

## PRACTICAL TRAVELER

## Up Close, but Doing No Harm

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

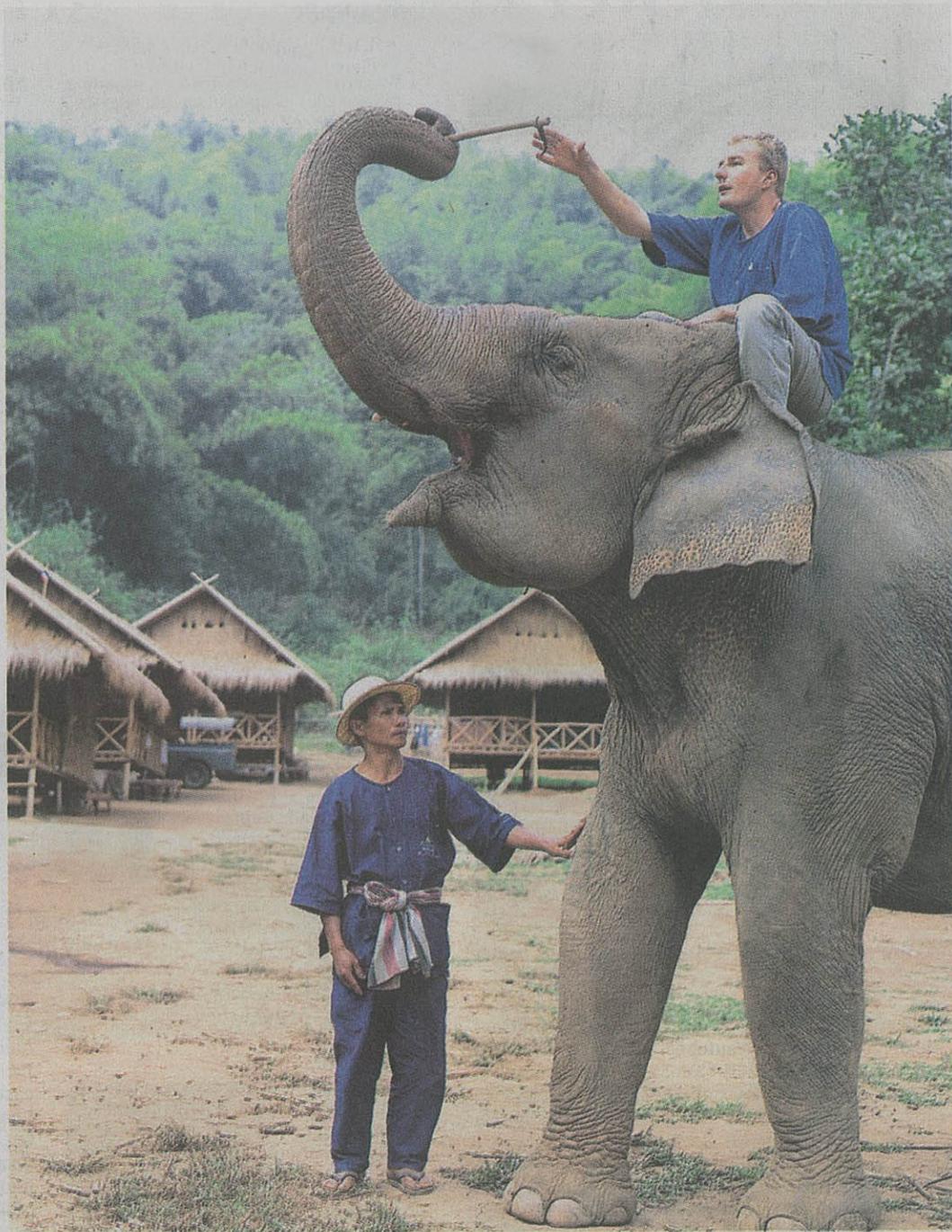
**W**HITE-WATER rafting in Costa Rica. Riding an elephant in Thailand. Communing with indigenous people in Ecuador. Tour operators are marketing activities like these to travelers in search of “authentic” experiences, often using buzzwords like “eco-friendly” or “sustainable.” But how do you know which tour operators are truly responsible or simply exploitive?

“While tourism is a vital source of income for many developing countries, it can also result in pollution, deforestation, inefficient energy use and cultural exploitation,” said Ronald Sanabria, vice president of sustainable tourism at the Rainforest Alliance, an environmental group based in New York. The best sustainable tourism businesses not only recycle, conserve water and energy, and use locally produced goods, they also hire local employees, support community projects and preserve cultural heritage.

If you are in the market for a sustainable vacation, look for operators, like the ones mentioned below, that have been certified or recommended by reputable organizations like the Rainforest Alliance, Sustainable Travel International or other third-party entities.

And don’t choose an outfitter based on price alone. “Companies that focus on supporting environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation and localized economic development typically have a higher overhead than those that don’t support sustainable tourism outcomes,” said Brian Mullis, chief executive of Sustainable Travel.

