



The Insider Journeys Responsible Asian Elephant Tourism Policy

The context

Due to urbanisation, deforestation, lack of reproductive opportunity and poaching, elephant populations in developing Asia have plummeted – in recent decades, at alarming rates.

The World Wildlife Fund (www.worldwildlife.org) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN, www.iucn.org) class the Asian elephant as an endangered species, ‘facing a high risk of extinction in the wild’. The IUCN reports that the Asian Elephant population has most likely decreased by at least 50% over the past 60 to 75 years, amounting to a staggering population decrease of around 50,000 elephants.

Estimates of the current total Asian elephant population (wild and captive) are crude and vary greatly – due to the difficulty of locating elephants in their natural environment – but are usually in the range of 40,000 to 50,000. The IUCN website refers to the following population estimates (from Sukumar, 2003):

Bangladesh	150 – 200		Bhutan	250 – 500
Cambodia	250 – 600		China	200 – 250
India	26,390 – 30,770		Indonesia	2,400 – 3,400
Laos	500 – 1,000		Malaysia	2,100 – 3,100
Myanmar	4,000 – 5,000		Nepal	100 – 125
Sri Lanka	2,500 – 4,000		Thailand	2,500 – 3,200
Vietnam	70 – 150			

Plausibly, within 100 years Asian elephants will die out in countries once famous for their elephant populations (such as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), and if this happens there will be a loss of natural heritage, culture, tradition, and sheer animal beauty. The world will be a lesser place.

It is however, important and inspiring to note that in India, which has up to 30,000 elephants and by far the largest population of any country, there are instances where conservation efforts seem to have increased elephant populations, for example, in the Western Ghats in South India.

A key part of Insider Journeys’ responsible Asian elephant tourism policy is our urging of travellers to do their own research about tourism involving elephants, and to support responsible elephant tourism activities.

Our definition of responsible Asian elephant tourism

Insider Journeys supports ‘responsible’ tourism involving Asian elephants.

We define ‘responsible Asian elephant tourism’ as an activity through which tourists can observe or interact with Asian elephants in a safe environment, and which promotes elephant physical and cognitive health, as well as social and reproductive opportunities. This includes viewing elephants in the wild, as well as the viewing, bathing, feeding or trekking with captive elephants at sanctuaries, parks and camps, where we believe that operators endeavor to properly consider elephant well-being, and where the alternative to interacting with tourists (for example, a return to the wild) is likely to increase the risk of injury or premature death.

The issues surrounding tourism involving elephants and the viable alternatives available, differ across countries. We are therefore wary of generalisations on the topic of Asian elephant tourism.

Our policy does not cover African elephant tourism issues; although parts of our policy may also be relevant to Africa, our views are confined to the area of the world we know best, Asia.

Why we have a responsible Asian elephant tourism policy

Insider Journeys has a responsible Asian elephant tourism policy because we are Asia specialists, and in many of the countries in which we work, there are opportunities for tourism involving Asian elephants. We have a network of offices in Asia and this imbues in us a special responsibility to be informed about elephant tourism and conservation efforts, and to ensure that the activities we support and promote are operated responsibly. In the same way we research and create life-changing creative holiday experiences, we believe we have prepared this policy with care and thoroughness, after consultation with people on the ground in Asia who are knowledgeable in the field of elephant conservation.

We do not believe that a blanket ban on tourism involving elephants (including trekking) is the best way forward for the conservation and re-generation of a species threatened with extinction in many parts of Asia. We recognise that tourism which involves elephants ranges from being responsible and humane, to being irresponsible and cruel. We support elephant tourism which endeavors to work responsibly, and where we see it is an alternative to a less desirable situation, such as harm or premature death in the wild from the direct or indirect effects of human activity.

Why do we believe in responsible Asian elephant tourism?

