



# Dangerous liaisons

More often than not the highlight of most polo endeavours is the activities that take place off the field rather than on the field... And as any peripatetic player will tell you, a polo trip that involves Red Bull, B52s and a hot tub has got to rank up there amongst the most superlative of efforts. I had the good fortune to be involved in one such venture last week when I travelled to Northern Thailand for the King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament at the Anantara in the Golden Triangle. What started out as a whimsical conversation between two quirky sports lovers has evolved into being the 6th largest annual event on the Thai Tourism Calendar. Originally launched in the Royal seaside town of Hua Hin in 2001, the event moved to the Anantara in 2006. In the intervening eight years the King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament has evolved from a small two-day event into a week-long extravaganza (and that is putting it mildly) which in 2008 featured 10 teams from four continents, encompassing 40 players from at least 15 countries. This year 12 equally diverse teams entered what was a fiercely contested competition.

This quirky notion has been in existence since 1982 when the World Elephant Polo Association established the governing body, strategically located at the Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge in the Royal Chitwan Park in Nepal. Unlike the horse polo circuit, the elephant polo circuit is a relatively small one, being played between Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand, but

## Confessions of a POLO JUNKIE

the participants are no less serious.

The rules of the game are similar to those of horse polo, but there are some key differences. All elephants carry a player and a mahout; ladies are allowed to use both hands and mallets around two metres in length are used. It stands to reason that a quirky game such as this would also attract some eccentric folk. There is an anecdote of an English aristocrat getting up on top of his fireplace to practise hitting the ball from that height... you can all imagine how that ended... and yes, 911 was involved... For the more conventional amongst us, players can be seen training in swimming pools by swinging a golf club one-handed through the water to strengthen their wrists or



Suited and booted, Karen Kranenburg preparing for that first match against the Nellies.  
(Photos: Linda Lewis-Bishton)

Still red hot.

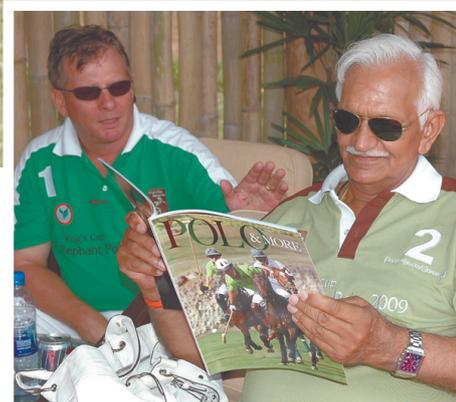




The spa at the edge of the polo field, where complimentary treatments were available to players and guests — Why can't all polo pitches be like this?



Play underway: KBank vs the Nellies, one of the two all-female teams participating in the event.



WEPA (World Elephant Polo Association) legend, and captain of the WEPA team, Col Raj Kalaan perusing the pages of Polo & More.



A winning smile and some Jamaican flavour — Angad Kalaan with his wife Mandira, daughter of former president of ICWI Anila Kalra.



Bath time in the Mekong River - The elephant' being prepared for polo by the mahout.

on various platforms to perfect their swing. For my part, as a horse polo player, sitting atop an elephant, and trying to strike a polo ball, with two hands, was a highly unusual sensation, not to mention trying to direct the mahout who was supposed to be in control of the elephant, but who seemingly had a mind of his own, which wasn't always in concert with mine, the elephant's or the direction of the ball, for that matter. Of course all this combined with the usual major daily hangovers from the festivities of the night before, which didn't really see me on my best form during daylight hours, was not necessarily the best representation of my polo skills, but my team-mates were very forgiving.

Apart from all the abundant festivities associated with the event it does have a

serious purpose, and through its elephant sanctuary located within the grounds of the resort, the property's focus on the future of Thailand's rapidly decreasing Pachyderm population forms an integral part of the resort's operations. It is estimated that Thailand has around 3,600 domesticated elephants and 1,500 wild elephants. This is down from an elephant population of around 50,000 in 1950 and 100,000 in 1900. To date the tournament has raised over US\$200,000 for the National Elephant Institute. For further information and to make a donation to the Elephant Sanctuary go to [www.helpingelephants.org](http://www.helpingelephants.org).

Hot tub and Red Bull aside, the event was a truly unique event in amazing surroundings, resplendent with all the bells and whistles of a regular horse polo

tournament. It provided an opportunity to catch up with old friends... make some new ones... as well as enjoy the extraordinary hospitality of the Anantara, who were exceedingly gracious hosts, providing a plethora of social activities, apart from the fieldside VIP marquee which had free-flowing food and drinks each day, to the nightly cocktail parties and the extraordinary black tie event which closed it all off. Not to mention my personal favourites, the spa at the side of the field... and, of course, the hot tub in question.

There are no elephants in Jamaica, but the party is just as good. If you want to see how some traditional horse polo is played come and visit us throughout the season. The next event, the NCB Jamaica Open Grand Finale Sushi & Soca at Kingston Polo Club, takes place today (Sunday, April 5) with special guest appearance by Fab Five, followed by the WCT Ladies match on April 8 also in Kingston and the "Battle of the Sexes" on April 11 in St Ann. Keep reading SO for more details.

If you want to have a taste of the polo lifestyle, enter our competition to win a trip for 2 to the Cartier International in England on Sunday July 26, 2009, with 2 return tickets to UK compliments of Virgin Atlantic, and accommodation for the weekend. To be eligible you need to attend a polo match at any of the above polo grounds, between now and June and post your entry in the Virgin Box in the club-house at each location.



The VIP Tent at the edge of the polo field — with food, drink and traditional Thai hospitality.



Elephant Polo Master Tom Claytor and Olsten Beinhorn of the Mercedes Benz team practising before a match.