

They say elephants never forget nor will **Mike Smith** and family forget the elephants in The Elephant Conservation Centre near Chiang Mai.



Unforgettable Elephant Conservation Centre

ELEPHANTS ARE THE WORLD'S LARGEST LAND ANIMALS, and of course instantly recognisable, but how much do we know about them? Their numbers have been declining dramatically as poachers kill them for their ivory, their habitats are being destroyed and they are being killed because they come in conflict with local people. Ideally, they should be seen on a safari tour where they live freely, but unfortunately that is impractical for most people.

There are dozens of places to see domesticated elephants in Thailand, but some of the so called sanctuaries are controversial money makers and may not properly care for

their animals, so finding the right one where the elephants are well-treated can be challenging.

Living at Lampang

The Thai Elephant Conservation Centre (TECC) at Lampang Thailand is owned by the government and has great reviews so we opted to visit that one on our New Year break in Chiang Mai. Setting off at 8:00am in a new luxury 9-seater minivan with our English speaking driver Mr Kamo of C.C.T. Express we were there in 1.5 hours.

It is important to get there early because watching the



elephants bathe is one of the highlights of a visit. In particular the young calves were adorable and the location superb.

Riding elephants on wooden seats is not recommended by the purists as it can be considered cruel. We skipped that, but must add that we did not see any hooks being used or any chained legs.

Let The Show Begin!

Some people don't like to see elephants being exploited and performing in shows. However, I give credit to the folks at T.E.C.C. because the emphasis is on what domesticated

elephants actually do and demonstrated how strong, coordinated and well trained the animals are.

The Mahouts showed various ways to mount and dismount from an elephant. The animals showed their prowess by dragging and lifting heavy logs and there appeared to be a genuine bond between the two.

National Geographic claims that elephants have 100,000 muscles in their trunks. They are used for breathing, drinking, smelling, making noises and picking things up - including the mahout's hat and putting it on his head.



Photo Call - Going Bananas

What is really nice at T.E.C.C. is that you can get really close and personal to the elephants and there is no pressure to tip or even buy bananas, but buying fruit was cheap and a fun way to interact with the elephants, so we willingly spent a few dollars.

Try to go to T.E.C.C. on your own rather than on a package tour because you need time to explore. The nursery was unbelievable and we had the place to ourselves watching intently as the mahout did his daily dental inspection while the trusting mother looked on. There is even a hospital on site which treats injured animals and performs medical

operations on elephants, even if the owner can't afford to pay. As luck would have it the youngest new calf, only three months old, happened to be taking a bath as I walked towards the elephant hospital. What a poser and a very special moment for me!

Elephant Poo Paper Making

Elephant poo supposedly doesn't smell. Whatever! I'm glad it wasn't me bleaching the balls of dung, diluting them with water and spreading the liquid onto mesh frames to dry in the sun to make a thick paper for eco-friendly gifts. There is also a small biogas factory to make sure all the elephant



dung is recycled. The Chiang Mai Post Office is really unique – you climb steps, as if to an elephant mounting platform, to get to the letter box!

Bring up the Rear (end)

All too soon it was time to end the visit. Allow at least four hours for a day visit, but if you are keen there is accommodation and you can spend a couple of days learning how to become a mahout.

I've been to numerous elephant camps in Thailand, this the best so far. The nursery and hospital are special attractions

and the setting in lovely countryside is excellent. Because it is relatively remote, the crowds are smaller too! 

POCKET GUIDE

Land transport provided by C.C.T. Express

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