



Sunday
MAG

SAVING THE ELEPHANTS

A former Tasmanian's magnificent
journey through Laos

Cover story

A trek through the backblocks of Laos on the back of an elephant proved an unforgettable experience for former Examiner photographer MIKE LARDER.



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

She fans my picnic lunch with her great rubbery proboscis and bats away the airborne irritants.

Her exquisitely sensitive trunk, in extremis, could easily smash me to a gory pulp.

Instead, she examines my banana with interest, snuffing its sweet scent with her mobile nostrils, peering at me with her tiny limpid eyes set low and out of all proportion within her huge bulbous skull. I offer her my fruit.

She eases the banana from my palm with the powerful, muscle packed and multifunctional tube that is her nose, sensory device, battering ram, high-pressure hose and knife, fork and spoon.

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 sacred relatives remain in the land-locked People's Democratic Republic of Laos, the fabled 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 animals left in Laos and a further 700 wild ones rapidly running out of habitat.

The beleaguered species may well vanish within 50 years.

The kings of the forest are, despite their impressive bulk, very thin on the ground.

I had met my trekking companions, in Paklay for the Festival Of Elephants.

I was to meet Frenchman Sebastien Duffillot who, with partner Gilles Maurer champion ElefantAsia, a well credentialed non government organisation dedicated to the health, breeding and finally restoration of the elephants to the Lao forests. An elephantine task.

Seventy-four local working elephants, resplendent with brightly decorated howdahs, painted toenails and garlanded with tiaras of wild



Former Tasmanian's spectacular journey highlights bid

ELEPHANT

flowers with their elegantly uniformed mahout descend on dusty Paklay.

Fifty thousand people show up for the festival. As with all things Lao, a kind of controlled chaos ensues. Sebastien and Gilles acted as event consultants to the local communist tourism officials. The festival was an exuberant success.

I then join Sebastien and fellow countrymen, Guilhem — a video journalist — and Gael and Pierre — teachers holidaying from Paris — on a unique ramble into the wilds of western Laos.

Sebastien and Gilles operate a boutique rugged and ecologically sensitive elephant treks deep into the remote, sparsely peopled and "forgotten" country. Proceeds help ElefantAsia's work.

The mahout are willing to accept

less money for easier and ethical work for their elephants — logging takes a heavy toll.

The wiser mahout, the Lao equivalent to western heavy haulage contractors, are protecting their life long investment.

We meet our caravan in Hongsa in western Laos. Both elephants, mahout 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 some playful water fights, squirting refreshing showers over themselves and their human passengers.

Elephants love water. The Lao

villagers emerge from their huts, wide-eyed with curiosity.

We climbed steadily all morning, gradually learning some important safety rules, like never creep up behind an elephant without yelling a throaty grunt. And never approach one without a mahout.

Our Lao-style luncheon menu consists of noodle soup, glutinous sticky rice, dried buffalo meat (I think) and leafy salad.

'Elephants' feet are an engineering masterpiece, so well balanced and shock absorbed that a five tonne elephant . . . has a ballerina's ability to move in virtual silence.'





Delicate balance . . . the elephant caravan makes its way through the not-often-visited countryside of a Laos, with villagers providing a generous hospitality at stops along the way.



Mike Larder, aka The Moving Mountain, on the back of his sure-footed chariot.

to save gentle Asian giants from extinction

RESCUE

We munch and gape at a panoramic view of distant hazy mountains and deeply shadowed valleys.

The swaying motion and lilting musical accompaniment from the elephants' necklace of bells eventually induces an semi-hypnotic state.

We lurch and sway, sure-footedly probing an entangled trail, our elephants deftly maneuvering their lumbering bulk through rocky creek beds with silent finesse.

Elephants' feet are an engineering masterpiece. So well balanced and shock absorbed that a five tonne elephant for all its misshapen bulk has a ballerina's ability to move in virtual silence.

The gloam of the evening envelopes our tiring troupe. We reach our camp — a barren paddy field.

Weary elephants are led to the stream for bath time. There is much falsetto tooting and raucous trumpets drifting over from the creek.

A full moon rises.

Camp chairs appear, as does a bottle of Pasti, saucisson and a reeking cheese.

Our Lao staff, accustomed as they are to some gastronomically yucky delicacies, reel back pinch their noses and giggle hysterically. The Lao love a party and are enthusiastic imbibers of their own evil hooch, a lethal brew distilled from rice.

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 the powerful liqueur, best sipped with great caution.

I leave this convivial little soiree,

carefully side stepping large piles of steaming elephant dung and stumble to my tent.

Next morning the guttural babbling of the mahout unshackling their elephants awakes me.

Peering across my toes that protrude from my little tent, I see the cooks frying eggs. I also smell coffee. It is barely light, the surrounding heights shrouded in a gossamer mist.

We slurp on hot coffee and hungrily devour fried eggs mopped up with the ever-sustaining sticky rice.

Mrs Flower, freshly bathed and perky, appears through the mist and trots past waving her trunk in salutation. "Isn't she pretty?", Sebastien mumbles.

