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REGIONAL

Targeting Tibet and beyond



HONG KONG-BASED ADVENTURE trekking specialist Whistling Arrow has confirmed its expedition schedule for 2016. Designed and led by owner Adrian Bott, the select portfolio offers a number of itineraries for the coming year.

This June, a small-group expedition heads into the wilds of eastern Tibet to hunt for the fabled Himalayan blue poppy. Other destinations for 2016 include an expedition into the remote Tibetan borderlands of eastern Tibet, hidden between the two Himalayan peaks of Kanchenjunga and Makalu; and a rhododendron trek to an alpine lake nestled at the foot of Mount Kenyichunpo which straddles Burma and China.

Two old favourites also remain in the calendar: the Kawa Karpo Kora or pilgrimage in eastern Tibet, and an expedition into the world of Kazakh eagle-hunters in the far-flung mountains of western Mongolia.

For more information, visit the website www.whistlingarrow.com

CAMBODIA

Song of the sea

SPANNING THE ISLES OF KOH OUN AND Koh Bong off the coast of southern Cambodia is Song Saa Private Island. Here guests come to lose the world for a while, throwing themselves into enjoyment of the natural surroundings, immersing themselves in cultural encounters or perhaps just doing nothing at all for some much-needed downtime.

For the more active, the array of activities available range from conservation and community initiatives to island and marine safaris. Perhaps take a kayak out and explore the mangroves and unspoilt coves, go hiking through rainforest or snorkelling over the vibrant reefs.

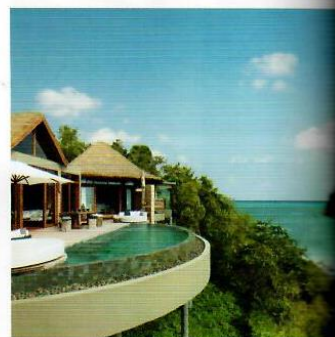
Song Saa also operates a non-profit NGO, the Song Saa Foundation, which has established the archipelago's first marine reserve and solid waste management centre. The Song Saa Foundation is now aiming to build on this work by further promoting sustainability among communities in the archipelago.

The resort has just introduced a special 'Stay 5 Nights Pay 4' all-inclusive promotion. The extra night applies for double occupancy reservations

for every room type: Over-water, Ocean view or Jungle villas.

For travellers looking to combine exploration of Cambodia and Thailand, a single visa option facilitating travel across both countries is also now available.

For reservations or enquiries, email reservations@songsaa.com or check out their site, www.songsaa.com.



Science is not a safari

Joining an expedition into the Sumatran rainforest as a conservation volunteer is no holiday – and that's the point

Story by Steve White



WE'D HAD A SHIT DAY. AT LEAST, THAT WAS THE STORY I AGREED with Manuela, ahead of that evening's debrief back at base. It had been our longest day-hike into the reserve, along an ochre dirt road under unstinting tropical sun. Our tiredness was real enough, so to trudge back to the field station and announce we'd had a 'shit day' sounded perfectly plausible.

We were both volunteers, accompanying two researchers from Indonesian WWF on a field survey looking for tigers in Rimbang Baling Wildlife Reserve in Riau Province, Sumatra. Along with four other volunteers, we had paid for the privilege of joining this project, run by WWF in conjunction with Biosphere, a voluntourism outfit.

Started by German former paratrooper and self-confessed control freak, Matthias Hammer, Biosphere run wildlife conservation projects around the world, many of them aimed at research on big cats. This particular project was new, and Manuela and I were part of the pioneer group, filling the first of 2015's six two-week slots. Besides Manuela there were three other Germans – journalists Andreas and Franz, and an architect also called Matthias – plus Michael, a geared-up Australian survivalist.

Within 40 minutes of the city of Pekanbaru on the drive in, we already had a sense of the challenges the hard-pressed forests of Sumatra face. First we'd passed a van full of hunting dogs, uncommonly sleek and healthy in a country with little interest in pet canines. Then a trike with more dogs and a roadtrain of trucks piled with palm oil fruit. Other trucks ferried logs and coal. It was clear that Sumatra's extractive industries were in good health but it didn't augur well for the jungle or the tigers that supposedly inhabit it.

