

“Mahout” Training

April 25 & 26, 2008

Being a professional clown in the mid-1970's, I have always been interested in elephants. When we had the opportunity to go thru a course to learn how to control, handle and care for elephants, we jumped at the chance.

These mighty beasts have many things in common with man. Their life span is about the same, living between 70 and 100 years. Some elephants have been known to live over 120 years. The elephant's body temperature stays around the same as a human.



Some of you men may think the sex drive for a female elephant is about the same for a human as the average cow elephant only wants sex about six to nine times in her life. That is about the number of baby elephants (6-9) that a mother elephant has during her lifetime.

Also, the actually act of mating lasts less than five minutes. I guess that is like a human, too.

The cow elephant does carry the baby for 19-23 months. The baby is on its own feet within 15 minutes after birth and stays with the mother for approximately three years.

The average Asian elephant weighs two to three ton eating about ten percent of it's body weight in grass a day. Yes, that is 400 to 600 pounds of food a day. They eat all the time, 20 hours a day and they sleep only about 4 hours from 11:00 PM to around 3:00 AM.

Compared to the rest of their size the brain is small but the elephant has an excellent memory. Since they eat all the time they also poop all the time. Yes, at least 15-20 times a day. Elephant dung does make great paper but that is another story.

Our trip to the elephant camp started from Mae Sai in the northern part of Thailand. The VIP bus to Chiang Mai was just about four hours. We stayed in a guest house for two days while Daeng got her shots for her trip to America.

On April 25th we got up around 5:30 AM, showered, packed up and Sophi, the manager of the Sabai Sabai Guest House, fixed us some eggs, toast and coffee. Around 6:30 AM the car arrived that she had arranged to transport us to Maesa Elephant Camp <http://www.maesaelephantcamp.com/> .

It drizzled during the forty minute ride to the elephant camp. It was 7:15 AM and we arrived about forty-five minutes early. That didn't seem to matter to the staff as they escorted us to the office where we filled out a few papers showing our correct names and paid the 12,000 Thai Baht (about \$387 USD) for the two of us for the two day course. That included room, food and a "Mahout" outfit for both of us.

We were shown to the nice little building that we were going to live and sleep that night. "Rickie", who was going to work with us while we were at the camp, scouted around to find the biggest shirt was an "XL". I ask him if I could wear one of my DIAL ONE t-shirts and was told that would work okay.

Before I go farther here is the latest *Birth Announcement*:

Maesa Nursery is proud to announce the birth of our newest elephant born 1st March, 2008, a girl named Meena, was born at 00.25am. She weighed 80 to 85 kg and is 80 cm in height. She is the proud daughter of mother Pang Suay and father Seedo. You can come to visit her everyday.



We changed and walked with him to see the new baby elephant.



The little elephant was soooo cute and friendly. It kept reaching out with it's trunk to play



and even lifted a leg like to shake hands.

After playing with the baby elephant we walked over to a grassy area where we met "Sam" and "Mae Ma Boo 3", Mae Ma for short. Sam was Mae Ma's "Mahout". Mahout is the Thai name for the elephant controller that stays with the elephant all the time. The mahout cares for the elephant and controls where it goes and what it does except for the eating and pooping stuff.

Daeng and I were introduced to another mahout, named "John", that showed us the basic commands of lay down, get up, go forward, turn right, turn left and stop. I was shown how to get up on the 10 foot high elephant and off we went.



I want to tell you that it was harder than it looked for this old, fat, plumber to get on this big animal.

We took a little stroll around the grassy area and I got off without falling down.

Now it was Daeng's turn. She did really great getting up onto Mae Ma's shoulders but was scared and wanted down right away. We got her off and she was shaken. Daeng and I talked about how scary it was up so high and just looking over the elephant's head to the ground 12 feet down without anything to hold onto.

We also talked about how she could just grab a hold of the elephant's ears, as hard as she wanted, as it did not hurt Mae Ma. We also talked about the laying down method of mounting Mae Ma. That way the elephant lies down, you get on the elephant and she stands back up. I thought that would be a good way for me, too.

Daeng said she would try it again. Mae Ma laid down, Daeng got on, elephant got up, they were friends and took a little walk



together.
of Daeng for getting back on Mae Ma.

