



Jungle Bubble Lodge
at Anantara Golden
Triangle Elephant Camp
& Resort

A Thai resort spoils its guests, big and small

JOHN BORTHWICK

At last, a travel bubble that's not just a thought bubble. And I'm sleeping in it, literally a plastic bubble, in a northern Thailand jungle clearing. My only neighbours, a couple, speak no English and keep a polite distance, content to spend most of their time eating.

Last year when the world seemed covered in Covid, tourism honchos everywhere hustled to create so-called travel bubbles, attempting to pair-off "safe" destinations such as Singapore with Australia, NSW with whoever, and Western Australia with, well, itself.

Most of these wildly optimistic bubbles burst without even inflating. When actual travel resumed, those who could flew the coop to wherever possible. Which brings me to this valley in the Golden Triangle and to the large, inflatable dome, known as a Jungle Bubble, that I temporarily occupy. Totally transparent and very comfortable, my see-through igloo has not only headroom but a bedroom, ensuite and more.

Reveal time: my non-speaking, constantly eating neighbours are in fact two Thai elephants, Jathong and Jammoon, from the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation. Rescued from decades of hauling logs or equally weighty tourists, they're now in snoozy retirement in this jungle reserve beside the Anantara Golden Triangle Resort.

"Discover the elephant outside your room" is the line Anantara coined when it launched its first pair of self-contained, one-bedroom bubbles in 2020. In the early Covid-era, these quasi-isolation pods, in which guests can spend a night observing elephants roaming free, proved instantly popular. My accommodation is the newest model, the twin-bedroom Jungle Bubble Lodge that accommodates a family or two couples.

It stands alone in a clearing at the far end of a closed valley and is entirely private. The five interconnected bubbles are built on an elevated wooden deck and are accessed through a single airlock entrance. The bells and whistles inside include airconditioning, ensuite bathrooms, hot showers, king beds and Wi-Fi, and – you beaut – no TV.

The central living room bubble has doors that open on either side to a spacious bedroom and its own bathroom. The three middle bubbles – living room and bedrooms – are fully transparent, while the end bathroom bubbles are coyly opaque, presumably to not unduly alarm passing elephants.



The self-supporting bubble domes, designed by Spanish company SkyBubble, are made of clear polyester fabric. The new lodge cost \$270,000 to build and launched late last year. Sitting on an 80sq m platform, it looks down a narrow valley with walls that form a natural enclosure for the roaming elephants. At one end of the deck a heated plunge pool burbles quietly, while at the other a dining table is set for a meal to be served.

"It's time for your snack," announces the butler, Khong, delivering a cold beer – not the usual local Chang or Singha suds, but a new local brew, Chiang Mai Blossom Weizen. A parade of delicate canapes follows – fish, tiny pork pies and money bags – all of which I enjoy too eagerly as I realise when the resort's executive chef Gino Pong unveils an expansive dinner.

After entrees of salads, sea bass and freshwater prawns, plus an excellent main course of crispy khao soi gai noodles, followed by khao neeo mamuang (sweet sticky rice with mango), I'll never again joke about Jathong and Jammoon and their afternoon snacks of 50kg of sugar cane.

Khong disappears the dinner things to some mystery space below decks and then, bidding goodnight, disappears himself back to the main resort, which sits out of sight a few hundred metres away. Should I need anything there's a direct-dial phone in my bubble.

Night falls and the plastic-fantastic bubbles glow from within like a cluster of radar domes, as though the Pine Gap satellite spy station had been dropped into a Thai jungle. I take stock, beer in hand, with the forest's non-silence buzzing all around and a row of



IN THE KNOW

Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort is 55km from Chiang Rai. Guests can have the Jungle Bubble experience at additional cost, returning to the hotel in the morning. The two-bedroom Jungle Bubble Lodge can be shared with family or friends, from \$1650 a night for two including dinner. A one-bedroom Jungle Bubble is from \$745 a night for two.

anantara.com

Thai Airways flies from Sydney and Melbourne to Bangkok, with connections to Chiang Rai.

thaiairways.com

Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation performs rescues for elephants, mahouts and their families. helpingelephants.org

sci-fi radomes behind me that might be speaking to the stars. Meanwhile, out front, a pair of low-tech four-tonne elephants is shredding a tree into a caesar salad. It is for oddities such as this, is it not, that we travel?

And then something truly odd. On the far horizon I notice an array of bright neons burning. This being the Golden Triangle, we're at the Mekong River intersection of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. I realise I'm looking across to where China has established a de facto colony, the so-called Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, on 3000ha of Lao territory. The neons are from its garish "entertainment" zone for FIFO Chinese gamblers.

I turn away from the dubious glow and implications of Macau-on-Mekong and tune into the jungle music. Out there in the dark I can hear the elephants, the susurrant of their breathing, the deep bass belly rumbles, the occasional trumpeting blast and late-night munchings in a bamboo grove.

And so to sleep. Lights-out finds me looking skywards from the bed. A little condensation mist on the transparent ceiling means I can't clearly see the stars, but I'm soon fast asleep anyhow.

Sometime after midnight I wake and wander out on to the deck to star gaze. Jathong and Jammoon are grazing companionably on the grass in front of the Lodge, the heavens are brilliant and my plunge pool beckons. I simmer in it, listening to the jungle rumble soundtrack until sleep calls again. The next thing I hear is two mahouts rounding up the elephants and Khong preparing coffee.

John Borthwick was a guest of Anantara Hotels and Resorts and Thai Airways.