Christophe Boisvieux/Hemis.fr; Dom Joly

KEEP THE WHOLE TRIBE HAPPY

Dom Joly had been neglecting his nearest and dearest, but he made heroic amends and booked the world's greatest family holiday

Come and swim with me, Jacks..." I was pleading with my four-year-old son who was scuttling past the pool as fast as his little legs would carry him. As he reached a huge clump of bamboo that made him look an inch tall, he turned to look back fleetingly — "Sorry, I can't, Dad, I've got yoga." Yoga? What the hell had happened to my family? We'd been in Thailand for one week and my son had turned into a hippie.

We were in Chiang Mai, Thailand's second city and a far more temperate destination than Bangkok. It was also "the best destination of happiness and impression" — at least, that's what the sign said outside the main railway station, and who was I to argue? The idea of the trip was for me, a too-often-absent dad, to gain parental brownie points by organising the perfect trip for all the family. My eight-year-old daughter, Parker, is obsessed with pandas, and Chiang Mai zoo has a pair of giant ones. My four-year-old son (the yogi), Jackson, is infatuated with elephants, and this is the best place in the world for elephant trekking. My wife, Stacey (undisclosed age), is a lover of all things spa-related, and is in severe need of some "her" time. So I go for it and organise this holiday.

Everyone is a bit wary: it's a long flight, and I've booked us in at a hotel that is the brainchild of a millionaire Thai car salesman who dreamt of building a resort in the form of a fantasy city straight out of the ancient Lanna kingdom, the land of a million rice fields. It could be a recipe for kitsch disaster. Fortunately for us, it's a Mandarin Oriental, and quite the most stunning hotel I've ever stayed in. So far, so good.

We wake up the following day to great excitement: today is panda day, and Parker is up at 5.30am, ready to go. Luckily, the zoo doesn't open until 9am, and we are told that the pandas wake up at 10am and get fed at 11am — I wouldn't mind being a panda. We coax Parker back into bed.

It's not only panda day, but Songkran, the Thai new year. As this always takes place in April, the hottest month, there is a tradition of spraying everyone with water to cool down. The people of Chiang Mai have taken this to an extreme level, as we discover on our way to the zoo. It's like an aquatic LA South Central, with moped riders performing drive-by shootings using high-powered water pistols, and gangs of kids on every corner, hurling buckets of water at anyone going past. Jackson is keen to get out and start street fighting, but Parker will not be diverted: we're off to see the pandas, and nothing is going to stop us now.

We get to the zoo and it's a carnival — street sellers, food stalls, motorbikes zooming all over the place. It's glorious chaos and I love it. After a 10-minute walk, we get to the panda house. Parker is almost fainting with excitement. She clutches her lifelong companion, Pandy, a beaten-up toy panda who has his own passport and has travelled everywhere with her since she was tiny. We enter the building and both Parker and I are yabbering away loudly. A guard in an ill-fitting uniform rushes up and tells us in no uncertain terms to shut up. Pandas are extremely noise-sensitive, and one is pregnant to boot. The sensitive creatures are already up, but they're not doing much. To be honest, "up" for a panda means they have their eyes open.

Suddenly it's feeding time — the pandas are given huge sticks of bamboo and they sit on two chairs, methodically stripping off the leaves and stuffing them down their throats. After 10 minutes of frenetic feeding, they get up, flop into a cool pool of water and fall asleep. It's good to be a panda. Parker is so excited she can barely speak. She quietly compares notes with Pandy about all the panda facts she knows. It's hot — very, very hot. As we return to our city within a city, we once again face the barrage of water attacks — it's actually a relief to be soaked.

THE NEXT DAY, and it's elephant time. Jackson is up at 5am, beating Parker's effort the previous morning. He's buzzing and won't go back to bed. He very much hopes that the elephant will know his name. I tell him that this is unlikely, and not to be too disappointed if it doesn't. I like the idea of our destination, Patara elephant farm. It's not a camp, and they don't do the kind of "show" where the poor animals are made to stand on tourists and paint pictures. The concept is that you learn about an elephant by looking after your own all day. This means feeding it, washing it, even checking its poo. (A healthy elephant produces at least six cannonballs of poop per bowel movement — just so you know.) Jackson is in seventh heaven, despite being slightly nervous when the baby elephant of the group decides that he is to become his new best friend and keeps chasing him round the farm. We introduce ourselves to our elephants by offering them a huge basket of fruit each. If the elephants' ears are wagging, they're in a good mood — after they've consumed half their body weight in fruit, the flapping provides us with an efficient air-conditioning system. We then lead our pachyderms down to the river, where we wash them.

