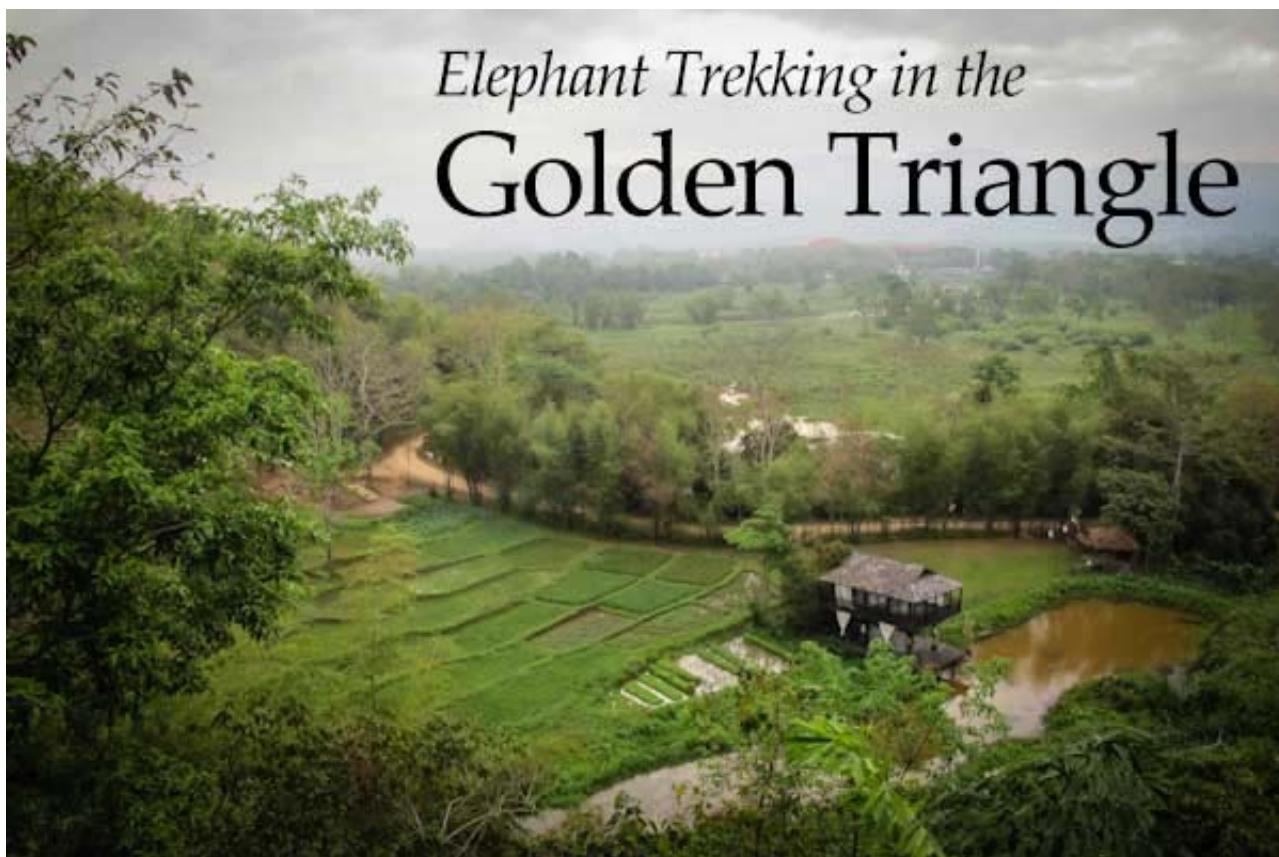


Breaking tel de la Paix Family Beachfront Fun Deal Miss World visits InterContinental Hua Hin

The Bachelor finale location Anantara Golden Triangle Resort

12 MAR 2013 POSTED BY ASIALIFE

0 COMMENT



Set at the meeting point of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, Mark Bibby

Jackson visits the Anantara Golden Triangle Resort to discover a certain young female deserted by the star of The Bachelor TV show.

Sean may have his Catherine, but in overlooking Meena, he missed out on the star attraction of the Anantara Golden Triangle Resort where Sean stayed when the final episode of The Bachelor was shot last year.