What follows is a list of travel experiences, their potential consequences, and outfitters that offer ways to enjoy the same or similar activities in a responsible fashion.



The elephant camp at Antara Golden Triangle Resort & Spa in Thailand.

## Riding Elephants In Thailand

**CAUSES FOR CONCERN** Camps, which typically offer elephant rides through the jungle, can be excellent places for visitors to learn about elephant conservation. But some elephants are mistreated, and training methods may be abusive. Elephants that look lethargic or repeatedly swing their heads can be indicators of mistreatment. And performing certain tricks, like balancing on two legs, is often a sign of cruel training, according to ElefantAsia, a nonprofit organization in Southeast Asia dedicated to the conservation and protection of the Asian elephant.

**LOW-IMPACT OPTIONS** The Elephant Camp at Anantara Golden Triangle Resort & Spa at the convergence of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos hosts the northern extension of the Thai Elephant Conservation Center, set up by the Thai government, under royal patronage. For two weeks each month, it lends its veterinarians to the government veterinary hospital in Lampang to offer free care to Thailand's captive elephants, which are mainly used in tourism. The resort also has a separate charity, the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation, for abused elephants or those that cannot work. Guests can learn to ride and drive an elephant (included in the \$950 starting rate) but don't expect the animals to perform tricks.

Intrepid Travel, an Australian-based tour operator, is offering a new Short Break itinerary in northern Thailand (\$425 a per-

son) that includes a visit to an elephant sanctuary where travelers can feed, bathe and learn about protecting the animals. "We are also encouraging travelers to carefully consider whether taking an elephant ride is the best way to experience these amazing animals," said Darrell Wade, the company's chief executive. "I'm not sure I'd be happy lugging around tourists on my back all day."

## Visiting Ecuadorean Communities

**CAUSES FOR CONCERN** Many visitors to Ecuador want to interact with indigenous people who have rich cultural traditions involving food, crafts and costumes. But tourism revenue and other benefits can easily elude local economies. Patronizing foreign-owned resorts and other hotels and tourism businesses that are importing goods, services and labor can also lead to loss of income for locals.

**LOW-IMPACT OPTIONS** Kapawi Ecologo & Reserve in the southern Ecuadorean Amazon basin opened in 1996 as a partnership between Canodros, an Ecuadorean tourism company, and the Achuar people to develop an economically sustainable project that would help preserve the cultural and environmental riches of Ecuador's Amazon region. Canodros transferred the ownership of Kapawi to the Achuar in 2008. Rates start at \$1,240 a person for three nights, including a contribution to the Achuar community.

The Napo Wildlife Center,

where tourists can see monkeys, macaws and other jungle creatures while staying in eco-friendly cabanas (from \$820 a person for a three nights), is owned and operated by the Kichwa Indians of the Añangu territory. Their land lies inside the Yasuní National Park.

## Adventure Travel In Costa Rica

**CAUSES FOR CONCERN** Last year Costa Rica welcomed more than two million visitors, up about 30 percent from 2005. All those visitors leave a mark on the environment, whether from the growth in tourism infrastructure or something as seemingly benign as the repeated use of the same trails. Over time, these cumulative impacts may result in eroded landscapes and animal habitats, polluted waterways and less wildlife, notes the Rainforest Alliance in its "Practical Guide to Good Practice for Tropical Forest-Based Tours."

**LOW-IMPACT OPTIONS** On the Osa Peninsula near Corcovado National Park, Luna Lodge (from \$195 a person a night), which hires locally and uses hydroelectric energy, participates in several conservation projects, including purchasing forested lands for wildlife protection. Wild Planet Adventures, which uses Luna Lodge and other eco-friendly bases for its 14-day, \$4,398 Costa Rica Ultimate Wildlife Eco-tour, says it weighs every detail of the trip, from seeking out less-trodden rivers and trails to using refillable jugs of water so guests

don't leave behind plastic bottles.

On its nine-day, \$2,495 Adventures in Costa Rica trip, Mountain Travel Sobek uses local operators like Rios Tropicales, which is involved in several preservation projects. Power at its ecolodge is generated by a small hydroelectric plant and waste is recycled or composted.

## Philanthropic Travel In Africa

**CAUSES FOR CONCERN** Tours that include elements of volunteering or charity work have become popular in Africa and elsewhere, but misguided contributions can perpetuate dependency, according to the Center for the Responsible Travel, in Washington.

**LOW-IMPACT OPTIONS** AmericaShare, the nonprofit arm of Micato Safaris, has been working with the people of the Mukuru slum in Nairobi for 25 years, offering educational, medical and other programs. For every safari it sells (from \$7,040 a person) Micato pays school fees for a child who would otherwise stay home. Guests may participate in AmericaShare projects during their safaris.

The San Francisco-based tour operator Geographic Expeditions works with Campi ya Kanzi, an ecolodge built in partnership with the local Maasai community of Kuku Group Ranch in Kenya. A \$100-a-day conservation fee, paid by guests, helps compensate herders for livestock lost to predators and pays the salaries of local wildlife rangers who enforce anti-poaching regulations. ■