Getting the gibbon experience

Whizzing through the jungle on zip lines, sleeping in the forest canopy in multi-level tree houses, hunting for critically endangered apes – the Gibbon Experience in northern Laos offers its guests a rainforest sojourn like no other. But it's also proving to locals the value of preserving their natural heritage. **Lee Mylne** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS *by* PAUL WAGER

JEF REUMAUX

The haunting call drifts through the mist. It's just after dawn in the ancient forest of the Bokeo Nature Reserve in northern Laos and I'm instantly awake.

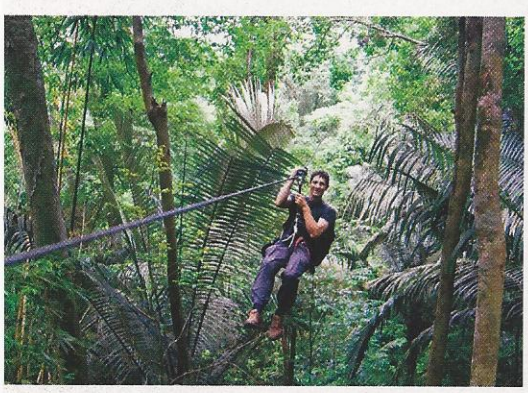
Perched above the trees where a family of gibbons is heralding the new day, a handful of visitors rouse from their sleep, eager for a sighting of these elusive forest dwellers. Our roosts are in treehouses built 20–40 metres above the forest floor. To get here, we trekked through the forest and then strapped ourselves – sometimes somewhat nervously – to zip lines, the only access to our temporary accommodation.

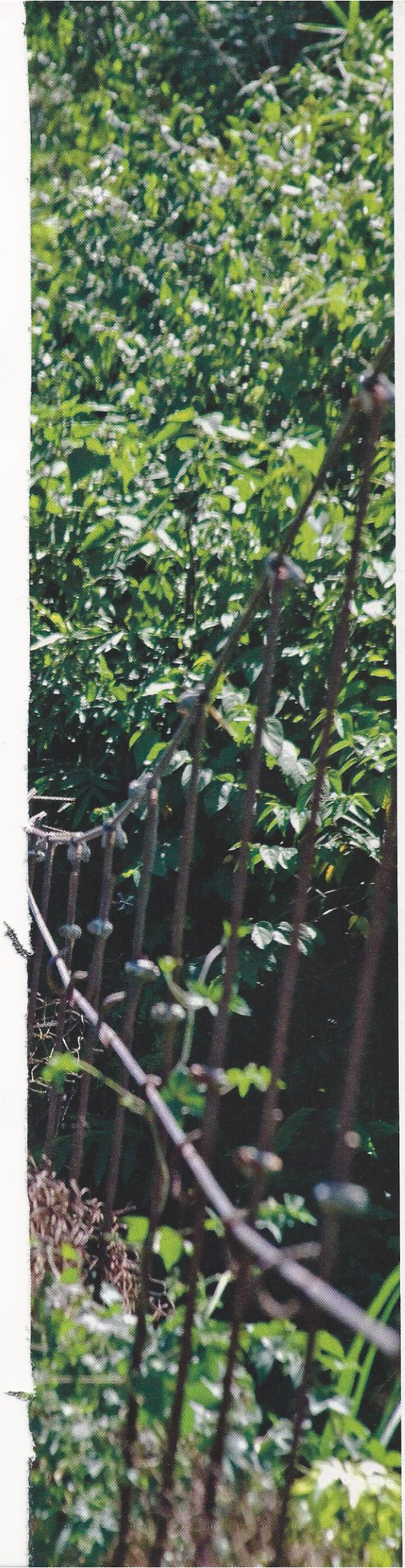
That we're here to see the gibbons is obvious. That we're part of something more important than simply observing these distant relatives is soon to become evident. The presence of people in the gibbons' habitat is part of a wide-ranging conservation project that's changing the way that villagers here look at their world.

APE ESCAPE

Bokeo province, in the far northwest of Laos near the border with Myanmar and Thailand, has one of the last remaining populations of black crested gibbons in Laos – and of this particular subspecies in the world. The Gibbon Experience, a three-day excursion into a protected habitat in the Nam Kan Provincial Protected Forest, offers the only opportunity to see or hear this endangered lesser ape.

From a village at the forest's edge, our small group has trekked for about an hour with local guides and Gibbon Experience founder Jef Reumaux. Reumaux, a French national, has worked in the forest for more than a decade, developing a strategy to bring tourists here as a way of funding projects to





give villagers an alternative income and remove the need for slash-and-burn farming, poaching and logging.

