours in cave. Or overnight for Mae Lanna Cave, longest through cave in South-East Asia. Unique blind fish, underground waterfalls. Tough and serious.
Prices and details on application

Trekking

One-day trek, qualified Karen guide, packed lunch, forest, river, village visit, flexible bespoke route, Trek back downriver to Kanlaya's river steps. Car back up on call.
Each 2000
Minimum two 4000
Bespoke Trek, qualified Guide, car to start and back up, part-foraged Karen Hunters Lunch beside river, Karen Village visit, weaving, bamboo crafts, meet Gail's family, trek back down river to Kanlaya's boundary, or by car.
Two 6000
Extra guests each azzza1000

Kayaking

Lang River

Through cave 6 Kms, visit second cave, 2 hours, each 1500
Through cave, 15 km to Pangmapha, 2 more caves, rapids, forest temple, Pack lunch, 5 hours, each 2000

Intermediate. Join up with group or min charge

Khong River, 45 Kms drive, all day, waterfalls, lunch & transport, each 2800

Sunrise breakfast, Golden Buddha and Mae Lanna Valley, off road, 8 hours, 70 km, inc full sunrise breakfast and lunch in Mae Lanna Garden Resort or Lahu Coffee Village farmer's house and farm visit. Coffee at Ban Jabo Viewpoint
Min for two 7500
Extra guests, max four total 2000

Manora Waterfalls, Karen Village visit, trek and fall-side lunch, two village guides, 40 km off road, 80 kms round trip 10000
Extra 2000

Secret Waterfall, price for two, back up vehicle, guides/porters, some off road, Karen Bamboo Hunters lunch and BBQ, Lahu village or Army stop on way back	12500
Additional guests, each, up to 2. More than 2 needs extra car	2500

The Road to Mae Hong Son

4x4 4 door Chevrolet pick-up/ drop off round trip, guide and car to MHS Airport inc first two hours from airport, 2 guests	3500
Or round trip from Kanlaya's inc first 4 hours	3500
Per extra hour driver/guide/car	750
Per extra guest	500
Long Neck direct charges	
Scorpion boat return for up to 5 passengers	600
Extend downriver to Burmese border option	500
Village contribution, each	250
Quaking Bridge	no charge
Fish Cave each guest	100
Forest Monastery	no charge
Viewpoint and Tribal stalls	no charge
Lunch Fish Cave BBQ or Noodle Restaurant, both good	at cost

Rak Thai Chinese village, **Queen's Palace and Kings Project**

8/9 hours, car and driver/guide, either round trip from Kanlaya's or MHS pick-up/drop off	6000
Extra guests	1000
Authentic Chinese Lunch in Rak Thai	at cost

Pai Town

4x4 4 door Chevrolet pick-up, driver/guide, 2 guests, 130 km approx 7 hours duration, stop at High Pass viewpoint	6000
Extra guests each	1000
Extra hour driver/guide/car	750
Elephant river ride each	1000
Hot Springs bathing each	250
Eat on Walking Street budget each	500