I was very proud

Now riding an elephant bare back is like riding a horse except the elephant is much bigger. The reason I'm telling you this is your butt gets sore just like horse back riding if you are not accustomed to it.

We took a little break, had some water and fruit and made friends with a couple of other elephants by feeding them bananas. We reviewed the basic commands for controlling Mae Ma and



went to the river

to give



Mae Ma a shower.
actually scrubbed her up with scrub brushes.

We

It was fun being in the river with the elephants.



We were reminded that
although Mae Ma and most elephants are very gentle. They are
very big and only see light and dark, kind of like trying to see at



twilight.

What this means is
be careful so they don't roll over on you or step on you by accident.

The morning was gone and it was time for lunch. We walked over to the restaurant and had a great lunch. We eat more than we should have as it was great Thai cooking.

We walked the couple hundred meters (1 meter = 1.094 yards) back to our room. Daeng was not feeling well after her vaccination shots, two days before, so she decided to stay in for the afternoon. She laid down and went to sleep. I took a shower and walked back to the elephant area.



I got up on Mae Ma and we went for a long walk up over the hill and thru a jungle area. We came back to the grassy area and we walked with John and Sam into the jungle area. I was getting pretty sore on the bottom so Mae Ma laid down and I got off. Sam said he was going to take Mae ma home over the hill and we would see him in the morning. We said good-by and John and I walked back to the camp.

I took us a lot longer to walk back than it took to get into the jungle. Even though Mae Ma walked very slowly she covered a lot of ground. It probably took us 45 minute to an hour to walk back. John said he would see us at 7:00 AM and that he hoped Daeng felt better.

I said: "7:00 AM?" and John said yes as we would walk back into the jungle to meet Sam and Mae Ma in the morning, ride back and have breakfast.

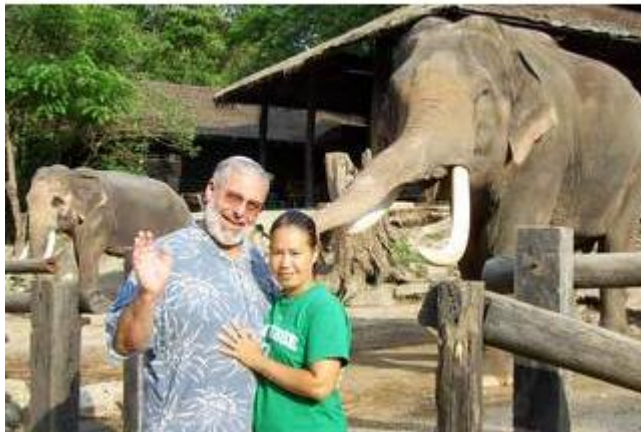
Rickie came by while I was taking off my shoes. He ask how Daeng was feeling and said he would meet us about 6:00 PM in the little building next to the one we were staying in. We would

have a little Thai cooking class and eat the food we cooked together.

I told him that sounded like fun and we would see him then if Daeng was feeling okay.

When I got back into our room Daeng was up and taking a shower. Taking a lot of showers is very normal in Thailand as it is hot with high humidity. Now, add the smell of the elephants and showers are needed even more.

Daeng got out of the shower and said she was feeling much better although she had bumps from the shots on both arms. I took a shower, put on clean clothes and we took a little walk together. We walked over to where



the two biggest tusked bull elephants stay at night.

When we got there the two elephants had their tusks together and it looked like they were kissing. Rickie came by and told us that they were communicating with each other. I could not get my camera out fast enough. It would have been a great picture.

We walked back to the building that we were to cook in and met



Rickie. We cooked a nice meal of coconut milk soup, stir fried chicken and vegetables with rice. We they had to test our own cooking by



eating it. I must say we did very well cooking together.

This is the low tourist season in Thailand so it was pretty quiet in the elephant camp. Most of the seventy-seven elephants were home with their mahouts. We were the only people, except Rickie and a few other staff, left in the camp. We were pretty tired so we turned in.

I slept pretty well until about 2:00 AM. I got up, drank some water. Before going back to bed I did go outside. It was very quiet and I could see a few stars as it still was cloudy.

