HOME

STOP Riding Elephants in Thailand: A New Investigation Reveals 69% Live in Poor Welfare Conditions

By bestfolkmedicine · 08/11/2026 · 9 min read



Imagine traveling thousands of miles to Thailand, surrounded by breathtaking landscapes, tropical forests, and extraordinary wildlife. Among the experiences advertised to visitors is something many people consider unforgettable: riding on the back of an elephant.

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For years, elephant rides have been marketed as a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Tourists smile for photographs, families enjoy the experience, and social media fills with images of these magnificent animals carrying visitors through beautiful scenery.

But behind some of those picture-perfect moments lies a troubling reality.

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Animal welfare experts are warning that many elephants used in Thailand's tourism industry continue to suffer from restrictive living conditions, stressful interactions, and inadequate care.

And a major investigation released in 2026 suggests the problem is far from over.

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A Disturbing Discovery About Thailand's Elephant Tourism Industry

In January 2026, World Animal Protection published a report titled *Bred to Entertain*, examining the welfare of captive elephants used in tourism across Thailand.

Researchers assessed 236 tourism venues housing 2,849 elephants between February 2024 and January 2025.

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Their findings were alarming.

Approximately 69% of the elephants assessed were living in poor or unacceptable welfare conditions.

Only 5% were housed at facilities receiving the highest welfare scores.

The investigation identified problems including:

- Elephants restrained with short chains
- Limited opportunities to roam freely
- Inadequate nutrition and poor living conditions
- Insufficient access to veterinary care

- Forced participation in tourist activities
- Stressful interactions and restrictive management practices

Although elephant rides and performances have declined in some locations, many animals remain involved in tourism activities that raise serious welfare concerns.

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For travelers who genuinely love animals, these findings raise an important question:

Are we unintentionally supporting suffering when we pay to interact with elephants?

What Tourists Rarely See Before an Elephant Ride

An elephant calmly carrying visitors may appear comfortable and cooperative.

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However, the animal's behavior during a short tourist encounter does not reveal its entire history or daily living conditions.

Elephants are enormous, intelligent, socially complex animals. Managing them in captivity requires extensive training and control.

In some traditional tourism operations, handlers use restrictive equipment, intimidation, or painful methods to make elephants comply with commands.

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One controversial tool is the bullhook, also called an ankus.

This instrument has historically been used to control elephants, but its misuse can cause pain, injury, and fear.

Animal welfare organizations have documented abusive training and handling practices at certain elephant tourism facilities.

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Not every handler uses the same methods, and welfare standards vary significantly between venues.

Nevertheless, tourists should understand that a seemingly peaceful elephant ride does not automatically indicate humane treatment.

Elephants Are Far More Intelligent Than Many People Realize

One reason elephant welfare deserves serious attention is the remarkable complexity of these animals.

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Elephants possess sophisticated social behaviors and an impressive capacity for learning.

In the wild, Asian elephants develop relationships, communicate through sounds and body language, and interact within changing social groups.

They also engage in exploration, feeding, bathing, and other natural activities that occupy much of their day.

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Researchers have documented behaviors consistent with empathy, cooperation, social recognition, and responses to the distress of other elephants.

Young elephants often maintain strong relationships with their mothers and other members of their social groups.

Restricting these animals to small spaces or preventing meaningful social contact can interfere with important natural behaviors.

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Captivity does not automatically mean an elephant is suffering, but its environment, management, freedom of movement, and opportunities for social interaction are crucial.

The Hidden Problem With Chaining Elephants

One of the most concerning findings in welfare investigations involves the routine use of chains.

At some facilities, elephants spend substantial periods restrained, with limited space to walk or explore.

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This is particularly troubling because elephants are naturally active animals.

In the wild, they may travel considerable distances while searching for food, water, and suitable habitat.

Movement helps support their physical condition and allows them to engage in natural behaviors.

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When elephants are repeatedly prevented from moving freely, their physical and psychological welfare may be compromised.

Restricted movement can contribute to problems involving the feet, muscles, and general activity levels, especially when combined with unsuitable ground surfaces or insufficient exercise.

Some captive elephants also display repetitive behaviors, such as swaying or rocking.

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These behaviors can be associated with stress, frustration, or past experiences, although their causes require careful assessment.

What appears amusing or charming to an inexperienced visitor may sometimes indicate a welfare problem.

Why Elephant Riding Raises Serious Welfare Concerns

An elephant is certainly strong enough to move enormous objects.

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But that does not mean repeatedly carrying tourists is harmless.

The welfare concerns surrounding elephant riding involve much more than the weight of a person.

Researchers and animal welfare specialists consider several factors:

Training methods: How was the animal taught to accept riders and follow commands?

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Working conditions: How frequently does the elephant carry tourists, and how much opportunity does it have to rest?

Equipment: Is the riding equipment properly fitted, and could it cause pressure or discomfort?

Environment: Does the elephant have access to suitable ground, shade, water, and opportunities for natural movement?

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Freedom of choice: Can the animal avoid interactions, or is participation compulsory?

An elephant's welfare depends on the combination of these conditions, not simply whether it can physically support a rider.

According to World Animal Protection's latest assessment, venues offering elephant rides generally received substantially lower animal welfare scores than observation-only facilities.

