



TRAILS OF INDOCHINA

*Artisans of bespoke journeys to
Southeast Asia & beyond*

SOP for Captive Elephant Interactions





SOP for Captive Elephant Interactions

Version: 004.2024

Most recent update: 25 Feb 2024

By: Sustainability/Products Department

INTRODUCTION

Elephant activity is one of the most iconic experiences during the travel to Southeast Asian countries. Elephants have been part of the culture and heritage in these countries when they do not only play an important role in religious and cultural beliefs as well as national identity, but also in warfare, village construction, goods transportation and logging.

Nowadays, the Asian elephant is heading toward extinction and thus is on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) 'red' list. The rapid decline of wild elephant populations has highlighted the recent significance of the captive elephant population. Moreover, better captive elephant management is considered as an important tool for the conservation of the wild elephant population. Besides, maintaining captive elephant population provides jobs and opportunities for rural communities. Elephant ownership has a long-standing tradition, so it holds cultural and religious significance. At the moment, there are many legitimate concerns about the well-being of elephants in the elephant camps and sanctuaries (hereinafter collectively referred to as the *elephant venues*) which have been set up for tourism in Southeast Asia. As a responsible travel company, Trails of Indochina is evaluating the situation with regards to elephant interactions carefully, based on both actual data and recommendations from professionals.

There is no simple answer. In an ideal world, elephants would be released back into the wild to roam free, but in truth there is no longer the space required for elephants to live without the constant threat of human encroachment. This creates potentially unsafe conditions for both the elephants and humans.

A total ban on elephant riding (or elephant venues operate riding experience) would not improve the animals' quality of life and would in fact have a detrimental impact on the elephant and mahout population. Alternatively, we wish to encourage long-term behavioral change by promoting experiences that prioritize elephant welfare while the value of indigenous culture is still honored. Therefore, ethical elephant venues can be a part of the solution. As such, we have consulted credible sources to create a policy that reflects these realities.

OUR POLICY

In general, we take action to ensure that:

- Absolutely not provide elephant related experience to clients in the elephant venues that are not licensed to operate, go against the Animal Welfare Policy and have evidence of animal abuse.
- Only provide services in the elephant venues meet the minimum requirement according to TOI Animal Welfare Policy
- Promote the ethical and responsible certified elephant venues.

Particular situations:

- We are **not banning elephant riding** altogether as we believe that would ultimately result in a poor outcome for the elephants. Riding an elephant under the correct conditions can be done without causing harm. Riding can offer an elephant enrichment and daily exercise.
- We do **not promote** any experience that involves elephants trained to perform **unnatural acts** (For example: circuses, painting, etc.).
- We are **aware that elephants** have the ability to be dangerous to humans and other elephants in venues so they **must be managed** accordingly (like using hooks as a tool and protection for mahouts¹ and other people, using chain in correct way, etc.).
- We **only work with elephant venues** that meet or edicate to continuous improvement to **meet TOI minimum requirement**
- We **showcase and support responsible and certified elephant venues** that:
 - Meet the TOI minimum requirement;
 - Has licenses & operating permits and Standard Operating Procedures, elephant ID books, annual reports;
 - Give opportunies for clients to engage in cultural awareness like learning about the mahout life, how the elephant venue important to the local communitess, etc... not focus only on elephants and clients;
 - Care about client safety: insurance, safety protocol, education & interpretation;
 - Environmental responsibility: energy saving devices, recycling, waste disposal;
 - Social responsibility: staff entitlements, living wage, fair work practices, working papers;
 - Elephant welfare: diet, living quarters, cleaning, calf welfare, bathing schedules;
 - Elephant interactions: no exploitation, staff supervision, signage, activity plans and timetables;
 - Has conservation policy, size and location, government relationship, professional affiliations.
- **Educate clients** on the benefits of elephant-based tourism in all 3 aspects: social, environmental, economics.

