



In the ancient and mystical land of Laos, trekkers are following in some very big footsteps to explore dense jungles and complex cultures, and to learn about the fate of the country's elephants...

Mrs Flower delicately plucks a leafy shoot from a convenient shrub and meditatively wafts it about her enormous bulk. She fans my picnic lunch with her great rubbery proboscis and bats away a hovering squadron of persistent insects.

Her exquisitely sensitive trunk could, in extremis, easily smash me to a gory pulp. Instead, she examines my banana with interest, snuffling its sweet scent with her mobile nostrils and peering at me with tiny limpid eyes, set low and out of all proportion within her huge bulbous skull.

I offer her my fruit and she eases it from my palm with the muscle-packed and multifunctional tube that is her nose - a sensory device, battering ram, high-pressure hose and knife, fork and spoon all in one.

Mrs Flower is an Asian elephant, and a lucky one at that...if you can call being seriously endangered lucky. For 22 of her 37 summers she has toiled in Lao's verdant forests, dragging heavy logs from impenetrable jungles. Now she hauls tourists for a living, and they are an awful lot lighter.

Just over 1300 of her sacred relatives remain in the land-locked Peoples Democratic Republic of Laos, once known as *Prathet Lane Xane* - the Land of a Million Elephants. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature melancholically describes the Asian Elephant as being, "seriously threatened with extinction".

There are 560 working elephants left in Laos and 700 wild ones, who are rapidly running out of habitat. The beleaguered species may well vanish within 50 years. The Kings of the Forest are, despite their bulk, very thin on the ground.

w WALKING WITH GIANTS

Story + Images Mike Larder



Elefacts

- Asian elephants are significantly smaller than their African cousins.
- An elephant's life span is similar to that of a human.
- Human-elephant interaction can be traced back at least 3000 years.
- The Lao, fervent believers in reincarnation, consider the elephant to be second only to humans in nature.
- Elephants are very intelligent, and can understand at least 40 commands.
- An elephant's trunk can pick up a five cent piece or a needle...or smash a tree to match wood.
- Elephant crap is prized as fertiliser and for medicinal poultices. It has wondrous healing abilities...and grows great veggies.
- Mahouts form a life-long partnership with their elephants. A boy mahout will interact with a baby elephant before he can speak.
- Elephants do not naturally hold each other tails. This engaging practice only happens in circuses, although a baby elephant will hold its mother's tail for support.
- Elephants were once used as war machines and mobile battering rams. Their size alone frightened the bejeesus out of adversaries who had never encountered such a creature.
- Elephants cannot jump or gallop but make very efficient submarines.
- In 1500 BC, an elephant and a monkey are believed to have succored the young, fasting Buddha by carrying water and honey to him, assisting him to reach enlightenment.
- Upon the Buddha's death, the elephant was the first to mourn at his side. A white elephant appeared in the pregnant Queens Maya's dream telling her that her future son would be the Buddha. To this day the Lao believe a white elephant to be divine.



The caravan treks through a dry paddy field. ABOVE + TOP LEFT: Pak Lai Elephant Festival. TOP CENTRE: Gael rides Mrs Flower piloted by mahout, Sieng Khong. TOP RIGHT: Sebastien Duffillot from ElefantAsia with Mrs Flower (Mae Dok).

First meet my trekking companions at the Elephant Festival, when 74 working elephants descend on dusty Paklay - the animals resplendent in bright howdahs, painted toenails and garlanded with tiaras of wild flowers, and their mahout riders decked out in elegant uniforms.

Fifty thousand people attend the festival, and a couple of Frenchmen, Sebastien Duffillot and Gilles Maurer, are acting as event consultants. Sebastien and Gilles also champion ElefantAsia - a well-credentialed NGO dedicated to the health, breeding and restoration of elephants to Lao's forests...an elephantine task indeed.

Shortly after the exuberant festival I join Sebastien and his compatriots Guilhem (a video journalist), and Gael and Pierre (Parisian teachers on holiday), on a unique ramble into the wilds of western Laos.

Sebastien and Gilles guide ecologically sensitive elephant treks, the proceeds of which assist ElefantAsia's work. Mahout on such trips accept less pay for easier and more ethical work for their elephants. Logging takes a heavy toll on animals and the wise mahout are protecting a life-long investment.

We meet our caravan in Hongsa, where elephants, mahout and virgin trekkers eye each other apprehensively. By gripping giant ears, and with the assistance of arms proffered by the mahout, we scramble aboard. Throughout the ensuing adventure we will take turns riding and walking.

