

> OPPOSITE: APPRENTICE MAHOUTS—OR FUTURE ELEPHANT DRIVERS—DRESSED IN LOOSE-FITTING SHIRTS AND TRADITIONAL THAI PANTS TRY TO RECALL ALL THE COMMANDS THEY WILL HAVE TO ISSUE TO BEND THE GREAT ANIMAL TO THEIR WILL. BELOW: THE SMALL TREK IN THE JUNGLE ISN'T AS EASY AS IT LOOKS, SINCE THE ELEPHANTS STOP TO SNACK ON LEAVES WHENEVER THEY FEEL LIKE IT.

> CI-CONTRE: PREMIER JOUR DE COURS POUR LES APPRENTIS MAHOUT, LES FUTURS CONDUCTEURS D'ÉLÉPHANTS, AU FOUR SEASONS TENTED CAMP, EN THAÏLANDE. AMBIANCE DÉCONTRACTÉE, MAIS STUDIOUSE. CI-DESSOUS: LE MINI-TREK DANS LA JUNGLE N'EST PAS SI FACILE. LES ÉLÉPHANTS S'ARRÊTENT QUAND ILS VEULENT POUR SE GAVER DE FEUILLES D'ARBRES.

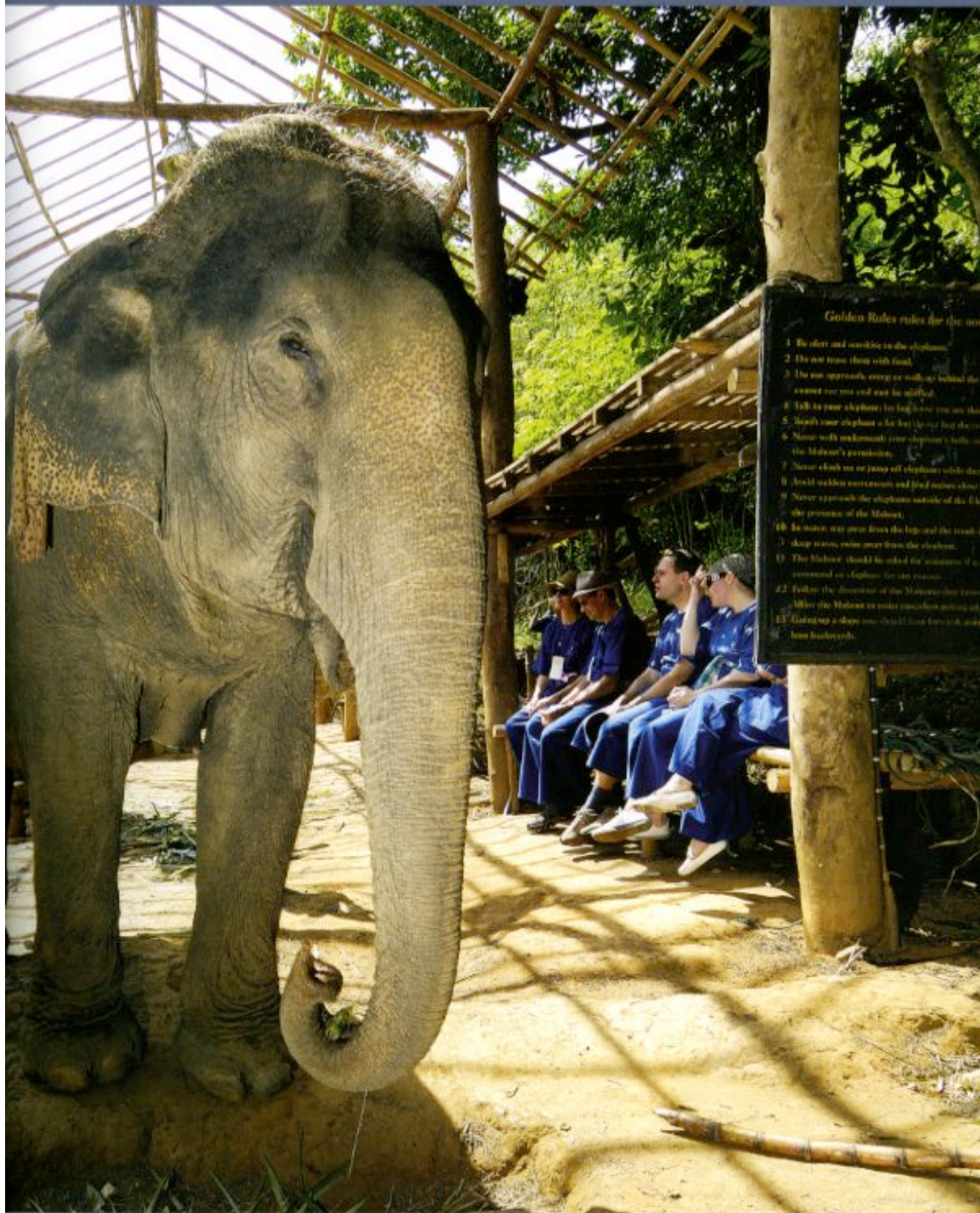
MASTER MAHOUT

WE ARE ABOUT TO REVEAL A HIGHLY CONFIDENTIAL ADDRESS: THE FOUR SEASONS TENTED CAMP, NEAR CHIANG RAI IN THAILAND. HERE YOU WILL LEARN THE SECRETS OF THE MAHOUT—A WORD DERIVED FROM SANSKRIT MEANING “ONE HAVING GREAT MEASURE,” BUT THAT ACTUALLY DESIGNATES A SKILLED DRIVER AND CARE-TAKER OF ELEPHANTS.



The silence around us is interrupted only by the soft rustling of the wind in the jungle of bamboo trees lining the river—and the thrumming of engines, as a small river boat carries us into the heart of the Golden Triangle, where 15 luxury tents are spread out over a kilometer of unparalleled scenery, fronting the Ruak river in the foreground, and Burma and the mountains of Laos in the distance. Though