¹ *Mahouts: are the keeper, driver, trainer, caretakers of elephants.*

- **Allow the client the right to choose whether they engage in human-elephant contact or not.** This is respectful to both the client and the elephant venue and allows for respectful communication between local voices and international clients.
- We will **continue to seek advice from reputable organization and specialists** in the field, in order to guide our decision-making progress going forward.

GUIDELINES FOR PRODUCTS

- Products Department uses the TOI guideline for elephant product inspection, to evaluate the management and practice of elephant venues, make report and update recommendations to Sales Department;
- Product Department creates a list of elephant venues including (1) unacceptable elephant venues, (2) acceptable elephant venues and (3) recommended elephant venues;
- Products Department, based on TOI Animal Welfare Policy, effectively communicates ethical and responsible elephant tourism as well as elephant-based tourism certification and regulation schemes to elephant venues that TOI has been working with. The best way to help improve the situation is not to stop selling to elephant venues not meet the TOI Animal Welfare Policy, but to give them suggestions and encourage for improvement;
- Include TOI Animal Welfare Policy and Captive Elephant Interactions in elephant product description;
- Take courses on elephant-based tourism and stay up to date with recommendations from experts to continually improve the TOI elephant scheme and guideline.

GUIDELINES FOR SALES

- Travel Consultant will be supplied with a list of TOI recommended elephant venues;
- When an unacceptable elephant venue request comes through, Travel consultant should offer an alternative option from recommended list and at the meantime share to clients TOI Welfare animal Policy. If the agent would still like to book that elephant venue, then they can do it by themselves. TOI even not provide guide, vehicle for that experience. The important thing is that we make our recommendation clear with a gentle voice. Visitors should be given the opportunity to learn about the high-quality elephant venues that are in the Southeast Asian region. With the right education, a consistent message and continued support, this industry can shift to a positive and meaningful message of industry reform and resilience.
- When receiving a request to elephant venue out of the acceptable or recommended list, check with Products Department for recommendations;
- Respect the clients on choosing whether they engage in human-elephant contact or not;
- Training to be provided on elephant policy and how to handle request

GUIDELINES FOR OPERATIONS AND CARES

- Set a question in the clients' survey regarding their experience in elephant venue; This is a guideline for Operations and Care, we can remove from this SOP after finalizing the question. It can be: If you have elephant experience in your trip, do the elephants there are healthy, content looking with no visible signs of skin damage from the ankus?
- Collect the feedback from guides/clients about elephant venue and inform to Products Department to recheck. This can be a useful way to effect positive changes.

GUIDELINES FOR MARKETING

- Learning about different cultures is a **key component of responsible travel**. Marketing should not focus only on elephant but also the mahouts and the local community. Highlight the cultural heritage and significance of regional Asian elephant ownership and utilisation. Promote the **responsible tourism philosophy of cultural acceptance and safe elephant use** in remote communities. Highlight and showcase mahout families, their knowledge and stories of elephant lore in international marketing campaigns.
- Marketing **ethical and responsible elephant venues** is critical to changing the inaccurate perceptions people have about this sector.
- Focus on promoting elephant venues from Product recommended list and avoid greenwashing. By marketing and showcasing the well-regulated venues, you are demonstrating that you are a proponent of positive, reformative elephant tourism, not ALL elephant tourism. Focus on the positives, not the negatives.

RELATED INFORMATION

Reference: <https://nextcloud.tntoadcorporation.com/index.php/s/oycLAdFQii372sc>

- 2. TOI Animal Welfare Policy
- 2.1. TOI Elephant Venue Standards
- 2.2. TOI SOP - Captive Elephant Interactions
- 2.3. TOI Elephant Camp Myths and Realities

REFERENCES

- ABTA Animal Welfare Guidelines <https://www.abta.com/sustainability/animal-welfare>
- Standardized benchmark for elephant welfare by Asian Captive Elephant Standards (ACES) <https://www.elephantstandards.com/standards>
- Human - Elephant Learning Program (H-ELP) <https://h-elp.org/>

- Elephant Camp Animal Welfare Standard and Assessment Initiative by Asian Captive Elephant Work Group (ACEWG) <https://www.asianelephantresearch.com/about-acewg/>

