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Saving Elephants, One Exotic Vacation at a Time

Anantara Golden Triangle in northern Thailand is one of the only places where you can ethically interact with the country's elephants.

By Nikki Ekstein
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I'm half-submerged in the Mekong River—the watery border that separates Laos from Thailand and Myanmar—sitting atop a big-eared, pink-spotted, 3-ton



A mahout, wearing the traditional mohom outfit—denim, red neckerchief, and yellow straw hat—sits atop an elephant at Anantara.

elephant named Poonlarp. Her skin looks soft from a distance, but it's much coarser up close, covered in inch-long bristles. Her gait, which at first gives the appearance of flowing-through-honey movement, feels wobbly up this high. She's alternately headstrong and playful. If you've ever walked a large, stubborn dog, you have an idea what it's like to ride an elephant. This is the -bucket-list item that brings people here to Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort. Perched directly on top of Poonlarp's wide shoulders, forcing my legs into a permanent straddle behind her ears, magnifies her immensity. At one point, she takes a deep drink and sprays the water gleefully, like a living fountain, out of her trunk.

The pool at Anantara features a pattern of poppies, a nod to the region's opium-producing history.

It's my second day at Golden Triangle, a 63-room honeymoon spot set among the rice paddies and tea plantations of far-north Chiang Rai province in Thailand. I flew with my sister to Bangkok from New York, then caught an hourlong connecting flight. The van that picked us up had massage chairs instead of passenger seats and a welcome basket filled with cold face towels and elephant-shaped shortbread cookies. We arrived after sunset, in time for a late dinner of papaya salad and pad thai.

It wasn't until 5 a.m. this morning, jet-lagged and awake on the terrace, that I first heard the soundtrack of elephant roars. It started off quietly but grew louder as the sun rose and a band of tiny-looking animals emerged from shadows in the distance.

The resort started in the early 2000s, when Bangkok-based Minor Hotels acquired a Le Méridien and transformed it into a five-star resort. The company's chief executive officer, William Heinecke, had the idea to turn the new property into an

elephant camp—he loves the animals and felt the Polynesian-style resort's small footprint on a 200-acre parcel of land would lend itself to a luxury wildlife experience. The task was given to John Roberts, a budding conservationist who'd been working with elephants in Nepal's Chitwan National Park. He wasn't formally trained, but Roberts had a promising vision of sustainable elephant tourism. Instead of buying the elephants outright, for instance, Anantara leases them on a permanent basis; it discourages locals from snaring another animal in hopes of a big payout.



Fifteen years later, the resort has become a globally recognized standard-bearer for responsible wildlife tourism and one of the only options in Thailand for conscientious travelers who want face time with pachyderms. In 2006, Anantara created a sibling property next door at the Four Seasons Tented Camp—a more posh and colonial-inspired, if slightly less elephant--obsessed, experience.

A third camp is on its way this fall, on a 44,000-acre conservancy Minor Hotels has pieced together in the Cardamom Mountains of Thailand and Cambodia. This resort will support an initiative to rehabilitate and rerelease native species such as the Asiatic wild dog, black bear, and clouded leopard into the wild.



Some animal rights advocates say the line should be drawn at looking, not touching, and it's an argument that's intensified in recent months. One video making the rounds on Facebook, posted in February by Unilad Adventures, an online travel community with 1.7 million followers, begins with a warning about graphic content. "Thinking about riding elephants in Thailand?" the -minute-long video asks in block letters as a melancholic violin plays. It then shows baby elephants chained to posts, workers kicking the gargantuan animals as tourists struggle to climb onto them, and trainers prodding their thick hides with long, crude pickax-type tools.

A 2010 study by the University of Oxford's Wildlife Conservation Research



Unit exposed Thai elephant camps as some of the travel industry's most irresponsible businesses—not only for their poor treatment of the animals on their premises but also for encouraging locals to kidnap calves, some less than a year old, from their mothers and force them into submission.

By 2014 influential travel operators such as Intrepid Travel had removed elephant rides from their offerings. Mass petitions from World Animal Protection and Change.org rang up tens of thousands of signatures in a matter of days, encouraging more than 100 travel companies, including slower adopters such as Thomas Cook Travel, to nix the rides from their itineraries.

By the time Unilad posted its video, travel junkies were primed to react with disgust. To date, the video has gotten almost 17 million views and about 400,000 shares on Facebook, along with 17,000 mostly horror--struck comments. "I wish I hadn't contributed to this," one user wrote.



