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WILD ANIMALS
Rescuing Elephants
in Thailand



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Rescuing Elephants



There were going to be many first-time adventures on my travels to Northern Thailand; riding in a tuk tuk, touring an ornate Wat or eating bugs at the Sunday night walking market.

But the one experience I was anticipating the most was getting up close and personal with some of the many resident Asian elephants known to be in the country.

STORY BY
Annette White

Thailand offers an array of elephant interaction opportunities for visitors; trekking through the rivers, a display of artistic painting tricks and even circus themed shows. But, after much research, the decision was made against any of the aforementioned presentations. I had read one too many stories about the horrific training techniques of these precious animals in order for them to be these sorts of tourist attractions. They are typically torn from their mothers as babies and then put through a traditional Phajaan, also known as a crush. It is a training technique where they are confined in a very small pen and abused with bull hooks until their spirit is crushed and

they become submissive. Not to say that there are not ethical companies out there, but I did not want to take the chance of unknowingly supporting this type of behavior. Instead, I would be spending an entire day bathing, feeding and getting educated at a highly recognized elephant rescue center. Having a more intimate experience washing elephants sounded like much more of a memorable experience than simply riding one anyway.

I chose to have my one-day elephant interaction at The Elephant Nature Park, which is an elephant rescue and rehabilitation camp where visitors not only get an ellie education, but are also able to spend time feeding and bathing these majestic creatures. It was an easy choice.



The Elephant Nature Park was started in 1996 by Lek, an impressive woman whose life mission is to create a natural environment for these rescued animals to live. Her bond is deep; over the years she has been a midwife, mother, saviour, friend, protector and provider. She has also travelled far lengths to negotiate fees with loggers and trekking companies in order to have the injured elephants join the safety of her herd. Her love and respect is evident. And it is inspiring.

The mission of the park is to be a sanctuary for endangered species, to educate visitors, provide rain forest restoration and cultural preservation. The training style is to reward the elephants for good behavior, not punish them for bad. This is the reason the mahouts (elephant caretakers) always have a bushel of bananas with them. Elephants will do almost anything for a banana.

The rescue is located about an hour from the Chiang Mai city center, where I was staying, and the park provides free transportation with your entrance fee. They picked us up punctually at our hotel in a comfortable air-conditioned van. On the short ride over we passed several trekking companies that were offering one of the most common Thailand attractions, elephant rides. I noticed that a

handful of the animals were tied up outdoors, with a short chain around their leg, waiting for their next tour. They were occupying their time with a small pile of hay that lay in front of them. I wondered how many hours a day that they had to be spent tethered there. The thought passed as we hit the end of the long dirt road where the fields opened up with endless stretches of green, lush rolling hills and there was the gorgeous sight of ellies

roaming free. We had arrived. And I immediately knew that this wasn't going to be any ordinary day.

We were assigned one of the passionate guides and started our morning at the park with an informative tour of the expansive grounds and an introduction to its animal residents. They were an eclectic bunch; some old, some young, some blind, some injured from working in the illegal logging industry, some abused and

some rescued from the circus. All beautiful. One of my favorites of the herd was Lucky, a big girl who was blind in both eyes and had been rescued from a circus show. She had been the star in the "Lucky Circus" for thirty years, even after she was blinded by several years performing under the spotlight. There were no more show-stopping tricks for her to perform here; her days were filled with love, com-

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A SLEEPING BAG MADE FOR TROPICAL CONDITIONS THAT PACKS SMALLER THAN A COCONUT



Snugpak

passion and a couple hundred pounds of pineapples.

It was also hard not to get emotional as Malai Tong limped by, a medium sized elephant who was victim to a landmine which left one leg shorter and disfigured. Unfortunately, this fate was quite common in the illegal logging industry and Malai was one of the luckier ones who survived the explosion. Though she was not productive in the logging industry after the injury, her mahout found her disfigurement to be valuable at street begging, which is illegal in Thailand. Not long after, Lek rescued her, bringing her to the safety of the park. Even though she was not in pain any longer, every step she took looked like an extreme effort.

There were so many other heart-breaking stories of animal cruelty that these elephants could tell, but it was also heartwarming to see them in a better place with people who now cared about their wellbeing.

Despite the name, the Elephant Nature Park does not limit its residents just to these massive, endearing creatures. It is also home to over 200 dogs that were either rescued from catastrophic flooding in Bangkok, local villages or the dog meat trade. Apparently, Lek's compassion has no boundaries. You will see the pups all over the property, lounging on wooden chairs in the sun, barking at strangers and roaming in the fields. Many just wanted a little love, which most of the visitors were happy to give.

