

# Wildest Dreams

IN SOUTHEAST ASIA'S GOLDEN TRIANGLE, AN ADVENTURE CAMP  
SHOWS HOW TOURISM CAN HELP ENDANGERED ELEPHANTS.

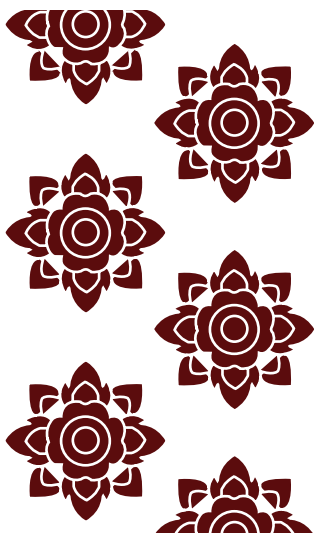
By Joel Centano

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It's dusk in the jungle of northern Thailand's Chiang Rai province.

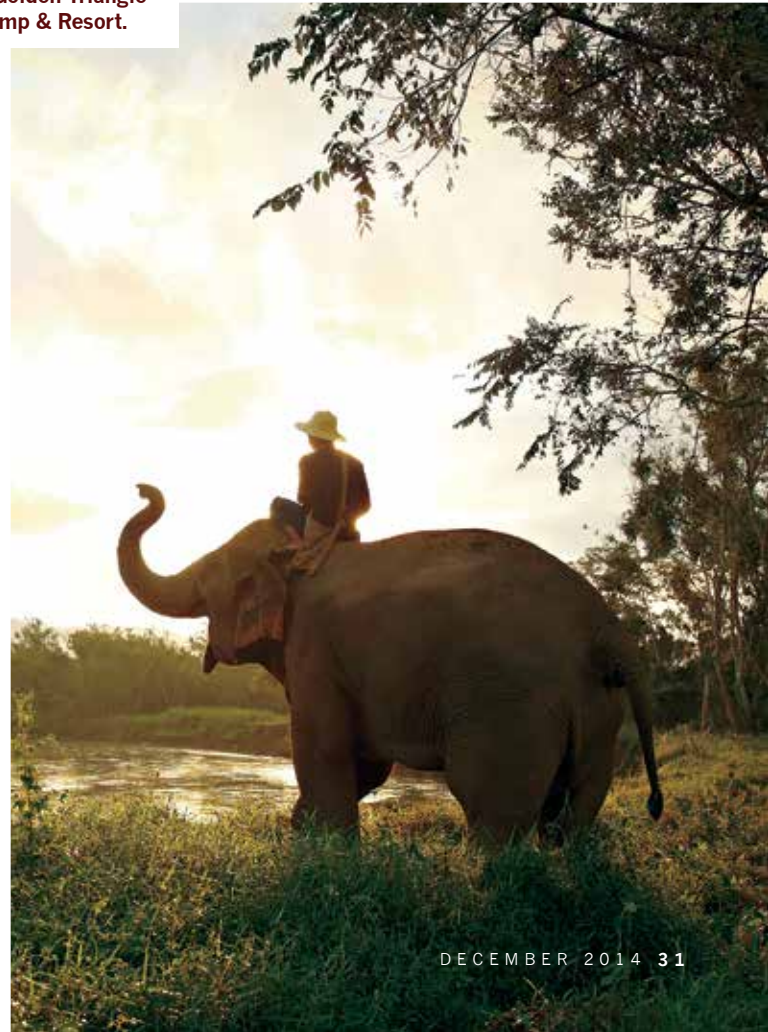
A symphony of cicadas plays in surround-sound as fireflies flare in the jasmine-scented air. I'm seated in an outdoor *sala*, preparing to tuck into a three-course Thai feast, watching as my plus-size dinner companions approach through the gloaming.

Moving closer, their colossal forms take shape in the lamplight. They breathe in my scent as a form of greeting, flutter their ears like butterfly wings, and then let it be known that it's time to eat. Long, strong, prehensile trunks sinuate and stretch, snatching up liberal servings of sugarcane from my outstretched hands.

