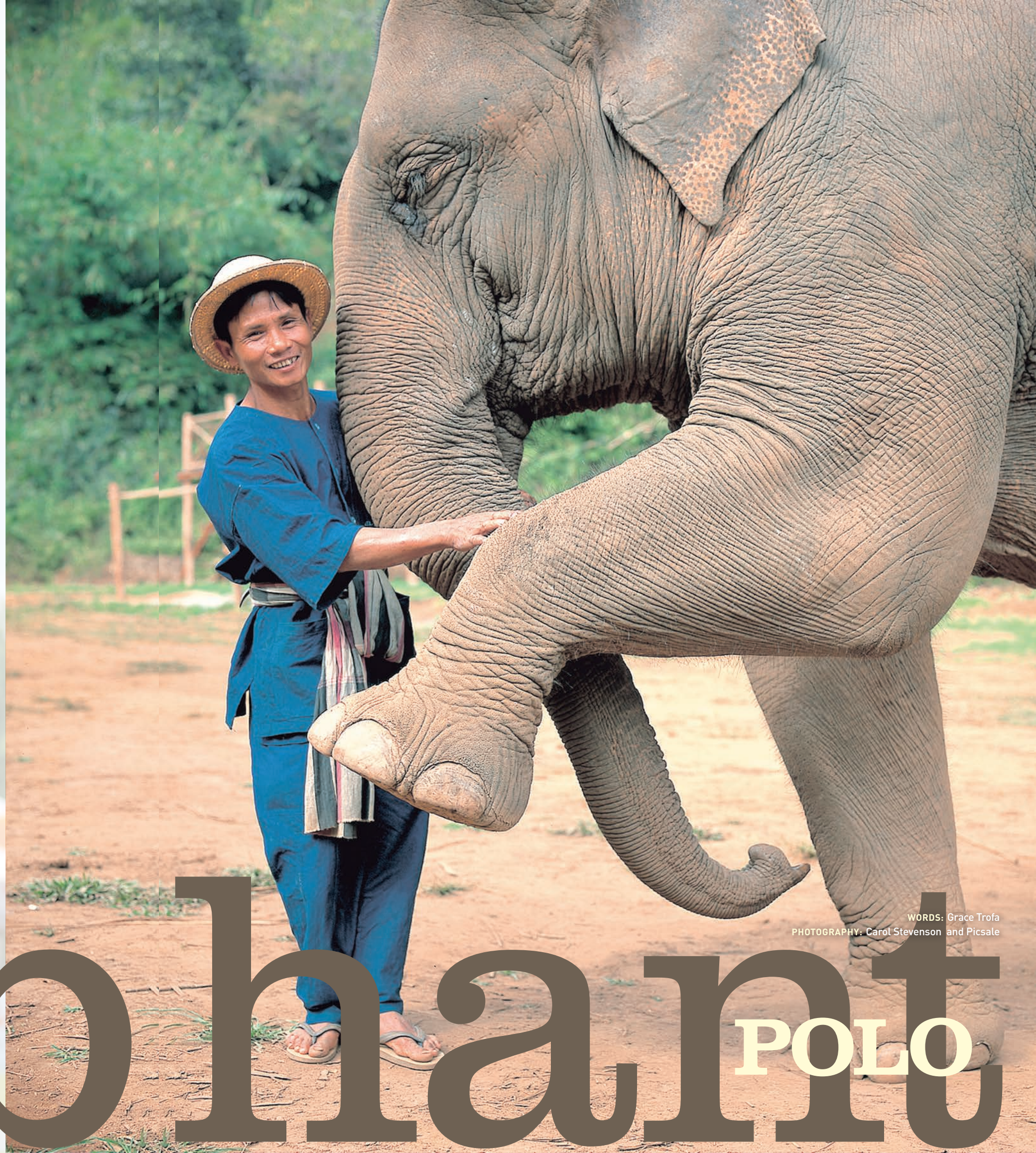


The **King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament** was introduced to Thailand in 2001 by Anantara Hotels, Resorts & Spas, and the 2012 event proved to be the **best** yet. To date, it has raised \$600,000 to fund projects such as the first **elephant hospital** in southern Thailand



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# Elephant POLO





Games can sometimes run long as no elephant may lie down in front of the goal mouth or pick up the ball in its trunk during play; both constitute a foul. Try telling that to an elephant...

