



Elephant Program in Chiang Mai, Thailand

The name of the Elephant Camp is “Maetaman Elephant Camp.” The Camp is a family run organization, which was started by the family over 20 years ago. Currently there are over 70 elephants at the Camp with roughly 250 workers. Most of the workers are of ethnic hill tribe decent, which makes them an ethnic minority in Thailand. Many of the workers are unable to speak, read or write in Thai very well.

The Camp receives many foreign day visitors. The cost of admission from the day visitors keeps the elephants healthy and the camp in operation. Elephants are incredibly large animals and take a lot of money to keep properly fed.

The Camp is an hour drive (almost) straight north from the city of Chiang Mai. The last 15 minutes of the ride, although paved, is very bumpy. The road was built a long time ago and hasn't received proper maintenance. The Camp is beautiful, as it is nestled in a mountain valley.

There are very few elephants in the wild in northern Thailand. Therefore camps such as Maetaman, are the only real place where elephants can live in sanctuary from poachers and where people can safely visit, learn and experience the Asian elephant. Some claim that if it wasn't for camps such as Maetaman, Asian elephants would no longer exist outside of zoos. For this reason, just volunteering in the project is helping further the plight of the Asian elephant in Thailand.

The regular schedule for volunteers in the Elephant Camp project is as follows:

Arrive into Chiang Mai on the Friday before your service is to begin.

Saturday and Sunday – Pre Volunteer Service Orientation (accommodation starting Friday evening – Monday morning will be at the Volunteer House or in the area of the Volunteer House – Costs of accommodation during orientation are covered in one's project fee).

Monday morning, Cosmic Volunteers will send volunteers to the camp by Cosmic Volunteers transport or administrators from the Elephant Camp (that live in Chiang Mai)

will escort volunteers to the Camp. Volunteers normally arrive at the camp at around 10am.

From **Monday to Friday** afternoon, volunteers will stay at the camp.

Within **the first week of a volunteer's service**, Anchalee, the camp manager and part of the family that owns the camp will meet with volunteers and discuss the plight of the Asian elephant, how the camp is run and give a presentation on the history and treatment of elephants.

Friday afternoon, volunteers will come back into Chiang Mai. If there is space available at the Volunteer House during the weekend, volunteers will be welcomed to stay there. If there is no available space, volunteers will have to cover the cost of their own accommodation. Cosmic Volunteers staff will be more than happy to assist volunteers in finding affordable and safe accommodation in Chiang Mai.

Monday morning volunteers will return to the camp.

The daily schedule for volunteers during their service at the Elephant Camp:

5:30 - wake up, get dressed (in a bathing suit) and help bathe and then feed the elephants

8:00 – Sit down with the staff at the Elephant Camp and enjoy breakfast and northern Thai coffee.

After breakfast - Volunteers will learn about some of the safety procedures with the elephants. After spending a few days learning about these safety procedures, volunteers may be asked to help out with explaining the safety procedures to day visitors upon their arrival at the Camp.

Around 9:30am the Elephant Show for the day tourists begins. The show has elephants conduct simple, entertaining tricks, like kicking a soccer ball, to complicated tasks, such as painting. The show is designed to show visitors how smart elephants are and how close their relationship with their mahout, or elephant trainer is. Volunteers normally sit and make small talk with the mahouts during the show.

12:00 – Lunch time.

After lunch – Volunteers will be split up into different tasks in the afternoon. Some volunteers will teach an hour or two of English at the local hill tribe school located right outside the Camp. All of the students at the school are children of staff at the Camp. Other volunteers will be asked to help cut grass (elephant food), make herbal medicine balls for the elephants, help make the elephant dung paper and maybe assist in teaching English to their mahout or some of the other staff at the camp.

Late afternoon / Early evening – At this time, day visitors will be making their way back to the city and volunteers will be able to spend more time with the elephants and elephant trainers.

6:00 / 7:00 - Dinner

After Dinner - Relax and take in what was done throughout the day.

Staff and Administration at the Elephant Camp

There are many, many workers at the camp. The most important ones for volunteers to know are listed below:

Anchalee – A Thai woman, who is part of the family that owns the camp. She is the managing director of the camp and a very well educated, knowledgeable person on elephants. You will meet her during your first week at the camp.

Phinyo – The coordinator of the volunteer project at the camp. He has many different responsibilities and isn't always at the camp. Phinyo will be the individual that will (probably) meet with volunteers in the project during the orientation at the Volunteer House. He is also, normally responsible for the legal side of having the liability forms completed and works a lot behind the scenes for promotion and other activities related to the camp.