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The travellers gather at the "beaut pub" on sticks at Ban Keng En, left, as the elephants head for the beach.





“ They say it is polite to compliment a Lao woman by watch an elephant walk is an exquisite sight though,

Frenchman Sebastien Duffillot with his beloved Mrs Flower.

From previous page

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 ancient, mystic Lao culture.

She is also Seb's favourite.

"It is lucky I have an understanding wife", quips Flower's gallant admirer.

Several mugs of coffee later everybody feels much livelier. Our journey continues almost vertically. Emerging from the mist reveals sweeping panoramas.

Laos is unfortunate in its geographic location. The ancient land-locked country forms a strategic land buffer between China, Burma, Vietnam and Cambodia.

The subjugated Lao found themselves embroiled in a vicious international conflict.

The US military spread death en masse from the bellies of the whispering death, the B52s sowing the country with a deadly crop.

The grindingly impoverished country remains the most bombed nation, per capita, on the planet.

Duffillot has lived and worked in Laos's capital Vientiane since 1996 when the enigmatic country tentatively emerged from its four decades of isolation opening its borders to neighboring Thailand. They found that they were a forgotten race.

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, meanwhile, amuse the awed kids, showering themselves and anyone nearby with a sprinkling of convenient stream water.

Warmed by the mellow winter sun our little convoy follows a winding, vine-entangled creek.

It is here, as we nimbly negotiate rock pools and mossy logs that the dexterity of the elephant becomes apparent.

Progress is slow but precise and virtually silent.

The clonking chimes of the elephants' bells echo about the rearing cliffs lulling us into a sleepy torpor. Pete snoozes peacefully lodged sideways in his cozily oscillating howdah.

Gael gazes dreamily ahead, seemingly suspended in a state of bliss, a frangipani bloom woven into her hair. We are suspended in a time warp as indeed Laos has been for the last half-century.

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 River.

An elderly grandma beams at us with a

broad toothless smile 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 mounts Mrs Flower and settles comfortably astride her broad neck. "Now I am a mahout," he crows.

"Hrrow . . . hrrow", he grunts dramatically.

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 and maintains his aplomb as we arrive to an awed reception.

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 bob up from where they frolic in the rock pools, bronzed and shiny, surprisingly finding themselves face to trunk with elephants.

I'm a lengthy 2m plus and I feel like I have entered the mythical land of Lilliput.

The ever-considerate Lao try not to stare but the sight of the longest white Falang (Westerner) they have ever seen stretches their inherent good manners to the limit. Earlier in our journey, I discover that our Lao companions have christened me, the towering shaggy bearded westerner, The Moving Mountain.

We make our grand entrance. This is pure Spielberg. I unconsciously search for the cameras, microphones, lights but nup!, this is for real.

I'm jerked from my reverie. Am I the first Australian ever to have set foot here? Whoh!

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 late afternoon sun streams down coloring the afternoon with wash of burnished golden light.

The entire population drift from their solid rosewood and rattan dwellings to greet us. Small children peer from behind their mothers' skirts.

As honoured 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.

Everywhere charcoal fires are preparing the evening meal. After formalities are completed Sebastien promises us a Lao beer



from the "best little pub on the Mekong".

It is spectacular, he promises.

The Mother Of Water — the Mekong — morphs into a thundering swirling torrent during the wet season. Now, in the dry, the river is low and sanguine.

I stand gobsmacked. The "pub" is a bamboo hut that teeters on worryingly thin poles. Guzzling a Lao beer from atop the cliff we watch our four pals, the pachyderms, wallow and cavort in the swirling eddies of the Mekong.

Mrs Flower submerges amid a maelstrom of bubbles and hissing foam, her trunk poking above the surface, snorkeling and rotating like a ship's radar scanner. The team, except me, (I'm not abandoning my source of crisply refreshing Lao beer) join the elephants.

Later, at the chief's house, the Baci is awaiting us. The essentially Buddhist people believe that, like the elephant, humans have 32 souls. 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 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 Lao cotton strings around our wrists. The hallucinatory effects of the highly potent rice whisky are kicking in and our jolly party becomes noisier.

With the theatrical flourish, the chief separates two tin dishes revealing the blank staring eyes of a beheaded chicken. The



Group aims to care for elephants

ElefantAsia is a not-for-profit French based organisation 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, providing quality medical care to wounded and sick elephants in remote areas.

It also supports educational programs for the mahout and Lao vets of which Laos has very few qualified large animal specialists.

A ceremony in the Festival Of Elephants at Paklay.

SECU vets have so far successfully treated several hundred ailing, exhausted or broken down animals.

Foot damage from razor sharp bamboo, eye and foot damage and skin lesions and severe injuries from snapped chains are taking their toll of the dwindling population.

Elephant diseases are similar to bovine cows.

As the forests disappear — 60 per cent of Laos's forests have been logged — so do the elephants, a living shrine to the Lao people, and the ancient traditional knowledge and culture of the mahout.

telling her that she walks like an elephant', chuckles Sebastien. 'To personally, I would not like to try saying it to a French woman!

