

Bathing an Elephant is a BIG Job

The click-click-click of the ceiling fan awoke me; the queasy nervousness in my stomach made sure I didn't fall back to sleep, despite the early hour. The gravity of the day ahead slowly pierced my sleepiness, as I recalled with dread that today I was going to bathe an elephant.

In the darkness, I silently berated myself for agreeing to something so ridiculous. I hate water – I hate swimming – I even hate washing my hair, yet here I was embarking on some crazy activity I might not survive! Such were my darkest thoughts as I dressed for the trip, pulling on a swimsuit beneath shorts and a cotton shirt. Bundling my towel, video camera and sunhat into a bag, I reluctantly headed out the door.

Sam was waiting for me at the bottom of the hotel steps. I envied his carefree attitude as he leaned nonchalantly against the door of the comfortable jeep, the engine's hum assuring me of the air-conditioned coolness within. Sam was my gentle, smiling, knowledgeable driver-cum-guide, charged with keeping me entertained during my stay in Sri Lanka. So far he had taken me on city tours, shopping trips and jungle adventures. With him, I had bottle-fed baby elephants, released three-day-old turtles into the sea, and even stroked a porcupine. He had introduced me to a new way to eat fresh pineapple—chopped into rings by a machete-wielding grandmother who threw a handful of salt into the bag before I could stop her. It tasted surprisingly good. Now, I had submitted to his enthusiastic idea that I could not leave Sri Lanka without bathing an elephant. Whatever was I thinking to say “yes”?

Sam drove steadily along the dusty road, stopping the car a short while later and dashing along the busy street on his usual errand. I asked him once why he always stopped outside the temple

before each journey, and his reply humbled me. “The mountain roads are busy and dangerous. I make a prayer and an offering at the gate to ensure our safety.”

It wasn't just his attitude that earned my respect. Each day he greeted me, despite the sticky heat, wearing a crisp, collared shirt, tailored black trousers pressed to perfection, and highly polished dress shoes. When I visited his home and met his wife and two young daughters, I realized how incredibly difficult it was to maintain such sartorial standards while living in a house with no electricity.

We drove inland, the jeep climbing the steep, winding mountain roads through the rainforest. I calmed my butterfly nerves by concentrating on the oncoming traffic. It was the usual procession of ancient rusting vehicles: noisy three-wheeler tuk-tuks laden with workers, low-powered mopeds carrying a family of four, dilapidated trucks spewing pollution at every gear change, and the occasional elephant rattling its chains as it dragged huge logs along the road.

I tried not to think about what lay ahead. Bathing an elephant – how much water would that entail? Would it be like swimming with dolphins, I vaguely wondered, although I had never been brave enough to do that.

Sam pulled the car off the road and into a shady clearing beside a wide river. The rushing water bounced and buffeted over the smooth stony riverbed. I hopped out of the car and stretched, listening to the lively buzz and hum of a thousand invisible insects. Soon the heavy tread of an approaching elephant broke the tranquility. A moment later it emerged from the jungle carrying a mahout wearing little more than a loin cloth. The man jumped nimbly down, and the elephant began to pick its way down the grassy bank and into the clear water.

Sam took my video camera and urged me forward. He thrust two coconut-shell halves into my trembling hands, and nervously I waded into the river. The elephant knelt ponderously on his front knees, then rolled slowly onto his side with a splash, his mouth ajar in a jumbo-sized smile. You could almost hear his sighs of pleasure. Cautiously, I approached and began scooping water over that enormous gray hide, scrubbing with the coconut shell as I worked my way across his dusty flank. Soon, I became totally engrossed in the task, my fear of water and my nerves forgotten as I scooped and scrubbed, scooped and scrubbed. It became wonderfully therapeutic as I sought to serve and please my new best friend.

After about 20 minutes, the elephant began to struggle and rose onto his forelegs. Dimly I heard Sam shouting from the bank “Up! Miss Gillian, Up!” Responding to his voice, I grabbed the fraying rope around the elephant’s neck and scrambled up to sit on those broad shoulders as the elephant stood foursquare in the middle of the river. I never anticipated what happened next. The elephant reached its dexterous trunk into the river and began hosing up huge amounts of water, then he threw back his trunk, spraying water all over his head – and drenching me. Time after time he sucked up the water and tossed it back, and I was helpless to do anything except laugh with sheer delight at the absurdity of the situation.

Finally, the elephant had enough. Swaying with each step, he trundled up the river bank, with me riding high on his neck. I was soaked but jubilant, feeling better than if I had spent a day at the spa. A gigantic sense of achievement replaced my earlier fear of water and trepidation of large animals – for today I had bathed an elephant.