

Denmark's last four circus elephants (African) now live in a 14ha enclosure at the Knuthenborg Safari Park on the island of Lolland

# GREAT ESCAPE

As zoos and circuses release their captive elephants, what solutions exist to offer these giants a better quality of life?

Words by MARK STRATTON

Ghandi the Asian elephant has access to woodlands now



Visitors and raised tents at Knuthenborg Safari Park. The elephants are free to decide when they want to be seen.

Joining what was touted as Europe's "first elephant safari", I felt uneasy as I settled into a safari tent on a raised platform for two nights outside the enclosure's perimeter. Was this just replacing one form of elephant exploitation for another? My concern, however, soon dissipated.

**T**HE ENCLOSURE'S ANCIENT OAK trees and undulating topography enables the elephants to disappear from view when they want to.

I spent two blissful days observing four boisterous girls, all displaying characteristics seen in the wild. Lara, the gentle matriarch, Djungla, and tiny tuskless Jenny, were constantly side by side. They grazed non-stop on the rich grassland like true savannah giants. Throughout the night, I heard them snatching clumps of grass close to my tent. Throw in a howling hyena and I could have imagined myself in the Maasai Mara. The elephants dust-bathed and wallowed in a muddy pan, rumbling with pleasure. "The African species has never been domesticated so their wild instincts remain, even in zoo-born individuals," Garai says.

Ramboline, one-tusked, and the largest lady, was from a different circus to the other three, so remained aloof. Yet she was feisty. I watched her chase the zebra herd that live alongside them. "She'll chase anything – hares, pheasants," laughs Knuthenborg's owner, Christoffer Knuth. "She can get quite angry. The others won't go in the barn when she's in a bad mood."

The 'barn' is a heated, state-of-the-art structure where the elephants' health needs are addressed by keepers, the only interaction humans physically have with

**G**ANDHI, A 52-YEAR-OLD ASIAN elephant, is picking at windfall apples when an intruder darts through her enclosure. It's Woody, the farm cat. Ghandi's ears flare and she swivels, chasing the fleeing feline towards her heated barn. She plunges indoors and doesn't reappear, likely preferring the warmth to the chill of an autumn day in southern France.

Ghandi was the first elephant to take up residence here at Elephant Haven, a sanctuary co-founded by ex-zookeeper Sofie Goetghebeur and Tony Verlost in 2016. It's

the largest elephant sanctuary in western Europe, comprising 29ha of beautiful mixed woodland and ponds. Ghandi arrived here in October 2021 from a cash-strapped Brittany Zoo. She had been spirited away from her mother, likely in Thailand, when a baby, in 1973, and has spent her entire life in captivity. "Before being rescued, Gandhi stood around with little energy. Now look at her. She has new life," says Goetghebeur.

**E**LEPHANT HAVEN REPRESENTS a glittering template of what life in captivity could look like for elephants at a time when we are realising that these intelligent and sentient creatures do not belong in zoos and circuses. Many European countries – France being the latest – have banned live animal performances, while zoos from Mendoza to Buenos Aires are releasing individual elephants to specialised sanctuaries. Rumours even circulated in summer 2021 that the UK, which holds 51 elephants, would ban zoo captivity

from 2022, though no legislation has been forthcoming yet.

It's about time the complex needs of captive elephants were met. The keeping of large mammals in captivity was recently described by neuroscience professor Bob Jacobs of Colorado College as "neural cruelty". And, according to the Born Free Foundation, 36 of the 618 elephants currently in European zoos endure solitary captivity, which is particularly damaging to a species whose existence in the wild is characterised by close family bonds.

I saw this for myself a year before when visiting a solitary elephant called Bunka at Yerevan Zoo in Armenia. Alone for seven years, this 14-year-old Asian bull was clearly displaying 'stereotyping' behaviour in the form of repetitive headshaking. Stereotyping behaviour – such as headshaking and pacing – is common in large captive mammals, driven by the lack of stimulation and challenges typical of life in the wild.

"Elephant lives revolve around space and being part of a social entourage. Most

## The keeping of large mammals in captivity was recently described as "neural cruelty"

of their cognitive activities centre around walking and searching for food, water and mates," says Marian Garai of the Elephant Specialist Advisory Group. "Dysregulation of their brain's pathways is serious for their welfare, and they resort to stereotyping behaviour out of frustration because they cannot move around or socialise." Disease in captivity, obesity and lameness due to feet problems adds to their suffering and can also trigger premature death.