LEFT: Ed Story of SOCO International playing in the King's Cup. He was the first to introduce Thai players into the tournament, with two former mahouts playing on his Rueang Chang team

Like so many great ideas, the King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament resulted from a conversation between two bon vivants, enjoying a round of drinks at a bar in St Moritz. James Manclark and Jim Edwards discovered they both shared a passion for polo, which was fine for Manclark, who enjoyed the sport in his native Scotland; but Edwards lived in the jungles of Nepal, where there are more elephants than polo ponies. It took the duo only six months to organise the first elephant polo game in 1982.

While there are other elephant polo tournaments – the World Elephant Polo Championships are still played annually in Nepal, and the tournament in Sri Lanka may be revived, although this is doubtful – they arguably do not share quite the same *joie de vivre* as this annual event that takes place in the seaside town of Hua Hin, the former royal retreat of the King of Thailand some 80 kilometres south of Bangkok. Edwards passed away recently, but his partner in crime, Manclark, though on in years, is still a formidable opponent and continues to take part in the event. The King's Cup is, for the most part, all fun and games, but these are competitive people. They also raise money for projects that work to improve the lives of Thailand's elephant population, these gentle animals that give the players so much joy by partnering them in a rollicking game of polo.

The Elephant Polo Tournament was introduced to Thailand in 2001 by Anantara Hotels, Resorts & Spas, and has become one of the biggest charitable events in the country. Held last September, the 11th annual King's Cup proved to be the best yet. Thanks to the spirited bidding at the final night auction, the amount raised to date is an impressive \$600,000, used to benefit projects such as the first elephant hospital in Krabi, southern Thailand.



FROM TOP: The King's Cup Tournament kicks off with a parade through town complete with bands and beauty queens; Team Anantara and Team Mercedes in action; A mahout with his charge; Mark Thomson of Anantara Hotels, Resorts & Spas meets an elephant





# the elephant story



ABOVE: Elephant polo enthusiast Ed Story and his wife Joey outside their Texan shop, The Elephant Story, which sells items from Asian craftsmen to benefit elephant conservation and village projects; BELOW: Katie (left) and Sara Story of the Sara Story Design Team; BOTTOM: The Nellies Team



The Sport of Kings, as more traditional polo is known, included some royalty last year. Prince Carl-Eugen Oettingen-Wallerstein, his wife Princess Anna and daughter Princess Joanna got into the swing of things and went head to head with the formidable New Zealand All Blacks rugby team. And, in the spirit of good sportsmanship, the macho All Blacks played a wild exhibition game against Thailand's Ladyboys, headed by Miss Tiffany Thailand, the country's most famous transgendered person, prior to their cabaret performance at the evening's gala dinner.

Players make their way to Thailand from around the world; perhaps, dare I say, the common denominator is a dose of eccentricity. And, shockingly, there are some professional polo players in the mix! There's plenty of heat, between the temperature and the testosterone, as they compete in teams sponsored by the titans of industry, including IBM, Mercedes-Benz, Citibank and King Power (Thailand's duty free shops). Then there's The Nellies, wonderful, real Asian ladies; Blue Label, a refreshing beverage from Johnnie Walker that made everyone friendlier; and the impossible to beat Audemars Piguet team with star players Uday and Angad Kalaan who practise at the family-owned Haryana Polo Club in India (fortunately there is a handicap system in place!).

Anantara's elephant activities aren't limited to elephant polo. The Anantara Golden Triangle Resort & Spa is a Lanna Thai-style hotel located in the north of Thailand, sitting on a hill overlooking the jungle of Burma, Laos and Thailand. It's a magical setting by any stretch of the imagination, made more so by the resort's onsite elephant camp. Here, 30 elephants live, assured of medical care and sustenance, in their natural habitat on 160 acres of land; most were rescued from the streets.

*There's plenty of heat, between the temperature and the testosterone, as players compete in teams sponsored by the titans of industry*

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, the elephant population in Thailand dwindled from 100,000 to just over 5,000. One of the many projects of The Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation and the King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament is research on the rehabilitation benefits elephants provide for autistic children.