In Asia, the alternatives are normally either:

- A return to the wild, to face a very real and (in some parts of Asia) inevitable risk of being poached for ivory, ‘medicinal’ preparations, skin or meat, illegal export to countries for zoo captivity, or a struggle for survival in a habitat increasingly encroached on by humans.
- Physical toil for organisations or individuals engaged in the (often illegal) logging industry, where:
 - the treatment of elephants is closed to public scrutiny (including tourist feedback)
 - reproductive opportunities are usually limited
 - overwork, mistreatment, and (sometimes) resultant death occurs

- there is poor or no access to a vet and the medical equipment necessary to treat elephant ailments and injuries

Responsible Asian elephant tourism is rarely ideal. The ideal is that Asian elephants return to and live in the wild. The reality however, is that this would possibly result in extinction in many regions of developing Asia. Insider Journeys hopes there will be a point in time when captive elephants can be returned to the wild and live free from fear of harm or death brought on by mankind. Our endorsement of responsible elephant tourism is therefore a practical compromise solution, and one which we hope to be able to lift in the future – when it becomes safe for elephants to return to their natural environments.

What we base our belief on and who did we consult with?

We have sourced views from a broad range of perspectives.

Our belief has been informed by the contact our Asia-based management has had with elephant tourist services in Asia, by a review of a variety of published opinions on responsible elephant tourism, and by discussions with representatives from Asia-based organisations which are involved in the advocacy and conservation of Asian elephants.

We have shared this policy with our main travel partners in the countries in which we work, as a way of making our views on elephant tourism known, and to encourage thoughtful debate and change which benefits elephant conservation and population growth.

Our belief is qualified

Due to our office presence in Asia, we are in the privileged position of being able to inspect or investigate tourism activities involving elephants. Where we have founded reasons to believe elephant welfare is not being properly considered (for example, where elephants are being physically abused), we will avoid the inclusion of these activities in our tours.

We do not claim that we are aware of the operating procedures at all elephant tourist sites in Asia at any point in time. We therefore strongly encourage our travellers to give feedback direct to elephant tourism operators and to Insider Journeys, in the event of concerns about elephant welfare. In our experience in Asia, collective, regular and reasoned feedback can have a positive effect on changing behavior.

Your part in conserving and regenerating Asian elephant populations

We encourage anyone considering the inclusion of a form elephant tourism in their holiday to do advance reading about elephant conservation and tourism issues. A key to the conservation of elephants is education, and the direction of patronage to elephant tourist services which do a better job at considering elephant welfare.

We ask travellers to remember that only a generation ago, western culture had little understanding of animal welfare, and operated zoos and circuses which we would now regard as inhumane. It will take time and an international concerted effort to improve the quality of tourist elephant experiences to sufficiently safeguard elephant populations and give species survival and growth the best chance possible.

We encourage you to include in your Insider Journeys holiday an elephant tourism activity. By doing this, you will be supporting responsible elephant tourism and conservation efforts.

Commonly asked questions about elephants and elephant tourism ... and answers

Where do elephants at elephant tourist facilities come from? Elephants in sanctuaries, parks and camps are typically rescued from poachers or the logging industry, or are brought into camps by owners who are unable to support or care for their animal.

Does Insider Journeys support trekking on the back of an elephant? We reiterate our hope that there will be a point in time when Asian elephants will be able to return to the wild, free from risk of direct or indirect harm from humans. Until that time, we support responsible elephant trekking.

We believe that trekking is responsible when the realistic alternative to this activity is likely to lead to an outcome significantly more harmful to elephants (for example, a return to the wild which is likely to lead to injury or premature death from poaching), and where elephant comfort and welfare is considered. We believe trekking is irresponsible when there are realistic local alternatives which are likely to be better for the welfare and conservation of elephants and their regeneration. Our belief is dependent on region and setting, as illustrated by the cases of elephant trekking in two neighbouring countries - Thailand and Laos.

Thailand is a country in which there are both responsible and irresponsible examples of tourism involving elephants. In parts of northern Thailand, there are multiple elephant sanctuaries which allow for elephant viewing, bathing and feeding in an open-range environment. We regard this type of elephant tourism as responsible. In the same parts of northern Thailand there are also elephant camps which offer elephant treks to tourists without or with far fewer opportunities for 'softer' interaction with elephants. We do not regard elephant tourism in these latter camps as responsible – because there are viable nearby alternatives which far better consider elephant welfare.

