

Asian Elephant Tourism Needs New Optics, This Thai Resort Shows a Way



A couple admiring elephants from outside their Jungle Bubble accommodation at Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort in Thailand. Photos: Anantara Hotels, Resorts & Spas

By Raini Hamdi, 03 May 2022

Asian elephant tourism has lost its visual. The image of a gleeful tourist riding a captive elephant, which sold millions of rides and made elephant tourism one of Thailand's key attractions, has come to symbolize elephants being taken for a ride.



John Roberts, Minor's director of sustainability and conservation, sees a silver lining from Covid for the future of elephant tourism

Animal rights organizations such as World Animal Protection have been campaigning for observation-only elephant tourism, i.e., no riding, bathing or feeding. By now no tour operator in Europe or America would dare use a photo of a tourist atop a pachyderm. Many have boycotted venues that feature such activities.

The business needs new optics. But it may be harder for the observation-only model to capture the imagination of tourists the way the riding photo has done. Still, the new face of Asian elephant tourism is beginning to emerge.

Showing a way is the Jungle Bubble at the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort in northern Thailand. The transparent dome, as spacious and finely equipped as any luxury hotel suite and placed on a raised wooden deck in the jungle, is helping to portray observation-only as "sexy," as opposed to hard persuasion based on moral grounds that elephant riding is bad, which is boring. Plus, let's be clear, the science on this is inconclusive (see this deep dive on the controversy).

Visually, the bubble makes one forget the proverbial elephant in the room, that is, the complicated business of saving Asian elephant tourism. Instead it creates an aspiration to observe the elephant outside the room amid new heights of glamping.

The resort, located in the Chiang Saen district about 75 minutes' drive from Chiang Rai International Airport, introduced the Jungle Bubble in December 2019. The pandemic interrupted the launch momentum. Travel restrictions kept away millions of international tourists from entering Thailand.

For captive elephant owners and mahouts in Thailand, who depend on tourist dollars to feed these insatiable mammals, Covid-19 is catastrophic.

A jumbo costs \$18,000 a year to feed, according to the [Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation](#), a body that helps rescue elephants and work with the government and other groups to chart elephant welfare standards in South-east Asia. Minor International, Anantara's parent, is the largest single donor.

Silver Linings Playbook

Fortunately at the Anantara, whose camp, Dara, shelters 20 elephants and their mahouts and families, the bubble has played "a big part" in attracting scores of local guests to the resort, said general manager Serge Cuypers.

"Our guests have been predominantly Europeans and Americans so it's a silver lining that Covid-19, along with the bubble, has created this new market for us," he said.

Thai guests love the "Instagrammable" photo opportunities that experiences such as the Jungle Bubble and Walking With Giants offer. And the more they post on social media, the more appealing and the more publicity observation-only elephant tourism gets.

"It's been a joy really to see local guests," said John Roberts, Minor's director of sustainability and conservation, based at the resort. "That's positive not just for us and the elephants, but for small entrepreneurial coffeeshops, restaurants and imaginative businesses in the North [to thrive]."

Roberts sees a silver lining for the future of elephant tourism. “There’s always a sliding scale of elephant welfare in the different business models. Camps that pandered to 20 to 30 big buses of 50 tourists and gave each tourist a 15-minute elephant ride were the worst elephant welfare.

“But tourism as it comes back will first be in small groups. People aren’t going to want to sit in a bus with 50 strangers. So those businesses will have to find ways they can make money from fewer tourists, than from selling a 15-minute ride for 100 baht [\$3] to many tourists. They will have to look to other businesses such as these [Dara camp and others like it].

“At the very least, they are beginning be aware that this is what people want to see. Not everyone has the means to do the Jungle Bubble and all the five-star amenities that Anantara does so well, but they will have to think of something similar or other ideas for smaller groups, perhaps a platform with a tent on it where people can get up at night and observe elephants which, crucially, totally ignore them.”

The Anantara Model

The key to a new visual for Asian elephant tourism is not photography but unique, sustainable experiences that keep the camera clicking away.

Anantara Golden Triangle’s model is all-inclusive and allows guests to choose one experience for every night’s stay. This incentivizes the resort to provide a range of signature experiences.

As this author found out during a three-night trip there, the choice was splendid, each deserving its “signature” badge. A night at the Jungle Bubble, Walking With Giants and the Royal Enfield Sidecar Tour were her activities. The latter was an amusing twist to riding: instead of an elephant as the workhorse, she was taken to tour the village and paddy fields in a Royal Enfield, the oldest motorcycle brand in the world.

But as exhilarating as the new workhorse was, the experience could not beat the Jungle Bubble and Walking With Giants. At close range with elephants, their sheer size alone brought out a mixture of wonder and fear. The hour's walk with two elephants through the resort's acres of grassland, accompanied by their mahouts and the camp manager, Ooh, also produced unorchestrated insights into elephant behavior. For instance, the younger elephant, a 33-year-old named Ka Mun, showed her playfulness when, bathing in the river, she suddenly climbed on the back of her best friend, the 53-year-old Ga Thong. Like kids, they refused to return to land despite their mahouts repeatedly calling them to come back.

The Jungle Bubble is a must-see for its invention. Custom-designed for Anantara by Sky-Bubbles, the structure wasn't made of cheap plastic but a high-tech polyester fabric using Précontraint Serge Ferrari technology. As a result, it's so clear that you could see every detail of the accommodation from the outside: the king bed with crisp white linen and fluffy pillows in the bedroom, the four armchairs and minibar cabinet in the living room – it's phantasmagorical. The feeling of being the one who is being observed, like a goldfish in a bowl, is the irony of this observation-only model. Even though there's no one else in the cordoned jungle near the resort, this author couldn't help feeling exposed.

Her only companions were two elephants at a stone's throw from the wooden deck. Who else could they be but Ka Mun and Ga Thong. They were brought there by their mahouts, who would return at dawn to fetch them for their morning walk.

Observing the pair of pachyderms from the living room in the bubble, one could understand why it costs a lot to feed elephants. They were wolfish eaters, preoccupied with nothing else but eating. Their trunks swept up the grass in the pasture as though it's the last meal they would have. By dawn, one side of the pasture was ravaged.

Together, the bubble and the walk made the elephant experience at Anantara Golden Triangle a bucket list.

It is extraordinary that a two-decade-old resort that once offered guests a mahout training activity, which involved being atop an elephant, could reinvent itself time and again.

Clearly, this Anantara resort has not been living in a bubble.