

Asian Elephants – On the Brink

During Asia’s dramatic 4,000-year history, the Asiatic Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) has played a significant role in human development. But this partnership in religion, work and war is at risk of coming to an end within our lifetimes. Pachyderm populations have decreased by 70 percent, with an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 individuals left in existence, spread across 13 countries – with as many as 30% spending their lives in captivity. The primary culprits for such a dramatic decrease in population levels is the loss of habitats, poaching for tusks, tourism and human-elephant conflict.

The solution to sustaining the elephant population is multi-faceted, involving government intervention and long-term planning, but also every visitor and tourist’s participation. EXO Travel and all of our valued customers can play a significant role in ensuring that Asian Elephants thrive again.

EXO and Elephants

EXO Travel and our non-profit affiliate, EXO Foundation, are looking to facilitate responsible, rewarding encounters with elephants across Asia. Travellers will only visit approved elephant camps and sanctuaries that have been vetted by our in-house sustainably coordinators, and are in accordance with ABTA (Association of British Travel Agents) *Global standards for Animals in Tourism*, as well as by experts in the field who we are working closely with.

Elephant Care

Caretaking for elephants is a monumental task, one that involves comprehensive physical wellness and ensuring psychological wellbeing. Below is a list of basic norms an elephant camp should operate within, and we will strive to satisfy and enforce as many as possible:

- The origin of each elephant should be documented by official papers (to show it has not been poached from the wild).
- Elephants should not work more than 4 hours per day and not during the hottest hours.
- Calves should not be separated from their mothers until they’re at least 5 years old.
- Elephants should not walk too long or too often on hard surfaces like concrete.
- Elephants should not be trained to perform shows involving any unnatural behaviour: playing football, painting, standing, etc. These performances often lead to injury and are the result of the harsh training of young elephants.
- Elephants should have enough time to socialise with other elephants, especially for cows.
- Elephants should be allowed to roam freely during downtime and not be confined to small pens or restricted by short tethered chains.
- Mahouts should be properly educated in positive reinforcement techniques and safety.
- Physical abuse should not be used as a training method, and the usage of hooks should be minimal.
- Elephants should have access to a varied diet and ample water.
- Elephants should get a minimum of one bath per day, part of which is free time not involving the entertainment of tourists.
- Elephants should be provided shaded areas for resting time and as much as possible during ‘working hours’.
- Bi-monthly health checks should be conducted by experienced veterinarians.
- Portions of the proceeds from tourist income should be reinvested into mahout training, elephant care and conservation.

While currently only a few elephant camps offering rides on chairs fulfil all the above criteria, we will regularly assess camps and recommend only those where elephant rides respect the basic norms outlined above, and where all negative effects are minimised.

Should I Ride?

A surprising fact is that elephant's backs are not made for riding. Unlike horses, in spite of their strength and size, elephant backs are fragile and not intended to carry two people for many hours a day on a chair that can damage their spine. Elephants should work for a maximum of 4 hours, not carry more than 150 kgs and have padded protections for the chairs on their back.

Riding an elephant remains one of traveller's top choices on a Thailand to-do-list. EXO Travel do not ban elephant rides outright, as the loss of income from abruptly banning elephant rides may contribute to poorer camp conditions and larger economic issues for communities linked to this activity. Furthermore, if mahouts are not earning enough money, they may take their elephants to the city for work, or find themselves unable to provide adequate food and healthcare. Therefore, a very gradual shift and change of mind is the preferable solution, which requires building awareness about the issues and presenting alternative options to the practices that currently do not fulfil the checklist we have adopted.

We do believe an elephant camp should be a place of sanctuary where the animals' wellbeing comes before profit and entertainment. There are already some excellent examples of responsible and commercially viable camps in Thailand which provide a respectful and more meaningful interaction with the elephants, and we hope travellers will increasingly opt for these so that elephant rides are no longer in demand from clients.