Air – Kind of a jack of all trades at the camp. She is at the camp all the time, almost every day. She is involved with lots of different parts of the organization and has a decent amount of daily contact with volunteers.

Nicky – A young Thai man in his early/mid 20s. He has nice, long dread-locks and a great sense of humor. Nicky is the individual that spends the most time with volunteers. He is responsible for organizing volunteer activities on a regular basis. His English is very good and he acts as a translator between the volunteers and most of the other staff at the camp.

Accommodation at the Elephant Camp

Accommodation at the Elephant Camp is quaint, but basic. The rooms are not equipped with air conditioning, but the area of the Camp (because of being in the mountains) gets rather cool at night. All the rooms have an attached bathroom with a hot water shower. In most cases volunteers will have private accommodation, unless traveling with a companion. There are the three unique tree houses that over stretch over the river and also three rooms above the gift shop. The tree house rooms are pretty neat. They are not very big, but they sit right along the river and have nice views of the area and lovely sounds of the river and the camp. The rooms available over the gift shop are larger and

more comfortable, but not nearly as unique as the tree houses. The bathroom in all of the accommodation for volunteers is “Thai style.” This means that the shower is attached to wall and the floor of the bathroom is tile. Water goes all over the place. In Thai the word “bathroom” is directly translated as “water room.” This, very much, is what it comes out being.

Safety and Security and Elephant Time

Although elephants are beautiful and mostly gentle creatures, they are very, very large, ranging from 5,000 – 8,000 pounds. By nature, some of them are gentle and warm creatures, some are not. It’s important to keep in mind that these big, beautiful animals are not dogs or other domesticated animals. They still very much act like enormous, wild animals. If in a situation where the elephant is threatened or frightened and around a new/unknown person, the elephant may very well act aggressively. For this reason, safety with the elephants is of the utmost importance. It’s just not possible for volunteers to spend time with the elephants alone, as elephants can rather skittish around people they are unfamiliar with. The total amount of hands on time volunteers in the project have with the elephants is roughly two hours per day. There are other times, throughout the day that volunteers are allowed to spend with the mahouts and their elephants informally (such as the elephant show, or when the mahouts are spending time with their elephant in the evening). Volunteers are required to keep clear distance from the elephants when not with the mahouts (elephant trainers).

Due to security reasons, volunteers are not allowed to take more than 500 Baht (roughly \$15) to the camp per week. If the volunteers end up spending more than 500 Baht, then the camp will offer volunteers a credit to purchase what they would like. This credit will be cleared at the end of the week or the beginning of the following week. There is not much to purchase at the camp, considering all food and accommodation is covered in the initial project fee. It’s also highly recommended that volunteers don’t take any expensive valuables with them during their time at the camp. As is mentioned above, the camp has around 250 employees and hundreds of other day visitors to the camp each day.

Elephant Care and Treatment

Maetaman Elephant Camp is recognized for their excellent care of elephants. On-site there is an “Elephant Hospital” where elephants that are injured or ill are looked after. There are no formal/certified vets at the camp. There are, however, individuals who have looked after elephants their entire life and were taught by their parents who held such positions before them. They use herbal and other basic remedies to treat the elephants when sick or injured.

Some of the elephants at the camp are owned by the actual elephant trainers themselves, whereas others are owned by the camp directly. Elephants are incredibly expensive to

Elephant Program in Chiang Mai, Thailand

buy, feed and take care of. For this reason, obviously it is in the best interest of the camp and the trainers to look after the elephants as well as possible, and they do.

After a day out with the mahouts, the elephants are chained to covered, open air, shaded structures. The chain is used as a measure to help insure the safety of the people and passersby of the camp, along with the elephants themselves. Elephants are in large part, wild animals and if left to wander, they would get in fights, eat things they shouldn't, be a nuisance to traffic on the road, etc.

Teaching Material

While school is in session, volunteers are able to teach an hour or two of English at the small hill tribe school near the camp.

Teaching a lesson:

It is important to plan and prepare lessons. For the inexperienced teacher, lengthy, in-depth lesson plans are not necessary. It is however, crucial that when preparing/planning a lesson that one must write down a simple procedure of how they plan to conduct the class. Attempt to cover all four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) in the period of an hour class. Below is a basic plan as to how inexperienced teachers can plan lessons:

Introduction to the class and a short fun warm up activity

Presentation of new material/review of already covered material.

Practice of the material presented

Speaking activity then writing activity using the material covered.

A quick wrap up activity.