Improving the lives of captive elephants is spatially complicated, as genders and species (Asians and Africans) are typically separated. Yet new facilities are opening across Europe that can address their needs

and thus enable better mental and physical health.

So what do these facilities look like? My quest to find out began in the unlikely setting of Lolland, a southern island of Denmark.

Denmark banned circus animal performances in 2018. The government paid €1.6million to purchase the country's four circus African elephants – Djungla, Ramboline, Lara, and Jenny – aged between 40-44 years old. Knuthenborg, an ancestral estate and now safari park, agreed to take them, constructing a 14ha reinforced enclosure.



Training elephants entails suffering

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Stratton is a travel writer, environmental journalist, photographer and radio broadcaster for BBC Radio 4 and BBC World Service. His work has taken him to more than 140 countries. Visit [markstrattontravels.com](http://markstrattontravels.com)



Jenny, Djungla and Ramboline enjoy a dust bath together in Denmark

➔ OTHER ELEPHANT SANCTUARIES

Three shining international examples

**Elephant Nature Park in Thailand**

This sanctuary for Asian elephants near Chang Mai began life in the 1990s, the brainchild of an inspiring local woman called Lek Chailert – who also started Save the Elephant Foundation. More than 100 elephants currently reside at ENP, rescued from logging and tourism camps, and the foundation has been particularly active during the pandemic, offering outreach to more than 1,500 captive elephants who have faced hunger and welfare issues. Visitors are welcome.



Greeting N'yoka, the existing residents crowded along the fence line, trumpeting loudly

them. “Their personalities have changed completely since arriving in May 2021,” says Knuth. “They were bored when we met them, swaying from side to side. But that stopped quickly. Within a week, they were ignoring a German keeper who came with them when he called their names”.

“They’ve had a hard life in circuses. Now it’s time for them to just be elephants.”

**M**Y TIMING AT KNUTHENBORG proved fortuitous, with the arrival of 43-year-old N'yoka. Plucked from Kruger National Park as an infant, she had spent her life at Sweden's Boras Zoo. “She was unsettled by Boras's breeding bull, so we'll try integrating her with these girls,” says Anita Haupt-Holm, Knuthenborg's head of animals. N'yoka is truly magnificent. I'm not sure I recall seeing a wild African female with longer tusks.

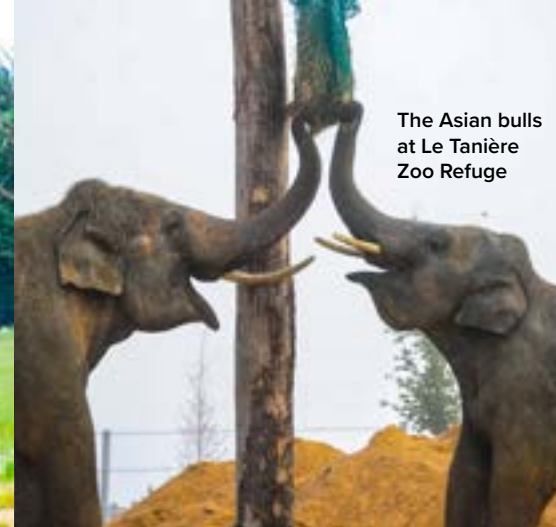
Greeting her, the existing residents crowded along the fence line, trumpeting loudly, swaying with excitement. They

smelled N'yoka in a holding enclosure prior to being integrated in the main field. She played peek-a-boo, in and out of the barn, and Ramboline was so eager she damaged the fence. Knuthenborg has space for eight African females, but N'yoka's integration would be assessed to decide if she could stay. A month later, Haupt-Holm informed me that she'd settled in well.

At Knuthenborg I met vet Therese Hard, who'd accompanied N'yoka. She explained that zoo elephants are registered in the European Endangered Species Programme (EEP), which facilitates captive breeding. It's difficult to rationalise how captive breeding currently helps dwindling wild populations, as the elephants are never rewilded, plus there is the moral question of confining highly sentient animals with developed emotional capacity. EEP, it seems, spawns a merry-go-round of transferring elephants around zoos, which risks breaking familial and friendship bonds. Breeding has also created an excess of bull elephants that are unable to remain within matriarchal herds.

