

# Herald Scotland

Wednesday 11 August 2010

## On the road with the elephants of Laos

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9 Aug 2010

**Massive, majestic and much mistreated, the elephants of South East Asia deserve respect.**

Elephants were apparently the favoured mode of travel for Laos's ancient gods and kings, and it's not difficult to see why. Few forms of transport confer quite the level of panache conferred by six tons of majestic pachyderm.

Admittedly, it seems unlikely that gods and kings were helped on to their gigantic mounts courtesy of a hard shove on the bum from beneath while someone else dragged them up by the wrist from above. But despite my inelegant introduction, Mae Bountom, a 14-year-old female elephant, seems content to carry me as a passenger and, with a determinedly pronounced "Pai" from Phonxay, her mahout (the person who looks after and works an elephant), we're off.

It takes a little getting used to, this swaying elephantine gait. Swing, loll, swing, loll ... I think I'm starting to get the hang of it then we start to go down hill and it becomes: swing, scoop, loll, swing, scoop, loll, and I'm forced to wiggle myself into a more balanced position and grip tight on the wooden bars of my seat. But eventually I start to relax.

The Laos earth is a bright rust red and the path we follow cuts a garish gash through luminescent green paddyfields and shady forests. The mahouts sing as we go along, with the occasional accompaniment from their charges.

Elephant rides are a popular tourist attraction across the region. But for many visitors to Laos, the country once known as Land Of A Million Elephants, the desire to spend time in the company of one of these endangered creatures is tainted with concern for their welfare. It is fair or right to use such intelligent animals in this way?

"That depends on how they're treated and how treks are run," explains Sebastien Duffillot, co-founder of elephant protection NGO Elefantasia, who points out that humans and Asian elephants have a working relationship dating back 4,000 years.

The organisation is hoping to revive the fortune of the nation's drastically declining elephant population by encouraging foreign visitors and local mahouts to become involved

in welfare-conscious trekking and put Laos at the forefront of responsible elephant tourism in Asia.

Bordered by Thailand to the west, Vietnam to the east, China to the north and Cambodia to the south, laid-back Laos, home to some of the most dramatic waterfalls in South East Asia, has been steadily carving a place for itself on the tourist map over the past 10 years.

It offers the most gentle of introductions to the region. Prettily-painted colonial-era houses with wooden verandahs make for picturesque towns where there are plenty of European delicacies for those visitors reluctant to indulge in local favourites such as dried buffalo skin or chicken embryos masquerading as ordinary boiled eggs.

From high on top of Mae Bountom I get a chance to appreciate just how beautiful this mountainous and verdant landscape is. Despite their great bulk, elephants can pass through surprisingly small spaces. I'm amazed, as we navigate our way through patchwork paddy-fields, to see how their huge feet can pick their way along the narrow tracks less than a foot wide.

Golden sunlight warms wooden houses as we pass through traditional villages. Chillis dry in the sun and piglets and chickens root around in shady corners beneath the stilt-raised houses. Wide-eyed children stare in astonishment at our approach, scampering off squealing until they've gathered enough courage to sneak back for a closer look at the passing giants.

There are fewer than 1,000 wild elephants left in Laos, and approximately 500 domesticated ones. Widespread logging, which has destroyed the elephants' natural habitat, poaching and changing lifestyles mean many young people have had little contact with these animals.

In Laos, most working elephants are used for logging. As beasts of burden, they are often overworked and too exhausted to mate, says Sebastien Duffillot. A two-year pregnancy, and a further two years before a calf can be weaned, means that breeding is seen as a liability by owners who use their animals in the gruelling logging industry. "Elephants start logging at the age of 14," says Duffillot. "But, because they are very cute, they can generate income at birth in a tourist facility."

They certainly are cute. One of the elephants I meet is just six, and if you crossed a hyperactive puppy with a small tractor the potential for chaos would be similar. At one point the spiky-haired youngster stumbles in boggy ground, panics and careers into the back of Mae Bountom, prompting a minor stampede.

Thankfully it doesn't take Phonxay and the other skilled mahouts long to get the elephants under control and, this being Laos where relaxed is the default mode, calmness is soon restored and we return to sauntering through the trees.

Elephants, it seems, have to learn a lot of lessons as they grow up. Seeing the adult elephants carefully assessing new riders, or sussing out routes they're taking for the first time – checking the stability of bridges with their sensitive trunks before crossing, for example – suggests these lessons add up to produce extremely bright creatures.

“Reconverting logging elephants into tourism is not a simple task,” says Duffillot. “Elephants are fragile creatures despite their imposing stature. Some elephant camps in South East Asia are no better than open air prisons for elephants and abuses are frequent in poorly managed camps.”

Trekking company Elephant Adventures, which works alongside Elefantasia, organises forest treks which last several days, during which those taking part get to learn about bathing, feeding and caring for the elephants while exploring the varied Laos landscape. Part of the cost of the trip covers a donation to a mobile vet unit which provides care to domesticated elephants across Laos. Duffillot says he would like to see this model emulated throughout Laos and other parts of South East Asia.

According to Elefantasia’s information guide, key areas of concern include whether the animals have access to sufficiently varied food (not just fruit) and fresh water; whether the mahouts are injuring the elephants’ skin with the steering hooks they use to direct them; and whether the elephants are flapping their ears and tails (a happy sign) or repeatedly swaying their heads back and forth (often a sign of stress).

As the sun sets, I watch Mae Bountom head out to her forest resting place for the evening, her impressive silhouette framed black against gold. I realise with a pang that with so few elephants left in Laos such sights, without action, may soon be a thing of the past.

## GETTING THERE

Emirates operates daily flights from Glasgow to Kuala Lumpur via Dubai. Prices start from £515 per person. For more information visit [www.emirates.com/uk](http://www.emirates.com/uk) or call 0844 800 2777.

Air Asia operates flights from Kuala Lumpur to the Laos capital, Vientiane. Prices vary considerably, but a current promotion has flights available in August starting at £35.

## WHAT TO DO

Elephant Adventures offers four and five-day elephant caravan tours for small groups. Each guest has their own elephant during the trip. They are accompanied by experienced mahouts and guides. The route covers Laos’s diverse landscapes, finishing on the banks of the Mekong River.

Elephant Adventures gives 5% of its turnover to the mobile elephant clinic operated by the Elefantasia NGO, which provides veterinary care to Laos’s domesticated elephants.

Tour prices start from £418 per person. For more information visit [www.elephantadventures.com](http://www.elephantadventures.com)

## FIND OUT MORE

For more about elephants in Laos and the work of Elefantasia visit [www.elefantasia.org](http://www.elefantasia.org)

Recommander

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