Passing through the village of Ban Viengkeo, we cross a stream where our four elephants indulge in some playful water fights, squirting refreshing showers over themselves and us. Villagers emerge from their huts, wide-eyed with curiosity.

We climb steadily all morning, learning some important safety rules as we go: never creep up behind an elephant without yelling a throaty grunt, for example, and don't approach one without a mahout.

Our Lao-style lunch consists of noodle soup, glutinous sticky rice, dried buffalo

meat (I think) and leafy salad. We munch and gape at a panoramic view of distant hazy mountains and deeply shadowed valleys.

The swaying motion and lilting music from the elephants' necklaces of bells becomes hypnotic and eventually the gloaming evening envelopes our tiring troupe. We reach our camp - a barren paddy field - and the weary elephants are led to the stream for a bath. Soon a cacophony of falsetto tooting and raucous trumpeting drifts from the creek.

Under a full moon, camp chairs appear. We eat simply and in the Lao way - squashing unidentifiable vegetables and meaty bits with balls of sticky rice. Then out comes a frosted old bottle of powerful liqueur. The Lao love a party and are enthusiastic imbibers of their own evil hooch, a lethal brew distilled from rice, best sipped with great caution. For safety's sake I leave this little soiree early, carefully side-stepping piles of steaming elephant dung, and stumble to my tent.

The guttural babbling of the mahout unshackling their elephants wakes me. Peering across my toes I see the cooks frying eggs. The peaks are still shrouded in a gossamer mist and Mrs Flower, freshly bathed and perky, appears through the veil and trots past waving her trunk in salutation.

"Isn't she pretty?" Sebastien mumbles. Mrs Flower is a very visible ambassador for ElefantAsia's commitment to the future existence and repatriation of the Asian Elephant, the environment and the mystic Lao culture. She is also Seb's favorite. "It's lucky I have an understanding wife," he quips.

"They say it's polite to compliment a Lao woman by telling her she walks like an elephant", chuckles Sebastien. "To watch an elephant walk is an exquisite sight, I wouldn't try saying it to a French woman!"

Our journey continues almost vertically. As we clear the mist, sweeping views appear. This is an enigmatic and beautiful land, but it wears the scars of a horrible recent history.

Laos is unfortunate in its location. The ancient landlocked country forms a strategic

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buffer between China, Myanmar/Burma, Vietnam and Cambodia. During the Vietnam War, the Lao found themselves embroiled in a vicious international conflict. As American B52s sowed the country with a killer crop, death was dished out indiscriminately. The grindingly impoverished country remains the most bombed nation, per capita, on Earth.

Sebastien has lived and worked in Lao's capital, Vientiane, since 1996, when the damaged country tentatively emerged from four decades of isolation, opened its borders to Thailand and discovered that it had been forgotten. He loves the culture and the country. Above all, he loves the elephants.

We halt for lunch in tiny Ban Nam Tap, watched by dusky, wide-eyed children clutching pet puppies. The elephants amuse the kids - showering themselves and anyone nearby with cooling creek water.

As we nimbly negotiate rock pools and mossy logs, the animal's dexterity really becomes apparent. An elephant's foot is one of nature's masterpieces. They're so well balanced and shock absorbed, that a four-tonne beast is possessed of a ballerina's ability to move in virtual silence.

The clonking chimes of the elephants' bells echo around the rearing cliffs, lulling us into a sleepy torpor. Pete snoozes peacefully, lodged sideways in his cosy and oscillating howdah and Gael gazes dreamily ahead. We are suspended in a time warp, as Lao itself has been for the last half century.

As the afternoon wears languidly on we trek through a tiered rice paddy, a slender teak plantation and follow a small river that dribbles into the Mekong. An elderly grandma beams a broad, toothless smile at us while washing herself, a squirming baby and her laundry in the trickling Houey En rivulet. We call greetings from our lordly height.

"*Sabai dee bor?*" (Hello how are you?) We are welcomed with a chorus of *sabai dees* and much clapping of palms under chins. Sebastien, exuding boyish glee, hops up on Mrs Flower and settles comfortably astride her broad neck. "Now I'm a mahout," he crows. "Hrrow...Hrrow!" Mrs Flower responds with a flute-like toot, and we proceed in grand style. The moment only slightly marred by an enormous, windy fart. "It wasn't me!" protests our leader, maintaining his aplomb as we arrive to an awed reception.

