

March 23, 2010

**Notes from the Field: King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament,
Anantara Golden Triangle.**

A Sporting Retreat for Elephants

Among the other various exotic sights in Bangkok, visitors are often shocked to see elephants shambling down the main thoroughfares, their owners generally using them to solicit money from tourists. It hardly seems a proper lifestyle for these magnificent animals, and of course it's not: navigating the bustle of a metropolis is psychologically challenging, not to mention fraught with danger.

Although some maintain that the elephants' owners are guilty of failing to care properly for their charges, more often than not this odd arrangement is a product of desperation: an adult elephant eats up to 150 kg of food a day and so are very expensive to keep. And releasing a domesticated elephant into the shrinking wilderness of this rapidly-modernizing country is not an option. The truth is that more often than not, elephant owners care deeply about their animals but have few options to treat them to the "good" life of bygone days, when Thailand was dependent on them for logging and had plenty of untamed jungle in which they could live comfortably.

Of the 100 or so elephants pandering on the streets in Thailand, every year a select few get to experience the equivalent of a "sporting retreat" by being chosen to play in the King's Cup Elephant Polo competition. Only expected to play fifteen minutes a day at the most, the elephants spend the rest of their time on their "retreat" being attended to by veterinarians, provided medicine and meals rich in calories and nutrients and getting to socialize with other of their kind in a bucolic natural environment – something these very social animals especially miss when toiling in an alien city environment.

Though obviously not a permanent solution to the problem of street elephants in Thailand, the attention they receive over a few weeks as a result of their participation in the tournament helps bolster the physical and psychological health of these misplaced creatures. And of course, the funds raised by the event go to support the a selection of elephant related project including the elephants and children with autism project led by the Thai Elephant Therapy Project in 2010. Moreover, through the publicity associated with the event, more and more people around the globe are learning about the plight of the endangered Asian elephant and offering their help and support.

If you yourself would like to help, please visit the Anantara Golden Triangle's own elephant charity at www.helpingelephants.org.