

Chris Honey, wildlife conservationist now working in Vietnam.

I lay in bed in my hatched cabin, the symphony of the morning stirs me softly. But there's something else, a gentle and quite noise yet its presence is enough to bring my senses alert and force me out of bed. I go to my window and prod open the shutter to see a young local boy, no older than 8 mounting the back of a tremendous, stunning bull elephant who is happily chewing on shoots of water lilies whilst he wades through the muddy pathway. What awoke me? Not the hola of the elephant village awakening, nor the soothing hymn of young local lad, but rather the presence of this beautiful sentinel being strolling only feet away from my raised bamboo hut.

And that was only the first day. Little prepared me for the life changing month I was about to embark where every day I would live alongside the locals whilst being part of an elite, hands on team to uphold and conserve one of the most awe inspiring species on this planet. There is a reason why they are a flagship species and it wasn't until Siniwan (an aged retired female elephant) paused and noted my presence, before greedily snatching the whole watermelon from my hands that I realised why. Asian elephants most defiantly have that 'wow' factor. They are without a doubt; Big, Bulbous and Beautiful.

As an Elephant Stay volunteer I experienced something that you cannot do within Europe, due to all the red tape. The program taught me core practical husbandry whilst educating me about the roots of elephant domestication and why it is so essential for the Asian elephant's survival. The Elephant Stay program demonstrated that the tool of conservation can ultimately be a connection between two species, which I learnt was reciprocate both ways. Mahouts (elephant handlers) and elephants themselves have a timely bond which within Thailand has been entwining for the past 5000 years. I now understand that for the Thai culture, tourism and the livelihood of many depend on the survival of that bond between beast and man. Elephant stay is not just an elephant conservation program, it is preserving Thai heritage and its history.

As to be expected it was not always easy working as part of the Elephant Stay team- because let's face it, elephants are large and messy. The days can be long and most of the time is it the visitors that cause the head ache. But all is rewarded when you are sitting upon the back of your favourite nelly heading out into some local fields to do a spot of afternoon grazing.

The village is a bustle of activity with an essence of peacefulness which for me was the best learning environment. Each day brought something new whilst both Michelle and Ewa encouraged me to get stuck in, be creative and think outside the box. They listened well to all that I said and I left feeling that I had made a difference.

Michelle and Ewa deserve so much credit for the long, arduous hours they have invested into the program. During my stay and even now they act as my advisors and friends who I hold the deepest respect for. My experience has left warmth in my heart for the elephant village and the deepest memories I shall never forget! Cheers for everything guys **Chris Honey**