We must make an engaging sight for the villagers of Ban Keng En. Our steeds are enormous next to the locals, and I measure over two metres myself. I feel like Gulliver entering the mythical land of Lilliput.

The ever-considerate Lao try not to stare, but the sight of the longest *Falang* (Westerner) they have ever seen must stretch their inherent good manners right to the very limit. Earlier in our journey, I had discovered that our Lao companions had christened me the 'Moving Mountain'.

“ We reach our camp and the weary elephants are led to the stream for a bath. Soon a cacophony of falsetto tooting and raucous trumpeting drifts over from the creek. ”

We slither off the weary elephants, dust ourselves down and remove uncomfortable wedgies. Under the golden glow of the late afternoon sun the entire population drifts from rosewood and rattan dwellings to greet us. Small children peer from behind mothers' skirts. As honored guests, we are invited to a village *baci* celebration. Recent experience of the Lao's ability to party suggests that this could be a long and lively evening.

After formalities are completed Sebastien promises us a Lao Beer from the "best little pub on the Mekong". I'm gobsmacked. The 'pub' is a bamboo hut that teeters on thin poles. While we guzzle, the pachyderms cavort in the swirling eddies below.

Later, at the chief's house, a *baci* awaits. The Lao, essentially Buddhist people, believe that humans have 32 souls, just like elephants. A *baci* ceremony is conducted to re-gather and heal lost or damaged souls.

We sit on the floor, drink, chatter and share noodle soup, sticky rice, buffalo sausage and a decidedly malnourished chicken. The men crowd in, chanting and caressing our hands and arms. They are calling our errant souls back to our bodies and are banishing bad spirits. They tie loops of cotton strings around our wrists. The hallucinatory effects of the highly potent rice whisky are kicking in and our jolly party becomes noisier.

With a theatrical flourish, the chief separates two tin dishes, revealing the blank staring eyes of a chicken, sans body. The game starts: Russian roulette played with a litre of fermented hooch and a rooster's head as the dice. We shake the bowls and reveal the severed head. It's bad news if the beak points at you. I lose again, to the delight of my alcoholically enervated hosts.

I must drink, or risk causing disappointment and offence, but I have a plan. I sip, to loud encouragement from all assembled, but capably dribble the potion though my shaggy beard and hope my already smelly T-shirt will absorb the liquor. I think I got away with it.



Bath Time in the Mekong. Sinouane leads the weary caravan into the Mekong for their play time. TOP RIGHT: Sebastien Duffillot rides in a 'First Class' howdah. RIGHT: Buffalo for Lunch at Ban Nam Tap.



As an honored guest, I am then invited to sleep with the chief's wife...and kids...and dogs...and, fortunately, the chief himself. I excuse myself from the raucous frivolity, locate the village's communal water tap and sluice down the sticky remains of rice whisky. Cleansed and refreshed I wander back to the chief's house. All is now quiet but for the snoring chief.

Tomorrow we will say a sentimental farewell to our friends, the elephants, and our amiable support group. We will board, with some apprehension, a longboat for the 10-hour slow voyage to Luang Prabang, against the swiftly flowing current of the Mekong.

In the meantime the Moving Mountain finally rests. 🐘

Elefantasia

ElefantAsia is a not-for-profit organisation based in France. It was chartered in 2001 for the express purpose of providing veterinary care for the remaining herds of wild and domesticated elephants. ElefantAsia supports a mobile Sayaboury Elephant Care Unit (SECU), providing quality medical care to wounded and sick

elephants in remote areas. ElefantAsia also supports educational programs for the mahout. Around 60% of Laos' forests have been logged, and as the trees disappear, so do the elephants and the ancient knowledge and culture of the mahout. ElefantAsia are constantly on the lookout for vets from foreign countries who would be willing to work in Laos. For more about

the organisation see elefantasia.org.

Eletreking

Elephant treks take place over four or five days and groups contain between two and six people. Trips start from US\$530 per

person. See elephantadventures.com for more information.

Mrs Flower

Mrs Flower, ('Mae Dok' in Lao) was purchased in collaboration with ElefantAsia, by the Elephants

Umbrella Fund ([elephants umbrella.org](http://elephantsumbrella.org)), a US based NGO that raises funds to rescue and rehabilitate damaged elephants. She now spends her days as a living ambassador for ElefantAsia, trekking or delivering school books, turning up at weddings, parties...anything to further the peoples' awareness of the grim situation Asian elephants are in.