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An elephant and its mahout take a bath at the end of a long day.

game begins. Russian roulette played with a litre of fermented hooch and a very dead 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 our alcoholically enervated hosts.

You have to drink otherwise cause disappointment and offence. I hit on a plan. My beard has reached a certain rampant shagginess. I sip, to loud encouragement from all those assembled, but cagily dribble the potion through my beard and hope my already smelly t-shirt would absorb the liquor. I then smack my lips and emit an appreciative "Mmmmm".

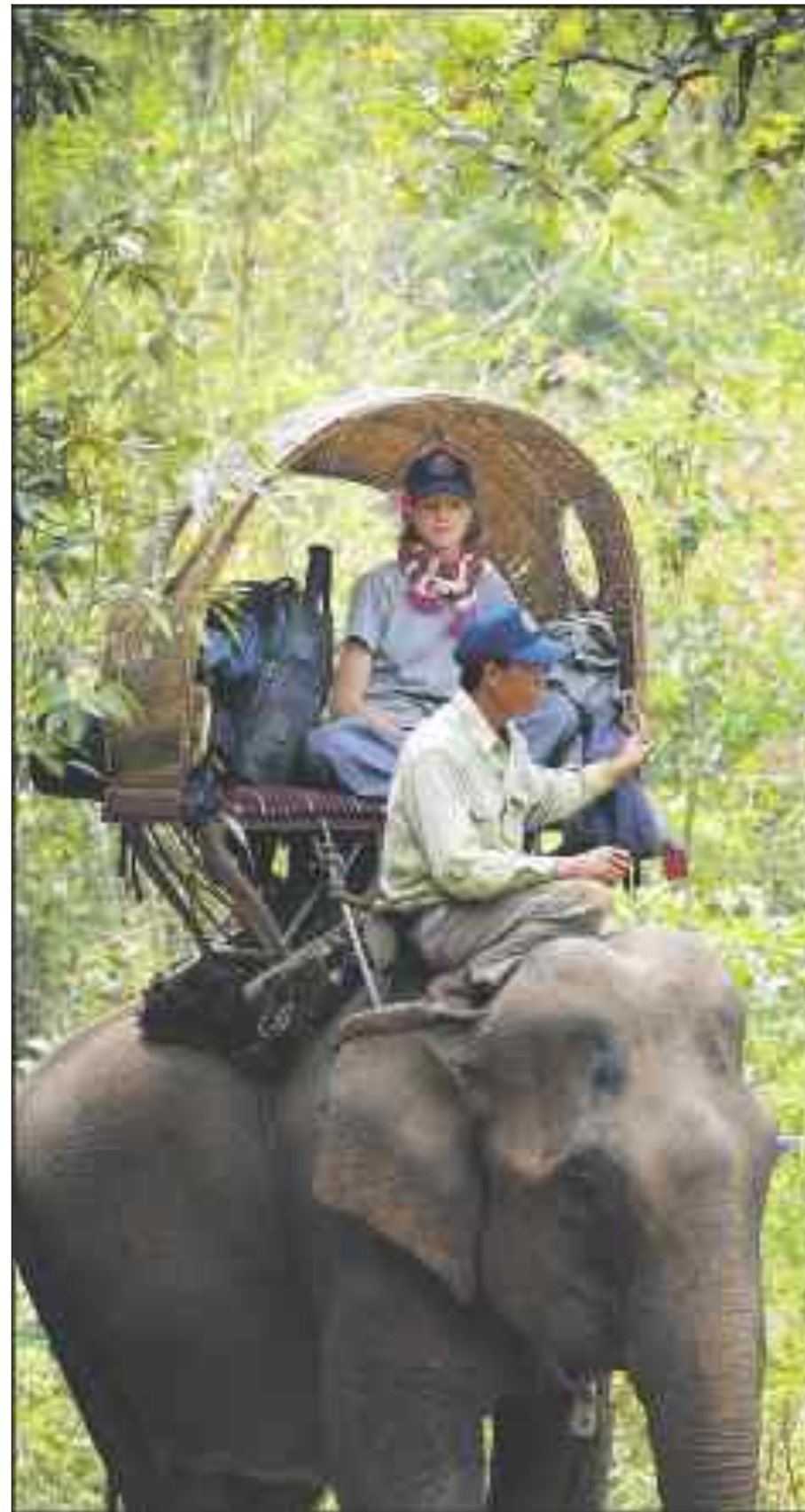
I think I got away with it.

As an honoured guest am invited to sleep with the chief's wife, and kids and dogs and, fortunately, the chief himself.

I excuse myself from the raucous frivolity, and 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 board, with some apprehension, a longboat for the 10-hour slow voyage to Loang Prabang, against the swiftly flowing current of the Mekong.

In the meantime The Moving Mountain rests.



French tourist Gael in her oscillating howdah on her elephant.



The elephant safari is greeted by bemused villagers.



Despite their size, the elephants move almost silently through any terrain.