

Surin Project Helps Elephants in Thailand

The Surin Project which aims at unchaining elephants and empowering mahouts by giving them better living conditions, is an initiative taken on by the Elephant Nature Foundation. Since the logging industry in Thailand has been overtaken by development, elephants in the country have no natural habitat left to survive. Thus their caretakers take them to tourist spots like Bangkok and make them perform tricks to impress tourists and earn a livelihood. Without proper food and water and trying to live amidst civilization, it gets very stressful for the elephants to survive.



Situated in Baan Tha Klang village and headed by Alex Godfrey, the project brings forward a natural and sustainable environment where the elephants and the mahouts do not have to beg or perform tricks to fend for their livelihood. The elephants can live without chains and shackles and the mahouts do not have to be harsh and cruel.

Four years ago, the Surin Project was started by Elephant Nature Foundation to help these elephants and mahouts. This organization tries to spread awareness about the problems faced by elephants, how they are an endangered species and the trouble that mahouts have in sustaining themselves and their families. They have also opened a sanctuary called the Elephant Nature Park where Asian elephants that have been abused while performing in circuses and working in the logging industry, find refuge and feel closer to their natural habitat.

In 2005, an Elephant Study Center was set up whereby 2000 acres of land was put aside to rehabilitate elephants that were earlier seen begging on the streets. Since the Surin province used to be a forest area, there was a lot of elephant population. When the province started growing into an urban development, these elephants were dislodged from their homes and brought to the streets. Thus the government started the 'Take Me Home' project under which several elephants were rescued and rehabilitated in surroundings that were more like their real homes.



Currently, almost 200 mahouts and their pet elephants stay at the Elephant Study Center where they mutually help one another to make a living.

The project depends extensively on the help of volunteers who together build the sanctuary, seed plantations, grow food products like sugarcane and bamboos and get elephants out of their chains to guide them for a bath in the river. All volunteers are assigned work like cutting down elephant food from the fields, cleaning their homes, renovating stables and taking elephants for daily walks. This makes for a great learning experience as you can witness elephants in their natural environment and get a different perspective as opposed to watching them entertain tourists and provide rides as in most cases.

People from across the world volunteer in the Surin Project and contribute to wildlife friendly tourism operations and help restore ecological sustainability. The money that is generated from this project also helps in terms of economic revenue for the mahout community. Not only do the mahouts enjoy a better standard of living, this project encourages other mahouts to voluntarily come to the rehabilitation area from the city so to allow themselves and their elephants to live better lifestyles.



As a tourist volunteer, you have to travel seven hours from Bangkok to reach Surin which is part of the Isaan Region in northeast Thailand. An air conditioned bus will pick you up from Bangkok and drop you at Surin. The rich rural culture, spicy food and innovative farming traditions are the things that have made Surin famous.

Tourists mainly constitute volunteers and are required to pay a fee of \$384 for serving a period of five nights and six days. You can extend your service period if you like. While volunteering at Surin, you will be staying at the Elephant Study Center and receive three meals a day. While you are free to contribute new ideas for developmental work, your chores will vary from week to week.

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