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BABY ELEPHANT WALKS



An ecotourism start-up in Laos offers an elephant experience with all of the charm and none of the usual animal exploitation, writes **Tibor Krausz**

O

n a narrow path that winds through a grove of banyans and giant ferns by a babbling brook, a fallen tree lies across a muddy bank. Mr Kit takes an immediate interest in it, peeling off from his small party of wanderers to investigate. He nudges the heavy log with his head. It doesn't budge, so Mr Kit decides to straddle it instead, rubbing his belly against it to scratch an itch.

He dismounts and breaks into a run, then stumbles and skids down the slippery riverbank. He is unhurt and begins to wallow in the thick mud, before clambering back to his feet, caked in muck, and dashing off to rejoin his mother.

Mr Kit is a 16-month-old Asian elephant calf and duly behaves like a kid. He's rambunctious and mischievous. One minute he's on his best behaviour, feeding at his mother Tongkhun's side, under a strangler fig. The next, he's off for some more hijinks.

"The baby boy is pretty hysterical," says Michael Vogler, an American conservationist who is one of the young elephant's handlers. "He's quite a draw."

He's also quite a draw at Mandalao Elephant Sanctuary and Tours, run by Vogler and a few other budding entrepreneurs. The ecotourism start-up offers refuge for six retired work elephants, and Mr Kit. It enables visitors to get up close and personal with the beasts in northern Laos, outside the ancient royal capital of Luang Prabang.

Tourists can walk with the sanctuary's elephants on trails in countryside dotted with vegetable plots and little villages



Tourists follow an elephant through Mandalao's forest sanctuary outside Luang Prabang. Photos: Paul Wager, Gregorio Rojas, Tibor Krausz, courtesy of Mandalao

of bamboo shacks. They can splash water and moisturising herbal sprays on them at bathing time in the Nam Khan River. And they can feed them plantains (a banana-like fruit) and pose for pictures with them. But they can't ride them.

Elephant tourism is popular in Laos, a mountainous country bordering Yunnan province in southern China, where many thousands of wild elephants once roamed. Today, according to Laos' Elephant Conservation Centre, only 450 to 500 remain in the wild, and about the same number in captivity. This is a country that once proclaimed itself the "Land of a Million Elephants".

Many of those in captivity have been chain ganged into hauling heavy loads at illegal logging sites, where they can suffer serious injuries. Others are used to entertain tourists whom they carry around on their backs, sometimes all day long, in howdahs, heavy canopies that can damage their spines.

"A lot of elephants are better

off in logging camps than they are at these tourist places, [where] they get less food and are worked harder," Vogler says.

Not so at Mandalao. A self-described "outdoorsy guy" from Colorado, Vogler, 29, launched the venture last year with two of his friends and a Thai elephant expert as a way to promote responsible elephant tourism in Laos.

"We did it from the ground up, every step of the way," Vogler says. "We saw that there was a really dismal state of affairs here – underfed and overworked elephants everywhere, chained up and prodded with hooks. There are [carvings and paintings of] elephants on every [Buddhist] temple in town, but real-life elephants can be treated abysmally. We want to change that."

Mandalao's elephants, which were once forced to work in logging, are now living it up. They're largely free to roam on 100 hectares of undulating meadows and forests leased from neighbouring villages. The

animals, which each consume 200kg of food a day, can forage and feed to their heart's content.

They also get tasty treats daily, courtesy of a resident chef well-versed in elephants' dietary habits. Tourists, too, can make nutritious cupcakes for them using tamarind, sticky rice, herbs and rock salt.

Feeding elephants is fun, but walking with them is even more entertaining. With another three day-trippers, I set off behind three of the sanctuary's elephants, including Mr Kit, who is trotting alongside his mother. From the pebbled shores of the Nam Khan River, we follow the animals down a narrow trail between vegetable gardens.

Maan, a matronly elephant, fancies a snack and snatches a stalk of corn from one of the gardens. The villagers tending their fields don't mind: they get reimbursed by Mandalao for all the crops the elephants devour.