Meena, a seven-year-old elephant who visits guests each morning, is the public face of the Golden Triangle Asian Foundation, an organisation that protects 27 domestic elephants living in the grounds of the luxury resort located at the meeting point of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand.

Some of the elephants were literally rescued from “the streets” according to the resort’s general manager, Christian Zunk. A logging ban has led to a decline in traditional work for the animals “forcing them to make a living by begging on the streets,” he explains.

Supported by UK group Elephant Family and Friends of Conservation in the US, the camp “works to rescue elephants in distress and provide a safe, sustainable income for them and their supporting families.” While mahouts tend the elephants, their wives weave silk in a mock village in the grounds of the resort.

In addition to providing a viable income for the elephants – part of the room charge is donated to the Foundation – the resort arranges rides as part of its standard inclusive package for guests.

My elephant is Lana, a twenty-something female. Bending on her hind knees she allows me to climb her back – there is no lofty podium here – and I struggle to swing my right leg over her colossal frame before grabbing hold of her ears. The mahout climbs on behind me and Lana rises to her full height.

Mahout riding is not something for those scared of heights nor for those with a bad sense of balance – both of which I suffer from. Hanging on to Lana’s ears for dear life and digging my knees into her flank, we start to lunge forwards. The mahout, Aek, shouts out instructions to Lana who dutifully obeys – thus demonstrating her superior grasp of Thai than mine – and we set out for a Sunday afternoon perambulation around the resort’s grounds.

After a while I become accustomed to Lana’s loping movement, and stop fearing a sudden descent to earth like a modern day Icarus at every step. The resort is right in the heart of the Golden Triangle. Across the Mekong lies Laos and a short elephant swim across the smaller Ruak river is Myanmar. We pass an elephant chained to a tree because she had ventured across the border to Myanmar the day before. Apparently she didn’t have the right visa.

Eventually it is time for the highlight of our short ride – a swim in the Ruak. Nothing in life has prepared me for bathing with an elephant. As we descend the steep slope, the only reassurance I can muster is that the waters will break my fall.

Safely entrenched, Lana falls to her knees and the muddy waters rise to my neck. She then rolls to one side and I fail to counterbalance in the opposite direction. Before long I am swimming with an elephant

for the first time. It is at once refreshing and exhilarating.

Once we have safely finished our ride, Adrian Tortosa, a Spanish volunteer veterinarian, explains that the camp is not all about play. Important research on elephants' intelligence is being carried out by the NGO Think Elephants International, which is developing conservation education curricula for Thai and international children.

One experiment involves placing a mirror in front of an elephant. While it sleeps an image, such as an arrow, is painted on the mirror. When it awakes, it tries to remove the arrow from its head rather than from the image in the mirror. "If we can show to a lot of people they are very smart animals, they will treat the animals better," says Tortosa.

Zunk believes that coverage in TV programmes such as *The Bachelor* can only help to "drive awareness" of the area, which is still largely off the beaten track. "It attracts people to come here," he says. "They want to find out where it is."

The Golden Triangle's remote location has not always worked to its advantage. The impressive Hall of Opium, just across the road from the resort, illustrates that the area has long been associated with the *papaver somniferum* poppy and the opium produced from it.

Now Zunk believes it is this very remoteness that could provide a future for tourism, especially for those who wish to avoid the Thai road most travelled by tourists, heading to Chiang Mai in the north and the islands of the south.

"It has a great potential," says Zunk. "It is an undiscovered destination. You get back to nature with elephants and sleep with the sound of the jungle."

The following morning I get up for breakfast, a little saddle sore from our ride the day before. Meena is there to have her photograph taken with guests as usual. If she is upset that Sean passed her over for Catherine, Lindsay or some other wannabe socialite, like a true pro, she is not showing it.

The Anantara Golden Triangle is a 45-minute drive from Chiang Rai airport. AirAsia has daily flights there from Bangkok's Don Muang airport. The resort will arrange a complimentary pick-up from the airport. The elephant ride is also complimentary in the all-inclusive package. For more details visit: <http://goldentriangle.anantara.com/>

Read more about Anantarar Golden Triangle Resort on AsiaLIFE

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