used accurately, the word “tent” is something of a misnomer when you consider that this luxurious set-up is among the most beautiful hotels in the world. The Four Seasons Tented Camp has been designed to recapture the feel and flavor of 19th century British expeditions, but with all modern comforts and amenities. Its true originality, however, resides in the elephant-driving training courses

the hotel offers to those clients who have an abiding love for animals and a great sense of adventure. Classes last for three days, and are organized jointly by the Four Seasons and the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation, created in Bangkok in 2005 by John Roberts. For the purposes of its mahout driving course, the Four Seasons Tented Camp currently houses six elephants and fourteen calves on two fields owned by the Foundation. To instruct its clients, it employs several mahouts who earn a base salary and benefits, including health insurance, food and lodging. The Four Seasons contributes to the Foundation at the rate of one dollar per client per night. The fun begins at 9 a.m. Here I am, with three other apprentice mahouts, in a strange open-air classroom, among piles of bananas and sugar cane stalks, which the elephants throw to the ground to crack open and get at the juice. We are all wearing our official outfits—loose-fitting

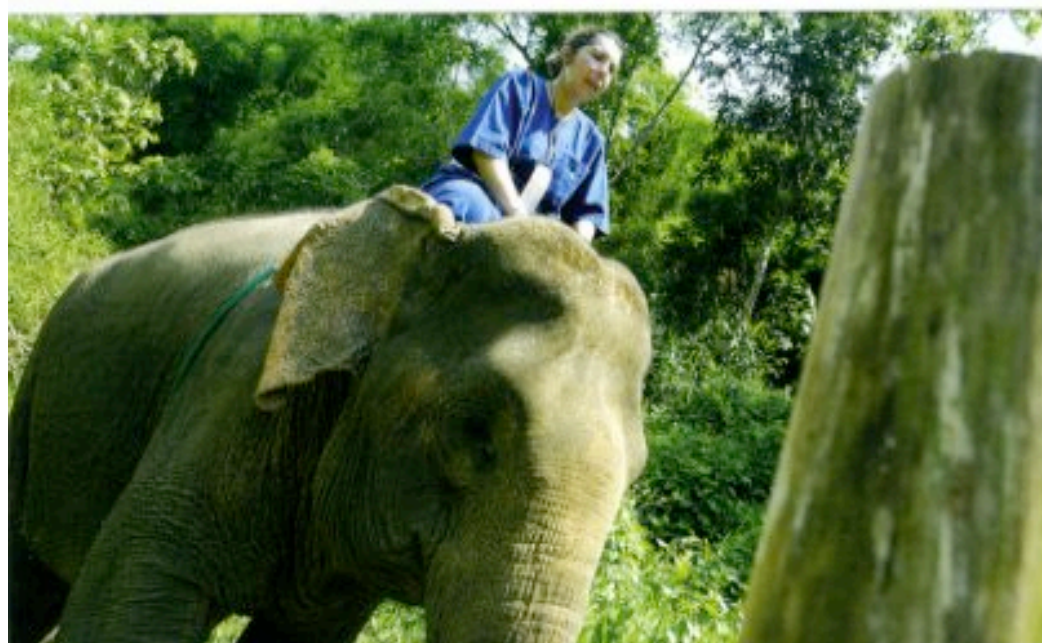


Golden Rules rules for the...