It's quite extraordinary to be up so close and personal with these primeval beasts. They are like huge puppies, rolling around playfully in the water and responding well to tickling. They thank us for the bath by spraying us with water from their trunks. Jackson is rolling about in the river, giggling with his baby elephant friend. I feel good, very good.

We mount our mammoths and set off into the jungle. Parker is riding her own elephant, as are we, but Jackson is too young and rides shotgun. He is keen that we encounter a tiger, as he wants to see who wins in a fight between them and an elephant. Thankfully, we see no tigers and eventually get to a waterfall, where we dismount for a picnic lunch. As the elephants wallow in the pool below the waterfall, we sit on a rock above them and eat lunch off two huge palm leaves. By now, the kids are very comfortable with the elephants and spend a long time with trunks wrapped around their little bodies, engaging in elephant hugs. Jackson pronounces it "the bestest day of my life". My bottom hurts so badly that I will find it difficult to sit down for three days, but phase two is over and I'm doing well.

As we leave, we are told the three elephant secrets to life. First, walk like an elephant. Elephants are sure-footed and check the ground meticulously before every step. We should not be impetuous, but really think about things before acting. Second, eat like an elephant. No problem there, I thought, but it turns out that they are healthy eaters — only fruit and vegetables. Consequently, elephants do not suffer much from cancers or heart conditions. Finally, live like an elephant. Family is important to these creatures, and they all look after each other. The mother of the herd is important, and I am urged to listen to and respect my wife. I feel sure Stacey has slipped the mahout a fiver for this one, but decide to ignore my cynicism for once. With this in mind, we head back to implement phase three.

The following day, I dispatch Stacey to the hotel spa, where she is given an intensive life interrogation before being prescribed her treatments. She spends three hours there while the kids disappear to try "kid yoga". I flop into the pool and wallow. Elephant living is for tomorrow; today I live by panda rules.

We all meet up again around lunchtime, and there is distinct harmony in the Joly family unit — a rare commodity. The kids are eager to show me their "tiger" and "tree" positions, while Stacey doesn't say much — she just sits calmly, gazing out over the rice fields.

Bath time at Chiang Mai; above right, Dom and Jackson make a friend

"My bottom hurts so badly that I will find it difficult to sit down for three days"

"How was it?" I ask gingerly.

"Heaven," she replies, smiling at me like she used to before kids. "You really should try one of their treatments. It would be very good for you."

I smile back in a noncommittal fashion. I have no need for spas — I've found my secret to happiness, and that's a laughing, contented family. It's no coincidence that they call this country the Land of Smiles.

Dom Joly was a guest of Seasons in Style

TRAVEL BRIEF

Getting there: there are no direct flights from the UK or Ireland to Chiang Mai. Expect to pay from £660 from Heathrow with Thai Airways via Bangkok, through Trailfinders (0845 058 5858, trailfinders.com), Opodo (0871 277 0090, opodo.co.uk), or Netflights (0800 747 0000, www.netflights.com).
Where to stay: the Mandarin Oriental (00 800 2828 3838, www.mandarinoriental.com) has room-only doubles from £230. Or try the more minimalist Chedi (00 66 53 253 333, www.ghmhotels.com), with doubles from £132.
Tour operators: Seasons in Style (01244 202000, www.seasonsinstyle.com) has a week at the Mandarin Oriental from £1,975pp, including flights from Heathrow to Chiang Mai via Bangkok and private transfers. For regional and Irish departures, contact the operator. Or try Audley (01993 838000, audleytravel.com) or Abercrombie & Kent (0845 618 2200, www.abercrombiekent.co.uk).
Further information: Chiang Mai Zoo (www.chiangmaizoo.com; entry £3). A visit to the elephant farm can be arranged by your hotel for about £110pp.