

# TRUNK CALL

A family-run elephant sanctuary in Myanmar's Shan Hills is working to provide not only a comfortable and safe retirement for its animals, but also new opportunities for its village neighbors  
BY CLAUDIA FLISI

**L**oose-fitting fisherman's trousers and loofah-like brushes await us at a muddy stream, as does a pair of pink-eared pachyderms. Smiling, their mahouts give us a crash course in elephant-scrubbing, which involves a lot rubbing and lathering with a natural soap extracted from a local vine. The water is cold, the streambed is rocky, and by the time our 30-minute session is up, we're soaked up to our chests. I can't remember having so much fun.

Visitors have been washing elephants at the Green Hill Valley Elephant Camp since October 2011, when a local couple decided to turn their dream of ecologically responsible tourism into reality. Tin Win Maw and her husband Htun Htun Wynn had worked in the tourism in Myanmar for almost two decades at that point, and Maw had grown up with elephants. Her uncle, U Ba Kyaw Than, is a retired forestry veterinarian who specialized in elephants; she had spent her school holidays with him in the forest.

Three years ago, the timing was right for the couple to link their knowledge of the area and their enthusiasm for Myanmar's largest animal to a project that involved forest conservation, animal care, and community service. Green Hill Valley is the result, hosting up to 30 visitors a day for personal elephant interaction, nature trekking, tree planting, and refreshments.

The need for elephant sanctuaries in Myanmar is great. The country has the highest population of domesticated (i.e., working) elephants in the world, mostly employed by the timber industry. It also has the second-largest population of wild Asian elephants



(after India) as well as the world's largest continuous areas of natural habitat for the animals (more than India and Thailand combined).

Green Hill Valley began as a family operation, with Maw and Wynn as cofounders and Maw's veterinarian uncle as project manager. The location, selected after careful consideration, is Magwe village, about 45 minutes by car from Kalaw in the mountains of southern Shan State. The resident elephants include two of the family's own animals, plus five retired elephants from the Ministry of Forestry. Green Hill Valley's 20 hectares are not a lot of land for seven elephants, so the animals have roaming rights in the adjoining Wet Pyu Ye

forest reserve, giving them an additional 60 hectares over which to stretch their legs.

The location had been a major timber logging camp in the 1960s, employing more than 20 working elephants at maximum capacity; the environment, with its forests of teak and bamboo, is not an unfamiliar one for Maw's animals. Their comfort is reinforced by the presence of their mahouts, the caregivers who had tended to them during their working lives. Each elephant has his or her personal mahout, and each mahout lives at the camp with his wife and children.

The mahouts are a comfort to camp visitors as well. When we edged into the stream,

**—THE DETAILS** ANYONE INTERESTED IN VISITING **GREEN HILL VALLEY** ([GHVELEPHANT.COM](http://GHVELEPHANT.COM); 95-9/7310-7278) SHOULD CONTACT THE CAMP AT LEAST ONE DAY IN ADVANCE. FOUR DIFFERENT TOUR PROGRAMS ARE AVAILABLE, RANGING IN PRICE FROM US\$100 TO US\$180 PER PERSON, DEPENDING ON THE SIZE OF THE GROUP AND THE TIME OF YEAR.



**HIDE BOUND** Clockwise from above: The author at feeding time; a scenic terrace at Green Hill Valley's restaurant; local accommodation. Opposite: Getting ready for a bath in the camp's stream.

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they lent a hand to help us navigate the rocky bottom. They let us know when bath time was over for the elephants by clambering onto their backs and urging them out of the water and back to camp. When we emerged, dripping, they proffered towels to help us dry off before exchanging our soaked trousers for the dry pants we had left on shore.

Then we followed staff members to the reforestation area of the camp, where we helped plant seedlings from the camp's nursery. Our seedlings were teak, but the plants may also be silver oak, cassia, or other fast-growing regional trees, depending on what forestry experts suggest. Every visitor gets

to plant a tree as a lasting souvenir of his or her visit. Since elephants can eat 150 kilos of vegetation a day, replanting is a logical part of the camp's ecological equation and reforestation is a core focus of Green Hill Valley.

After the planting ceremony, we returned to the main area of the camp, where our two scrubbed and gleaming elephants had been joined by the other five pachyderms that call Green Hill Valley home. Five of the seven—including the two that had belonged to Maw's family—are females ranging in age from 38 to 62. One is a 49-year-old male. All are retirees from the Myanmar logging industry. Phoe Chit has a different history. He is a

four-year-old orphan from a conflict area of the country. "He is our spoiled baby and everyone loves him and cares for him as he has no mother," Maw explains. "He weighed almost one ton when he arrived here, but he is much heavier now."

No surprise there—elephants love to eat, as we observe when we feed them bananas provided by the camp, handing the fruit to eager, uncoiled trunks or popping them into triangular pink mouths. Feeding these gentle giants was almost as much fun as washing them. Each elephant has his or her own personality: some would grab the fruit right out of our hands; others would pluck it delicately. Some preferred to take the offerings with their trunk; others opened their mouths in an unmistakable pantomime of "feed me."

When it's time to accommodate our own appetites, we grab a table in the bamboo-walled dining area, which opens onto a terrace furnished with lounge chairs and sun umbrellas. It creates a perfect frame for the panorama that gives the camp its name: green hills dotted with teak, bamboo, and acacia trees dipping into a soft greener valley, punctuated by darting butterflies and the birdcall or monkey screech. It also seemed an appropriate backdrop for our Nepalese-tinged meal of dosas, curries, condiments, and baked bananas (what else?) for dessert. The Nepalese influence is due to the Gurkhas who came here from Nepal during British rule and stayed on after independence; Wynn himself is 25 percent Gurkha.

"We trained local girls from the village to cook and now they handle every aspect of the lunch," Maw notes proudly, adding that the girls take lessons in English during the slow season, when they have more time to study. Last year, Green Hill Valley also inaugurated the first primary school in Magwe.

The camp could conceivably add a few more elephants, Maw says, but the maximum number would be 10. "We are just a small family-owned private camp, not an international NGO," she points out. But she and her husband would be happy to share their experience with others interested in setting up elephant camps. "We would also be happy to share our cooperative work with others," she adds.

If that happiness is as infectious as the joy of elephant washing is for visitors, the prospects for future elephant camps in Myanmar are gleaming indeed. ©