1. Be alert and sensitive to the elephants.
2. Do not tease them with food.
3. Do not approach, touch or walk up behind the elephant. The rear end is not to be touched.
4. Talk to your elephants in a low voice. You can't hear them, but they can hear you.
5. Don't touch elephants or let them touch you.
6. Please don't touch the elephants' bodies without the Mahout's permission.
7. Never climb on or jump off elephants while they are standing.
8. Avoid sudden movements and loud noises close to the elephants.
9. Never approach the elephants outside of the Mahout's presence.
10. In a queue, stay away from the legs and the trunk of the elephant in front of you.
11. The Mahout should be asked for assistance if a problem or elephant for any reason.
12. Follow the direction of the Mahout when they are talking to you. Allow the Mahout to make decisions regarding the elephants.
13. Getting up a queue you should look forward and not backwards.

> AFTER THE FIRST 15 MINUTES, THE STUDENTS ARE LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES. WHEN THE ELEPHANT ENTERS THE WATER WITH HIS HEAVY STEP, IT FEELS LIKE SHE MIGHT TRIP UP. FAR BELOW: ODILE HABEL FROM HORS LIGNE, CRIES PAI, PAI ("MOVE FORWARDS!") AS MUCH AS SHE WANTS—PANG PUANG PHET ISN'T FAZED!

> APRÈS LE PREMIER QUART D'HEURE, LES ÉLÈVES SE DERROULENT SEULS. AVEC SA DÉMARCHE PATAUDE, ON A L'IMPRESSION QUE L'ÉLEPHANT POURRAIT TRESSAUSER EN ENTRANT DANS L'EAU. EN BAS: ODILE HABEL, DE HORS LIGNE, A BEAU CRIER PAI, PAI - AVANCEZ! - À PANG PUANG PHET, CELLE-CI N'EST NULLEMENT IMPRESSIONNÉE!



blue jackets and traditional Thai pants—while around our necks hangs a useful card featuring the main commands in Thai to direct the elephant. *Song soong* means “lift your leg,” so that the mahout can clamber on to the back of the animal; *hab soong* means “to dismount”; *pai*—“forwards”; *hou*—“stop”; *baen*—“turn”... There are a dozen basic commands such as these, and a dozen more elaborate ones that ask the Elephant to drink, lie down, or slow down. The chief mahout starts with a few basic recommendations. Basic, but very useful and very welcome considering the size of the animal I’m dealing with: don’t pass behind the elephants; avoid their ears—a slap from one of those can really hurt; and watch your fingers when you feed them: elephants often confuse them with bananas. Each apprentice is assigned his or her own elephant, always female, since they are of smaller size and more compliant than bulls.

> GETTING TO KNOW PANG My elephant is called Pang Puang Phet. She is 37 years old, charmingly nonchalant but with a very distinct personality—read: grumpy! When she first joined the camp, she gorged on bananas and sugar cane for three days, having arrived half starved after working on the street of northern Thailand for many years. She has since understood that food is in plentiful supply here, and now she is in excellent shape, an elephant who shows restraint and who



knows how to just say no when she isn't hungry. If her appointed mahout insists, going so far as to try and slip one directly in her mouth, she pulls it out with her trunk, tosses it to the ground, and gives the impertinent apprentice an exasperated sigh. The mahouts-in-training line up beside their elephants and await the signal to climb up. I don't feel apprehensive, but impatient. I

glance once more at the card to remember the command—and finally we are given the green light! A flurry of *song soong*'s ring out in tentative Thai... Fortunately, the elephants are not picky about our pronunciation, and they all lift their legs gracefully. I step up and grab hold of the top of Pang Puang Phet's ears, then slide to the top of her head and sit on my knees. I place my feet

behind her ears: Presumably, or so I have been told, I can use them to enforce any commands to go left, right, forward... This is nothing like horseback riding. Pang's skin is thick and rough, spotted with a few very tough hairs. Still, it still makes me want to pet her... With two hands flat on her head, I give my first real command: *pai*, forward march! Pang is not impressed. So I say it again, ▶



more firmly this time, and add a few small kicks behind the ears for good measure. This time something happens. I'm impressed; her pace is gentle, very comfortable even. I feel safe enough to dare a glance behind me to see how the other mahouts are faring. An obstacle course has been set up in the middle of a clearing. The professional mahouts stand nearby, but there is not much they can do. We have to slalom our way

through the course on our own merit—*pai, pai, baen, houl!*— and as we all cry out our commands in a cacophony of discordant Thai, I'm amazed how unfazed our elephants appear. The huge animals move about, a little awkwardly at first perhaps, but without an apparent care in the world, while we juggle between holding on to their ears, looking at the commands card, and not falling off. Once we have cleared this first

