

Sunday Mail

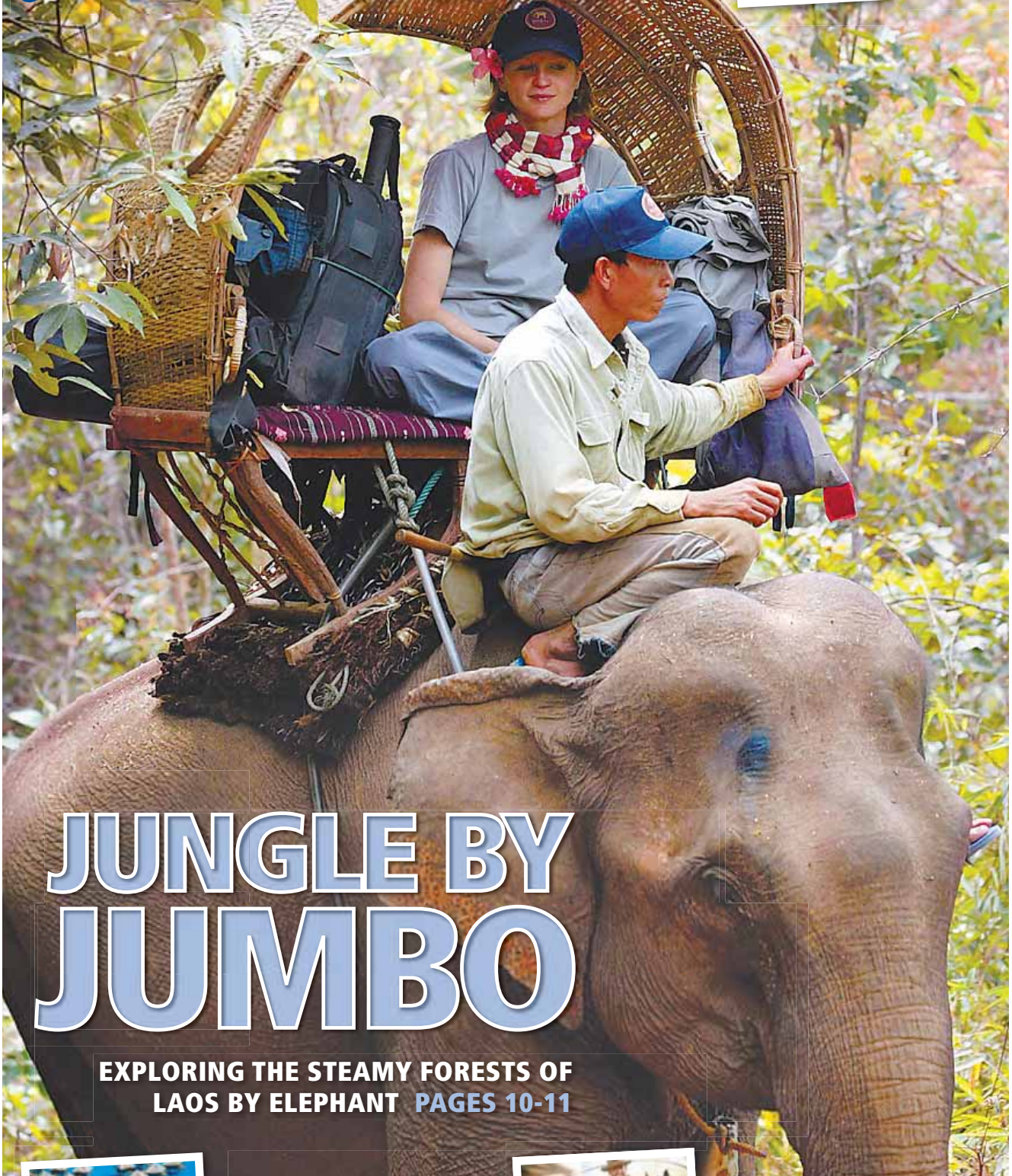
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DRAMA**
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JUNGLE BY JUMBO

EXPLORING THE STEAMY FORESTS OF
LAOS BY ELEPHANT PAGES 10-11



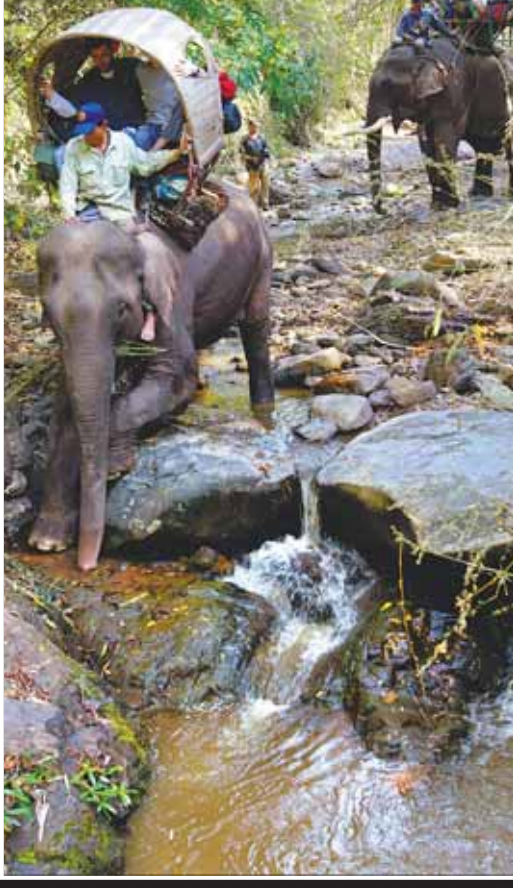
Tahitian dreaming
The pearl of the Pacific PAGES 4-5



