

MY FIRST TIME...

No, it's not what you think. These women reveal, no matter how old you are, it's never too late to try something new

...ON HOLIDAY ALONE

Elaine Hutchinson, 56, lives in Scotland. She has three grown-up children, Owain, 32, Callum, 30, and Aaron, 21.

I caught the travel bug as a child. With my dad in the navy, we travelled the world – and I never lost the thrill of landing in a new place.

But in the years that followed, after having my children, travelling seemed to fall out of my plans. It wasn't until I approached my 50th that I realised I desperately needed a break.

Running my own restaurant, I barely had so much as a weekend off, let alone a holiday. Then, in December 2006, my mum died suddenly. I was devastated. She'd been living in an annex off my house and, with my children having flown the nest, I suddenly found myself totally alone.

Navigating my grief and exhaustion, I decided I had to get away. Looking online, I found a tour of Thailand volunteering with elephants. It sounded exactly what I needed. It was only after booking it that the panic set in. The thought of getting myself to the airport in London was terrifying enough. How could I travel 5,000 miles alone?

Still, after giving myself a much needed pep talk, in November 2007, I finally landed in Bangkok. And I hardly had time to feel sorry for myself. After meeting up with the rest of the tour group, we arrived at the elephant sanctuary. And with 6am mucking out to contend

with, we quickly became a team. There was something incredibly cathartic about being among strangers. Nobody knew about my restaurant, my children or my grief. To them, I was just Elaine – good at shovelling elephant dung!

Back home, I felt like a different person. As I relayed anecdotes from my travels to friends, to rounds of 'I wish I could do that', I could barely believe I'd really done it. It was as if I'd ripped off a plaster: that trip had given me confidence when I had needed it the most.

Since then, I've been back to Thailand as a tour guide and I'm even setting up my own restaurant and guest house there. Greeting tourists with a panic-stricken look on their faces at Bangkok airport, I'm reminded of myself. Since that first petrified plane journey, I've become a different person.

* telltaletravel.co.uk

**'I TRAVELLED
5,000 MILES
ON MY OWN'**



Working with elephants gave Elaine her confidence back