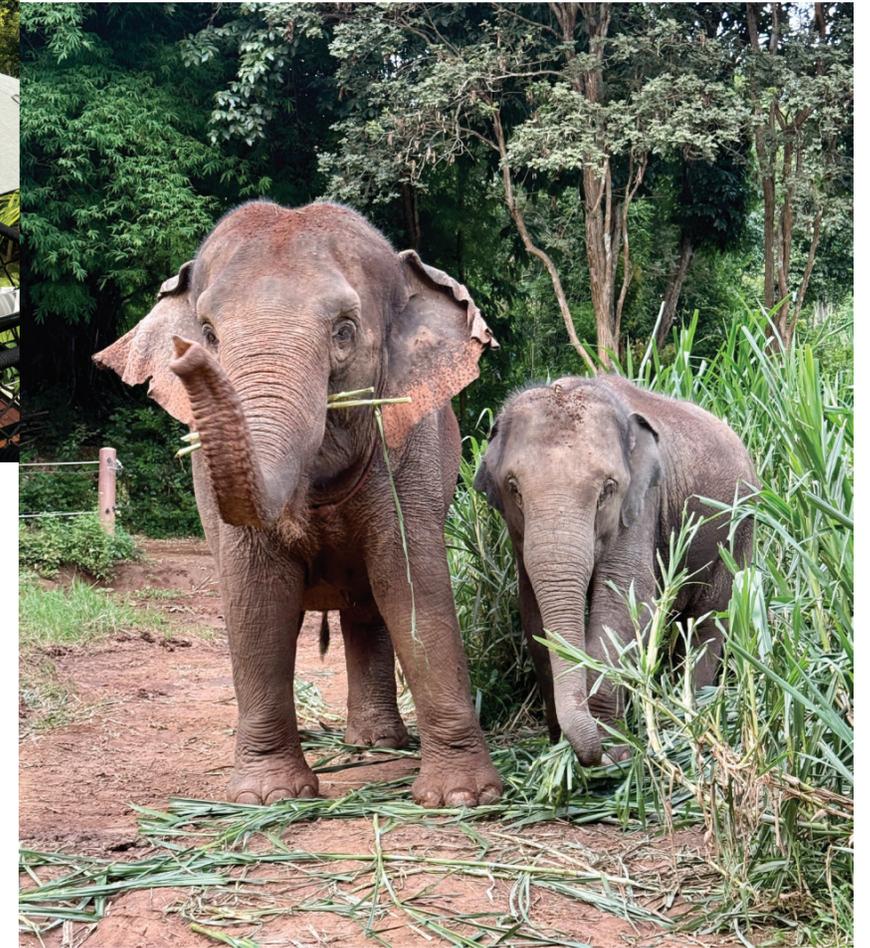


IN THE SHADOW OF GENTLE GIANTS

At Anantara Golden Triangle, the luxury of stillness meets the soulful presence of rescued elephants in a stay that lingers long after you leave.

Words: CHARUKESHI RAMADURAI



At the end of a long day, I lay wide awake in bed, staring at the skies overhead, trying to count the stars peeking through the thick blanket of clouds. My city nerves are not used to this utter stillness, and the steady drone of cicadas feels strangely comforting.

A gruff trumpeting noise suddenly breaks the silence, echoing through the transparent dome that is my home for the night. I am in the Jungle Bubble at the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp and Resort, a warm and cosy cocoon in the midst of the property's manicured wilderness. And the sound is that of five-year-old Chok Petch—meaning Lucky Diamond—demanding attention from the elderly Dah.

Dah and Chok Petch are two of the 16 rescue elephants at the resort, which provides a safe and happy home for elephants facing neglect or abuse, in partnership with the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation. When elephant owners—who often double up as their mahouts—find themselves unable to provide for these gentle giants, the foundation steps in to help both the animal and the human.

Given Anantara's experience in luxury hospitality, I know what to expect from this resort, perched prettily on a hillside. And I get it all—from the warm welcomes and smiling faces to the earthy tones and understated décor, it is classic Anantara. The outdoors mingles seamlessly with the indoors everywhere, the traditional lanna-style architecture of this region mirrored in the sloping roofs and delicate eaves.

My plush suite opens out to a balcony complete with a day bed on which I could lie all day and watch the mighty Mekong merge with the gentler flow of the Ruak River. My visit coincides with the rainy season in Thailand, and the countryside is sparkling like a brilliant emerald. Then there are the small and unexpected touches in the suite—elephant-shaped cookies and reusable water bottles—that prove particularly delightful.

The resort is located in the heart of the region known as the Golden Triangle, the meeting point of Thailand's borders with Laos and Myanmar. Once known solely for its flourishing opium trade, the area is now popular as a day trip among visitors to the hill towns of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, with



their exquisite *wats* (Buddhist temples) and bustling night markets.

But I am drawn here solely by the fascinating story of community and conservation that this Anantara property has created. And a night in the Jungle Bubble is one of the best ways to experience this up close. So, late in the afternoon, as the sun begins to turn a mellow orange, I am escorted to the wired enclosure within which two of these transparent climate-controlled domes have been set up on a wooden deck.

As soon as I step into the bubble, I hear rustling noises and come out to see that Dah and Chok Petch have arrived in search of their evening snack among the bamboo and sugarcane crops. From the porch, and indeed from the bed itself, I get to watch these two eat and play through the evening. Chok Petch is as young, impatient and curious as Dah is old, wise and cautious. The interactions between the two, and with their mahouts who come to watch over them, are fascinating. As night falls slowly on the jungle, my personal valet brings dinner in a tiered container. I tuck into my meal in contented silence, thrilled with such august company.



Just when I think nothing can top this dinner, I get to have breakfast on a treetop. Almost. Early the next morning, I am led all the way to the other end of the property, where breakfast has been laid out in what looks like a massive basket cage. Once I am seated comfortably, the basket is raised—with me and the laden table in it—to canopy level, over 50 metres above the ground. And that's how I end up having coffee and croissants with an uninterrupted view of three countries and two rivers.

The elephant encounters continue after this sumptuous meal, when I head out for a walk with a few of them along with their mahouts and Maprang, who manages the elephant camp. Despite her diminutive size, Maprang is fearless in the way she stands close to them, soothing and cooing, knowing exactly how to behave in their humbling presence. I walk at a safe distance behind the elephants and their mahouts, stopping by the riverbanks to hand out sugarcane and banana treats.

Through this leisurely ramble, I am impressed afresh by the emotional intelligence of these animals, who know what they want and how to get it. "They are just like humans," says mahout Jumbo, when I laugh at his elephant, 35-year-old Jathong, who refuses to move away from the muddy water despite Jumbo's coaxing and cajoling. "They have a mind of their own and don't like to be told what to do," he says with a smile.

After a quick lunch of *khao soi*, the tangy, soupy Burmese noodle dish that has travelled across the border along with other culinary traditions, I make my way to the newly launched Mekong Explorer Tent, a lavish glamping experience set on a secluded hilltop vantage point. The tent is a sepia-tinted throwback to the glamorous days of safari outings and stylish stays in the forest, with vintage leather trunks, brass water basins and hanging lanterns. There's an open deck with a bathtub and plunge pool. And then there are the views: the Mekong in full flow, and beyond that, Laos and Myanmar—almost as if I could touch them all if I reached out far enough.

My nightly repose at the tent is once again punctuated by the trumpeting of impish elephants. But as I turn over in my sleep, I realise it's only in my dreams. ☒

Footnote:
Reservations at Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp and Resort can be made at anantara.com/en/golden-triangle-chiang-rai and donate to the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation at helpingelephants.org.