Formerly working as a university mathematics teacher in the Laotian capital, Vientiane, Reumaux spent a number of years carrying out survey work in remote areas of the country. In 1997, he learned of a population of Laotian black crested gibbons. Once believed extinct, the gibbons were living in an area where seven tree-houses now nest.

Ten families of gibbons, each with about five members, are known to range among the treehouses. 'There are also about 35 individuals on the other side of the range, a little less than a total of 100 we know of, and we suspect that there are another 100, from the stories we hear from rangers in the forest,' says Reumaux.

This, he says, is a subspecies that exists nowhere else. 'They are considered to be both the most endangered gibbons in Laos and the healthiest population in Laos because there are no predators,' he says.

FOREST 'FLIGHTS'

After several years of negotiations with the Lao government, the Bokeo Nature Reserve was established in 2004 by the Lao forestry authorities and Reumaux's conservation-based ecotourism company, Animo. The reserve covers 123,000 hectares of mixed deciduous forest in a mountainous region that borders the Nam Ha Protected Area, ranging up to 1,500 metres in elevation.

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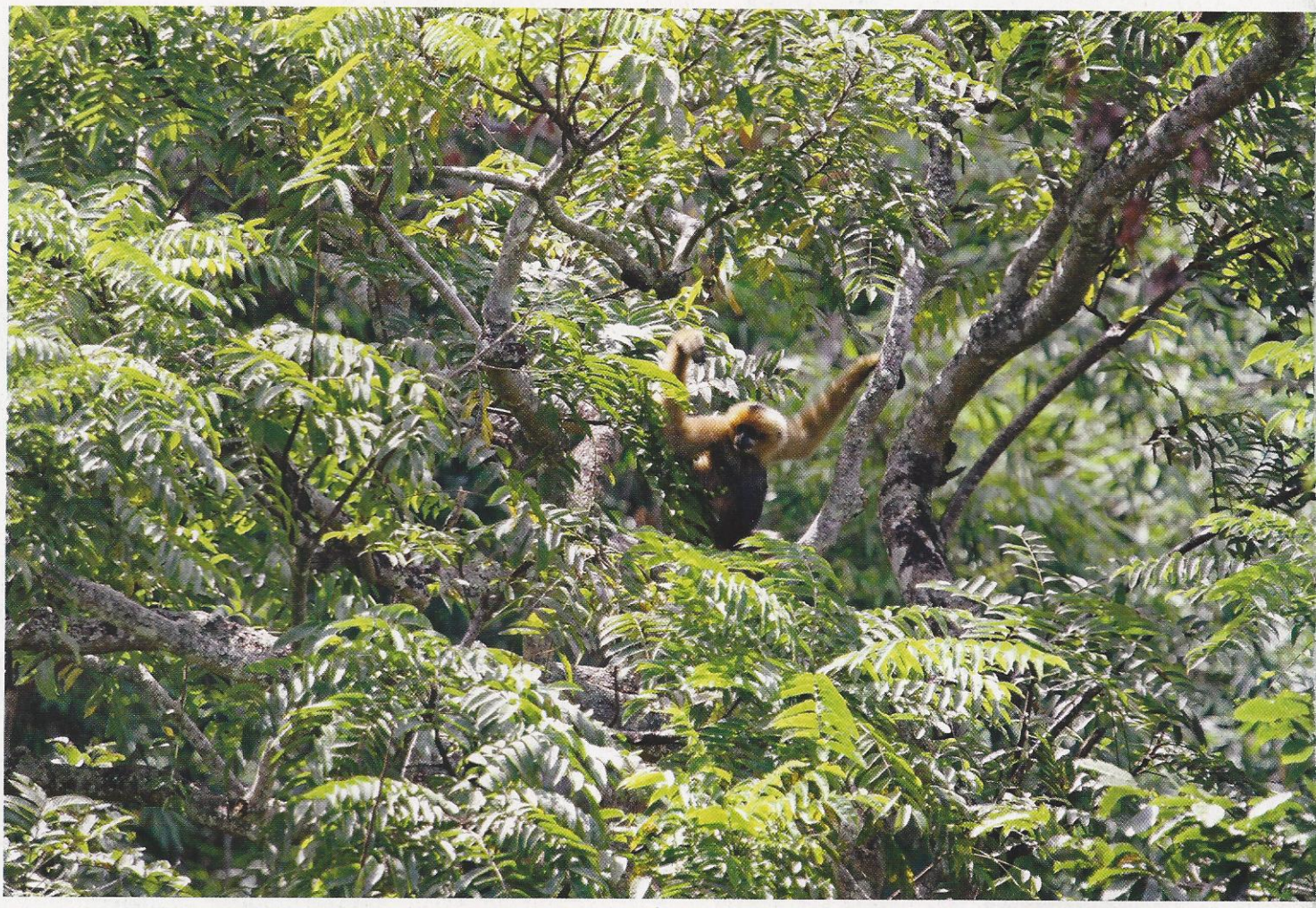
The Gibbon Experience is run by Animo, with a mandate from the Lao government to provide local people with a way to live sustainably while conserving the rich diversity of the reserve, which includes resident populations of bears and tigers, as well as migrating populations of elephants and buffalo.

