

Press Release

Thailand's Elephants and Mahouts, a Tradition Lives on in the Golden Triangle

At the beginning of the 20th century, there were an estimated 100,000 elephants in the former Siam. According to latest estimates, the elephant population in Thailand has dwindled to just over 5,000. Some 3,600 are domesticated elephants, while a mere 1,500 roam freely in the wild.

Alarming, overall numbers are further decreasing, making projects like Anantara's Elephant Camp vital to the success of national conservation efforts. With legislation in place to ban elephants from 'working' in cities, the camp offers mahouts a viable alternative to return with these proud animals to the green jungles where they belong.

Having loyally served kings and commoners throughout Thailand's history – in warfare, as a means of transportation and for agricultural activities – these noble species are regarded as a symbol of prosperity and power. Elephants are also prominently featured in Buddhist art, architecture and sculpture. Thai people in fact have a long shared history with the elephant, and their skillful tradition of elephant training is highly regarded worldwide.

The mahout (or in Thai 'Kwarn Chang') is the person who drives an elephant. There are three kinds of mahouts, distinguished by the way they control the animal: A 'Reghawan' uses love, a 'Yukthiman' uses ingenuity to outsmart them, and a 'Balwan' controls an elephant with discipline. The latter practice, however, is less accepted and much more uncommon today. Essential to becoming a successful mahout are qualities like stamina, patience, perseverance, responsibility and common sense in order to handle an unforeseen crisis.

Interestingly, many myths and superstitions exist among mahouts about elephants and their profession. Since the elephant is the country's national symbol and a representative of Lord Ganesha, the Hindu god with the elephant head, it is considered disrespectful to mount or ride an elephant with footwear on. Mahouts will always pray before mounting an elephant and – as elephants are very smart and can sense emotions like fear or apprehension – they (mahouts) have to be confident and have a peaceful mind. Along with that goes the responsibility to take good care of the animal, to be aware of its safety at all times, to ensure that it's well fed, has enough water, is well taken care of and always clean. Verbal commands have to be loud and firm, but kind softer words are used to sooth the animal. So dedicated are many mahouts to their elephants that they are known for putting the elephant's needs before their own.

A fascinating aspect of the culture around domesticating elephants is the traditional role of the 'Khru Ba Yai', of which there is only a few left in all of Thailand. Historically, the 'Khru Ba Yai' was the person who possessed spiritual control over all elephants – the highest rank an elephant capturer could attain. A lesser rank was that of a 'Mor', and to become one you were required to capture at least ten elephants.

Prior to every elephant capturing, the 'Khru Ba Yai' would bless the 'Mor' and set the rules. In the jungle he would speak to the spirits – believed to bring good luck to the capturer and confuse the spirits so they cannot warn the elephant to run away. This practice stopped 40 years ago, and the only remaining 'Khru Ba Yai' are now in retirement. In Thailand, elephants are no longer captured in the wild. The 'Kui' people of Surin province in the northeast of Thailand were renowned for their capturing skills, and treated these animals like their own children. They raised them with love and care, buried them with proper Buddhist ceremonies, and prayed for newborn baby elephants to be loved, smart and strong.

The common sight of elephants today in many large Thai cities appear to be a novelty at first (for tourists), but the sad reality is that they are used for begging, are often not well fed and live in unsuitable conditions. And that's what essentially gave birth to Anantara's Elephant Camp – the realization that an alternative could be offered to the mahouts, their families and elephants... A place where the animals are rehabilitated in their native habitat – assured of medical care and sustenance – while the mahout and his family are also well taken care of.

Anantara Resort Golden Triangle is located 60km north of Chiang Rai's international airport.

For enquiries and reservations, please call + 66 (0) 5378 4084 or + 66 (0) 2 477 0760 or email infogt@anantara.com. For more information, visit www.anantara.com.

Editors Note:

For hundreds of years throughout Thailand, people would leave a jar of water outside their house to provide refreshment and extend a welcome to the passing traveler. Anantara is taken from an ancient Sanskrit word that means 'without end', symbolising this sharing of water and the heartfelt hospitality that lies at the core of every Anantara experience.

Anantara Resorts are currently located in the seaside town of Hua Hin and on Koh Samui in the Gulf of Thailand, and in the Golden Triangle in the country's north. In the world-renowned destination of the Maldives, Anantara Dhigu and Anantara Veli are a 30-minute boat ride from the capital Male. Anantara Seminyak debuted in April 2008 in the most fashionable district of Bali – the Island of the Gods. Late 2008 saw the opening of Anantara Phuket, situated in the serenity of Mai Khao Beach, Thailand, followed by Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara on Sir Bani Yas Island off the coast of Abu Dhabi, and Anantara Si Kao which lies on the secluded Changlang Beach area south of Krabi, Thailand. Anantara Baan Rajprasong in Bangkok opened its doors in April 2009 to become the first serviced suites property for the Anantara group, while the newest member of the Anantara family, Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara, opened in October 2009 in the legendary Liwa desert near Abu Dhabi. www.anantara.com

Anantara is a member of Global Hotel Alliance (GHA), the world's largest alliance of independent hotel groups. GHA partner hotels are renowned for reflecting and respecting local traditions and culture through their products and services. www.globalhotelalliance.com

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Additional images are available upon request.