"We call this the elephant supermarket," says Tai Anurak, 26, a guide who, along with two mahouts, chaperons the three animals. Their job is to make sure the elephants don't stray too far or make too much mischief.

With Mr Kit around, that can be a bit of a challenge. "He's a gentle animal but playful and naughty," says Chom Tiabua, 55, an experienced mahout who owns the calf and his mother. "He can be quite a handful."

You can say that again. Mr Kit sneaks up on me and tries to snatch the cap off my head. When he is foiled he snorts indignantly and stomps off. A moment later he's back and tries again.

Yet, unlike at other elephant camps in the country, mahouts at Mandalao don't use hooks to prod or discipline elephants. Nor do they use chains to restrain them. "When I first asked the mahouts not to use hooks, they said, 'No, that's impossible,'" recalls Prasop Tipprasert, 57, Mandalao's project director. "But you don't have to use hooks with elephants. They're highly intelligent and social animals. You can communicate with them."



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MICHAEL VOGLER (ABOVE), CO-FOUNDER, MANDALAO ELEPHANT SANCTUARY AND TOURS

Prasop is a Thai animal welfare expert who founded the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre in Lampang, in neighbouring Thailand, where he pioneered "positive reinforcement training" among captive elephants. Those in his care are rewarded for complying with orders, but aren't punished for failing to do so. It takes longer to train them this way, but it's far less stressful for them, he says.

At times, during training sessions, Mr Kit playfully kicks Prasop and runs off, inviting him to chase. "I don't give him a banana if he does that," Prasop says.

Prasop has spearheaded efforts in his homeland to promote responsible elephant tourism to stop the majestic creatures from being used as giant playthings. "The elephants always come first," he says. "We welcome visitors [at Mandalao], but we don't force the elephants to do what they don't want to do."

His goal is to spread this model across Laos, where animal welfare remains rudimentary. But it isn't just the sanctuary's elephants that benefit from his approach – locals do, too. Most of the staff at Mandalao are from

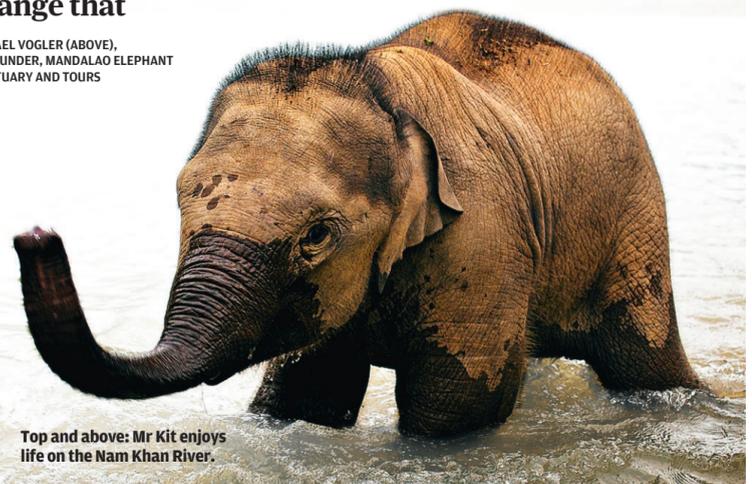
local communities, and the venture also buys produce in bulk from villagers to feed the elephants.

"Community-based conservation projects like this can provide jobs and incomes to local people," Prasop says. "This way we can wean them off animal exploitation and improve animal welfare. Making life better for elephants and better for local people – that's what we're trying to do."

Nang Ounkham, a villager who emerges from among trees on a forest trail, says: "We didn't have elephants here before, but it's good to have them."

For the elephants at Mandalao, the back-breaking work at logging camps is behind them and they won't be subjected to the daily toil of carrying tourists on their weary backs any more.

"Logging was hard and dangerous work for my elephants," says Chom, the mahout. "They had to drag heavy logs uphill and downhill for many hours. Now I am happy for my elephants. They don't have to work hard and can do whatever they want." life@scmp.com



Top and above: Mr Kit enjoys life on the Nam Khan River.