Suggestions for topics and activities:

Suggestions for Topics	Suggestions for basic Activities
Colors	Tick tack toe (with vocabulary)
Numbers	Memory (vocabulary and definition/picture)
Time	Word searches
Animals	Crossword puzzles
Days of the week/months of the year	Skits
Sports	Dialogue type games
Hobbies	Songs (to follow, but not sing)
Sports	Hangman
Food	Scrabble type games
Places around town	Bingo (with numbers, pictures,

Elephant Program in Chiang Mai, Thailand

	vocabulary, whatever)
Countries / travel vocabulary	Pictionary
Things at home	Spin the bottle (conversation / vocabulary, not kissing)
Things at school	Simon Says
Music	Running Dictation

Please know that the local hill tribe school has very little money and no budget for teaching materials for volunteers. Additionally, there aren't any stationary stores in the small village where the Elephant Camp is located. For this reason, bringing some simple materials from abroad or purchased in Chiang Mai before leaving for the Elephant Camp on Monday morning maybe a good idea.

Advice from Successful Volunteers

The following are excerpts from three past volunteers, in their Volunteer Reports, who successfully completed the Elephant Camp Volunteer Project.

Volunteer 1.

Things that went really well / Things you recommend future volunteers to do in your project/school/placement:

- Be pro-active in getting to know the mahouts, and therein, the elephants at Maetaman. Don't be afraid to try and use your Thai to talk with and/or joke around with the mahouts. After cleaning the area around your elephant, walk around the camp and see if you can help other mahouts clean their elephants' areas. By doing this, it helped to make my stay much richer, fuller and more enjoyable. Also, it enabled me to ride and bath many different elephants!
- Stay in the tree house! Spectacular views and probably once-in-a-lifetime experience!
- When teaching at the school, try to follow the school's English curriculum. Read to the students from the text. To hear a native speaker read English helps the students with their fluency and listening skills. Use the text to develop "Who" "What" "When" and "Where" type questions that you can write on the white board ... number each question with the answer to each question directly below the question. Use a lot of repetition, of asking the same question written on the white board to different students. You can either have them repeat the question or give you the answer. Once students are comfortable with the four to six questions/answers on the white board, call pairs of students to the front of the class One student asks the question and the other answers. You can build on this activity by asking students to spell some of the words in the text.

- Go down to the kitchen early in the morning (7:30 am. or so) and spend time using your Thai to speak with the kitchen and restaurant staff. The women are delightful and love to chat. The cook makes great papaya salad (som tom) with sticky rice. Try it for breakfast You will not need to eat all day!
- During lunch time, go out of your way to chat with a least one tourist, or one group of tourists who have come to the camp. These tourists come for just one day. We, on the other hand spend weeks with the elephants, and the tourist love to hear about what we do as volunteers at the camp.
- One afternoon, walk to the waterfall and take a dip. After a good rain, the waterfall is powerful, beautiful and cool. If you sit in just the right area of the waterfall.... The water plummets you with a cold water massage!
- Leave your flip flops behind when you bath the elephants! The Maetang River ate three pairs of my flip flops, causing me to have to buy new flip flops about every three days.
- Buy sugar cane or bananas regularly at the camp and then feed them to your elephant! Your elephant will identify with you much faster! And you'll get some get some get photo opportunities too. Oh ... take a close up picture of your finger next to your elephant's toe nail too!
- Enjoy just being the presence of / close to the elephants ... they are incredible, magnificent creatures.

Things that didn't go so well / Things you do not recommend future volunteers to do in your project/school/placement:

- Understand these elephants are well taken care for, and loved, even though they spend part of their day chained and the mahouts use a hook (elephant remote control) to get the elephant to respond. I found it very easy to be judgmental, thinking both the chain and the "elephant remote control" were bad. After staying with the elephants for a month, I came to appreciate the rationale for using both since in reality they both help guard and protect the elephants. It would be nice if the elephants could roam free as they did many years ago. But where can they now just roam around free? And how can they be allowed to just roam around, without endangering themselves and others? The camp is, I believe, providing a good safe alternative within the financial constraints of taking care of what truly are some rather expensive mammals.
- Viewing the elephants either up close, or from a distance, it is easy to fall in love with these creatures. I wanted to touch and be as close to them as much as I could until one day, moments after I'd been on Tong Soup's back ... one of the largest male elephants at the park ... I saw Tong Soup throw his head back and

forth so violently that the mahout who was sitting on Tong Soup's neck was thrown off, only to land on the hard cement floor some 10 to 12 feet below. My level of respect for the power of an elephant shot straight up! As did my respect for the mahout who did nothing, to chastise the elephant after this incident. Even though the Asian elephant has been domesticated for a long time, it is still a very, VERY big and powerful mammal .. with a mind of its own.

Volunteer 2.