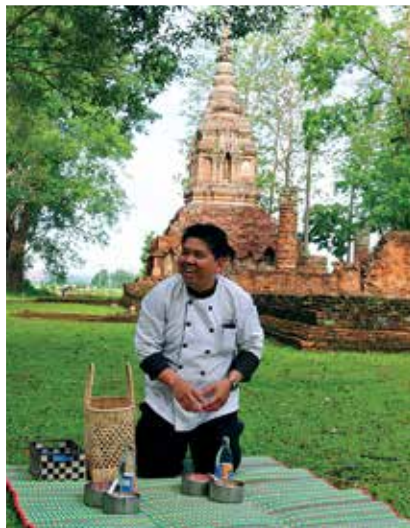




Wild and scenic: Views from the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort.



(MAHOUT AND LEAF) JOEL CENTANO, (ELEPHANT) JOJOY ADRIAN KARAVIC / THE NOUNPROJECT



**Clockwise from top: Pachyderm parade, chef Paitoon prepares a breakfast picnic at Chiang Saen’s Wat Pa Sak, and sala dining at the resort.**

It’s not your typical dinner party, of course, and Teang Moo, Lynchee, and Pleum – one- to three-ton Asian elephants that consume ten percent of their body weight daily – aren’t your typical guests. Tonight’s repast (accompanied by haute Thai dishes prepared on-site for attending humans), however, is a fitting finale to my four-day stay at **Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort**, where close encounters with pachyderms are the norm.

Three- to five-day visits to the resort, which travel advisors often recommend in longer Thailand itineraries, provide insight into a region famed for its thirteenth-century Lanna ruins, history of opium production, and human interaction with elephants that dates back some 4,000 years. Set along the Mekong River with views of Myanmar and Laos (both countries converge with Thailand to form the Golden Triangle), the 160-acre retreat features fine-

dining options, including contemporary Italian fare; a hands-on cooking school; a holistic spa; and 77 sleek guest rooms styled with teak furnishings and private balconies, all backed by a traditional mahout (Hindi for “elephant keeper”) village.

“Typical” days at the resort flow much like this: Guests rise early to the bellows of elephants grazing in surrounding bamboo forests, don denim mahout suits that can best be described as outsize maternity clothes, and then choose from a program of educational, elephant-centric activities. The lineup includes interactive presentations by camp veterinarians and conservationists from **Think Elephants International**, along with classes in which students, perched on pachyderms and accompanied below by resident mahouts, learn basic phrases and light touches used to steer their steeds past misty rice terraces and riverside plains. Watching the elephants swim and bathe is also big here, as are visits with the

## Also Consider



Explore the **Golden Triangle** beyond Anantara’s elephant camp through its collection of excursions. Travel advisors can help tailor your experience to fit your interests, from touring temples to perfecting pad thai.



Set foot in three countries on a guided daylong journey that visits Phra Jow La Keng monastery (shown above) in Myanmar, thirteenth-century temples in the Thai town of Chiang Saen, and the market on the Laotian island of Done Xao. A bonus: A **longtail boat ride** up the Mekong – an antidote to the region’s steamy air – takes you to the precise spot where the three countries converge.



Anantara’s culinary program begins with a guided market tour and a breakfast picnic beneath Lanna ruins in Chiang Saen. Back at the resort, **cooking classes** reveal the correct way to cut lemongrass, when to add lime juice to *tom kha gai* soup, and how to tinge pad thai using red chili and tamarind sauce. Guests then dine on their creations – or better, the instructing chef’s – during lunch.



Showpiece of a campaign led by Thailand’s late Princess Mother to eradicate opium production in the Golden Triangle – once the world’s largest producer – the **Hall of Opium** provides a comprehensive look at the drug’s 5,000-year history. Take a tuk-tuk from the resort and plan to spend at least a few hours here.