Though, some were not quite as friendly, which the red ribbons on their collar indicated. Either way, each was lucky to have a safe new home with free rein of the ample grounds.

After the forty-five minute tour, it was feeding time and everyone in the herd was hungry. Large buckets of watermelon, bananas and pineapples were ready to be devoured, and the ten of us in our group were in charge of the feeding. One piece of fruit at a time, we fed the elephants, putting their nourishment at the end of their trunk as they grabbed it and skillfully shoved the



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food into their mouths. The precise capability of their trunks was impressive, sometimes even more so than myself with a fork. Though their appetites seemed endless, the barrel of fruit was not and when the bucket was empty, they retreated back into the expansive fields for some relaxation.

The animals were not the only ones who needed to eat lunch, so did we, and the rescue center had provided a seemingly endless buffet with a line of chafing dishes that were filled with both Asian and American cuisine. It was quite a selection, everything from a traditional Thai Papaya Salad to American-style french fries. I put a little of everything on my dish, I like variety. After overloading our plates, our group sat at one of the several picnic tables, joined by dozens of other volunteers. Some of them were here just for the one-day educational experience like us and others for the week long volunteer program that required them spending the night in cabins on the premises. Their experience definitely required more intensive work like preparing the fruit, cleaning the poop in the pens and cutting down corn stalks. We all chatted randomly about our favorite Thailand experiences so far, agreeing that this one would be amongst the most memorable, even though we were only half way through the day. It was certain that riding in a tuk tuk, touring a temple or eating crickets just could not compare.

As we were finishing the last of the aluminum container of French fries, there was an indication that the bathing of the elephants was about to commence: a herd of dirty ones passed by, heading toward the river. Their backs and heads were covered with a thin layer of self-applied mud, a sun-block and insect control technique. This slight hint was

more than enough for me; I quickly brought my unfinished plate to the dishwashing stand, not wanting to miss any part of the cleansing event. I happily saw my lunch leftovers being put into a bin and then being fed to the random nearby dogs. Nothing goes to waste here.

Our group walked alongside our new four-legged friends, down to the shallow murky water. We were each given empty plastic pails and a piece of bark that was used to exfoliate their rough skin. We all, including the elephants, stood in the knee deep river as one person scrubbed the massive surface of the elephant and the other rinsed by throwing buckets of water. All the while, the ellies were being entertained by a basketful of bananas.





Though, at some point, the elephants did have to participate in the cleansing. They did so by submerging their trunks in the river, sucking in water and then spraying themselves. It was an entertaining spectacle, better than any circus show I had ever seen.

As we bathed a half dozen of the larger elephants, the mahouts took some of the smaller juveniles to a clear space in the river and supervised as they completely submerged themselves under water. This bathing technique seemed to be as much fun as practical. We watched, mesmerized, as they playfully rolled around in the river.

After about an hour, everyone was squeaky clean, and it was time for one more feeding. Apparently, these gentle giants never get full. Again, we went back to the feeding station, took fruit from the full baskets and fed until there was nothing left. At that point, the elephants turned from the platform and peacefully strolled back into the fields, undoubtedly knowing that the process would start all over again tomorrow.

It's a nice life for an elephant here.

Annette White



Trying to find my passion was the best thing I ever did.

It made me realize that my passion is having new experiences, traveling the world, eating adventurously and checking items off my bucket list along the way. I am obsessed with trying just about anything that I have never done before and it has led me to some amazing (& not so amazing, but memorable) experiences.

I have eaten lambs brain, rappelled into the depths of a cavern, fed a stingray, zip-lined through the Costa Rican rain forest, scaled the 463 stairs of Florence's Duomo and even got my hair pulled by a monkey in Honduras. I kind of liked that. I have also tried to curl like an Olympian, went hunting for ghosts in Goldfield and flew through the sky on a trapeze...unfortunately, without the greatest of ease. You can also see the top of my head in a

Hollywood movie (don't be jealous) and I, once, put on my big girl panties to give blood.

When I am not planning my next adventure, chowing-down at a new restaurant, writing for my 2+ readers or trying to turn my body into a pretzel through yoga, I am creating delicious food at my Michelin recommended Italian restaurant, Sugo Trattoria. There, I wear many hats; I am a chef, marketing executive, accountant, part-time psychologist, prep cook, and, sometimes, dishwasher (not my happy day).

I know my new adventures will never be over and I look forward to the unknown that is waiting. It is my hope to inspire my readers...you are there, right? Mom?...to step out of their box today and take a baby step to their goals.

Thanks for stopping by. I do hope you stay a while and join the journey.

If you need more information, want to share ideas or just want to stay in touch:

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