

# The elephants and me

'I hate elephants,' said no one, ever. Of all the world's wild creatures, I think elephants must be the most loved by people and I'm no exception. My recent experience walking with them in Chiang Mai was a highlight of my life.



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A few years ago, on my first trip to Thailand, before I knew better, I rode an elephant. At the time, I wasn't aware of what it took to make the animal "rider-friendly", but I shall leave that subject there and let you do your own research on the topic. This story is more about sharing the deep contentment of getting close to one of the planet's most incredible and endearing animals, in a unique and unforgettable way.

The Elephant Nature Park (ENP) is a unique project near Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, home to around 64 elephants (as well as cats, dogs and buffaloes) that have been rescued from distressing situations in Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar. In their previous lives, they endured many types of abuse, be it through trekking camps, illegal logging, street begging or performing.

At the sanctuary, they are nursed back to health, rehabilitated and allowed to thrive in their natural habitat. The person behind this extraordinary refuge is ENP Founder Sangduen "Lek" Chailert. This remarkable woman has championed the cause of elephants in adverse circumstances since the '90s, and has PhDs in sustainability and conservation and veterinary science. She also established the Save the Elephant Foundation, which does superb work across Southeast Asia.

## Walking with elephants

The Elephant Nature Park lies 60km outside Chiang Mai, a city of around 400,000 people, dating back to the 1200s, lying in the mountainous region of the country, close to Laos. As you edge north, the geography starts to morph beautifully: this was the Chiang Mai of which I'd heard so much. Rainforest and jungle territory, much of it depleted but still green and lush, and a breath of fresh air after the heat and buzz of the city we'd left behind.

Arriving at the camp, I could see "our" elephants in the distance and couldn't wait to meet them. Each tour group walks with four elephants and their mahouts, who direct them with voice commands, never with hooks. Although I was one of 10 tourists, I never felt crowded out, as everyone spreads out and moves along at their own pace. It's almost as if you have the whole rainforest to yourself. The elephants and me. Bliss.

Smaller than its African counterpart, an Asian elephant stands at about 2.7m. It's pretty, with delicate, frayed, flapping ears, gentle eyes with long lashes and a calm aura.

On my first close encounter, I placed my hand flat on the top of his trunk, an appendage loaded with 40,000 muscles - a nose, an arm, a hand, a voice, a straw and a hose, all in one. The skin is coarse and prickly, and the eye I looked into seemed so kind and understanding. I felt ashamed then, knowing what he had suffered at the hands of humans before his rescue. I know, from the incredibly moving book *The Elephant Whisperer* by Lawrence Anthony, just how sensitive elephants are and I am certain that, in that brief moment, I made a connection. I would never have had this experience if I'd been riding on his back. That's an incentive right there, to walk, not ride.

## **A stop-and-start amble**

One of the best things about this tour is that it was slow. You take your time. Touring can be such a drag - a mad rush as people try to cram in as much sightseeing as possible in a few hours and so often lose the chance to linger and truly absorb the surroundings. This isn't the case at the ENP, it's a leisurely stop-and-start amble, hanging out with the elephants so to speak. It's as if you're privy to their world for a day, accompanying them while they do their thing.

Our first stop was in the shade of a few trees where the mahouts ran water onto the ground to make a small mud puddle for the elephants. Before long, all four of them had gathered around and with their huge, disc-shaped feet, they started scuffing and dislodging the soil, stirring it up and then squirting it over and under their bodies, and anyone else's who happened to be in close proximity! Caked with dust and dirt, which is a type of sunscreen for elephants, they finished off with a good scratch against the tree trunks, a spa treatment of sorts in the wild.

The path we took led us across wide open fields, encountering a herd of cows and their herders on the way, as well as a few of the rescued dogs that live at the ENP. Our trek took us under tree canopies, across a fast-flowing river (remember to wear walking shoes suited to this), and along and up dusty mountain paths.

## **Getting an earth-fix**

I'm a Cape Town girl so very spoiled by the nature that surrounds me back home, and the more I walked the more I loved what I saw - I was getting my Earth fix. It felt like I was in my own universe, with the deep green of surrounding tropical rainforest and the soft-footed grey giants plodding along quietly behind and beside me.

Every now and then a trunk would slide over my shoulder or slip under my arm, the "finger" nudging my hand and poking around for the bananas I was carrying in a sling bag.

Lunch was an experience all of its own. Thai food is incredible and when we climbed up the steps of the elevated wooden deck, it was to a spread of deliciousness: noodles, chicken satay, watermelon, rice and vegetables, laid out on the floor in big banana leaves, and a traditional cast-iron kettle giving off a wispy steam in the corner. The scene was set for good

conversation with like-minded eco-tourists from all over the planet and the view before us, over the river and hills, was stunning.

## **On the way back**

On the way back to the camp, we stopped at the river and doused the elephants, tossing buckets of water over them, and everyone else, while they feasted on fruits and carried on as if we weren't actually even there.

At the main park itself, it was incredible to see the youngest baby elephant, Navann, swim underwater, totally submerged. Elephants are very strong swimmers and need to be able to bath daily and they get to do this at ENP. The finale of our visit was a 30-minute rafting trip down the river. I think I screamed from start to finish. It was an amazing end to a memorable day.

Awareness of the global plight of elephants has never been greater. This tour gave me the chance to contribute in a small way to the rescue efforts under way daily at this sanctuary, one of a few doing good work in the region. Discovering this sanctuary in Thailand gave me hope for the Asian elephant's rehabilitation in Thailand. Next time you're there, consider walking with the elephants. You'll thank me afterwards. - Alison Foat

*Source: Sunday Times*

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