



# Mahout Training In Northern Thailand

By Don Mankin



My wife, Katherine, likes large mammals – gorillas, bears, whales, hippos, even me. That’s why I am sitting on a very large elephant, riding bareback, at the Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC; [www.changthai.com](http://www.changthai.com)) about 20 miles outside of Lampang in northern Thailand. We are here for three days of mahout training, an introduction to the basics of elephant care and handling.

Since logging was banned in 1989 to protect Thailand’s forests, these magnificent beasts have

been put out to pasture, literally and figuratively. Many have been exploited in tacky tourist shows. Even more tragic are the hundreds, maybe thousands, that have been poached – murdered – for the ivory in their tusks.

The elephant preserves, like TECC, help save Thailand’s elephants by providing a financial incentive to the local communities to protect rather than poach the animals. The centers also educate tourists and school children about the role of the elephant in Thai

history and provide them with medical care and treatment.

## My Own Personal Elephant

The center also offers 1 to 3 day courses in mahout training, the reason we are here. We are signed up for the three day course, along with three others. Just a few minutes after our 8:30 a.m arrival at the center, we are wearing our blue mahout suits (with pants big enough for both my elephant and me) and trying to memorize the basic commands, in Thai, from a one page cheat sheet.

**Before I have barely mastered** what I consider to be the most important command, “how” for “stop,” we are each introduced to our very own elephants and mahouts.

Mine is huge (the elephant, not the mahout). Won, my mahout, barks a command, and Poom-phoum (or something like that) bends her front leg back towards me. Won motions for me to step on her leg and pull myself up by holding an ear in one hand and a roll of skin in the other. Somehow, with absolutely no skill and less grace, I manage to get on.

**It's a bit scary at first sitting on** top of this behemoth bareback with nothing to hold on to. I balance myself with the palms of my hands resting on the two lumps on the back of her head. It is my only means of support and seemingly all that keeps me from falling off.

**Soon, too soon, we are riding** our elephants in single file to the lake a hundred or so yards away. The elephants ease into the lake just as a tour bus pulls up. With the tourists' cameras clicking away, the elephants dunk themselves -- and therefore us -- for the first of several times over the next two and a half days.

**Then it's back to the open air** amphitheater for the show. Instead of watching the show, we soon realize that we are still part of it. We ride into the amphitheater waving triumphantly to the amazed audience. After a few minutes of demonstrating how to get on and off, we are finally off duty for a few minutes as the real mahouts lead the elephants through their paces for the rest of the show.

**After a brief rest, we return to** our elephants and ride them deep into the jungle. It is an amazing way to experience the jungle -- a quiet, swaying ride on the back of



*Katherine Mankin feeding baby elephant*

a huge animal, at “chirp” level, to use Katherine’s words, an animal that is as intrinsic to the setting as the trees and brush.

**We ride for about two hours,** get another dunking in a lake, then leave our elephants behind, tethered in place with a very long chain and walk back on the trail for a ride to our bungalows.

As we get ready for bed, Katherine pretty much sums up the day, “There is nothing as thrilling as riding your own elephant through the jungle. Temples are great but this gets my heart pounding.”

### **Riding Tall**

We return the next day to the jungle and walk up the trail to where Poonphoum waits for us. It's a strange feeling walking through the jungle, spotting a large elephant ahead of you and heading directly towards it. My instincts say stop, but of course it's OK. We carry treats -- stalks of bamboo -- and Poonphoum seems glad to see us or at least to see Won.

**Over the next day and a half** as we ride further into the jungle, I begin to feel more steady and comfortable, aside from a sore butt and inner thighs and am able to

appreciate what an extraordinary experience this is.

**Riding bareback, I can feel** the powerful muscles undulate under me. It's not a fast power, like an overpowered automobile but a slowly-push-through-anything kind of power. And its live power, driven by muscle and sinew, just like me but orders of magnitude greater. And it's a power that I know I could not control if she ever got it in her head to ignore me or Won.

**As we say goodbye to our** elephants and mahouts on the last day, Katherine is moved to tears. So am I. Every one of us has been deeply touched by the experience and by the beauty, intelligence, agility and almost human-like qualities of these extraordinary animals.

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*Don Mankin is a travel writer, business author, psychologist, organizational consultant and executive coach. The Wall Street Journal called his latest book, “Riding the Hulahula to the Arctic Ocean: A Guide to 50 Extraordinary Adventures for the Seasoned Traveler” (National Geographic, 2008), one of the best travel books to cross our desk this year. For more information on Don or Riding the Hulahula, check out his website [www.adventuretransformations.com](http://www.adventuretransformations.com).*