Marion Walsh-Hedouin, Group Director of Public Relations for Anantara Hotels, Resorts & Spas, sheds some light on the game and on the care of the elephants: 'We have a very senior mahout called Lord, who puts out the call on the jungle wire for elephants. About 42 are chosen, and the elephants come down for at least 10 days. Lately, the elephants have been from their hometown of Surin, the cultural heart of the mahout and elephant tradition. We prefer to use street elephants that have a more difficult life. Our two veterinarians do a full check of the animals; they receive booster injections, proper food and get to sleep regular hours in a green environment. The mahout stays with the elephant. He has probably been with the elephant his entire life.'

The game rules are simple - up to five members per team, but only three members from each team play on the marked pitch, which measures 100 metres by 60 metres. The game is divided into two seven-minute chukkas, with a 15-minute interval where the teams swap elephants in the interest of fair play. Games can run longer as no elephant may lie down in front of the goal mouth or pick up the ball in its trunk during play; both constitute a foul. Try telling that to an elephant...

Each day the teams get in about five games before everyone starts craving the afternoon beverage of choice, a Pimm's Cup, and the elephants are looking for their treats of sugar cane. The elephant takes direction only from his mahout, while the player sits behind the mahout; teamwork is the key. As for the elephants, Walsh-Hedouin shows her affection for the animals: 'The elephants are amazing, playful animals and it doesn't take them long to catch on to the game. Every year there is a star elephant. In 2012 it was one of the smallest elephants, a little girl. You tend to think the runt elephant is not going to be able to play as well as the other elephants. You should have seen her! She was tearing up and down the pitch, trumpeting and making noise, like a celebrity. Everyone wanted her on their team because she was a real goer. The odd times she was sitting behind the goals, as defence, it was a disaster. She would start noisy trumpeting again because she wasn't happy until finally they had to move her back into the centre of the field, in the thick of the action. Then she was off again, a little Formula 1 elephant.'

For a more personal perspective, the guy to talk to is Ed Story, CEO of SOCO International, the oil and gas exploration and production company headquartered in

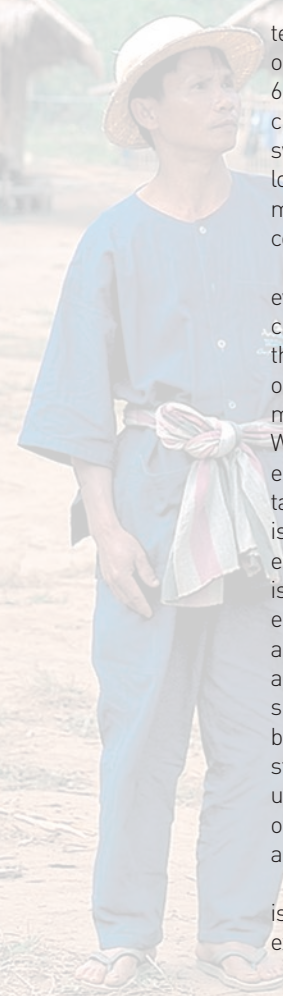
London. Among his friends, he's probably better known as a raconteur; Ed Story knows how to tell a story.

Thailand holds a special place in his heart: he has spent many years in the country, and now business dealings bring him back every six weeks. It all started as a way to unwind, learning to ride an elephant, which grew into a passion for the sport. At his 1,000 acre ranch in the hill country of Texas, Story makes do by climbing a ladder to mount a wooden elephant he had built so that he can perfect his swing. In summer 2012, he officially opened his store, The Elephant Story, in an old saloon that his wife, Joey, restored in Comfort, Texas. With more than 700 items from craftsmen throughout Asia, as well as those elephant polo team shirts, all proceeds from sales benefit elephant conservation and village projects.

Story was the first to introduce Thai players into the King's Cup. Two former mahouts play on his team, Rueang Chang, which is Thai for The Elephant Story. Like a true Texan, Story does everything in a big way. 'You have the factor of the elephant's capability, the mahout's capability and your own capability; trying to make the three different factors gel into a cohesive force to move forward. You have to be an elephant behavioural scientist to grasp it all, but it is just scintillating when you are on one of the small, fast elephants and the mahout knows what he is doing - there is nothing like it. The elephants can go quite fast. The first time up there you don't realise it beforehand, but once they start going, you say, "Oh my Lord!". You sit on what you can call a saddle, but it's really a kind of canvas with some sort of felt thing, and it's strapped on to the elephant and you try to secure yourself with some straps around your waist. In the last tournament, I was playing on a very fast small elephant against Audemars Piguet, usually the best team, when all of my restraining devices broke. The only way I could hold on to this elephant - I couldn't stop, it was continuous fast play - was to wrap my arm all the way around the mahout. I certainly wasn't going to fall off!'