From road's end at the village of Tanjung Belit, a brief boat ride delivered us to our home for the next two weeks: a handsome two-storey field station. There we assembled for an introductory session. Asked about our expectations for the trip, several mentioned the hope of seeing a tiger, though the Expedition Dossier we had received beforehand had clearly stated the likelihood of seeing them was low.

Hammer quickly jumped in: "Be very excited if you see some tiger shit," he said.

In that event, we were directed to take samples. For while discovery fired our hope, diligence would fill our days. We were to survey the kilometre-by-kilometre

A QUESTION OF RANGE
Prey species such as wild pig regularly come close to villages in Rimbang Baling but tigers more likely favour remoter areas.

« Interpreting shit – in both the general and the specific sense – is what field work is all about. »

world can identify scats on sight.

Still, interpreting shit – in both the general and the specific sense – is what field work is all about and we were excited to be learning even just a few basics. Knowing something about the shape of animal faeces, or recognising pig tracks, gave us inordinate pride. We'd found that third 'S', satisfaction, through the application of the second, science.

The scat needed to go off to a lab for DNA analysis so we had stood and watched Febri very carefully take samples – we'd been warned how common it was for samples to be contaminated with human DNA during collection.

A little later we had reached the highest point on the road, a natural break in the vegetation that afforded a view across ridge after ridge of forest. It was a rare view deeper into the park, where the project's subsequent groups would, in time, have to go. We had done all we could.

In the 2015 film 'Racing Extinction', Louis Psihoyos, cofounder of the Oceanic Preservation Society, calls the human-induced mass extinction of species, "the biggest story in the world". Sumatran tigers are not far off becoming a chapter of that story.

"My hope," says Psihoyos, "is that if you can show people the beauty of these animals there is a chance to save them."

Matthias Hammer would agree, with the corollary that even showing them some shit might be enough to get started. **AA**



Does voluntourism work?

The idea of it is very appealing: to 'give back' by paying to work, but voluntourism has come in for a fair amount of criticism. An article in *The Independent* called it: "a waste of time and money"; another on Huffington Post accused it of "doing more harm than good".

Matthias Hammer, who founded Biosphere Expeditions (www.biosphere-expeditions.org) to work expressly on conservation issues, says the field is, "full of charlatans ... about five years we started this campaign of 'top ten tips' because for the punters it's really hard – anyone can have a nice website."

He ticks off some of the questions a prospective client should ask:

"Are they a non-profit, do they publish their results, is the website full of people cuddling animals which you shouldn't do? Are they transparent, do they show where the money goes? Do they have achievements to show? A lot of them don't, it's just pretence sadly."

Asked what Biosphere have achieved, Hammer says: "None of it is just our achievements, it's always collaborative. But we've had a hand in creating protected areas on four continents – those are stories that take years or a decade to develop."

It makes sense that projects such as the conservation-related survey work that Biosphere does, require a long-term commitment, but the issue of time is crucial also to individuals signing up on a given programme and expecting to really make a difference.

Wayne McCallum (shown here) is Executive Director of the Song Saa Foundation (<http://songsaafoundation.org/>) which takes volunteers

on its Tropical Marine Conservation Programme: "Voluntourism faces a dilemma when it comes to quality of experience versus what the volunteer is willing to pay, is able to contribute and what time they have at their disposal."

"To get a meaningful volunteer experience where you learn as much as you give, you need to look at something that is at least a month in duration and with activities that marry up to your abilities. In the end, your contribution will be a function of the skills you are able to contribute and your ability (and the capacity) to translate these to others, more so than good intentions."

"Our programme reflects this – people need to be qualified divers while, for the first week, they spend time in lectures, boning up on skill to complete reef surveys. These lectures go on, although in decreased intensity, in the weeks that follow."

Biosphere too, work on volunteers' field skills and Hammer is considering a programme for repeat volunteers for the Sumatra survey featured here, given the scale and challenges of the work in hand.

Not being in-situ like Song Saa means Biosphere have to rely on the willingness of others to take things on when the project is over.

"We do research so that bigger people than us can target their efforts more effectively," says Hammer. "We are the ambulance, until the doctors decide to heal the patient."

