

Lilly is the kind of elephant everyone falls in love with. The giantess with the kind eyes charms most people she meets with her placid and affectionate manner. But it's amazing she has any good feelings towards people at all. Like many of the rescued creatures living at Thailand's Elephant Nature Park, her former life was a nightmare thanks to humans.

Lilly was made to haul heavy timber all day as part of an illegal logging operation. At night, her owners rented her out to work for another family. Exhausted, she refused to work, despite being beaten with sticks and metal hooks, so her owners fed her amphetamines. After two years, Lilly was swollen with cuts and bruises, could barely stand and was drug-addicted. But salvation arrived in the form of Thai woman Sangduen 'Lek' Chailert, who bought Lilly and set about detoxing and rehabilitating her.

The gentle giant now lives a peaceful life at Elephant Nature Park, in northern Thailand, with more than 30 of her kind. These include Jokia, who was blinded when her previous owner shot her in the face with a slingshot when she refused to work, and another who lost a foot after stepping on a landmine.

It's estimated that only 2000 tame elephants are left in Thailand, with an equal number in the wild. Experts predict there won't be a viable population left in 10 years' time. Wild elephants face destruction of their habitat, while tame ones (once employed in the now-banned logging industry) have turned up as tourist attractions. This may sound like a positive move, but many suffer injury, abuse and death at the hands of their owners. The animals that carry tourists on their backs are often underfed and overworked, with agonising skin and spine problems from the heavy wooden seats. Many pregnant females miscarry as a result, or their babies are forced to walk beside them all day while they work. Those that perform tricks, such as painting or playing soccer, often go through brutal training.

For 45-year-old former travel agent Chailert, things weren't easy when she started protecting elephants. She received death threats and one of her cherished baby elephants was poisoned. Undeterred, she persevered and public opinion has slowly turned in her favour.

Chailert has now received several international accolades, including being named one of *Time* magazine's Asia's Heroes in 2005. And at her sanctuary, funded by donations and visitor fees, she now has a little help from two Aussie employees.

"I'd love to say that this park isn't unique in Thailand but, sadly, it is," says Michelle Kobylka who, with her husband, Karl Cullen, has worked at the park for more than three years. Originally from Melbourne, the couple quit their retail jobs and tracked down Chailert after reading about her on the internet. Their first gig was as volunteers, helping to raise two orphaned baby elephants. "It really was the most magical, life-changing experience," says Kobylka, 34. The couple returned home when their funds ran out, but Chailert invited them back as paid employees. "There was no hesitation. We were back in a flash," Kobylka says.

They live on-site in a bamboo treehouse, with no phone or hot water. But these inconveniences are

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nothing compared to the joy of having elephants as neighbours – even when one of them demolished part of their home. "Not many people can say they've had their house 'redesigned' by a baby elephant," laughs Kobylka, whose job is to educate visitors.

Cullen, 32, works as a mahout (an elephant handler) to Max, a former street-begging elephant with a bad limp – a legacy of being hit by a semi-trailer and left for dead. It's been a steep learning curve. Although generally even-tempered, elephants can be dangerous, and it's not uncommon for mahouts to be killed by their charges. Yet Max clearly enjoys his days with Cullen. "Some people joke that Max is actually Karl's mahout," says Kobylka. "They have a lovely relationship."

Scores of paying visitors come every day to help feed, bathe and walk the majestic creatures at Elephant Nature Park. There's no riding, no tricks and no begging – just healthy, happy elephants. At feeding time, visitors help organise huge food baskets, each piled high with 60kg of fruit and vegies. It's chaotically entertaining as whole spiky pineapples are plucked from human hands, before disappearing

into soft pink mouths, and trunks snake along the decking to steal a banana – or 10. Tong Jan, a chubby-cheeked two-year-old, ducks out from between her mother's legs to watch, her trunk tucked into her mouth like a kid sucking its thumb.

Gazing at visitors splashing in the river, bathing the animals, Kobylka says, "The wonderful thing is that everyone who comes here learns that the most enjoyable thing you can do is watch elephants just be elephants. That's really what they do best." **SM**

To make a donation or for more information about the park, visit [www.elephantnaturefoundation.org](http://www.elephantnaturefoundation.org).



# In safe hands

BEATEN, BRUISED AND FED DRUGS TO MAKE THEM WORK – LUCKILY THAILAND'S MISTREATED ELEPHANTS HAVE A NEW PLACE TO CALL HOME

STORY KATE BROWNE



(from top) The elephants take a stroll; visitors at the park; Chailert with her charges; the frenzy of feeding time.