In horse polo, the typical polo mallet is 52 inches long; in elephant polo, the absolute shortest is 76 inches and can go up to 100 inches, while the ball is the same size as in horse polo. There was an attempt to replace the balls with soccer balls, but the playful elephants liked to stomp on them. Story says that 'the ladies have an advantage, and it can be formidable; they can use both hands to swing the mallet'. Story's team did get to play against the royals: 'They are very nice people and play polo all the time. We were fortunate to play them early, before they caught on to the game,' he laughs.

The King's Cup Tournament is not without its pomp and ceremony. The five-day event kicks off with a parade through town complete with elephants, Thai dancers, beauty queens and Elephant Spirit Men. 'It starts with







ABOVE: A sumptuous buffet is laid on for the elephants as part of the opening ceremony, comprising watermelons, pineapples, bananas and, surprisingly, cucumbers; RIGHT: An Elephant Spirit Man, custodian of rites, rituals and ceremonies; FAR RIGHT: The New Zealand All Blacks versus the Audemars Piguet team



the blessing by a Buddhist monk of the elephants and the more fragile humans followed by the feeding of the elephants – a feasting table of watermelons, pineapples, bananas and, surprisingly, cucumbers. It’s a taste we share with the elephants but we like ours in a Pimm’s Cup! Rumour has it that’s how the elephants got their taste for cucumbers. At the end of the day we have parties and, yes, as you might expect, it is a very unusual group of people who do this! We have a different theme party every night (the British like to get dressed up): Chinese Mafia night, Explorer night, and Black and Gold night. We always have some purveyor of alcoholic beverages sponsor a team: in 2012, for the second year, it was Johnnie Walker Blue Label – you can imagine the beverages they had at their booth 24/7. The final night gala is black tie: here you are in the middle of the tropics, in black tie, outside – what do you think?!

Story’s three children, all girls, have fond memories of childhood travels to Thailand, and share their father’s love for the country. Lisa lived in Bangkok and taught English to the Crown Prince’s sons at the Chitralada (palace) School, while the other two daughters share their father’s love of the sport. Sara, a New York interior designer whose business now brings her to Asia, has her own team, Sara Story Design. Her sister Katie, whom Sara proudly claims is the better player, is the team captain; in fact, rumour has it that Katie is the best female player of all. Their team is a force to be reckoned with: the girls are competitive, and the team’s third female player is a no-nonsense, gun-toting FBI agent. ‘It’s such a cast of characters,’ says Sara, ‘interesting people from all over the world, maybe a little eccentric, but who really like to have a good time.’ As for being attractive females playing among such strong male personalities, ‘they are really friendly before you get on the pitch, then they get so competitive, of course, and then they get really mean’, laughs Sara. For both Story girls, their best memory was the game in 2011. Their all-girl team made it to the semi-finals: at the penalty shootout to determine which teams would continue, the men totally missed it while Katie hit three goals in a row. She’s still basking in the glory.

‘We don’t get to see each other much,’ says Katie. ‘My father is based in London and travels the world, while my sister is in New York, so the event is a fantastic opportunity for us to meet together as a family. We stand on the sidelines and root for my dad (we are so proud of him), and he roots for my sister and me. It’s a really nice time.’ Both daughters find it remarkable that their parents found the time to create the store. ‘It is a major undertaking for them; walking into the store is almost like walking into a museum.’

Ed Story explains that ‘the whole thing about elephant conservation and the thrust of what we are doing at the store and the thrust of what we are doing with the King’s Cup fundraising is to take elephant off the streets of Bangkok, put them back into their natural habitat so that they can sustain themselves and we will assist with our contributions. The majority of the elephants come from Surin, where they were trained for logging, but that work doesn’t exist any more and there is not enough vegetation there to support them.’

In life, there are some experiences that glow in your memory, where just the recollection brings joy. Find your way to the King’s Cup tournament, at least once. If you really can’t make it to Bangkok, you can still sport a team shirt, courtesy of The Elephant Story, making a contribution to a worthy cause. bb



LEFT: Team Anantara players celebrate with their mahouts