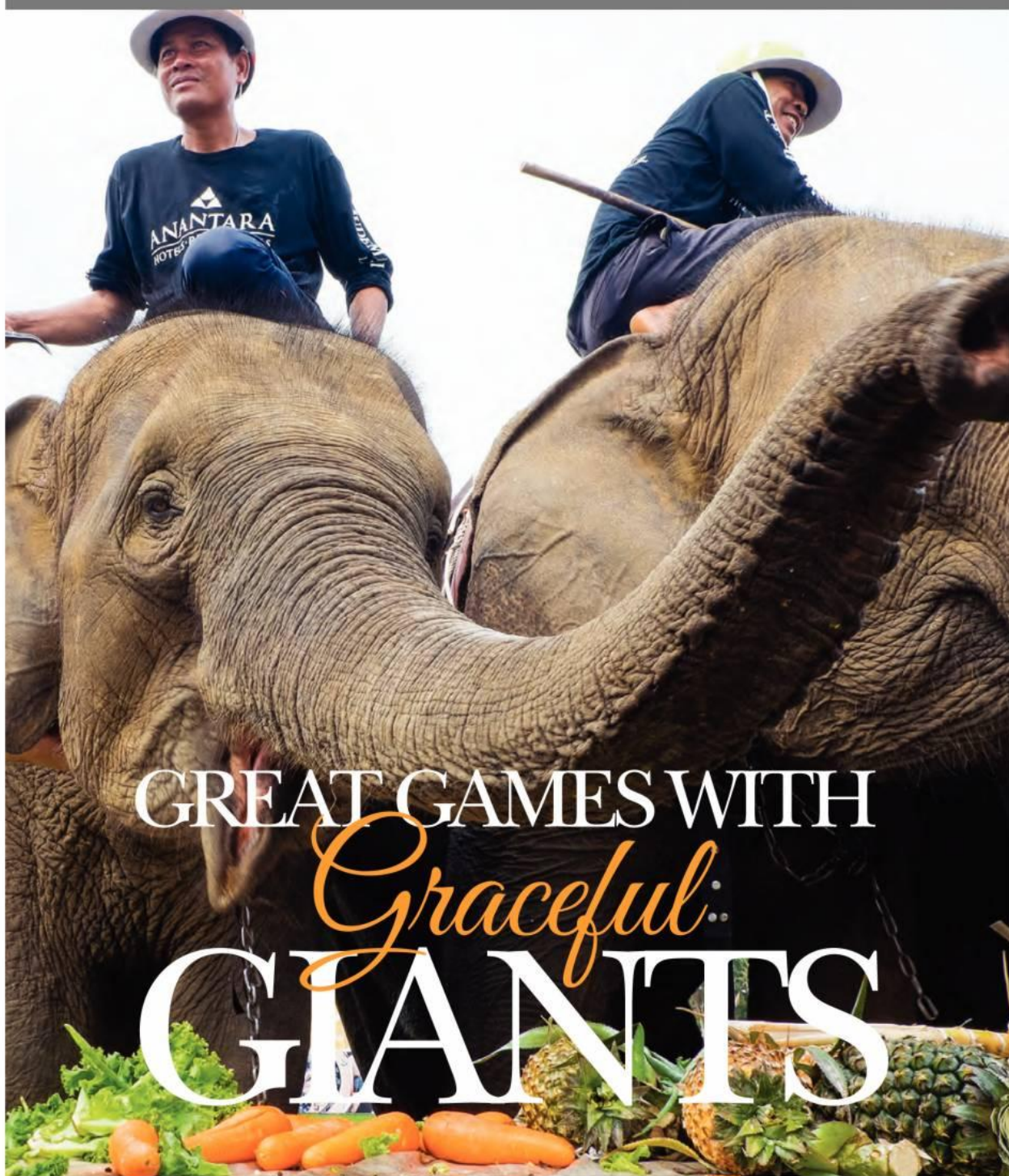


TRUMPETING THEIR CAUSE FOR ELEPHANT WELFARE AND ETHICAL TOURISM PROJECTS, THE ANANTARA KING'S CUP ELEPHANT POLO TOURNAMENT CELEBRATES THAILAND'S MOST CULTURALLY IMPORTANT NATIONAL SYMBOL, WRITES BROOKE THIO.



