

Patrick's pages

Neil Patrick takes a wry look at life in the third age

Tweaking the Thai tiger's tail

ONE DAY last year, a peep at the calendar warned me of a triple celebration on the horizon. My wife's birthday, her retirement and our wedding anniversary were all due to fall at roughly the same time.

Surely this was a time to have an extra-special holiday, and push the boat out – although we didn't fancy a cruise.

In fact, I had a penchant for something a bit closer to nature, bearing in mind that Linda is wild about big animals (note: a fact unrelated to her choice of husband).

Surely there were holidays out there that would let her have a few close-up, touchy-feely encounters with creatures normally only admired from afar, somewhere in the sun and where the food was delicious? And that, folks, is how

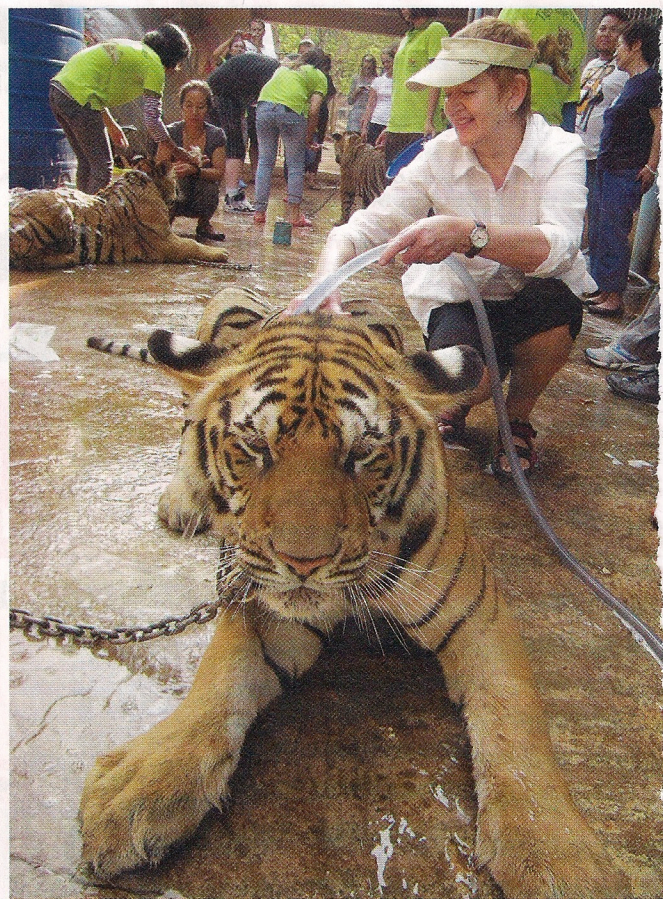
– in the new year – we found ourselves 6000 miles away, doling out breakfast to a line of Thai monks, then eating with them in their woodland monastery where tiger cubs popped in to join us for morning cuddles and bottle-feeding.

Someone was in her element...

However, that magical dawn moment was only the start of a special day at the Tiger Temple at Kanchanaraburi, Thailand, which is near the bridge over the River Kwai. Dozens of tigers and scores of other animals live as neighbours with the monks.

Soon we were taking a stroll in the sun with the bigger tigers. After some persuasion I nervously took the tiger tail that was held up for me to hold as I brought up the rear.

We watched other tigers leaping



"After some persuasion I nervously took the tiger tail that was held up for me to hold as I brought up the rear"

Giving a tiger a wash and brush-up, another highlight on the nature trail

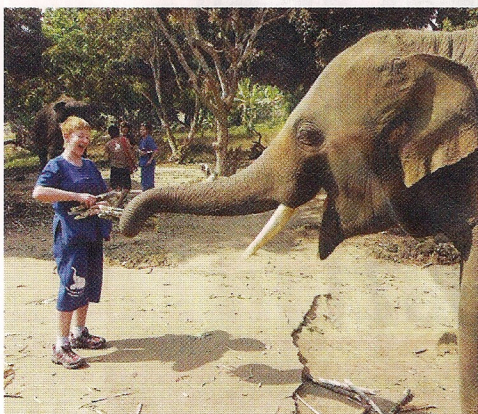
Left: A sweet-toothed elephant just can't wait when there's sugar cane about

squad of trained workers and volunteers from many parts of the world supervise your encounter.

Among the rules: Don't turn your back (an invitation for an attack); have nothing dangling from your clothes; approach the tiger from the back (in fact, we were physically steered to some tigers). Oh, and no sunglasses – a tiger, seeing itself in reflection, might interpret the image as an intruder. Before the birthday

and splashing in water pools, under the guidance of the volunteer helpers and staff teasing them with plastic bags on sticks, then met the head vet who told us the story of how the care for a single tiger cub at the monastery had led to a conservation project that is now known worldwide.

Not all tigers become sufficiently conditioned by human contact to be in close contact with visitors and, even with the house-trained cats, an attentive



girl moved on, she had bottle-fed cubs, given an adult a bath and a snack of boiled chicken, and then nursed the enormous head of a fully grown specimen.

There were many more unforgettable experiences to come as we followed our Thai nature trail, however.