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That difference suggests that the type of tourism experience offered can be an important indicator of the broader conditions in which elephants live.

Even Some "Ethical" Elephant Experiences May Be Misleading

As awareness of elephant riding has grown, many tourist businesses have changed their marketing.

Instead of advertising rides, some now promote experiences such as bathing elephants, feeding them, walking beside them, or spending the day as an elephant caretaker.

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These activities are frequently presented as humane alternatives.

But the word *ethical* on a brochure does not guarantee good animal welfare.

The 2026 investigation found that 54% of the elephants assessed were used in washing or caretaking activities marketed as hands-on experiences.

Such activities may still involve close control, restraints, and repeated interactions that the elephants cannot freely avoid.

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This does not mean every facility offering contact operates identically.

It does mean visitors should look beyond attractive photographs and reassuring descriptions.

A genuine commitment to animal welfare should be visible in how elephants live throughout the day, not just during scheduled tourist activities.

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How to Recognize a More Elephant-Friendly Sanctuary

Fortunately, visitors can still appreciate elephants while making more responsible tourism choices.

Animal welfare organizations generally favor observation-based experiences that allow elephants to behave naturally without direct tourist contact.

When researching an elephant sanctuary, look for the following characteristics:

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- Visitors observe elephants from a respectful distance instead of riding them.
- Elephants have space to walk, explore, and forage.
- The facility does not force elephants to perform tricks.
- Social interaction with compatible elephants is encouraged.
- Clean water, appropriate food, shade, and veterinary care are available.
- The sanctuary does not advertise elephant painting, dancing, or circus-style performances.
- Staff explain their elephant management and welfare policies transparently.
- Close-contact activities are not required to entertain paying visitors.

Be especially cautious of facilities that promise unlimited touching, hugging, bathing, or posing for photographs.

The most memorable wildlife experience does not always involve physical contact.

Sometimes, observing an elephant peacefully exploring its surroundings is far more meaningful.

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Why Simply Releasing Captive Elephants Is Not Always Possible

Some people understandably wonder why elephants kept in tourism facilities cannot simply be returned to the wild.

Unfortunately, the situation is complicated.

Captive elephants may have spent decades living around humans.

Some have health problems, injuries, behavioral challenges, or limited experience surviving independently.

Releasing these animals without appropriate preparation could put both elephants and people at risk.

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Habitat loss and conflict between wild elephants and nearby communities create additional challenges.

For these reasons, reputable rescue facilities focus on improving captive elephants' quality of life through appropriate space, nutrition, veterinary treatment, social opportunities, and reduced human interference.

Responsible tourism should also consider the livelihoods of local workers and elephant caretakers.

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Supporting better welfare practices and sustainable employment can help communities move away from exploitative entertainment without abandoning the people and animals already dependent on the industry.

What Every Tourist Can Do to Help

Individual travelers may feel powerless against a large tourism industry.

But consumer choices influence the kinds of experiences businesses continue to offer.

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Before booking an elephant attraction, research its animal welfare practices and look for independent assessments where possible.

Choose observation-only experiences over rides, performances, or forced encounters.

Avoid attractions that use elephants primarily as props for photographs.

Ask tour operators direct questions about chaining, training methods, daily routines, and veterinary supervision.

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If you witness suspected abuse, report it to an appropriate local animal welfare organization or authority rather than confronting handlers in a potentially dangerous situation.

Most importantly, share accurate information with others who are planning to visit Thailand.

Many travelers participate in elephant attractions because they love animals and genuinely believe they are supporting conservation or rescue efforts.

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Better information allows them to make more informed choices.

The Future of Elephant Tourism Could Look Very Different

There are encouraging signs that attitudes toward elephant tourism are changing.

The latest welfare assessments suggest that some operators have moved away from traditional elephant rides and performances.

Observation-focused experiences are also becoming more visible.

However, progress remains uneven, and many elephants continue to live in conditions that fall short of acceptable welfare standards.

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A meaningful transformation will require cooperation among tourism businesses, conservation organizations, veterinarians, local communities, governments, and travelers.

It will also require a change in how people think about interacting with wildlife.

An elephant does not need to carry a person, paint a picture, or perform a trick to be extraordinary.

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Its natural behavior is remarkable enough.

Final Thoughts: The Best Elephant Experience May Be the One You Watch From a Distance

Thailand is home to extraordinary natural beauty, rich cultural traditions, and some of the world's most remarkable wildlife.

Elephants are an important part of that heritage.

But appreciating these animals should not require controlling their every movement or turning them into entertainment.

The findings from recent welfare investigations remind us that attractive tourist experiences can sometimes conceal difficult realities.

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Travelers have an opportunity to support a different approach — one that prioritizes animal welfare, responsible observation, and genuine respect for wildlife.

The next time you see an elephant ride advertised as an unforgettable adventure, consider what the experience might mean for the animal.

Sometimes, the kindest travel memory is not the photograph you take sitting on an elephant.

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It is the moment you watch one living more freely, without being asked to perform for anyone.

Would you refuse to ride an elephant after learning about these welfare concerns? Or have you visited an elephant sanctuary in Thailand? Share your thoughts and experiences in the comments.

Read online: https://bestfolkmedicine.com/2026/11/why-tourists-should-stop-riding-elephants-thailand/

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