The situation in south Laos (which borders Thailand) provides a contrast. Here, the existence options for elephants are more limited. The south of Laos is less developed than most areas of Thailand and poaching is sad reality. In this part of Asia we include in some of our tours an elephant trek. Treks are for a short duration and there are rest breaks between rides. Elephants trek only for part of the year and only in the mornings. In the afternoon, the elephants roam in an expansive wetland area, free to play, eat, drink, rest and socialise. The mahouts who operate the treks have a life-long close and caring bond with their elephants. We regard our support of this elephant trek as a responsible action. This is because the alternative is a return to the wild a significant risk of death from poaching, or illegal export. We believe it is right to support this trekking until a viable better existence alternative emerges.

What is the ideal carry load for a fully-grown elephant in an elephant trekking setting? This varies, depending on carry load, the duration of rest breaks between treks, terrain, temperature, and the number of treks per day. We are not aware of any published guidelines on carry load, however we have proposed the below as a set of starting rules, based on consultation with people experienced in the field of elephant conservation. We hope that over time, our suggested rules will contribute to the formation of standards for elephant trekking, and we welcome informed feedback from people qualified to give it. We particularly hope that the recently-formed Association of Southeast Asian Nations Captive Elephant Working Group (see further below) will establish trekking guidelines for use across Asia.

- A single adult human of average weight plus a lightweight howdah (elephant chair), as well as a mahout trainer sitting on the neck – a ride of up to about one hour
- Two adult humans of average weight plus a lightweight howdah (as well as a mahout trainer on the neck) – a ride of up to about 45 minutes
- More than the above weights – do not ride for any duration, as elephant will experience discomfort early on in the trek

A human analogy elephant trekking might be the carrying of a knapsack or a shoulder-bag . The human body was not ‘designed’ to carry loads on its back, but can do so in comfort if carry time is short. After the elapse of time however, even a lightweight load will begin to feel heavy, and discomfort sets-in.

To minimise workload to elephants, terrain should be generally flat, firm and soft (no cement, asphalt, or rocks) and there should be regular protection from the sun, rather than constant exposure.

There should be rest breaks of 15 to 30 minutes between treks (the greater the carry load, the longer the rest break) to allow ample time for recovery, and no more than four hours of trekking work per day – to allow time for eating, drinking, rest and play.

Responsible elephant trekking settings are increasingly favouring the use of padded mats and/ or lightweight rattan cane (rather than wooden) howdahs positioned over the neck, to avoid discomfort to elephants. Weight positioned over the neck (up to the weight of an average-weight adult human) is unlikely to tire elephants, because elephant necks are very thick and muscular and can support heavy weight.

We are not aware of any peer-reviewed research which concludes that trekking on the back of an elephant per se, causes discomfort. We are aware of cases where the experience of riding an elephant has stimulated a genuine appreciation of one of nature’s great beasts, and we know of instances where an initial ride on an elephant inspired a life-long commitment to the preservation of Asian elephants and the formation of an elephant conservation centre and an elephant advocacy organisation.

What is the 'crush'

The 'crush' or phajaan' is a method historically used to condition elephants to working with humans. It has traditionally been likened to 'breaking the spirit' of an elephant. In some ways, the concept is similar to breaking-in a horse so that it can be ridden by humans.

If you choose to do an elephant trek, it is probable or even likely that your elephant was subject to the 'crush' earlier in its life, and it is possible that this experience was a harsh and even inhumane experience. It is impossible to change past practices, but it is possible to make the forward decision to take part in responsibly managed elephant trekking, where elephant comfort and welfare is considered and where the support of this activity is better for elephant conservation than the realistic next best alternative.

We are aware of cases where a combination of 'positive reinforcement', 'protected contact' techniques and softer traditional practices have had the same end effect as the 'crush' method. Insider Journeys encourages its elephant tourism partners to use as humane a process as possible to prepare elephants for existence in the presence of humans. We also encourage our travellers to ask mahouts how their elephants were trained to be at ease with humans.

