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From City Streets to Jungle Paths: Dr Nissa's Life Among the Giants

In the highlands of the Golden Triangle, Anantara's anniversary 'People Who Inspire' series turns to the veterinarian safeguarding a community of rescued elephants.



▲ Dr Nissa Mututanont Head Veterinarian at the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation

High in the misty mountains of Northern Thailand, jungle paths wind from the riverbanks into a 160-acre bamboo forest sanctuary where a spirited herd of rescued elephants live out their days in safety. Caring for them is Dr Nissa Mututanont, head veterinarian at the [Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation \(GTAEF\)](#).

Like the small-animal vet she once imagined becoming, Dr Nissa still makes daily house calls. But unlike New York City and Khon Kaen, where she trained, her rounds now take her through a

traditional mahout village rather than city apartment blocks. Her role is not only to safeguard the elephants' wellbeing but to help ensure that both her charges and their human handlers can flourish in the modern world.

Many of the pachyderms in her care once performed on city streets or carried tourists on their backs. Raised among people, they cannot survive in the wild. Now retired, they encounter guests from the neighbouring Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort only during scheduled activities such as morning walks, feeding, bathing and other gentle, respectful forms of engagement designed around the elephants' needs. More often, guests observe from a distance: sleeping in transparent jungle bubbles among the herd or watching from wide verandas as the elephants wander through the forest below.

What surprised Nissa when she placed her first treat into a waiting trunk had nothing to do with their size, and everything to do with a small, startling truth. "Elephants have no smell; at best, they smell like the earth," she reflects. Living, breathing creatures carved from something as old as time.

"Being so large and grounded, they are like mountains that have weathered everything."

From a city dweller who once saw elephants simply as "big and grey animals", Nissa has walked an unexpected path of destiny to become GTAEF's elephant vet. Since 2015 she has grown from a student of biology into a guardian of giants, learning to read the subtle boundaries, quirks and personalities of the twenty-two elephants under her care.

Her first months were spent simply watching them eat. For some, it is a slow, deliberate ritual: smelling each tuft of grass before selecting it, knocking off the soil fastidiously with their trunks, arranging blades to one side and roots to the other. Others shear off the roots with their teeth and get straight to business. In these small gestures, she found the key to their individual characters.

Then came the learning. Using padded sticks, gentle cues and sunflower seeds to help elephants participate in their own medical care, she has helped train more than 400 mahouts in these techniques, creating a culture of cooperation rather than fear. The learning went both ways. Working alongside traditional mahouts reshaped her understanding of Thai culture.

“The elephant is the old world, the mahout is the modern world. Together they move as one.”

With target training, elephants have the freedom to stay or to leave. Some are naturally drawn to human interaction; others prefer to be left alone, like the older elephants for whom Nissa prepares medicinal food balls in a daily gesture of respect for animals who have endured hardship and finally found a place to rest. The more sociable characters take part in the resort’s signature Walking with Giants experience.

“Their calm energy grounds people. For some guests, it becomes overwhelming in the most beautiful way.”

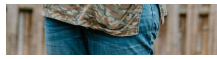
Two elephants, in particular, stay close to her heart. Poonlarp, who lost part of her ear and once worked in a circus, still greets Nissa with bright eyes and an open mouth, asking for treats. She grieved deeply when her daughter died, yet slowly found joy again with her best friend Yuki. Jathong, calm and wise, has had seven mahouts yet never hardened. She welcomes each new human with gentle acceptance and now spends her days with her elephant companion Kummool, even volunteering for overnight duty at the Jungle Bubble Lodge.

These stories, Nissa believes, embody the spirit of the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation, speaking of resilience, dignity and the possibility of healing that has touched more than 50 animals since its founding. As GTAEF’s veterinarian, she sees her work as part of a larger mission.

“I am, somehow, a guardian of the elephant. We hope tomorrow’s world will be kinder and more understanding of their circumstances.”

Learn more about Anantara’s 25th anniversary celebrations on anantara.com.





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Contact details

Mark Thomson

Group Director of PR and Communications
mthomson@minor.com
[+66 \(0\)2 365 7678](tel:+6623657678)

JJ Minder

Assistant Director of Public Relations & Communications
jminder@minor.com

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