



TRAILS OF INDOCHINA

*Artisans of bespoke journeys to
Southeast Asia & beyond*

6 Elephant Camps Myths and Realities





6 ELEPHANT CAMPS: MYTHS AND REALITIES

Version: 004.2024

Most recent update: 25 Feb 2024

By: Sustainability/Products Department

Managing an elephant camp is a complicated business. Managers are not hiring out motorbikes or ATVs – these are three-ton elephants that require constant care, feeding and supervision. A good elephant venue will strive to achieve the highest standards in elephant care, wellbeing and enrichment. That is challenging enough. But perhaps the biggest hurdle facing elephant venue management is information dissemination and challenging some of the outdated stereotypes that persist with tourists and tour operators. Let's then see some of the biggest myths and realities about elephant camp management, modified from the Asian Captive Elephant Standards Welfare FAQ.

CHAINING AN ELEPHANT IS CRUEL

Most camps will use chains at some point (even passive viewing camps). An elephant in chains is not in itself a welfare problem. The issue is not the use of chains, but the length, time spent in chains and the positioning of the chains.

An elephant can be restrained without suffering adverse stress levels. Indeed many animals under human care face some kind of restraint, often on a daily basis and without cruelty concern (think collars, cages, leads and choker chains for dogs. Harnesses, saddles, mouthpieces and whips for horses. Cattle prods for cattle, cages for birds).

Chaining is a problem if it is prolonged, sustained and incorrectly positioned. Certification such as offered by Asian Captive Elephant Standards thoroughly assesses back-of-house chaining practices to ensure they are done with minimal effect or impact to the elephant.

RIDING AN ELEPHANT IS CRUEL

Elephants need exercise, just as humans do. Without exercise, elephants tend to become overweight and are susceptible to health issues. Walking provides both physical and mental stimulation for an elephant. In this extensive study, elephants that undertook riding had lower stress levels than a subset of elephants that did not. Walking 4-8km each day is acceptable, as long as the path is mainly shaded, the elephant is walking on is appropriate substrate (not only concrete or road), drinking water is available, it is a suitable temperature and the elephant is given adequate rest breaks. Elephant experts agree that an Asian elephant can comfortably carry 20-25% of its body weight on its back. The saddle should be designed in a way that does not put pressure on the elephants' spine. Two people in a well-fitted saddle weighs under 10% of an elephant's body weight and will not cause any stress or damage.

Please see this scientific report for more information on correct elephant riding.

THE HOOK IS CRUEL AND SHOULD BE BANNED AT ALL TIMES

The hook was developed as a guiding tool and safety measure for the mahout and is no more damaging than a rein in a horses' mouth. The hook should be used in conjunction with verbal commands and never as a way to control the elephant. Indeed no mahout would ever expect to be able control an elephant using only the hook.

Some camps proclaim 'no hooks' as a way to appear welfare-friendly and to attract visitors. Sadly there has been an increase in mahout deaths at these camps, simply because the elephant may have become spooked by something out of the camp's control (any number of loud noises or sudden movements). Nobody should die at their workplace, and everyone should have the ability to protect themselves. A mahout with a hook tucked into his pants does not make him an elephant abuser, it simply means he has a chance to survive if the worst occurs.

Similarly, some 'no hook' camps bypass the hook issue by making mahouts use a concealed nail in their hand. Technically it's not a hook, so they are not fibbing! And let's not forget 'no hook' does not mean 'no abuse'. These are just a handful of reasons why the presence of hook is not in itself an admission of animal cruelty.

ELEPHANT SHOWS ARE OUTDATED AND PROMOTE UNNATURAL BEHAVIOURS

Behaviours such as standing on two legs, headstands or an elephant balancing on an object are not natural. Camps should be phasing out these activities immediately and we do not recommend that these camps are patronised.

Shows should also be mindful of other externalities that may stress an elephant, including excessively loud noises and sudden movements. But crushing a coconut to show off strength or putting a wreath of flowers around a person's neck can be achieved without any harm done to the elephant during the training process.

HUMANS SHOULD NOT TOUCH ELEPHANTS AT ALL

Some critics believe that all human-elephant interaction is cruel, even touching an elephant. However, studies have shown that elephants are stimulated by human-elephant interaction. Training can be considered a part of an elephant's environmental enrichment**. Please read this scientific report for more information.

ELEPHANT TRAINING INVOLVES “BREAKING THE SPIRIT” OF AN ELEPHANT

There are so many excellent verbal training methods now in practice at camps; fear, pain or starvation are simply not needed for training. The old stereotypes of “breaking in” elephants are very outdated and do nothing but perpetuate old stereotypes.

Elephants that have been born into captivity do not need their ‘spirits crushed’. Training a calf for 10 minutes a day using verbal commands and positive rewards is commonplace at many camps. The calves grow up knowing exactly what is expected of them, making them relaxed and not at all stressed when undertaking commands. Training has changed for the better and it’s time to acknowledge this.

But training is still very important and is a critical component of elephant welfare at any camp. It is a fallacy that passive-viewing camps do not have to train their elephants. Appropriate training allows veterinarians the ability to provide immediate relief if an elephant is sick, without the need for stressful and invasive physical or chemical restraint.

Reference: The Course Regenerative Travel: Responsible Elephant-Based Tourism in Southeast Asia – part of the Tourism Destination Resilience Project implemented by PATA in cooperation with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

