

Awfully big adventure

An elephant trek through the depths of the Lao mountain country reveals an intriguing culture, writes **Mike Larder**

MRS Flower's elongated snout, capable of the most delicate — picking up a needle — or the most destructive — destroying a farming village — uses the banana from my palm entwined within the powerful muscle that is her nose, sensory device, lathering rag, high-pressure hose, knife, fork and spoon.

Mrs Flower is an Asian elephant and a lucky one, if you call being critically 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 loads for a living.

A scant 1300 wild and domesticated of her sacred relatives remain in the landlocked People's Democratic Republic of Laos, the so-called 'Land of a Million

panoramic vista of distant hazy mountains and deeply shadowed valleys.

Elephants' feet are an engineering masterpiece. So well-balanced and shock absorbed that a four-tonne elephant, for all its misshapen bulk, shares a ballerina's ability to move in ethereal silence.

The gleam of the evening envelops our string troops. We stack our camp — a barren paddy field. Weary elephants are led to the stream for bath time. There is much balantia tooting and mucous transports drifting over from the creek.

Camp chairs appear, as does a bottle of Pils, saucisson and a meek cheese. Our Lao staff, accustomed as they are to some gastronomically pucky delicacies, reel back, pinch their noses and giggle hysterically. The Lao love a party and are enthusiastic imbibers of their own evil

ElefantAsia

ELEFANTASIA is a not for profit French-based organisation chartered in 2001 to provide veterinary care for the remaining herds of wild and domesticated elephants. It supports a mobile elephant care unit providing quality medical care to wounded and sick elephants in remote areas.



