

Your questions about riding elephants

Isn't giving rides to tourists cruel and unnatural for elephants?

No, for several reasons.

- If done correctly riding an elephant is no more cruel than horse riding.
- Elephants are like people in that their health suffers if they don't receive a minimum amount of exercise each day. Gentle walks are actually beneficial for their physical and mental health.
- The income earned from elephant trekking supports at least two mahouts and their entire families – an essential income creator in Laos.

How many people can an elephant safely carry in its saddle?



A fully grown elephant can carry up to 150kg on its back. So 2 normal adults and 1 mahout (on the neck) is fine for an elephant. Any more would be too heavy a load.

How many hours should an elephant work daily?

Work time varies according to the temperature and the terrain. Generally an elephant should not walk at a brisk pace for more than four hours a day. Any more than this and it will not have enough time to eat, drink and rest. If you think your elephant is being overworked, show your concern by asking your tour guide about its workload.



Can I walk up to an elephant and say hello?

No! Elephant experts will never approach a strange elephant, even a young one, without first asking permission from the mahout. All elephants should be approached very cautiously. Elephants dislike loud sudden noises and quick movements, especially behind their backs. It is best you have mahouts at your side at all times and carefully follow their instructions.

Turning tricks

Cute, maybe. Cruel, definitely. Teaching elephants to balance on stumps or up on their hind legs is unnatural. You can be pretty sure that these elephants were trained using force and pain. Do you want elephants to be scared of people? Do not support these activities.

All good mahouts and elephants camp managers already know and work within these guidelines.

But remember, if you don't like what you see tell everyone!

Vote with your visit!



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Read before you ride!

How to choose a quality elephant camp in the "Land of a Million Elephants"



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Elephants are the largest terrestrial land mammal. During your stay in Laos it's well worth a visit to an elephant camp to experience some pachyderm power. Camps can be excellent places for people to get up close and personal with the elephants as well as supporting their conservation in Laos.

The ownership of domesticated elephants is a respected tradition spanning many centuries in Asia. Today elephants are mainly employed in logging. Logging is a dangerous and demanding industry for elephants.

Tourism is a new opportunity in Laos, but if not managed to the highest standards can be just as damaging to an elephant's health as logging. Like all industries, elephant camps are businesses interested in making money, sometimes to the elephant's detriment.

This brochure will help you to make informed decisions about which elephant camp to visit. If you are not happy with what you see at the camp – tell the staff and tell other visitors!



Does the elephant have fresh, bloody puncture wounds on its forehead?

The ankus or hook can first appear to be a very cruel instrument. It is a guiding tool and when used properly, should not leave any noticeable trace of use. If you see wounds you know the hook is being misused and the elephant is being mistreated. Show your concern by pointing these marks out to the mahout.

Is there enough food for the elephant to eat when it is not working or giving rides?

Have a look at the enclosures where the elephants are kept. Is there grass nearby that they can access? Elephants must spend between 14-18 hours each day eating! The collection and feeding of fodder to elephants should be an obvious activity at any elephant camp. If you can't see any food around, ask where it is and when it's coming.

Fruit only is not a balanced diet

It's fun to feed your elephant bananas, pineapples etc, but make sure you can see other food around the camp for them, like grasses and bamboo.

Is there sufficient water and shelter for the elephants when not giving rides?

Elephants quickly suffer when exposed to too much sun, particularly during the hottest months, March – July. Drinking up to 100 litres of water each day, it is essential elephants have access to fresh, clean water at all times and a roof over their heads.

Is the elephant enclosure clean?

You don't want to be standing in your own mess all day, do you? Elephants feel exactly the same way. Dung should be regularly collected and disposed of while urine should be washed away. This is absolutely vital in preventing the spread of disease. If you think the enclosure is looking dirty, show your distaste to the camp staff.

Are the elephants flapping their ears and swinging their tails?

Try not to move for 10 minutes, it's pretty hard. A healthy elephant is in constant motion. It will always flap its ears to dissipate body heat and swing its tail to keep flies and insects away. No movement can be an indicator of ill health.

Are elephants repeatedly swaying their head widely back and forth?

Not to be mistaken for the point above. Elephants that have been chained or restrained for too long repeatedly swing their heads in a very distressing manner. This is stereotypical behaviour and a strong indicator of deep stress, boredom and a lack of environmental enrichment. Behaviour like this can be an indicator of elephant cruelty.

What does it mean if you see very liquid, runny dung (diahorrea)?

The dung of a healthy elephant is always several round, solid lumps. If you see liquid faeces, it is a sure sign that the elephant is ill and shouldn't be working at all. Inform the mahout and camp staff immediately.

