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Notes from the Field: John Roberts, a Man of Many (Elephant) Hats

When asked what impelled him to work with elephants, Director of Anantara Elephant Camp John Roberts admits it wasn't the elephants themselves. Rather, it was the deep and enduring culture which surrounds them which piqued his interest. Back when the mild-mannered Englishman worked as a naturalist guide at Tiger Tops resort in Chitwan, Nepal, he couldn't help but notice that the mahouts (elephant handlers) were always the fellows having the most fun. Having grown up around elephants and the bucolic jungle lifestyle in which they dwelt, they had a flip-flopped foot in each of two worlds, the modern and the timeless.

Certainly that now describes Roberts' life at the Anantara to a T. Spending the majority of his days in a quaint raised bamboo structure on the border of the resort's elephant camp, a verdant area nestled in a narrow valley of the sprawling grounds, one could easily envision him inhabiting the same scene some hundred years ago. That is, until he whips out his cell phone and laptop computer. When it comes to incorporating elephants into local tourism, Roberts is one of the foremost authorities in the country and regularly consults with elephant aficionados and researchers all over the world. Moreover, he maintains a lively, fascinating blog (<http://elephant-tails.anantara.com>) in which he shares his observations, anecdotes and opinions about the elephants he oversees at the camp, and elephants in general.

Also helping to bridge the traditional natural world with the modern, scientific one, Roberts has helped facilitate an expanding amount of elephant research at the camp. From upcoming studies involving elephant intelligence to completed ones regarding calcium levels in elephant mothers' milk to an ongoing program which employs elephants in therapy for autistic human children, this quiet, leafy outpost a stones' throw from the Burmese border is rapidly becoming a major nexus of international elephant scholarship. Even though it may risk disturbing the carefully-cultivated peace here, Roberts is eager to have many more elephant researchers come out and help unlock the mysteries of these incredible animals and help them flourish in a modernizing world in which their numbers are now threatened.

Roberts is a manager of many hats, both in the camp and at the King's Cup Elephant Polo tournament. Here he is best known as the official referee, sprinting around the grassy polo pitch in signature flip-flops. More importantly, however, he is in charge of safeguarding the well-being of his beloved elephants, and is consequently entitled to the final word when it comes to what happens on the field.

Also see:

<http://twitter.com/elehelp>

<http://www.helpingelephants.org/>

www.anantrara.com