BROOKE THIO PHOTOS



Something was going on and the great grey beasts knew it. They'd been shipped here, two to a truck, onto this patch of turf that smelled all fresh and new and overly clean when they ploughed into it with their feet. Thankfully, their keepers had accompanied them; now they stood waiting in the morning sun, curious, but quietly obedient as a monk splashed holy water on them and tossed garlands of marigolds onto their heads. Later they would help themselves to a buffet spread of fruit and vegetables – only the first of many treats to come. They are the blessed ones.

FROM STREET ELEPHANTS TO POLO MOUNTS

In Thailand the elephant is highly revered, both as a sacred symbol of royal power and as an important beast of burden: the majority of Thailand's captive Asian elephants and mahouts (keepers) were employed in the logging industry. However, when logging was banned in 1989, these gentle giants ended up slaving away on city streets or in tourist trekking camps in order to earn their keep. I remember visiting such a camp in Phuket, before I knew I better, and watching tourists marvel at a pair of baby elephants. Eager for food or freedom – likely both – the calves strained relentlessly against the shackles on their legs. I'd fled as quickly as I could.

Here in Bangkok, for the 14th King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament, however, I can't wait for the action to begin. A little research upon receiving my invite revealed that this was a charity event lauded for supporting elephant welfare and conservation. Launched in Hua Hin in 2001 by Anantara Hotels, Resorts & Spas, the annual King's Cup is practically a holiday

for the 20 or so domestic elephants fetched from Pattaya and Surin to be given much needed food, essential vitamin supplements, and full veterinary care. In fact, it's been so well-received by Thais and foreigners alike that this year, Anantara decided to turn a plot of land by the Chao Phraya River into a pitch and event area so it could welcome more visitors.

THE GAME

Being a complete ignoramus on the sport that is polo, the idea of polo players attempting to gallop around on a bunch of elephants while brandishing 2-metre-long mallets feels too big for my head. How many players, and pachyderms, would be on the pitch at one go? And how do the players control their mounts?

"They sit behind the mahouts and tell them where to go," a twinkly-eyed man in



Pocket Guide



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an eye-catching polo shirt kindly explains. “Each team has four players, one goalkeeper and three in the field. The game is played in two chukkas or halves lasting seven minutes each, and during half-time the teams switch mounts for a fair game since some of the elephants are smaller and faster.”

ELEPHANT SPEAK

His polo shirt is fascinating because the words “Elephant Osteopath” are emblazoned on the back – he is Tony Nevin, the world’s only wildlife osteopath and one of the Elephant Experts here to ensure the animals’ physical well-being.

Further chatting with Tony reveals that the elephants in this tournament only respond to Thai commands from their mahouts, which is why the latter are all wearing shirts printed with English translations for various commands. The players can then refer to them while sitting behind the mahout! As I watch this actually happen in the first few matches, while the players try to get used to playing on their much bigger and slower mounts, it’s clear that elephant polo is a lot more fun than I imagined.

OFF THE PITCH

Although this year’s tournament is being held in Thonburi, across the river from Bangkok’s city centre, it’s easily accessible to visitors. Anantara Bangkok Riverside Resort, where most of the players and guests are staying, runs a regular boat shuttle from Saphan Taksin BTS Station and the Asiatique shopping mall; the pitch itself is less than a kilometre away from the resort.

Naturally, this has attracted more sponsors to the event and the grounds are dotted with food trucks, bars, booths selling artwork and accessories, and games areas. However, today is Kids’ Day and close to 1,000 schoolchildren have been let loose here to learn about elephant conservation. I decide to take my eyes off of the action for a bit and spend the afternoon exploring Bangkok instead.

EXPLORING BANGKOK

At Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort’s jetty I am met by in-house Klong Guru Waiyawit “Diamond” Thongserm, who ushers our group onto a waiting longboat. In no time we zip downriver into a lock to begin our exploration of Bangkok’s maze of klongs, or canals – and we’re teleported to another world. As if stealing through a back alley we peek into the traditional wood-walled houses and factories bordering both sides of the water, and Diamond points out the more interesting buildings.

