

# Silent Footsteps

Travel with a Purpose: Elephant Stay, Ayutthaya, Thailand

Living with elephants in Thailand, passionate animal lover Dr Katrina Gregory learnt as much about herself as she did about these gentle giants.

words as told to sally o'neill photos katrina gregory

*In October 2009, Dr Katrina Gregory, vet and animal behaviour specialist, undertook the mammoth task of clearing her diary for an entire month. She swapped her hectic schedule for total immersion in a small village situated just outside Ayutthaya - the beautiful former capital of Thailand. Here's her story...*

I was introduced to elephants at Melbourne Zoo a few years ago, and became interested in managing these animals in their countries of origin throughout Asia. That's what the journey was all about. Thailand has virtually been built on the elephant's back. Through 2000 years of interaction, they have been used in war, royal rituals and the performing of hard labour, as well as being deeply entrenched in religious belief. Buddhists believe that elephants are one step away from becoming human. They are intertwined with culture there. You can't truly understand that unless you go there to experience it.

Visitors who find their way to the village deep into the forest are rarely prepared for the 'feeling' of the place. Every minute of the day is about the footstep and heartbeat of the elephants. Over 90 elephants and 50 human families live in this unique community, where elephants and people coexist in an atmosphere of deep respect and love. The elephant and human families have become one - that's what it's all about. Sometimes, I was the only non-Thai person at the camp, but we communicated through our common language of passion for elephants.

Only in the past few years have international visitors been able to participate in village life through the 'ElephantStay' program. It was developed by two Australian women - Michelle Reedy (who I worked with at Melbourne Zoo) and Ewa Narkiewicz. Each visitor is assigned an elephant, either a young animal with special needs or an old retired elephant. My role was to help people safely enjoy the experience while ensuring the elephants' welfare. I tried to educate visitors about the elephant as a species, and also to appreciate each individual. I advised them on how to be safe while enjoying the rhythm of the place as they fed, bathed and cared for their elephant.

We bathed them in the river twice a day. Once, the mothers and babies came down in a group - and it was complete chaos! The babies were cheeky and very excited, happily throwing themselves around, playing and interacting with our old elephants. I said to my group, 'Just relax... enjoy the moment - they know what they're doing. It's just normal family life: it's busy, noisy and active!'

Very few people get to work with elephants in free contact. It can be dangerous, though, and you have to be careful. Males weigh up to 5 tonnes and females 3.5 tonnes. These animals are incredibly intelligent, physically imposing and adept.

One night, I was woken to witness the birth of the newest member of the elephant family. It was very quiet, but a real celebration. The whole village was there in those muted, early hours. A gentle warmth pervaded the atmosphere. That was definitely an extraordinary highlight, in fact a privilege.

In the heart of the village is the elephant spirit house. It contains the ivory and some bone of all the elephants that have lived there to ensure their spirits are respected and to help protect everyone. Every day as the elephants go out to work, the mahouts bow their heads to the spirit house and often the elephants do the same.

A month was long enough to get into the rhythm of the village. I was living with the mahouts and their families - I was immersed in their world. My accommodation was a very basic, tiny grass hut on stilts. It was next to the river and it flooded during my stay. I was woken each morning by the passing traffic of elephants going to bathe and the chorus of geese housed beneath my little home. Guests have air-conditioning and more spacious rooms, and the home-style Thai cooking is fantastic (and you need it!).

Villages such as this allow elephants and their mahouts' families to live, earn money and maintain important traditions, including their own ancient profession, and being part of Thai cultural and religious ceremonies and daily life. The village also retrain dangerous elephants that would suffer a tragic fate if they had nowhere else to go. Since the village began, 40 babies have been born. No one in the zoo world can match that. These are natural matings, and elephants can't breed unless they feel good (physically and psychologically - not so very different from people). The oldest elephant in the village is 82 - in zoos, they usually don't live past 40.


The village was established 12 years ago by former Thai restaurateur, Laithongrien Meepan (known in the village as Pi Om - a name bestowed by Thai royalty in recognition of his work with elephants). When his young daughter asked for an elephant for her birthday, he learnt how much work was involved in caring for it, and about the awful plight of many Asian elephants. Since logging was banned in Thailand in 1989, vast>





numbers of elephants have become 'unemployed' and mahouts and their families are unable to keep their animals. Many Thai elephants are begging - it's a tragedy, and dangerous for the elephants and people.

When the baby elephant was born, Pi Om, who is a very wise and gentle man, commented to me that this baby would outlive us both. He knows everyone's time is limited on this earth, so he's trying to build the village up for when he's gone. It's a tiny little jewel in a very special place - an example of how Asian elephants can be managed better with well-trained and supported mahouts. They are happy in the group, and can breed very successfully.

We have to learn to live with these iconic animals and let them be all that they are. The wild places for elephants in Asia are shrinking fast - through habitat destruction and human pressures including poaching. These places must be preserved, but equally, the long-term welfare of the domestic Thai elephant must be considered. This is what ElephantStay is all about. Visitors contribute to the care of all the elephants in the village, and by sharing what they learn they encourage others to visit or even just to care. My stay taught me to live for the moment. The whole world could have stopped and I wouldn't have cared. I will return - the place is now part of me, part of my soul. 

[www.elephantstay.com](http://www.elephantstay.com)

Katrina is trying to raise funds for a DNA project to help the elephants, please contact her if you can help or need more information at [drkat@bigpond.com](mailto:drkat@bigpond.com)

\* A mahout is a person who works with an elephant. Mahouts are assigned a young elephant early in their life, and the working relationship continues for its lifetime.