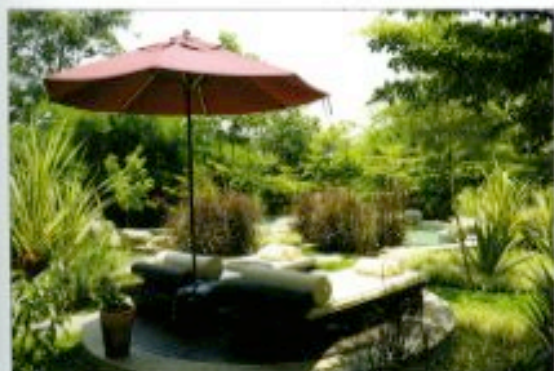
test, we set off for a two-hour trek through the jungle. At first, it seems much easier than the slalom, a chance to rest, sit back and enjoy the countryside. Except that Pang Puang Phet decides to go on a gourmet trip in the middle of the trek, plunging her trunk into

INFOS:

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> OPPOSITE: ODILE HABEL HAS GIVEN UP TRYING TO STAY DRY WHILE BATHING PANG PUANG PHET—WITH ALMOST AS MUCH SKILL AS THE AGILE PROFESSIONAL MAHOUT. BELOW: THE FOUR SEASONS TENTED CAMP OFFERS PLENTY OF MODERN AMENITIES TO REST AND RELAX, IN A 19TH-CENTURY COLONIAL SETTING.

> CI-CONTRE: ODILE HABEL S'APPLIQUE À DONNER UN BAIN À PANG PUANG PHET – SANS PLUS TROP SE SOUCIER DE SE MOUILLER. CI-DESSOUS: TOUT LE LUXE MODERNE DU FOUR SEASONS TENTED CAMP POUR SE RELAXER DANS UNE AMBIANCE QUI RAPPELLE CELLE DES EXPÉDITIONS DU XIX^E SIÈCLE.



thicket of succulent branches—and she takes me along with her. Only one in three orders that come out of my mouth has any effect, and I can't read my card anymore! Finally, I find the right word: *soek*, backwards!

Too late: Pang has already moved on, heading into the jungle where she will be spending the night while we return to the hotel. Once she finds her appointed spot, she won't budge. When I try to get her to turn her head for a last photograph, her temper flares. As she starts thumping the ground with her trunk, I decide that it's better not to insist.

We roll out of bed at dawn the next day, and head into the jungle at 8 a.m. to retrieve our elephants. It's time for breakfast and a bath. Pang needs some encouragement, but eventually agrees to let me climb aboard. She's obviously not a morning elephant—one thing we have in common—and stumbles with a sleepy step to the pond to be showered and brushed down. Quite a delicate operation indeed: I have to lean down to the water, plunge a basket into the pond and pour it over Pang—without falling off or getting too wet in the process. And to think that the professional mahouts can do it all standing up!

Off to feed her a few tons of food—and another day of classes will begin. ■

ODILE HABEL



C'est une adresse très confidentielle! Le Four Seasons Tented Camp, en Thaïlande, dans le Triangle d'or, fait partie des plus beaux hôtels du monde. Mais sa vraie originalité, c'est l'organisation de cours d'initiation au métier de mahout, le nom indien désignant le conducteur d'un éléphant.

9 h du matin. Je me retrouve avec trois autres apprentis mahout dans une drôle de salle de cours en plein air, au milieu d'amoncellements de bananes et de cannes à sucre que les éléphants frappent sur le sol pour les casser. Chacun élève porte, autour du cou, une petite carte sur laquelle figurent les principales commandes en thaï

pour diriger l'éléphant: song soong – pour lever la jambe et permettre au mahout de monter; hab soong – pour descendre; pai – en avant; how – stop; baen – tourner, etc. Au total: une vingtaine d'ordres.

10 Après quelques recommandations de base – ne pas passer derrière l'éléphant, faire attention aux oreilles pour ne pas recevoir un coup en pleine figure... –, chaque apprenti se voit assigner son éléphant.

