Elephants in Thailand
Edited by Emily Pritchard

Hannah Evans is a Junior majoring in Psychology who interned with Experiential Learning International (ELI Abroad): Friends For Asia in Chiang Mai, Thailand recently. “I wanted to learn by experiencing and doing rather than sitting and listening to someone talk. This experience has impacted my life in ways that I could not have ever imagined.”

What were you doing in Thailand?

“My experience while being in Thailand has been, by far, the most amazing and rewarding experiences of my life. While living in Thailand I have been working with Asian elephants. Over the course of the last three months I have learned about their different behaviors, personality and how they interact with one another. In my free time I was able to work with the kids that lived in the village that surrounded the camp.”

Why did you pick this particular internship?

“I decided to take this internship because I have always wanted to travel and experience different places, especially Thailand. I also wanted to experience the world for myself rather than listen to someone talk about theirs, while being in a classroom. Throughout my entire life I have loved working with animals and when I found this particular one, I jumped at the opportunity to be surrounded by elephants.”

How did you get connected with this opportunity?

“Three of the main things that led me to do this internship were: 1) I wanted to go abroad my junior year of college; 2) I had always wanted to go to Thailand; 3) I wanted to have an experience abroad that wasn’t going to make me be in a classroom all the time. I started by researching Universities in Thailand that UM had exchange programs with, but they were all in Bangkok, which was where I didn’t want to be. So then I started looking at internships and volunteer opportunities, which was more of what I wanted to do in the first place. I wanted to learn by experiencing and doing rather than sitting and listening to someone talk. That’s how I found Experiential Learning International (ELI Abroad), which then placed me with Friends For Asia, once I was accepted into the program.”
What has been the most rewarding part of this experience?

“The most rewarding part of this experience is being able to be around these incredible animals and have a completely new cultural experience than I have ever had. I got the opportunity to ride them, touch them, play with them, but even just being in the same vicinity as them was a privilege of its own. Not only was it a pleasure to be around elephants but the Thai community that I was surrounded by was so welcoming and so willing to teach me about their culture.”

Any especially memorable experiences?

“My favorite part, and most memorable experience, while living in Thailand would be the Loy Krathong festival, which takes place on the full moon every November. Most know it as the lantern festival, where thousands of lanterns are glowing in the sky and you make Krathong, which are banana tree floats decorated with beautiful flowers. In the small town I was living in, they also had a homemade firework competition; the fireworks were made out of huge pieces of bamboo and then stuffed with all the ingredients. If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought the competition was just a bunch of grown men blowing stuff up for fun. It was an experience that I would have never had in America, mainly because it would have all been illegal, but in the small town it was just a yearly tradition.”

Have there been any challenges you have overcome to get this experience?

“I think one of the biggest challenges for me was the language barrier because most of the people I was surrounded by spoke very little English. But over the last three months I have found this particular challenge more of a fun challenge, rather than something I needed to overcome. I got to learn more Thai every day and practice what I had learned. Another challenge that I still need time to overcome is: being alone. Traveling alone is really hard but a very rewarding experience; I met so many new people from so many new places, not only from Thailand but from all over the world.”

How has your participation in this AE experience impacted your life as a student and as a person in general?

“This experience has entirely changed both my personal life and my life as a student. I have decided to take next semester off and continue living in Thailand for the next four months. The first month I am planning to volunteer at an elephant sanctuary on the border of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar (the Golden Triangle). After that I am going to stay with a woman that lives in the same small village as the Elephant camp. I’ll be working with the community children, teaching English and helping to restore parts of the jungle, while also learning more Thai.”
Has this experience reaffirmed your career goals or has it changed your mind in any way?

“This experience has made me, not reconsider my career goals, but it hasn’t reaffirmed them either. As a Psychology major my plan had been to work with children in some way, but after living in Thailand I have shifted my psychological interests to, not only children, but also animals, particularly in a therapeutic setting, whether that be therapy for animals or helping children using animal therapy.”

What advice would you give other students considering opportunities like this?

“My advice for other students is to not over think. My experience in Thailand ended up being even better than I could have ever imagined. I was terrified to leave the things I was comfortable with: the same language, my family, my friends, my home, and familiar foods. But some of the best experiences I have had I didn’t plan, they just happened. Also, depending on where you are traveling to, get the correct visa/paper work done before you leave, that was one of the biggest issues I had while being in Thailand. Although laws in Thailand are more “guidelines” I still had to leave the country to get another visa.”