Outback up front
Australia leads a tourist boom PAGE 12-13

PUB: MAIL ESCAPE DATE: 30-NOV-2008 PAGE: 1 ED: STATE COL: CMYK

STEADY AS SHE GOES: The group carefully navigates a riverbed in Laos



MAKING TRACKS



RIVER OF DREAMS: Crossing streams isn't a problem when you're riding an elephant



LUNCH BREAK: Meal time for elephant trekkers is a simple affair featuring local food



JUNGLE BOOGIE: The group makes its way through the lush forest

Laos was once known as **The Land of a Million Elephants**. **MIKE LARDER** found out why

MRS Flower delicately plucks a succulent leafy shoot from a convenient shrub and meditatively waits her little posy about her lime bulk, creating cooling zephyrs and effectively disturbing a hovering squadron of persistent insects.

Mrs. Flower is an Asian elephant and a lucky one. If you can call being seriously endangered lucky. For 22 of her 37 summers she has toiled in the verdant Lao forests dragging heavy logs from impenetrable jungles. She now hauls much lighter tourists for a living.

A scant 1300 wild and domesticated of her relatives remain in the land-locked Peoples Democratic Republic of Laos, the fabled 'Land of a Million Elephants'.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) describes the Asian elephant as "being seriously threatened with extinction".

There are 560 working animals left in Laos and a further 700 wild ones rapidly running out of habitat. The beleaguered species may well soon vanish.

I meet my trekking companions in Pak Lay. Our group includes Frenchman Sebastien Puffillot who, with partner Gilles Mauer champion ElefantAsia, a non-government Organisation dedicated to the health, breeding and restoration of the elephants to the Lao forests. An elephantine task.

I will join Sebastien and fellow countrymen, Guillem, a video journalist, and Gael and Pierre, teachers holidaying from Paris, on a unique elephant ramble into the wilds of western Laos. Proceeds assist ElefantAsia's work.

We meet our caravan in Hongsa in western Laos. Elephants, mahout (elephant handlers) and virgin trekkers eye each other

apprehensively. Gripping elephant ears and arms proffered by the mahout we scramble aboard. Passing through the old world village of Ban Then, we cross a stream where our four elephants indulge in playful water fights, squirting refreshing showers over themselves and their human passengers.

The swaying motion and lilting musical accompaniment from the elephants' necklace of bells

eventually induces a semi-hypnotic state. We lurch and sway, surreptitiously probing an entangled trail. Our elephants deftly maneuvering their lumbering bulk through rocky creek beds with silent finesse.

The gloam of the evening envelops our tiring troupe. We reach our camp - a barren paddy field. Wary elephants are led to the stream for bath time.

Next morning the guttural

babbling of the mahout unshackling their elephants awakes me. Mrs. Flower, freshly bathed and perky, appears through the mist and trots past waving her trunk in salutation.

Warmed by the mellow winter sun our little convoy follows a winding, sine-entangled creek. Progress is slow but precise and virtually silent. The clonking chimes of the elephants' bells echo about the roaring cliffs lulling us into a sleepy torpor.

The afternoon wears languidly on. We meander through a tiered rice paddy a slender teak plantation and follow a small river that dribbles into the Mekong. An elderly grandma beams at us with a broad toothless smile while washing herself and a squirming baby in the Houey En rivulet.

We must make an engaging scenario for the villagers of Ban Keng En. A crowd of slack-jawed kids gathers atop a small cliff and gape. Small boys lope up where they frolic in the rock pools, bronzed and shiny, surprisingly

finding themselves face to trunk with elephants.

We slither off the weary elephants, dust ourselves down and remove uncomfortable wedgies. Ban Keng En is a solidly constructed and neatly brushed hamlet perched spectacularly on the precipice of a small hill, overseeing a pristine pure white beach and the meandering Mekong.

The entire population drift from their solid rosewood and rattan dwellings to greet us. As honored guests, we are invited to a village celebration.

Recent experience of the Lao's ability to party suggests that this could be a long and lively evening.

Tomorrow we will say a sentimental farewell to our friends the elephants and our amiable support group.

We board, with some apprehension, a longboat for the 10-hour slow voyage to Louang Prabang against the swiftly flowing current of the Mekong.

Helping our big friends

ElefantAsia is a not-for-profit French-based organisation chartered in 2001 to care for the remaining herds of wild and domesticated elephants. ElefantAsia supports a mobile "Savabouy Elephant Care Unit" (SECU) providing quality medical care to wounded and sick elephants in remote areas. SECU vets have successfully treated several hundred ailing, exhausted or broken-down animals.

ElefantAsia also campaigns against cruelty and abuse of elephants and unethical exploitation of the creatures. Visit www.elefantasia.org for information.



DESTINATION

LAOS

GETTING THERE: Vietnam Airlines flies to Laos via Melbourne and Saigon. Visit www.vietnamairlines.com.vn

FESTIVAL: In February Savabouy will welcome international guests to the third Festival of Elephants. The three-day gala celebrates the sacred elephant and the ancient Lao culture.

DETAILS: www.elephantadventures.com, www.elefantasia.org, www.elephantsumbrella.org



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