The sun rises over the Mekong River in Chiang Rai.

But in Africa, where poaching is the greatest danger facing elephants, travel has actually proved a strong engine for their conservation. Outfitters such as Singita are on the front lines of the issue, and Wilderness Safaris' Abu Camp in Botswana's Okavango Delta rehabilitates injured and orphaned elephants and reintroduces them to the wild.

For Southeast Asian elephants, the big threat isn't poaching but indentured servitude. Roughly 30 percent of Asia's 40,000 to 50,000 elephants are in captivity, often working under dangerous circumstances in forestry or performing in the street.

The region's legacy of elephant labor goes back 3,000 years. The tradition is so old, the Arthashastra, an ancient text that guided Indian kings in the first millennium B.C., gave instructions regarding the health of the forests where elephants lived.

Among mahouts, the once-respected class of people who work with elephants, fathers teach their sons how to manage the animals, the way a rancher takes care of horses. But elephants are far more difficult to keep: They can eat 450 pounds of food a day—mostly bananas, vegetables, and grasses.



The pool's sala, based on a farmer's resting spot in the rice paddies.



Mahouts and their elephants on-site.

Considering how many elephants are still in captivity, "it's extremely difficult to come up with workable and elephant-friendly solutions," says Roberts, now the group director of conservation and sustainability at Anantara. Outside of the resort, he helps run the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation and a program in Southeast Asia that teaches mahouts a gentler training technique focusing on positive-reinforcement. In February he was in Myanmar working on legislation that would outlaw the capture of wild elephants.

At breakfast on the third day, we're joined by a 5-year-old elephant named

Pang Luck, who regularly takes her morning meal in the company of guests on the restaurant terrace. After we eat yogurt parfaits with fresh passion fruit and local honey, we give her handfuls of tiny bananas. Using the two pointed “fingers” at the end of her trunk, she sucks the fruit out of our hands, peels it against her teeth, then helps her mahout clean up the discarded peels.

Like most of the 22 elephants here, Pang Luck’s short life has seen its share of tragedy. She was rescued from street performing, where she was patted and prodded in exchange for pocket change until the age of 3. Bounma, a fiftysomething elephant with a broken ear and distinguishing white hairs at the tip of her tail, was ill-suited for logging and spent years being badly beaten as a result; her owner took her begging until he gained admittance to join Anantara’s community.

When an elephant is accepted, Anantara also hires the animal’s mahout to train and care for it, employment that includes housing, health insurance, and education for his children. There are also opportunities for women to join a traditional silk-weaving collective.

A two-minute drive brings us to the Dara Camp, where most of the elephants “on duty” are relaxing in a series of open-air, canopied stables. One by one the giant creatures amble toward us, perhaps not gracefully but with intention. Poonlarp wags her tail and bats her long lashes. Dah, who survived on the streets of Bangkok and Pattaya before coming to Anantara, waves her ears back and forth nearby. Bo, the largest female of the herd, stretches her jaw open for the on-site veterinarians, who reward her with handfuls of sunflower seeds after a successful oral checkup.

Elephants’ memory has been the subject of much -mythology—the animals never forget, right? Absolute proof of that bit of conventional wisdom remains elusive, but over the past decade, scientists have confirmed that elephants exhibit a rare level of animal intelligence. They’re capable of solving simple puzzles and benefit from regular mental stimulation; like chimpanzees, they use tools in the wild, usually to shoo away flies. They collaborate with one another when problems arise; they flinch when they see a herd member get hurt; they mourn their dead. Elephants are capable of getting angry with one another and then reconciling. It takes only a week for them to learn a command, such as baen (turn) or toi (back up), and they’re capable of mastering as many as 70 of them.

Spend even a little time with them, and you’ll see it for yourself. One night we eat dinner above an elephant playpen, while below, Pumpui, who’s 50-ish, affectionately wraps her trunk around Dah’s body, like a human giving a one-armed squeeze of a hug. Later we look up at the gleaming tusks and towering proportions of Phuki, a 4-ton tusker and one of the resort’s two male residents. I offer a scoop of sunflower seeds. His muddy trunk-fingers grip onto my hand and, gently but with a formidable whoooooosh!, the seeds are gone.

Family suites at Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort start from \$1,707 per night, including meals, limousine transfers to and from the airport, high-speed Wi-Fi, and Dara Camp elephant experience.



Mahouts and their elephants at the camp.