La mienne s'appelle Pang Puang Phet. Elle a 37 ans, une nonchalance désarmante et un caractère bien affirmé. Elle travaillait dans les rues des villes avant de rejoindre le camp. Affamée, elle y a passé les trois premiers jours à manger. Aujourd'hui, Pang Puang Phet affiche une forme olympique. Elle a bien compris que la nourriture est désormais assurée et n'hésite pas à jeter négligemment une banane par terre quand elle n'a plus faim.

On attend le signal pour monter. Aucune appréhension, mais beaucoup d'impatience. Un dernier coup d'œil à la carte pour se rappeler la commande et c'est parti. Des song soong à l'accent thaï douteux fusent de partout. Mais les éléphants ne sont pas trop exigeants sur la prononciation et ils acceptent

DEVENEZ MAHOUT EN TROIS JOURS

de bonne grâce de lever leur patte sur laquelle on prend appui pour se hisser sur l'encolure en s'agrippant aux oreilles. Ensuite, on s'avance jusque sur le dessus de la tête, où l'on s'assoit sur les genoux. Les pieds se trouvent juste derrière les oreilles, où ils donnent de petits coups pour accompagner les ordres.

La peau de Pang Puang Phet n'a rien de la douceur de celle d'un cheval. Elle est épaisse et rugueuse, ce qui n'empêche pas d'avoir envie de lui faire plein de câlins!

Les deux mains posées bien à plat sur sa tête, je lance mon premier vrai ordre: pai – avance! Pang Puang Phet n'est pas impressionnée. Je répète avec plus de fermeté et j'ajoute de minicoups de pied pour faire bonne mesure. Cette fois, elle se décide. Son pas est souple, harmonieux, très confortable. On trouve vite son équilibre.

Premier exercice: le slalom a été aménagé. Les choses se compliquent. Les mahout professionnels restent à proximité, mais leur intervention est limitée, c'est aux apprentis de se débrouiller. Pai, pai, baen, how... Les éléphants se mettent en branle. Ces géants à la démarche pataude se croisent et se frottent avec une parfaite décontraction, tandis que leurs apprentis mahout se concentrent et s'écritent sur leur carte de commandes avec un succès mitigé. Peu importe, les éléphants,

eux, maîtrisent très bien l'art du slalom! L'entraînement se poursuit par un trek dans la jungle. L'exercice semble simple. Sauf que Pang Puang Phet confond trek et promenade gastronomique, stoppant net pour plonger sa trompe au milieu d'arbres aux feuilles visiblement succulentes. Je m'agite, lui crie des ordres auxquels elle répond dans une moyenne de un sur trois. Je m'embrouille dans mes commandes, relis ma carte et mes traductions. Enfin, j'ai trouvé: «Recule – sock.» L'omni, c'est que j'arrive trop tard: Pang Puang Phet a déjà repris sa route.

Deuxième jour. Il est à peine 8 h du matin et je m'enfonce dans la jungle avec les mahout pour aller chercher les éléphants. C'est l'heure du bain. Son mahout appelle Pang Puang Phet. Plusieurs fois. Enfin, elle émerge entre deux arbres. Elle reste quelques secondes, immobile, à observer avant de se décider à venir. Elle accepte que je grimpe sur elle avec une certaine mauvaise grâce. Mal réveillée, elle avance d'un pas traînant jusqu'à l'étang pour être douillée et brossée. L'opération est délicate. Penchée sur le côté, en équilibre instable, je plonge un panier dans l'eau pour arroser Pang Puang Phet. Encore dégoûtante – et moi aussi –, Pang Puang Phet avance jusqu'à l'esplanade pour son petit déjeuner.

Une nouvelle journée de cours commence. ■

> ELEPHANT DRIVING CLASSES LAST FOR THREE DAYS, AND ARE ORGANIZED JOINTLY BY THE FOUR SEASONS AND THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE ASIAN ELEPHANT FOUNDATION. THERE ARE SIX ELEPHANTS AND FOURTEEN CALVES ON TWO FIELDS OWNED BY THE FOUNDATION.

> LA FORMATION DE CONDUCTEUR D'ÉLÉPHANT DURE TROIS JOURS ET S'INSCRIT DANS LE CADRE D'UNE COLLABORATION ENTRE L'HÔTEL ET LA FONDATION DES ÉLÉPHANTS ASIATIQUES DU TRIANGLE D'OR. IL Y A SIX ÉLÉPHANTS ET QUATORZE BÉBES SUR DEUX CHAMPS APPARTENANT À LA FONDATION.