Things that went really well / Things you recommend future volunteers to do in your project/school/placement:

I had an amazing time at Maetaman Elephant Camp. I loved spending time with and being around elephants all day long, but it was the people who really made my six weeks at Maetaman so wonderful. Nicky, who's sort of your translator and guide around the camp, is really cool, nice and hilarious. If there's anything you do or don't want to do, don't hesitate to ask Nicky. You pretty much spend the whole day with him, so get to know him and ask him to recommend things to do when you have spare time at the camp. Make sure to ask him to take you to the karaoke bar down the street (mostly Thai songs, but they're spelled out phonetically, so you can try your luck at singing Thai pop songs!). If you want to sing English songs, ask him to take you to his house. He has a karaoke machine and pretty good speakers, too (as you can probably tell, Nicky is a huge karaoke fan).

A smile really goes a long way. Maetaman village is very small, so everyone knows each other (and if you stay long enough, they'll know you too).

Other advice: your clothes will get wet A LOT during the week because you bathe with your elephant in the river twice a day, and because it's so humid here, nothing ever really dries completely. So, to cut down on weekly laundry loads, set aside one outfit for bathing time and don't hesitate to re-wear the same two or three shirts during the week.

Try to bond with your mahout, because it makes waking up at 6 in the morning to pick up elephant dung that much more pleasant. Even though my mahout didn't speak English, we managed to bond through hand gestures, my poor attempts at speaking Thai, smiles, water fights, etc.

Every morning, you have to watch the elephant show. Sit in the area where the mahouts hang out. They're really fun to be around (despite the fact that we don't speak the same language). And try to ride elephants and spend time with them as much as you can. They're amazing, gentle creatures, and it can be a surreal experience to live among 70 elephants for a couple of weeks.

DEET/bug spray is absolutely necessary.
Anti-malarials are unnecessary.

Add cashew nuts to everything you order at the restaurant (which, by the way, serves the best food I've had in Thailand).

Be friendly and get to know the ladies in the kitchen and at the coffee bar – they're really nice and fun to hang out with.

Don't bother bringing books or flash cards to teach at the Maetaman school - all you really need to bring is a few balls. Think of some games you can play using those balls; they really get the kids talking.

Bring at least one pair of long-sleeve pants and one long-sleeved shirt, for grass/corn cutting. In terms of shoes, one pair of sandals/flip-flops and one pair of sneakers will get you through the weeks just fine.

There's a gorgeous waterfall that's about 10 minutes away by foot. Check it out.

Things that didn't go so well / Things you do not recommend future volunteers to do in your project/school/placement:

Maetaman is very laid back. If there's anything you don't want to do, just say the word and they'll find something else for you to do. With that being said, do try everything at least once. Cutting grass (as opposed to corn), for example, can be unpleasant because your arms and legs can get cut up by the sharp blades of grass, but I'm glad I tried it at least once while I was there.

When teaching, be patient and just try to have fun with the students. I was assigned M2 (sort of equivalent to 8th grade in America, I guess), and they had a Level 3 textbook. But they were nowhere near the level of English being taught in that textbook, so I ended up throwing that out the window and just starting from the beginning with basic conversational English lessons. Flashcards don't really help, especially if you're teaching older kids, but playing with balls and just getting the kids out of their seats really makes class more fun and it gets them talking too.

Comments / Other Suggestions:

Be open-minded and don't come with too many expectations. Air, Nicky and everyone else at the elephant camp are really accommodating, and if there's anything you want to do, they'll try to make it work for you. Try everything at least once. This can and should be an unforgettable experience, so just be open-minded and take in everything you see and do.

Volunteer 3.

Things that went really well / Things you recommend future volunteers to do in your project/school/placement:

I recommend sitting and talking with Air and her friends, they love hanging out with the volunteers and speaking English with you. Go karaoke-ing with Nicky, he has a beautiful voice and gets really into it, and you will have a lot of fun as well. Ride elephants as much as you can, and just spend time in their presence. They are amazing animals. Try to get to know your mahout, having a good relationship with him will make the daily cleaning activities much more entertaining.

Things that didn't go so well / Things you do not recommend future volunteers to do in your project/school/placement:

Don't get river water in your mouth! :-O

Comments / Other Suggestions:

Be open minded about the project and try not to have too many expectations. Being flexible is necessary at the camp, given that not everything always goes exactly by schedule. Everyone is willing to give you jobs if you want more to do, so do not hesitate to ask Nicky or Air for something more to do. Walk around Maetaman, it's a beautiful area. Talk to the local people through hand gestures and broken English/Thai, they will enjoy it a lot and so will you.