By the end of 2004, the treehouse project was under way, providing funds for the conservation work. A network of zip lines links the treehouses, with visitors 'flying' over the forest with local guides. It's an extraordinary,

PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT TO RIGHT: the Laotian black crested gibbon is a subspecies of black crested gibbon found only in Laos; one of the seven treehouses constructed by the Gibbon Experience in the Bokeo Nature Reserve in northern Laos; **FAR LEFT:** Gibbon Experience developer and manager Jef Reumaux rides one of the zip lines that are the only way of gaining access to the treehouses; **LEFT:** a local Hmong family crosses a suspension bridge built and paid for by the Gibbon Experience; **TOP AND ABOVE:** local Hmong girls regularly take advantage of the improved mobile phone reception available from the treehouses in order to call their boyfriends



exhilarating experience, but Reumaux is careful to ensure that it doesn't become a full-blown tourist attraction. There has been no advertising and visitor numbers are strictly limited.

He describes his project as 'a way to deal with politics without dealing with politics'. 'We came with no political intention, just ecological intention,' he says. 'It's very significant, what we are doing. What does it mean in terms of human development and economics? The environment is the first thing to save, but it will only work if people believe in it.

'It is an impossible choice: modernity or conservation,' he continues. 'I don't want a frozen idea of the past, and we are really dealing with the people more than with the wildlife or the trees.'

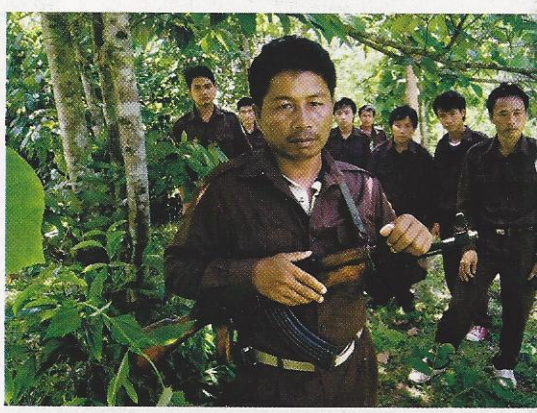
The human intrusion into the gibbons' habitat helps to raise awareness about the endangered status of these lesser apes, and to show the Lao people how much they have to gain by caring about wildlife and the environment. Income from the limited number of tourists – the treehouses can accommodate a maximum of 25 people, but the reality is that it rarely reaches that number – is reinvested to protect the forest.

Reumaux says that the success of the Gibbon Experience has proved that forest conservation can be achieved by a local team without relying on handouts from the government or from other countries. 'People can now really see that conservation can be profitable – and that's the only message that people understand,' he says. 'They need to learn that they can make much more money by protecting the forest. Conservation is an economic model on its own; it doesn't need to be backed by government. At a village, district and provincial level, the Gibbon Experience is accepted because it's fully sustainable and people are making money out of it.

'We have found this little niche and people have started to believe in it,' he continues. 'It's creating momentum with everyone at village and district level, rather than individuals thinking, "I will take as much as I can from that forest".'

GUARD DUTY

There are two major protection projects for the forest: the prevention of poaching and illegal logging, and a reduction



TOP: gibbon sightings are generally quite rare, but visitors are almost guaranteed to hear their haunting calls during the early morning; **ABOVE:** the Gibbon Experience funds a team of 20 'forest guards', who patrol about a third of the Bokeo reserve, protecting it from poaching and illegal logging

JEF REUMAUX

in traditional slash-and-burn agriculture. While slash-and-burn cultivation is still used to grow rice in the hills, inside Bokeo Nature Reserve, villagers are learning that they can make a 'non-destructive' living from their unique environment by protecting the forest and farming only on lower-altitude flatlands.