Do we support elephant 'circus' performances, or elephant polo?

No – and we do not include visits to these venues in any of our itineraries. Performing tricks (such as balancing acts or painting) is not a natural elephant function, and elephants are often hurt in the process of being trained. In the countries where performing elephant shows exist (eg. Thailand), there are usually alternative responsible forms of tourism involving elephants, which we do support. We do not support elephant polo, as this is not a natural form of activity for an elephant.

Elephants in tourist elephant camps are sometimes seen with cuts and wounds, especially to the head.

Why is this? We encourage you to raise any concerns you have about wounds directly with mahouts or camp management. It is possible that these wounds are caused by improper use of the bull hook. In elephant camps which work responsibly, it is also possible that these wounds are caused by elephants playing in forests and bamboo thickets, which can cause accidental self-harm.

Why do mahouts hit elephants on the head with whips, or on the ears with metal hooks? In conjunction with verbal commands, these implements are used to direct elephants, and if used properly cause no harm. The use of implements is a sensitive issue, because cultural norms in developing Asia allow for rougher treatment of animals than in western countries. Insider Journeys strongly prefers that 'carrot' rather than 'stick' incentives are used to direct and guide elephants, however we acknowledge that phasing out traditional implements such as the bull hook or ankus can only be achieved through training and adopting 'positive reinforcement' and 'protected contact' techniques. This training takes time, and so change will be gradual. Again, we encourage you to raise any concerns you have with the use of implements directly with mahouts, camp managers and Insider Journeys – showing an interest in animal welfare is a lever for behavioural reform.

Why do elephants sometimes spray water from their trunk, and is this a sign that they are parched?

Elephants store water in their trunks and spray themselves in order to keep cool – so this act is not

necessarily a sign that the elephant is thirsty. Signs of Elephant dehydration include toenails that are pulled back, cracking or peeling.

Are there innate incentives for elephant owners to look after their elephants? Yes. The cost of an elephant varies according to country of sale and the age and gender of the elephant, but might be between \$10,000 and \$60,000. Given this huge outlay, mahout trainers and elephant camps usually do their best to keep their elephants healthy and learn how to attend to basic elephant healthcare issues. Insider Journeys hopes for a time when elephants will not be bought and sold, but will be able to return to and roam safely and freely in a wilderness habitat.

Do mahouts usually have skills in attending to the medical needs of sick or injured elephants? Sometimes yes. In most elephant parks and camps however, elephant medical kits are more likely to exist, or camp managers will contact qualified veterinarians or people experienced in the care of elephants in the event that an animal is unwell or injured. In some countries mahout training courses exist, and these courses usually cover elephant health care.

Why are captive elephants sometimes chained? Foot chains are sometimes used in elephant camps in order to create a safe visiting environment. While most elephants in elephant camps are of the more 'passive' female gender (males are significantly more aggressive), all elephants have the potential to cause sudden and serious damage to people and property. Where chaining is used, it should be for a short time only, and chains in responsibly operated elephant camps are long to allow for roaming. For the rest of the day, elephants either eat (14 to 18 hours each day), drink, play, bathe or interact with tourists.

Is elephant tourism compatible with elephant breeding? If properly operated, yes. Elephant breeding is however an issue of major importance and concern – there are far too many venues in Asia which do not place enough or any priority on creating the right environment for elephant reproduction. We encourage you to raise this issue direct with mahouts and management by asking the question 'what are you doing to ensure that elephant populations do not merely exist, but increase?'

Responsible elephant tourism allows young calves to be housed and to walk next to their mothers. Elephants under ten years of age should not be ridden.

Are there rules or regulations about the operation of elephant tourism activities? Although we are not aware of any comprehensive regulatory or monitoring bodies across Asia which issue and enforce rules about the operation of tourist elephant activities, we do know that as from 2015, the Thai government passed laws making elephant street begging illegal and forbidding the use any old, pregnant, lame or sick elephants in trekking. Insider Journeys supports the development of elephant tourism standards and accreditation systems. We particularly welcome the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Captive Elephant Working Group (ACEWG), which held its inaugural meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in June 2015. We believe and hope that this forum will – among other things - lay the groundwork for the development of standards for the operation of responsible elephant camps across ASEAN nations. We hope that businesses connected to the travel industry will show an interest in the activities of this forum. The general absence of a standards and accreditation systems also puts an onus

on travellers themselves to read-up about responsible Asian tourism involving elephants (see next question).

