



# Assam shows signs of change | Andrews Blog

*Assam, north-east India.*

We arrived last night after landing in Guwahati, the capital of Assam in North East India. We were collected by our trusty driver, on behalf of the WTI (Wildlife Trust of India) and then began our afternoon long journey to the Bansbari lodge in Manas National Park. This road trip is always a highlight. Roadways in India are roadways for everybody. Cows lay in the sun in the middle of the road and children, dogs, chickens and goats are navigated around without a hint of frustration from the driver. Men and women walk along the roads four abreast much of the way wherever you drive and yet the journey always goes seamlessly as we weave in and around everything and everyone sometimes hitting top speed of 90kph.



*Preparing the sugar-cane used as the reward*

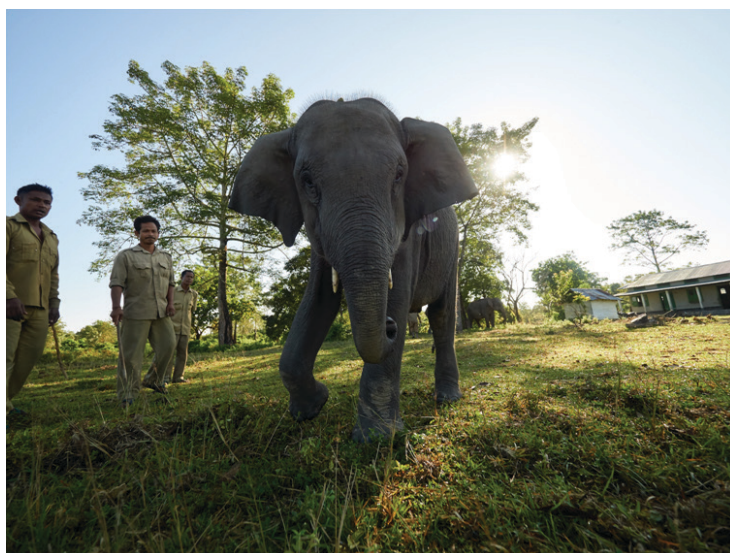
The air is smoky, the colours are wild, the smell is a vast spectrum and the tooting is endless but it is invigorating to be back here in Assam. The tolerance and the friendliness here is mellowing even though at one point we were stopped by armed guards for a proposed strike which soon evaporated, so once again we were on our way. Throughout Assam foreign phones don't work because of the risk of insurgency, mostly in the form of violence and occasional kidnapping. It's a pity because Assam is one of the most beautiful places on earth and has a rich biodiversity making it a mecca for eco tourists and biologists. The only drawback for us is the mosquitoes. You can bet that wherever there are elephants there are also mozzies. Mozzies here are mostly Malaria ones by day and Dengue and Chikungunya by night. I've had 2 of these diseases and don't propose to catch any more and I got the strong impression from Ben that he's not interested in experimenting with mosquito borne diseases either. They tell us that the monsoon rains were far stronger than usual this year, so mosquito paradise. The locals dismiss the seriousness and incidence of these diseases because they have some immunity. The biggest problems are for foreigners so we are careful.

## *Training Day 1.*

Coffee at 6.15 then into the jeep and off to the mahout camp some 2 km in a clearing of the jungle. We met up with our two translators, Rinku a vet with the WTI and Aftab, a WTI biologist whose job is to look after the swamp deer in the Park. The lodge assistant manager Bikash told us that just recently, a tiger leapt over the five foot wall next to our lodge and killed a cow. We've been keeping our eyes peeled.

This time in Assam our training was shortened to just three days because the training manual that I wrote last year was to be distributed, but as things go, it wasn't ready. This was a bit of a set-back because we had planned the three days to be interpreting and training from the book. Anyway no big deal, our mission this time now is to do 2 sessions per day: one on the morning and one in the evening.

When we reached the mahout camp, we were told that there were 2 three-year-old elephant calves with their mothers that would arrive from the jungle for us to begin our training. One female called Neela and a male called Monish. In the meantime the mahouts spent time cutting up sugar cane into bite-sized chunks to be used as food rewards, with a few bananas thrown in as well. When the elephants arrived we gave them a few minutes to settle in and then began with some explanation and demonstration of the early establishment of movements: single steps of forward and step-back. This first session was broken in to twenty-minute sets where the sequence of voice, pressure on the leg from the stick, removal of pressure, voice praise and food reward was established in the mahout's repertoire. By the end of the first set the elephants had got the idea and became eager students. When we had our tea break after the first twenty minutes, we couldn't get rid of them, they wanted to come too. During the tea break I explained the importance of consistency, making clear habits in the elephant's responses to signals, having boundaries of control, and using food rewards for motivation (as well as keeping the elephants with us as there are no walls and no tethers – they are free to leave at any time). I explained that mental security in humans as well as animals, comes from a clear, consistent and predictable behavioural environment, and that this doesn't include punishment for non-compliance. My challenge is to get the mahouts to take this way of training on and also to embrace some of their techniques, but just to polish them up a bit so that learning is optimised. The next sets of work showed even greater progress and so we returned to our lodge.



*Monish comes over to say hello*



*An anti-poaching patrol returned to camp during one of the training sessions. This river was flowing quite fast due to the higher than average rainfall during the wet season. The elephants crossed the river with ease, clearly demonstrating why there is currently no substitute for elephants in terms of transport for the guards to patrol the forrest.*

In the evening we went back to the mahout camp to do our second session of the day with two more sets of establishing further steps of step-back and forward and by this time, the elephants had begun to respond to the voice command alone. This was by no means reliable but it showed the first signs of going that way. Already we could see the propensity of the different characters of the two elephants. Monish the male was a little bit aggressive and quite pushy while Neela was a bit more easy going. The mahouts however were also different in character and training ability. Fortunately it seemed that Monish's mahouts were more skilled than Neela's, so let's see what transpires over the next few days.



*A good repetition rewarded by a mahout*