According to Reumaux, slash-and-burn is now confined to the south of the reserve, in a buffer zone between the main road and the primary forest farther into the reserve. 'We are helping villagers to follow the official agricultural transition plan, which aims to replace all slash-and-burn harvests with irrigated paddy fields throughout Laos,' he says, adding that Animo provides villages in the Bokeo Nature Reserve with free use of a tractor to speed up the transition. 'It has to work – otherwise people won't co-operate. There has to be both village and regional co-operation.'

As well as employing 80 people, the Gibbon Experience also funds a team of 20 'forest guards' – the only ones currently operating in Lao national parks – who patrol about a third of the reserve's area to protect it against poachers and illegal loggers. The armed guards report directly to the provincial forestry authorities, and are entitled to confiscate weapons, fine offenders and take them to the police. They stockpile seized illegal guns, logging equipment and chainsaws, and they regularly burn the weapons in a 'rifle pyre', an act that's as much about symbolism as destruction.

Composed of members from various tribal groups, the forest guards also record wildlife sightings and movements. Reumaux believes that only local people 'with a proper mandate' are able to effectively monitor and protect the forest, and says that they are ambassadors for their communities. 'The main thing is not about being a strong police force but gaining the confidence and support of the village,' he says. 'The team of protectors is not just the guards with weapons, but everyone in the village, who become guardians of the forest.'

Twenty-six-year-old Kham Yuan tew Sien, a Hmong from Luang Nam Tha province, on the other side of the national park, is one of a new breed of educated forestry workers taking up the role of forest guards. After completing a five-year Bachelor of Forestry degree in Vientiane, he went to work for a logging company. 'He was one of the best students in his class, and after two years working for the loggers, he came to me and said he wanted to help protect the forest,' says Reumaux with some satisfaction.

'We really welcomed him,' he continues. 'After three years with us, he is taking on more and more planning responsibility. That's the next stage in the development of our team – we need to have planners, not only young warriors.' And Kham Yuan tew Sien isn't an isolated case; he is one of three former forestry workers who have worked for Animo, and one of two who still do.

A plantation forest is also part of the broader plan. 'We can fight against local logging, but people will always need wood, and there will always be logging,' says Reumaux. A nursery on the outskirts of the border town of Huay Xai holds more than 15,000 plants – teak, redwood, rosewood – for use in reforestation projects around the national park. The aim, says Reumaux, is to provide 'something to log' in a decade's time, without encroaching on the ancient forest.

ETERNAL SONG

We walk through the forest, listening to birdcalls, spying vivid green geckos, butterflies, delicate ferns and fungi, as well as the fresh tracks of an Asiatic black bear. A hornbill calls. In the ensuing silence, but for the sound of our feet, there's a pervasive sense of how ancient this forest is.

At the first zip line, 80 metres long, nerves are stretched as taut as the cable. We'll travel on 15 'zips' during our three-day stay. The longest reaches 300 metres, spanning a wide valley and eliciting involuntary shrieks from the novices among us. The guides handle each as if they were born to it. Other zip lines have been built across the rice fields to make it easier for villagers to work.

The treehouses are built without nails, all bound to the trees with steel cables that are renewed every two years. The replaced cable is later used to build suspension bridges in the villages as an alternative to the traditional rattan bridges, which need replacing every six months.

In our thatched-roof aerie, Reumaux lets silence do its own work. His belief that a change of perspective – for visitors and locals – is all-important in conservation work rings true.

High in the canopy, our own 'gibbon experience' is limited to that eerie dawn song. We're staying in a treehouse that – today, at least – is too far from the gibbons for anything more than distant glimpses as they play in the trees. 'About 60 per cent of our guests see gibbons, but everyone hears them,' says Reumaux.

It's enough. Once heard, the song of the gibbon will stay with you forever. G

LAOS CO-ORDINATES

When to go

The relatively cool and dry winter months (November–February) are the most pleasant time to travel in Laos, but make sure to take a coat if travelling in the highlands. It's best to avoid travelling during the wet season (May–August), when roads frequently become impassable.

Getting there

The Gibbon Experience office is in Huay Xai, which can be reached via Thailand (fly to Chiang Rai, then take the bus to Chang Khong and a boat across the Mekong) or Laos (fly to Luang Prabang then take a two-day boat cruise or overnight bus).

Further information

To learn more, visit the Gibbon Experience website at www.gibbonexperience.org. To make a booking, call +856 (0)84 212 021 or email info@gibbonexperience.org.