Well, up at 6:15 AM, showered, got dressed, coffee and here we go. John met us and we walked thru the little "Karen" village. The Karen Hill Tribe is probably the most photographed as the Karen Tribe are also called the "Long Neck Tribe". The reason is the girls have gold rings around there necks from the time they are very

young. As they grow older with longer necks they just keep adding gold rings to their necks.

Karen folks are famous as Mahouts.



Here is a video link showing the Karen girls:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ualxq42LvwI&feature=related>

Here is a video of the Karen's singing "Take me home, country road:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BM5-kMmHF3s&feature=related>

You can cut and paste or type the video links into your address line of your computer so you can watch them.

We met Sam and Mae Ma at the edge of the jungle just a little ways from where we said good-night. Daeng and I got on and we



rode back to the camp. My butt was very sore.

My

When we got back they had a nice breakfast for Daeng and I. I also said that I did not know how much more I could ride Mae Ma as I was really sore on the inside of my legs and butt. Sam, John and Rickie laughed at me but did tell me that was very normal.

After we ate, Sam, Daeng and I walked over to the elephant show that was starting at 10:00 PM. There must have been 200-300 folks that had come on tour buses to see the show. It was



extremely nice because we had front row reserved seats.

When the show started, Rickie ask Daeng and I if we would be in



the dart throwing part of the show. I ask what that meant and he told me that we would be in a dart throwing contest with one of the elephants. I said it sounded like a lot of fun and we would love it.



It was fun and as you probably guessed the elephant won.



After the show we took Mae Ma and gave her a bath in a concrete area that is just made for that. She just laid down and let us scrub her up. I think she really liked to be scrubbed with scrub brushes, especially behind her ears and under her chin. That is probably because most of her skin is about 6- 8 millimeters (1/3 of

an inch.) thick except behind her ears and under her chin. That part is only about 2 millimeters thick.

Well, time to eat again. We had a nice lunch in the camp restaurant, took a little walk thru the shopping area. I did buy some “Elephant Dung” Paper.

Let me talk about “Elephant Dung” paper for a little bit. Remember that elephants eat 400-600 pounds of this thick grass a day. They only get about 44 percent of the nutrients out of the grass. That means the rest just goes thru them. The fiber in the grass is still there.

To make the paper, all they have to do is disinfect the dung, mix it to a nice consistency, spread it out and let it dry. Yea, we now have elephant dung paper. The nice part is if the elephant eats enough bananas the paper smells like bananas.

It was now time to work with the elephants to paint some pictures. Yes, elephants paint pictures and this elephant camp holds the world record for “The Largest Painting by a Group of Elephants” according to Ripley's Believe It Or Not and the Guinness World Records.

What we did was put the paint brush in the elephant’s trunk with the color that we wanted on the paper. (Elephants can’t see colors.) Then we would show the elephant with our hand movement where to paint.

I was the first one to try. I showed the elephant where to paint



the grass,

flower stems,

flowers, center of flowers and some blue sky. This is what it



looked like at the end.

Then Daeng showed the elephant that she wanted a tree.



with some sun light and sky.



This is what her painting with the elephant liked like.

I was too sore to ride on Mae Ma but Daeng just jumped on her



and had a nice ride.

As you can see in the picture; Daeng got along great with Mae Ma even though Daeng weighs 1/40th the weight of the elephant.

After that ride the veterinarian, Ronnachit Rungsri (D.V.M), sat with us and explained about the health and welfare of the elephants as well as the plans to help them at the Maesa Elephant Camp.

At one time there were over 100,000 elephants in Thailand. Today, only about 5,000 elephants exist; 2000 wild in the national parks and 3,000 domestic.

When we had finished asking the many questions that we had we took a little break and met the Mr. Kalmapijat. Mr. Kalmapijat's father, "Choochart", started the camp in 1976.



We were awarded completion certificates and took



some pictures together.



We said good-bye to Sam, John and Mae Ma along with the other elephants that worked with us painting. To say “Thank You” we feed them a hug basket of bananas. I am sure that batch of paper will smell really good.

We showered and packed, and then Rickie took us to the car that was arranged for us to travel back to Chiang Mai, Thailand. We had a great time!