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Story

Big love in Thailand

Cuddle up with the elephants of Chiang Rai

By Renny Widojo

Last Updated: 3:21 PM, July 29, 2013 Posted: 2:30 PM, July 29, 2013

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Not even in my wildest dreams had I seen myself strolling in the woods, sitting on top of an elephant. But there I was, caressing the trusting trunk of Ewong, getting ready to embark on a journey together inside the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort in Chiang Rai, Thailand, having the best time of my life.

Naturally, I've heard stories about how elephants could be temperamental, aggressive and non-cooperative. But Ewong is proving to be quite the opposite, showing me complete compassion and support. She's gentle, calm, patient and reliable.



Ewong the elephant is 4 tons of fun. Sophie Bergin

The on-site biologist, Sophie Bergin, tells me about the camp's elephants and how their mahouts (riders) play an important role in shaping their behavior, in the same way human children mirror their parents in their upbringing. Ewong's mahout, Chet, is rather frail-looking for someone who trains a 4-ton, 54-year-old elephant for a living. But he has the sweetest smile, the kindest face and an authoritative voice. I believe this is why Ewong is the way she is and all the elephants I met in the camp are so fun, friendly and well-behaved — they know that they are all safe, well-fed, well-loved and they return the favor.

Turns out, elephants and humans aren't so different. The younger among them are more playful and (relatively) lighter on their feet, while the older ones are slower, calmer and gentler. Like us, elephants generally reach puberty around the age of 14 or 15, they are highly perceptive and generally build relationships based on trust over time.

There are some differences, of course. Like, they eat 550 pounds of food a day, mostly consisting of grass, sugar cane, sunflower seeds, cucumber, bananas and other fruits and veggies (which, to my delight, are bought from nearby farms and markets to boost the local economy). Also, there's the females' 22-month pregnancy period.

Having seen how nice the elephants in the camp were, I could barely contain my excitement when the resort staff told me that there would be a baby elephant hanging out with guests at breakfast time. "A baby elephant? What?!" I beg Sophie to wrap up my mahout training a little early so I could meet Am.

Am, the 4-year-old (big!) baby elephant and the youngest of the habitants, has been coming up to the terrace during breakfast for the past couple of months and she has been pleasantly interacting with guests and loving the attention when they request to pose with her for pictures.

Now it's my turn — with a gentle reminder from Sophie that babies can be unpredictable at times.

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By RENNY WIDOJO

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I wonder if Am was smelling the familiar scent of other elephants, dirt and mud on my clothes, because she warms up to me almost instantly. She lets me put sunflower seeds on her tongue, asks me to rub her front leg, follows me everywhere I go and almost enters the restaurant when I go in to get some milk. I am beyond thrilled!

But even good times must come to an end. Feeling giddy, I happily take her extended trunk one last time and delightfully receive the biggest, drooliest and loveliest smooch I have ever had in my entire life on both my cheeks. I hug her tight and, as I wave goodbye, I bank the memory in my heart to pull out on a sad, rainy day in New York and hope I will be back to see her again in the near future.



Ewong the elephant is 4 tons of fun. Sophie Bergin

TIPS Be respectful and don't interact with an elephant without the mahout present. Wear a comfortable outfit and be prepared to get dirty.

GETTING THERE Take a 90-minute flight from Bangkok International Suvarnabhumi Airport on Thai Airways, which operates three times daily.

STAY Located just a short hour's drive north of Mae Fah Luang-Chiang Rai International Airport, the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort (rooms from \$1,124, all-inclusive, goldentriangle.anantara.com) offers magnificent views of the three Golden Triangle countries (Thailand, Laos and Myanmar). Daily excursions are available from the resort.

The resort supports the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation (GTAEF, helpingelephants.org) mission of providing a safe, non-violent habitat for elephants as well as guaranteed jobs and better homes for the mahouts and their families, with additional perks of free education for the mahouts' children and all money generated from sales of the hand-made woven silk made by the mahouts' wives.

DO The non-working elephants, whether they be injured, traumatized or not strong enough to work, are free to walk around the resorts extensive property on a daily basis while the working elephants participate in the resort's all-inclusive activities such as the mahout experience, elephant trekking, the elephant learning experience and even dining in the baby elephant camp.

RAISING AWARENESS The GTAEF is partnered with Think Elephants International (thinkelephants.org), a not-for-profit organization with a mission of conservation through research and education to preserve the lives of elephants around the world. One of the organization's brilliant educational programs is the after-school program at New York's East Side Middle School, which aims to educate children about the elephants in hope of creating the next generation of scientists to continue the mission. One of the activities is a Skype session between the children and the elephants in Thailand.

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