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I was fortunate enough to be accepted to a three month volunteer position at Elephantstay for the months of April, May and June of 2014. I had a background working in Zoo's and an Aquarium, but this would be my first time working with Elephants, and my first trip to Thailand and Asia. I had pretravel jitters, and on my way to the airport I was wondering what in the world I had just gotten myself into. I had read every testimonial, every trip adviser review to try and get a better feel of what to expect when I got there. I can tell you from experience, no matter how much you read, and picture in your head what it will be like, nothing can prepare you for that first moment as your Tuk-tuk passes the war elephant monument, then you see the white walls and red pillars of the historic Royal Elephant Kraal, and finally the turn into the village that was to be my home for the next three months. When you make that turn that's where the magic happens, everything you've planned and waited for... Elephants, and not one or two, Elephants everywhere !!! When you reach the end of the road and the tuk-tuk driver lets you out, its a bit overwhelming. You are standing watching the mahouts and staff going about their daily business, which to me on my first day seemed like absolute chaos. I felt very small, standing with my bags wondering where I was supposed to go, who are all these people going here and there, and did I mention elephants, lots of elephants. My train of thought was disrupted as a man with a Scottish accent that I would come to know as a good friend and co-worker named Neil called me by name and helped me with my bags to my hut, my lovely hut I would call home for my time there. Not five minutes later, I was escorted down to the Team hut where the new batch of Elephantstayers were waiting for the introduction to begin. I was offered coffee, tea or hot chocolate while we waited on Ewa to come and tell us about the program and what we were going to be instore for. For the first three days I was to go through the program just like any guest would to ease me into my volunteer duties The whole introduction process lasted a bit less than two hours, in that time we were given a history of the program and what their mission was, we introduced ourselves, explained why we were there, fitted for a shirt, asked about dietary concerns, and introduced to the staff that was there. Then the moment of truth, we were assigned our elephant we were to be working with for the next three days. I was given Jumpee, whom I was very glad to find out was the name of a flower and not a trait of the elephant!! The next thing that happened was we were led to the day area for our elephants, passing by the nursery and the 'day off' area for working elephants, and shown the rehabilitation area where Natalie was kept, aka no go area. Then, our elephantstay girls, all nine of them standing there swaying, trunks beckoning us new humans to fill them with some sort of delicious treat. And then I met her, my girl, my beautiful Jumpee. I was in awe, they were all so beautiful. We were shown how to feed them, gave them a brief snack of pineapple plants, which I learned down the line was to make the ride that was to follow a lot smoother !! So essentially a little more than two hours later I was sitting on my elephant, a mahout behind me to steady me and guide the elephant, Neil on the ground making sure we were all ok, and then we were off. That first step being the first of a long journey and an experience I will never forget. One of the first things I learned as a volunteer is that three days is no where near enough time, heck in three months I wasn't ready to go, but I had to relinquish my spot so someone else could have this amazing experience. There is so much to cover writing about my time there. I met some amazing people from all over the world. There were many first timers and many repeat Elephantstay family members that came back. Paul was right, they get into your heart, it was such a pleasure working with people who were so passionate about the Elephantstay program and their elephant(s). The villagers and Mahouts were also a pleasure getting to know. I made an effort to

learn some basic Thai while I was there, learning a little bit goes a long way, and many things we were able to communicate to each other despite the language barrier, there are signs and motions that are understood in every culture. I also got to know the local culture which the mahouts used as a pretext to have very lively conversations with me, Ewa, Michelle, Matt, Neil, and Paul know what I'm talking about !!. My advice is get to know everyone there, they are a lively bunch, and full of smiles and good times. Gik our head mahout was one hell of a woman, and very patient with everyone as they learned what it was like to walk a day in her shoes, and is sweet enough after a day of hot hard work to deliver beers from her store to anyone who wanted to purchase a cold Chang or Leo !! Nook in the Nursery gave the guests and myself hours of fun playing with the baby elephants. One moment I particularly enjoyed with Nook was one morning when I was on the AM shift after a fun night of cards and a few cold Changs, I'm making a cup of coffee eyes half opened when I see Nook beckoning me to the area where we keep the girls during the day. Her little girl Eve was running about all excited, Nook points and says "Baby", I'm thinking, yes Nook I know she is your baby, why did you call me over for this, she laughs says "No, Baby" and points, and yeah.... Brand new baby elephant, only four hours old, I can tell you from experience you don't need coffee when there is a new born ele in front of you !! The birth was one of an almost daily crazy event that happened. If you like routine you might be disappointed, it seemed like every day something outside the normal program parameters occurred. From Thai holidays like Songkran, World Cup soccer matches with elephants, parades, visiting monks, filming movies, painting elephants and elephants painting, Thai weddings, elephant performance shows, escaped bull elephants, mahout shenanigans, temple tours, pizza parties, Michelle's famous BBQ's, searching for Buddy in a pouring rainstorm, extra long elephant rides, playing with Soi, getting a Sak Yant tattoo, nights off in town hanging out at the bars on Soi Pharang, I could keep going but it's making me miss it too much. Suffice to say there are very few dull moments there, and when they occur it gives you a second to rest before the next exciting bit happens. Lets not forget what its like to bond with an Elephant. That is one of the big perks of coming to Elephantstay, the elephants become part of your life, they are literally the reason you get up every day. Over the course of my time there I got to know a lot of the elephants but none more so than our girls in the program, it was amazing to see their individual personalities come through, each so different than the next. I'll never forget when we took the elephants into Bangkok for a world cup event and Soi was there, amidst all the chaos of Khao San Rd, I walked by Soi and she reached out and grabbed me and pulled me in with her trunk, the look in her eye saying "I know you !!!" It was one of the sweetest moments I've had in my life. You also can 't talk about Elephantstay without talking about the food there. You are not even prepared as to how amazingly delicious the food is. I can't bring myself to go to a Thai restaurant now that I'm back, as I know it just won't compare. Everyone always talks about the food in their testimonials and there is a reason for it !!! My last bit of advice to anyone wanting to be a volunteer or come and stay at Elephantstay, is pack big sunglasses for your leaving day. I had seen it plenty of times. People come and then the time comes for them to leave and say goodbye to their elephant and everyone at the Kraal. Its an emotional experience, many people leave with tears running down their face. I tried to do everything possible to prepare myself for when it was my turn, but to no avail. I remember feeding Jumpee for the last time and watching her watch me as I walked out of the night area for the last time to collect my bags and wait on my tuk-tuk, thats when it finally hit me, this was it, the adventure was over (for now !!). Cue the waterworks. Ewa, Michelle, Neil and Paul were all in the team hut with the other guests that were leaving for a little goodbye ceremony. I was given the title of honorary mahout, hugs were given all around. Big sunglasses were put on to try and hide the

tears, bags were put into a tuk-tuk, and we were off. I will never forget that feeling, when we reached the end of the road to the Kraal, made a left to go into town, and the last elephant disappeared from my view, it was like getting kicked in the stomach, reality, I had forgotten that even existed and I terribly didn't want to get back to it. But here I am several months later. As I write this, I'm reliving my time here, heck there isn't a day that goes by that I don't find myself staring off into space, and there I am back at Elephantstay. I left a piece of my heart in Thailand, my time at Elephantstay was truly life changing. I am very grateful that I got to experience this, and to anyone else who is thinking about coming here short term or long term, this will be one of the most memorable things you will do in your life. Thanks again for the wonderful times and great memories.