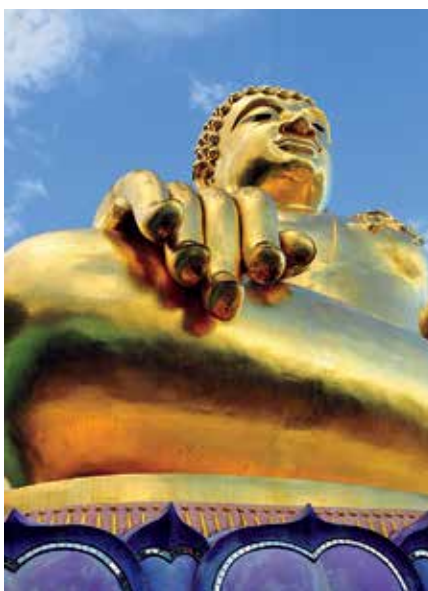
village's newest celebrity, baby Nong Sam, born in March.

Established in 2003, the camp works in concert with the **Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation** to provide sanctuary for Thailand's captive elephants and their mahout partners, trainers who are often lifelong companions. A 1989 nationwide ban on logging, an industry that employed the majority of mahouts and their elephants, helped spawn a number of unscrupulous trekking camps and led to some keepers and animals begging on city streets, explains the foundation's founder, John Roberts, who's also Anantara's director of conservation.

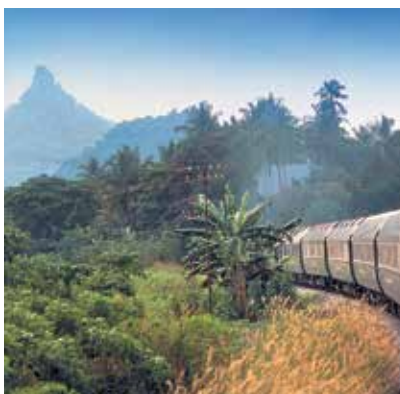
Though the foundation also works with the **Elephant Reintroduction Foundation**, which is exploring the feasibility of releasing the animals back into the wild, "given the lack of natural habitat remaining here, [this option] will only be an answer for a small proportion of the captive population, which currently numbers more than 3,500 in Thailand alone," says Roberts. He adds that the sheer scale of the animals' needs in terms of land, food, and water – it can cost upwards of \$15,000 annually to feed and properly shelter an elephant – also means that serious revenue must be garnered for their care. "So far," says Roberts, "sustainable tourism based on compassionate care for these elephants is the best answer we've found to accomplish this."

Twenty elephants currently reside at the camp, 11 of which engage in guest learning activities; all are rescues from city streets, illegal logging operations, or unfavorable conditions at surrounding camps. The elephants' mahouts also live on-site, where their families benefit from education, health care, and all profits from a silk-weaving business. Anantara's neighbor, **Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle**, partners with the camp, and income generated from guest experiences, stays, and donations at both resorts helps fund the foundation, which also works to protect herds still living in the wild. Asian elephants are listed as endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species; estimates of Thailand's wild population range between 2,000 and 4,000.

The camp only employs "target training" – based on positive reinforcement and rewards rather than punishment – and holds annual workshops to teach this technique to other regional organizations. It also opposes the purchasing of elephants, a practice that's



Clockwise from top: Poolside at Anantara, dragon fruit in Chiang Saen, and the Buddha contemplates the convergence of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos at Sop Ruak.



Belmond's Eastern & Oriental Express en route to Bangkok.



### Advisor Tip

"For the perfect complements to an adventure in northern Thailand, have your travel advisor include trips on **Belmond's luxury train**, Eastern & Oriental Express (which runs regularly between Bangkok and Singapore), and its **river cruiser** in Myanmar, *Orcaella*. Belmond spoils its guests, and both trips combine outstanding food and wine with unique sightseeing. Warning: Book them very early!"

