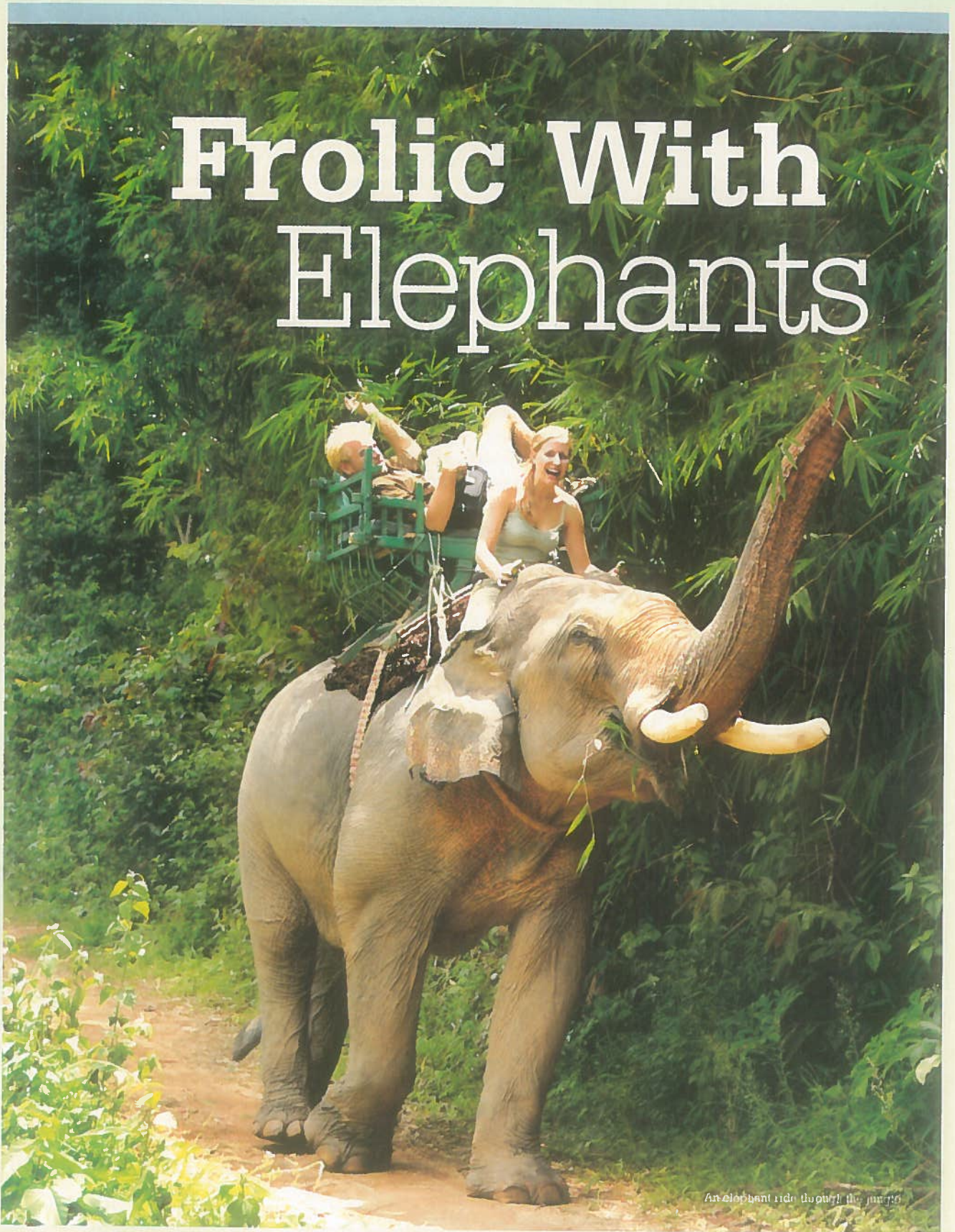


Frolic With Elephants



An elephant ride through the jungle

Watching the elephants spraying water on themselves and playing with one another at the Anantara elephant camp is a soothing experience. **By Murli Menon**



