

KERALA SRI LANKA CHONGQING LUANG PRABANG BANGKOK

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YOUR GUIDE TO HEAVEN ON EARTH

The ASIA Issue

U.S. EDITION/\$10

Amenities at Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort include huge terracotta soaking tubs, Thai silk bedding and panoramic views over not one but three countries.



LIVING LARGE

Thailand's Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp encourages guests to get up close and personal with its VIP residents.

BY EMMA SLOLEY

If modern globetrotting has a downside, it's that the travel experience can sometimes feel generic and boxed in. Small. But there are still some corners of the world where encounters verge on the gargantuan. So it is with the Golden Triangle, the confluence of three of Asia's most bewitching countries—Thailand, Laos and Burma—and the gentle giants that make their home in the dense jungle near Chiang Rai.

Recently I found myself at Thailand's Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort, trying on a new profession: elephant trainer. Naturally, it takes more than a few days of vacation to become a professional mahout, but this hilltop resort offers guests the chance to spend time getting to know the camp's 25 three-ton pachyderms, and the encounters—not to mention simply being surrounded by the elephants in their fast-shrinking natural habitat—are utterly out of the ordinary.

Established in 2003 as a traditional mahout village, the camp—working alongside the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation—not only rescues these awe-inspiring creatures from miserable conditions as working animals in the logging industry or on the streets of Thailand's cities, but offers sanctuary for the trainers as well, with whom they usually share a lifelong bond. (Nearby camps are following Anantara's example by ensuring elephants aren't captured from the wild.) On our training day, we meet the herd of Asian Elephants and their blue-uniformed trainers. The mahouts have over 70 commands and light touches they use to communicate with the elephants. They teach us a handful ("pai" for go, "baen" for turn and "how" for stop), along with demonstrating the suave way to get on and off the giant creatures, which none of us master with anything approaching their grace.

We meet a cheeky newborn, who attempts to wind his trunk around every outstretched arm, then mount our elephants for a single-file trek through the jungle. While it's no surprise to find that elephants exhibit distinct personalities, it really hits home when you're perched ten feet high on the swaying back of a mischievous female, who takes every opportunity to arch her trunk up and pluck bananas and tear sugar cane from the trailside plants, or watching as the herd lumbers into the river and a particularly feisty giant tries to roll its rider into the water.

Anantara offers several ways to get close to the camp's elephants: the Elephant Learning Experience, in which guests help perform hands-on tasks like feeding, observing a basic health check and giving an elephant a shower (word to the wise: stand back); elephant trekking across the retreat's lush 160 acres, and the newly introduced Golden Triangle Elephant Researcher Experience, an intensive four-day immersion that includes private presentations on elephant cognition and conservation, elephant intelligence research sessions, a veterinary examination and a meal with the research staff. John Roberts, Anantara's Worldwide Conservation Director, touts the experience as a chance to "really get inside the brain of an elephant. Guests doing the Researcher Experience will be among the first people on the planet to have an inkling of answers to questions long asked about elephants."

Naturally, it's not just the elephants that are spoiled at Anantara: the resort's suites coddle their guest mahouts with luxuries like huge terracotta soaking tubs, Thai silk bedding and panoramic views over not one but three countries. Waking up to a scene of jungles wreathed in mist, echoing with the trumpeting of happy elephants, is surely the definition of living large.

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