

# Myanmar begins | Andrews Blog

## Myanmar Day 1

There are more elephants in Myanmar than anywhere else in Asia. They suffer increasing habitat loss and there are only 2000 left in the wild while 5000 are in captivity. 3000 of these elephants were heavily involved in the logging industry. Things have now changed in Myanmar and using elephant for logging has now been stopped mostly because the timber industry has mostly been shut down.

So the question is what is the fate of these elephants? This is a huge question for Myanmar as it faces the decision as to whether to sell these elephants to China or whether to develop ecotourism and use them for elephant rides in Myanmar. There is not enough habitat left for them to be turned out to freedom in the forests and what's more, poaching is rife here too. The prospect of the elephants going to China is unthinkable. The journey there would be difficult and hazardous and they would be sued for entertainment most likely. However, the Chinese also have a penchant for not only ivory, but now there is a growing demand for consumption of the trunk and feet for which they pay a very high price and also, would you believe, for the penis as an aphrodisiac. It is possible that the culinary worth of the elephant is greater than or equal to the entertainment value according to Dr Zaw who has organised our workshop.

Our arrival was met with an official opening with officials and leaders, as we are beginning to find is the norm across most of our workshops in Asia. There were speeches that we didn't fully understand and a news crew arrived and did a story that aired on Sky News which we were hoping to see but didn't manage to catch.



*Opening Ceremony with Mahouts, officials and leaders.*



*The mahouts were each presented with a copy of our book, which appeared to be received with a lot of interest.*

We began our workshop at Wingo Baw elephant camp with 5 elephants. Two were too young to ride at ages two and three – they are not permitted to ride elephants in Myanmar until they are four years old. The other three were already being ridden, however there were some issues as we found in Thailand with various aspect of training though of a different nature.

My aim with the older elephants was to go back over their early training. I began with a demonstration of the training sequences (voice, pressure etc food etc). These elephants seemed a bit more calm and steady than the elephants I saw in Thailand, however they still didn't stand still when you walked away. Also they needed pressure to step backwards rather than do it from a voice signal. Not serious issues but certainly needed working on. I then showed by a demonstration how to train the elephants to stand still, however it took some time for the mahouts to learn this technique and the elephants also had some negative associations with the mahouts as a result of punishment whereas they didn't with me. So we had to work on this and it would take some time. Next I checked the ability of the elephants to pick up objects



with their trunks. I expected that they would have already learned this as they were ridden. Instead there were problems with all of them. One refused to even touch the stick as he had learned to fear it. So replaced the stick with a hat and he began touching it. The other two began touching then picking up the stick.

We then began work with the two very young elephants that were still with their mothers. They were both afraid of people and would hide behind their mothers, so we set about taming them. Both began cautiously taking food from our hands with their trunk only – we couldn't get anywhere near their mouths to deliver the food straight in there. The larger one of the two became a little braver and would linger a bit and smell us but then retreat. We managed to get some tamarin into his mouth. We left the camp feeling we had some work to do but that progress was in sight.



*Andrews demonstration got a lot of promising nods from the mahouts.*



*The tamarind was beautifully presented by the assistants on a tray, a good example of the attitudes towards the elephants that we encountered.*