One evening we sat with a guide in expectant silence on a track and as night fell a seemingly endless black ribbon flowed across the night sky.

This was the sight of a million of Thailand's ten million bats setting off for a night out. We learned that by the time they returned they would have gobbled up 10,000kg of insects.

Out exploring with a bird expert, we heard a noise high in the tree above us and spotted a magnificent Great Hornbill spreading its eight-foot wingspan. Another sound followed and our rather concerned guide asked us to back away; we were uncomfortably near a wild elephant which we could hear flapping its ears behind a curtain of bamboo.

We moved on to enjoy two days in the company of tame elephants at the Baan Chang

“Before the birthday girl moved on, she had bottle-fed tiger cubs, given an adult a bath and a snack of boiled chicken, and then nursed the enormous head of a fully grown specimen”



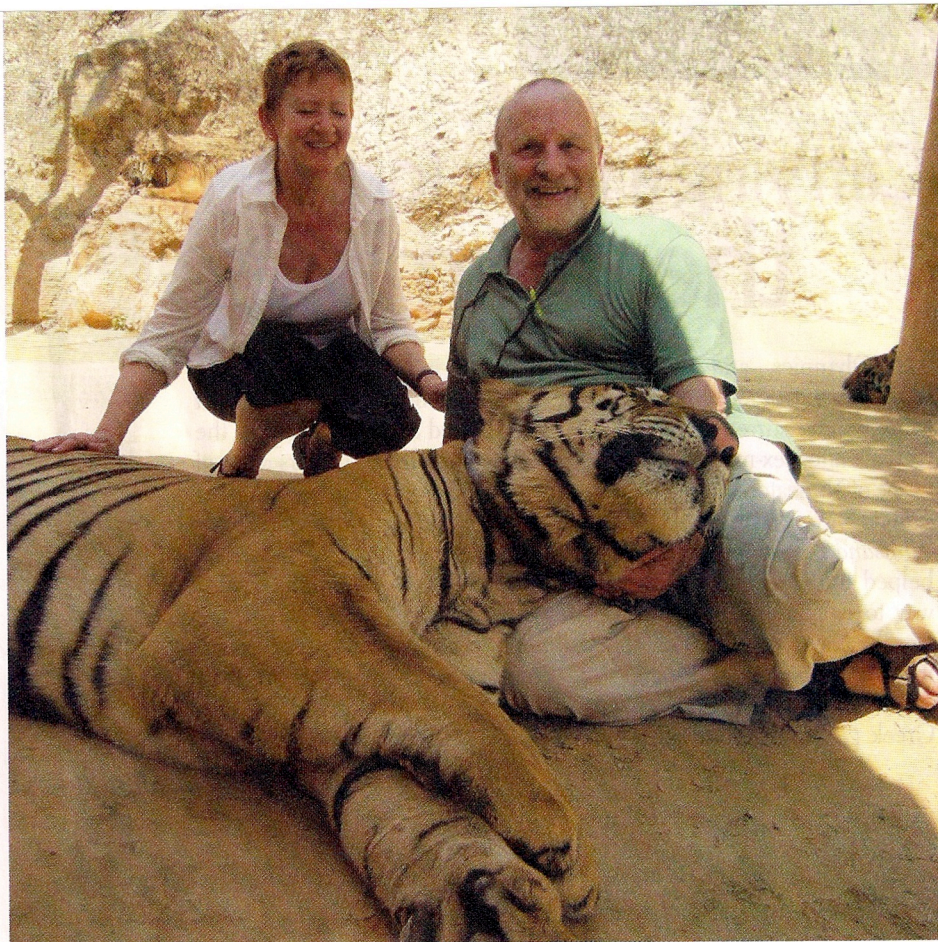
conservation park where exploited and abused elephants are given care and protection.

For any elephant-lover this place is paradise. We learned every aspect of elephant maintenance, fed them snacks (the equivalent of a dustbin full of bananas). We

learned to steer them with the help of Burmese mahouts and to determine their state of health via their dung.

Bathtime was, for us – and the elephants – the ultimate treat. We scrubbed them, swilled them and then lounged alongside them in the water.

If the birthday girl had been allowed, the elephant she had befriended would have been with us on the homeward flight. But you know how they are about baggage restrictions...



Above: A magical moment for Neil and wife Linda at the Tiger Temple in Thailand

Left: Unwinding in retirement – Linda and new-found friends at a conservation park

Cheery Carol makes forecasting fun

There can't be a better TV weather presenter than cheery Carol Kirkwood, and her list of awards proves it.

Recently she brightened my morning yet again – not with the forecast, which was awful, but by a vision she conjured up...

When a show host suggested that the bad weather seemed unseasonal, she said: “Well, put it this way, at this time last year I was out in the garden in just a tee-shirt.”

Just a tee-shirt? Our Carol, a naturalist?

Until I went in search of more information about this queen of the isobars, I had no idea that she had inadvertently added a bit of laughter before.

In fact, fairly recently she got into a giggling fit when a necklace broke while she was giving the forecast, and the jewellery ‘began travelling south’.

And she innocently raised a laugh by relating that a viewer had just described the weather as being “as wet as an otter’s pocket”... not knowing that the phrase had a rather graphic meaning in certain circles.