“This pitch is buzzing with electricity! Generated by **elephant power!** Like nothing you’ve ever seen!”

“Unfortunately, the water has become polluted because of the locks and factories. As the city develops, the klong lifestyle is slowly dying.” Seeing a few boat vendors floating by, however, confirms that at least some of the locals still cling to this traditional, slower-paced way of life. After visiting some beautiful temples, our final stop is Klong Bang Luang, a village on the canal that seems to stir awake only as we clomp along the wooden-planked walkway.

A LEISURELY PACE

This place is known for The Artist’s House, a gallery of Thai arts and crafts, and I can see why. Sitting by a sun-drenched courtyard, craftspeople carve puppet legs and embroider silk at a leisurely pace, while the second floor of the house is filled with drawings and paintings by local artists. As we lounge around, we’re served

a platter of delicious Miang Kham, a snack of crispy little things wrapped in a leaf. It’s a mouthful of refreshment in the blazing heat.

Upon our return to the hotel, however, the Anantara PR folks are waiting to escort us to what they claim is “the best place in the city to catch the sunset”. Thus, after an hour jolting and weaving through Bangkok’s peak-hour traffic, I find myself far above the ruckus, sipping a mojito and taking in the twilight view at ZOOM Sky Bar. Bangkok has always been one of my favourite cities, and the places I’ve discovered today only leave me more enamoured of it.

MONEY FOR ELEPHANTS

Whenever elephant conservation is involved, it’s practically a given that one will find a curious type of elephant present: these are particularly quirky and colourful, and being only 1.5 metres tall, they thrive in captivity if you can afford them. Unfortunately, I have neither the space nor spare cash to buy one, and so on the third day of the tournament I settle for a chat with the keeper of Elephant Parade, Mike Spits. Having experienced the outdoor exhibition of painted elephant sculptures in full force in Singapore, the smaller selection here at the King’s Cup Elephant Polo grounds is less overwhelming; I’m particularly taken by one clad in black wool – an elephant in sheep’s clothing, as it were.

“I actually didn’t really like that one,” Mike smiles wryly, “but it’s been surprisingly popular. It’s already been sold! We probably have the Kiwis to thank for that.” The PricewaterhouseCoopers New Zealand All Blacks is one of the most jovial teams here at the tournament, but I digress. Working with Elephant Parade certainly adds to the charm of the event, and the sculptures here are receiving competitive bids in the four-day silent auction.

At nightfall the grounds are transformed



into our outdoor gala dinner venue, and this is when the real competition begins: amid colourful spotlights and up-tempo music, I watch as high society guests bid heatedly against each other for auction items donated by sponsors. Eventually, the highlight of the auction – an Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Offshore Chronograph – is won for THB 920,000 (US\$25,000). It's a record for this year's event, which eventually raises a whopping THB 15 million (US\$415,000) out of a total US\$1,300,000 to date for elephant conservation centres, forest protection programmes, and mahout community development.

A NAIL-BITING FINAL

This year, the final day of the King's Cup Elephant Polo tournament has been scheduled to fall on March 13, coinciding with Thailand's National Elephant Day (Chang Thai Day). The event is graced by the King of Thailand's Royal representative, H.E. Privy Councilor, Air Chief Marshal Chalit Pukbhasuk, and after the Thai national anthem is sung the grand final begins. Both teams, King Power Duty Free and Rueang Chang (Elephant Story), comprise professional equestrian polo players. Seven minutes pass quickly,

and spectators yell and groan as each side blocks the other's shots.

The commentator, too, is caught up in the thrill of the action. "This pitch is buzzing with electricity! Generated by elephant power! Like nothing you've ever seen!"

Finally, in the last moments of the second chukka, the magic happens. A King Power player escapes the deadlock, one hand tightly gripping the mahout's shoulder as his elephant thunders down the pitch. With a resounding *smack* the mallet connects and sends the ball flying into the goal. It's a sweet, sweet victory.❖