What can I do to support the existence of viable elephant populations in developing Asia? You can:

- Read-up about elephant tourism, referring to useful websites such as elefantasia.org, the homepage for an organisation dedicated to the conservation of elephants. While much of the work done by ElefantAsia occurs in Laos, guiding principles are generally relevant to the rest of developing Asia. By referring to the ElefantAsia website you will be able to:
 - Understand how to identify the signs of healthy, and unhealthy elephants
 - Be able to download the informative 'Read Before you Ride' pamphlet (take this with you on holidays)
 - Support ElefantAsia's veterinary care or database management work, by making a donation through the site
- Refer to the ABTA 'Animal Welfare Guidelines' at abta.com/about-abta/raising-standards/animal-welfare. Also refer to the 'Five Freedoms: Best Practice' guidelines at the end of this policy. These are best practices, derived from ABTA website material.
- Read-up about particular elephant tourist activities before taking your holiday, then direct your business to activities which do their best to promote elephant welfare
- Visit a properly-run responsible elephant camp to feed or bathe an elephant or take part in an elephant trek
- Ask questions of mahouts and elephant custodians which show you are interested in the welfare and working conditions of the elephants you see. Again, be part of a positive (but gradual) change solution!
- Do not purchase anything made from ivory or any other product causing the unnecessary harming or killing of elephants.
- Give us feedback about your own elephant tourism experience, which Insider Journeys management can use to guide our choice of operators of tourism activities involving elephants
- Read the following guidelines on best practice elephant tourism (see next section), print these and take these with you on holidays

Five Freedoms: Best Practice (Source: ABTA)

- 1. Good feeding –**
 - a. Including continual access to clean fresh water
 - b. Nutritious food provided throughout the day.
- 2. Good housing –**
 - a. Access to large indoor and outdoor enclosures and good ventilation.
 - b. Ability to seek shelter, shade, and social interaction with other elephants.
 - c. Access to bathing facilities.
- 3. Good health –**
 - a. Access to onsite vet
 - b. Clear and bright eyes (no pus or foreign body)

- c. Bright pink coloured mucous membranes (mouth, tongue, tip of trunk, anus and vulva)
 - d. Normal urination (continuous flow, no blood or puss)
 - e. Normal defecation (10 to 12 times per day, non-watery)
- 4. Appropriate behavior –**
- a. Ideally housed in social structure of mixed sex and age of approximately five individuals.
 - b. Females and offspring housed together (male calves until age 10, female calves for life)
 - c. Bull (male) elephants only separated from the herd during musth (a periodic hormonal surge in male elephants)
 - d. Ability and encouragement to dig, bathe, dive, forage, dust bathe etc
- 5. Protection from fear and distress –**
- a. Limited use of bull hook (ankus), and efforts made to phase out its use for positive reinforcement training techniques.
 - b. Minimise public contact
 - c. Elephants free to move at will, escape and find refuge
 - d. Maintain elephants in social groups when at rest
 - e. Elephants should not be tethered except for welfare reasons

Indicators of Poor Elephant welfare:

- a. Entire ribcage visible beneath the skin
- b. Visible wounds or injuries around lower legs, feet, and behind ears
- c. Chain wounds (broken skin and tissue damage along horizontal plane in ankles)
- d. Damaged or infected feet and toenails.
- e. Swaying from side to side and head bobbing (from lack of sensory stimulation and behavioural opportunities)

Endorsement by Tourism Concern

This policy is endorsed by Tourism Concern, a non-governmental organisation with charitable status, based in the United Kingdom, advocating ethical tourism.

Views of Insider Journeys

The views herein are those of Insider Journeys', and not necessarily the views of any of the other individuals or organisations referred to or cited in this policy.