– Eleanor Hardy  
Louisville, Kentucky



**About to make a splash: Bath time at Anantara.**

leading to the decline of wild populations. “We believe that the future of Thailand’s elephants is in the wild herd,” says biologist Sophie Bergin, the camp’s manager, during my visit with newborn Nong Sam. “The mother, Boon Jan, was pregnant when we rescued her from a camp in Chiang Mai, so we are making the best of that situation. Otherwise, we don’t believe in breeding programs or adding to the captive population; rather, we’d like to help provide a safe haven for those captive elephants that already exist.”

Back at our dinner party, when it’s time for dessert, Teang Moo, Lynchee, and Pleum dig in. Working with the elephants’ mahouts, I dole out bellyfuls of bananas while we talk about our respective families. “The elephants are my life,” one mahout tells me, adding that they’re just like people, that working with juveniles can be tough but rewarding, and that caring for the animals brings him joy.

A full moon now sheds light on our scene as glowing prayer lanterns ascend into the sky, released from a nearby temple to commemorate Visakha Bucha. Celebrated across Thailand, the holiday honors the birth, enlightenment, and passing of the Buddha, who is believed to have

been conceived when his mother dreamed of a white elephant that entered her womb after descending from heaven.

When at last it’s time to say good night, I climb into an open-air jeep, opting for a rear-facing seat to watch the dreamscape while driving away. As the mahouts and elephants make their way along jungle paths leading back to the village, it’s difficult not to think about their shared history here in Thailand. Often praised in Buddhist scriptures for their composure and calm, and long



**Get Involved**

To learn more about the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation and how you can lend a hand, visit [www.helpingelephants.org](http://www.helpingelephants.org).

associated with Thai royalty, elephants have ridden into battle with Siamese kings, served as beasts of burden, and suffered sad fates on city streets and at unprincipled camps. As organizations continue to grapple with the most ethical means of caring for captive pachyderms and the best way to save a dwindling wild population, the future of Thailand’s enduring icon surely hangs in the balance.

They’re sobering thoughts, especially after such a sublime stay. But as I watch these particular elephants and mahouts moseying through the moonlight, prayer lanterns still rising, it feels good knowing that both have found a place to call home.

(BATH) JOEL CENTRANO



Dream It Up

Finding high adventure in Thailand.



Clockwise from top: An Anantara Suite, “roughing it” at Four Seasons Tented Camp, and a butler slips through The Siam’s lobby in Bangkok.

**STAY**

All-inclusive programs at **Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort** cover meals, select drinks, and in-room minibars; tickets and transportation to the Hall of Opium; one resort activity per day, including mahout training, a Thai cooking class, a spa treatment, or a three-country tour; and round-trip airport transfers. *From \$1,076 per couple, per night; Virtuoso guests receive a complimentary 50-minute massage.*

Copper bathtubs and explorer-themed antiques embellish 15 decadent tents at **Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle**. The resort’s three- and four-night packages include meals and beverages, a spa treatment, airport transfers, guest activities at the elephant camp, and area excursions. *From \$2,188 per couple, per night; Virtuoso guests receive a \$100 spa credit.*

Bookend your Golden Triangle travels with stays at **The Siam** in Bangkok. Authentic *muay thai* classes, Thai massages at Opium Spa, and rambles through the city’s historic Dusit district highlight visits to the 38-suite boutique hotel, set on the Chao Phraya River. *Doubles from \$460; Virtuoso guests receive breakfast daily and a one-hour sunset cruise.*

**TOUR**

Make merit at Bangkok’s Wat Pho, home to a 145-foot-long reclining Buddha. Visit ethnic hill tribes in Chiang Mai. Contemplate Chiang Saen’s stupas from your base at Anantara Golden Triangle. That’s just a sampling of what’s possible on a **ten-day tailor-made tour** crafted by your travel advisor with one of Virtuoso’s on-site experts. *Departures: Any day through June 1, 2016; from \$6,195. VT*

(THE SIAM) JOEL CENTANO