

I arrived at Elephantstay in February with incredibly high expectations. The Elephantstay experience, all the people involved and of course, the elephants more than fulfilled those expectations, and on most days, far exceeded them.

I had been looking forward to arriving for the previous six months, and was staying for three months. It seemed like such a long time to be away from home. Before I knew it, the time had passed in a blur, it was time to pack my bags and come back to Australia. Not a day goes by that I do not wish I was still there.

The first day I arrived characterised what the rest of my stay would be like. After the induction and within two hours of arriving, I found myself on Sinuwan riding down to the river. The rest of the day flew by with activities such as scrubbing the elephants, preparing their food mix, another ride down to the river and then putting them in their sleeping spots. Five o'clock came and I thought that was the end of the day...Wrong! We then travelled to Suphanburi for a magnificent Light and Sound show, a recreation of an ancient battle between Thailand and Burma. Organised chaos does not even begin to describe the spectacle of Elephants, horses, people, fireworks and lasers all coming together to provide one of the most entertaining evenings I can ever recall.

To say that I was completely and totally overwhelmed by this stage would be the biggest understatement I could ever make. I felt very much out of my depth and in the initial 24 hours wondered if I would be able to handle the whole experience. This is where Paul and Yvette, the other volunteers at Elephantstay really set the tone for my remaining time at Elephantstay. Without the support, friendship and humour of these two truly remarkable people I would not have had the experience that I did. I am eternally grateful and adore them both.

Michelle and Ewa, who are the directors of Elephantstay, are quite simply, the most awe-inspiring women I have ever had the privilege of spending time with. Their generosity, guidance and support is one of the greatest gifts I have ever been given. Without them, the Elephantstay program would not exist. The sacrifices they have made, and continue to make is truly humbling, and to allow me to be part of all that really has changed my life forever. 'Thank-you' somehow, does not even begin to cover it.

I had so many amazing experiences whilst in Thailand that I find it almost impossible to condense my time there down to one or two anecdotes. Before I left I had spoken with other volunteers and each of them said 'it will change your life'. I'm a bit of a cynic, and thought 'yeah, right!' ... but the longer I am home the more I realise how much I have changed. One cannot have an experience like this and remain unchanged.

I had gone to Thailand with the aim of gaining work experience with Elephants. I had not really thought too much about anything else. When I got there, I discovered that one of my roles was to facilitate between the Mahouts and the Elephantstayers. This was an absolute highlight for me, and something I had not even contemplated. I have made some good friends, and found that sharing a truly remarkable experience with like-minded people is one of life's sublime pleasures.

There is so much more to Elephantstay than the Elephants. We tell people at the induction that it is an 'immersion experience' into the village. The village, the people in it, the other animals and the elephants are quite simply, amazing.

I cannot recommend highly enough the volunteer program for Elephantstay. I am sure for anybody contemplating it that your experience might be different to my experience – but, I can guarantee it will be one of the greatest highlights of your life.

Sarah Griffin
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