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Travelling around India, a country as playful as its elephants, Emine Saner discovers how its people are working to live as one with its impressive wildlife

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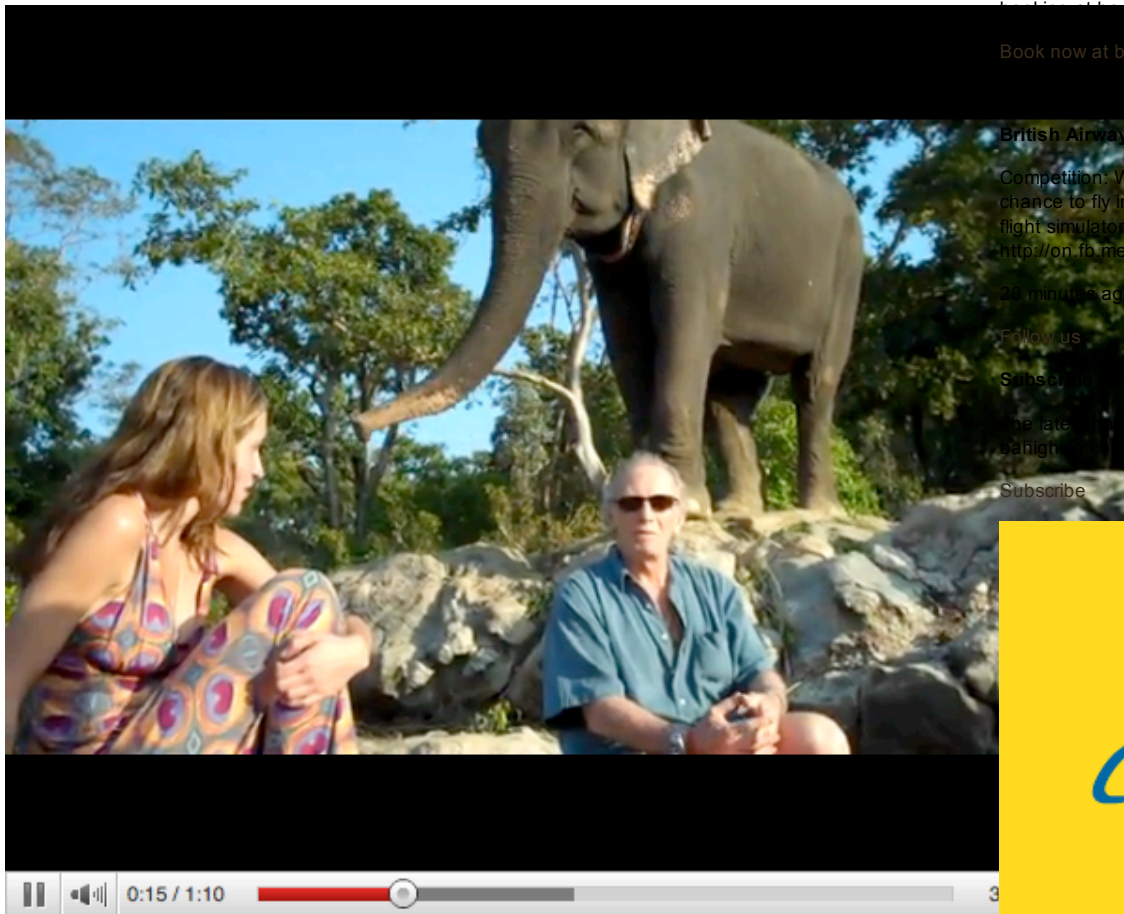
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Campaigner Mark Shand with his beloved Tara at Kipling Camp
Giacomo Bretzel



Tara was the start of it. A statuesque beauty in her 40s, with an elegant profile, long eyelashes and endless legs, she caught the heart of Mark Shand, a British explorer and travel writer, and never let it go. They nuzzle up to each other under the Indian sun and I feel slightly voyeuristic witnessing something so intimate.

They have a lot to catch up on, for this is a long-distance romance – Shand spends most of his time in the UK, while Tara lives at Kipling Camp, a forest retreat in the Kanha National Park in Madhya Pradesh, central India. Stay there and you can join in Tara's ablutions at the nearby Banjar river, where she will shower you with water. Once you

have both dried off, you can feed her Bourbon biscuits from the afternoon tea the retreat has packed for you, before climbing on her back and riding her to camp. Tara is an elephant, and as elephants go, she is a supermodel.

She knows it, too. She will stand, one leg nonchalantly crossed in front of the other, with an air of studied disinterest. Try to decorate her skin with flowers, as the camp did that morning just before we arrived, and she will throw a tantrum. Like every supermodel, she has an interest in charity. Shand says it is really Tara who is the founder of Elephant Family, his UK-based group campaigning to save the Asian elephant.

He tries to visit Tara every year at Kipling Camp – set up by his friends, the late Bob Wright and Bob’s wife Anne, who adopted Tara and now runs the retreat – so if you’re lucky enough to time your visit with Shand’s, it will be a priceless experience. The fact that Prince Charles is Shand’s brother-in-law (Camilla is his sister) is probably the least interesting thing about him. He’s been gallivanting around the world for decades, is ridiculously well-connected and can hypnotise a chicken. I saw him do this around the campfire on our last night. A fairly useless skill, it’s impressive nonetheless. And he once rode across India on an elephant – Tara, who he found emaciated and badly treated and nursed back to blooming health.

It really was love at first sight for Shand. ‘I didn’t even look at the other elephants,’ he tells me. ‘She was just perfect. The old *mahout* [elephant handler] kept asking why I was choosing her and I said “I don’t know. There’s something about her. She’s beautiful”.’

Through Tara, Shand became more aware of the plight of her wild cousins. A hundred years ago, there were around 200,000 Asian elephants in India. Now there are around 30,000. Much of the earlier loss was down to poaching. These days, the biggest threats are encroaching human populations and loss of habitat.

It isn’t an exaggeration to suggest that we are seriously contemplating an India – and a world – without these animals, which is what I think about as I walk back to the camp alongside Tara’s tree-trunk legs, flecked with silver from the sand of the riverbank.

What I’m trying hard not to think about, as the sun starts its descent and the light softens, are the tigers and leopards that roam the area. Just that morning, fresh tiger prints had been found yards from Kipling Camp.

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