Cruising the Mekong river

Elephants prefer to take their bath just after sunrise or just before sunset. It is almost impossible to get them into the water during their feeding or resting periods. So you have to get up at an odd hour and wait for the sky to lighten up before making the 3km trek along the bank of Mekong to the elephant camp. The trek is neither too easy nor too difficult but is interesting and with its own share of slippery patches and stretches of swampy forest tracks and it takes about 40 minutes of steady walking to reach the elephant camp.

The camp run by the Anantara Golden Triangle Resort is at the tri-junction which separates the countries of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos near Chiang Sean Lake in northern Thailand and the resort welcomes its guests. There are eleven elephants at the Anantara Golden Triangle's elephant camp. These pachyderms have been rescued from owners who were unable to feed the animals. This picturesque elephant camp is nestled 4000 metres above sea-level atop a hill ridge at the confluence of the Mekong and Ruak rivers in the heart of the golden

triangle, located a mere 70km away from Chiang Rai.

The greenery surrounding the camp is extremely pleasing to the eyes. You can see verdant hills encompassing the camp on both sides. A trek through the forest gives you the best way to feel many habitats from thick bamboo to riverine flood plains and an ideal chance to see birds and many small mammals inhabiting the area. The Mekong flows below the camp. Nature has bestowed this camp with a shallow pool where elephants can have a leisurely bath. The hills are covered with mist, fog and clouds and resemble

Getting There

❖ The nearest international airport to reach Chiang Rai is the Suvarnabhumi International Airport at Bangkok. There are several options for Indian tourists to get to Chaeng Sean (Golden Triangle) from Bangkok.

Bangkok to Chiang Rai (air/bus)

❖ Chiang Rai to Chaeng Sean (Golden Triangle) (bus/mini-bus/shared-taxi) (overnight stay)

Chiang Sean to Elephant Camp (moto-taxi)

❖ The easiest and most popular way to get to Chiang Rai from Bangkok is by bus. This 600km trip takes 12 hours. There are three bus terminals at Bangkok, namely Northern, Southern and Eastern. All buses are first class air-conditioned with pushback seats.

❖ The Elephant Camp is a 20 km drive over rough roads from Chaeng Sean bus station. Motorcycle taxis should not charge more than 100 baht during off season for this trip. Taxis can cost upwards of 200 Baht for the same. Time taken to reach the elephant camp from Chaeng Sean should not exceed 60mins by bike or car.

snow white mushrooms with green coloured stems.

The natural beauty of these hills is accentuated by several small waterfalls that cascade down the hills. The forest surrounding the elephant camp is dense and accessible only on foot. There are a few trails leading to the upper reaches of the hills for serious trekkers.

The most interesting aspect of this elephant camp is the mahout training course with the resident manager John Roberts and his team of experienced trainers. The elephants are normally in the camp from 7 am to 2 pm after which they return to the forest. They are brought back to the camp at dawn for their daily ritualistic bath. Guests are invited to watch the elephant bathing and even join in the proceedings. The surroundings are a myriad of spectacular greens.

Elephants normally take mud baths during the afternoon to stay cool. They eat about 150kg of fodder every day and are coated with a fine patina of red dust and feed on grass, shrubs and foliage, sometimes ripping trees from their roots too for a quick snack. It is indeed a delightful experience to watch these gentle giants at play. The Anantara Elephant Camp has four female, five male and three baby elephants.

Watching the elephants spray water on themselves and others and playing with one another is a soothing experience. Bathing the elephant with a handheld shower and scrubbing them with coconut husks is a tough task. At the end you walk back through the thick evergreen forest and return to the cool confines of your room after a once in a lifetime experience. **btw**

Tourists enjoying bathing an elephant

