

I went to Elephant Stay as a volunteer for one month over August/September 2010. I didn't know what to expect, I worked with animals back in Australia but nothing compared to the animals I was going over to work with. What I learnt and experienced was more than I ever thought I would.

The first thing I got told when I arrived there by Ewa was 'We are just like a family, with all its ups and downs and we look out for each other' and she was right. Ewa, Michelle, Paul and Yvette all took me under their wing and showed me different parts of the program. I loved every minute of it. Working with the mahouts was also great, Gik is wonderful and organized all the mahouts without any problems everyday and once I began to understand little bits and pieces of the Thai language, I found the mahouts to be great amusement, always playing jokes on each other and us (the volunteers). The mahouts all have a great bond with the elephants they care for and to watch them interact with them is fascinating. They are extremely talented in what they do and never do you feel the slightest bit of worry when they are sitting up on an elephant behind you.

I was also fortunate enough to be in the village while 'Boss' was back from the UK on holidays (Piom's son). He showed me a lot about the Thai elephants and culture and also came in handy as a great translator between me and the mahouts at times.

Then there is the elephant's, the reason for me being there in the first place. They are amazing in their own unique way.

An experience I will never forget is when I was lucky enough to be woken up by Yvette early one morning banging on my hut yelling 'Naam Pet has had her baby', so at 2am I jumped out of bed and ran over to her nightspot. It was a magical and the most incredible thing I've seen, a new born baby elephant not even half an hour old with his mum and mahouts caring for him already. All the village was awake with her also; they stay with her throughout the night to watch over her and her baby as if it is their own. It showed me that these aren't just elephants that they care for but part of their family.

Each of the girls (elephants) I worked with had their own personality. I suppose like everyone you have your favorite, mine being 'Jumpee' as she was the elephant I was allocated at the start of my 3 day program and whenever opportunity presented I got to ride and spend time with her. She was so gentle and caring in her nature but she was still young enough to have plenty of up and go in her when Peer (our mahout) used to race her down the straight against Gudunga (the tallest elephant in our program). I never thought I would be able to tell them all apart but now whenever I see pictures I can tell you exactly who it is by her appearance. I could list all these little unique quirks that I picked up and tell you so much more about my experience but that might take up pages and pages.

Basically this was the best experience of my life and I can't wait to return, a little later than planned now but I will defiantly be back soon, not only to see my friends but to see the elephants I love so much.

Thanks again to Ewa & Michelle for showing me a way of life I could never have imagined, and to Yvette for being my big sister while I was there. Papa with your crazy taste in music and always having a smile no matter what the mood you did brighten up every day.

As for the elephants, I miss you every day and life on the farm in Australia isn't as fun without a big Ele in the backyard roaming around demanding food.

Sarah,

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