Addressing the latter issue, in Chartres, south-west of Paris, I visited a new facility called Le Tanière Zoo Refuge. Funded by a French telecoms millionaire, it had taken in two young Asian bulls – Rajendra, aged 10, released from Cologne Zoo, and Sunay, a rotund little six-year-old from Rotterdam. “We wanted to help males surplus to the EEP,” explains keeper Joss Graffin, as I watched him employ positive reinforcement techniques – a gentle tap on the leg with a cane – on one-tusked Rajendra to facilitate a foot health-check. Knowing he will be rewarded with a snack, Rajendra acquiesced. “Young bulls in zoos, as in the wild, will be rejected by the matriarch and chased out. Rajendra was in a big herd where there was tension, so had to be moved. He will not be used for breeding here. We want to create a bachelor group, where the younger ones have role models and friendship for good psychological health,” says Graffin.

Outside, the duo has two separate enclosures (totalling 5,000m<sup>2</sup>) between which they're rotated for variety. Little Sunay



The Asian bulls at Le Tanière Zoo Refuge



LEGIBILITY?

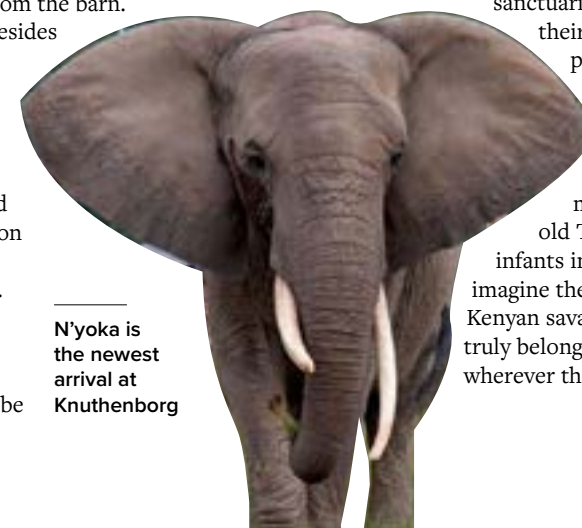
Rajendra has a health check

shadowed Rajendra everywhere and they touchingly caressed each other with their trunks. Their daily hay is hung high from a tower to promote enrichment, forcing them to stretch to obtain their food. Cunningly, Rajendra rose on his back legs to reach into the hay net's top opening to get larger trunks-ful of hay. Sunay tried to copy, but was just too short.

“They're such intelligent animals who would be better in the wild,” says Graffin. “All we can do is create stimulation for them while they're young. But it gets harder for them to fight boredom when they're older.”

**B**ACK AT ELEPHANT HAVEN, I wait for Ghandi to emerge from the barn. Besides

pursuing Woody the cat, a free life of exploration with only limited public viewing (on occasional open days) awaits her. In an enclosure mimicking an Asian elephant's habitat, she will be



N'yoka is the newest arrival at Knuthenborg

free to disappear into thick woodland amid rolling hills, and swim in ponds on hot days. She may have soulmates too: the sanctuary has capacity for six rescues, and is close to acquiring 20 more hectares.

“We worked with elephants for 20 years in zoos and became increasingly uneasy seeing their distress. They don't belong in zoos. Children can learn about them in other ways, through documentaries. After all, kids know everything about dinosaurs, but have never seen them for real,” says Verhurst.

“When Gandhi became available it determined we would take Asian, not African females. But in the future, perhaps we can create a separate area for African females or males,” he says, rekindling my hopes for Bunka in Armenia. “With good care, we hope Gandhi will live longer than if she remained in a zoo,” he adds. “I hope she will be with us many years. This is her home forever now.”

Elephant moves are happening close to home too. In July 2021, news of a radical solution for captive elephants emerged as Aspinall Foundation announced plans to rewild its entire herd of 13 from Howletts Wild Animal Park in Kent, back to Africa. They propose flying them in reinforced crates – 25 tonnes of African elephant – the 7,000km to Kenya, where they would be assisted with reassimilation into the wild by the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust (who rewild rescue orphans) and Kenya Wildlife Service. Such a translocation from a European zoo has never been attempted. In one stroke, this would rewild 25 per cent of the British captive zoo population of 51.

Aspinalls remain cagey about when this may happen, but I made my way there regardless to see the herd. Critics say risks are involved, and potentially fatal ones, such as death during transportation, or maladaptation to the wild. And would rewilding the elephants in European captivity really redress their rapid wild decline, especially in Asia, where severe human-elephant conflict exists? Most certainly not.

Yet the fact remains that captive elephants demand a better life and spacious sanctuaries that can address their physical and psychological needs.

At Howletts, as I watch the herd marshalled by the magnificent matriarch, 34-year-old Tammi, with three infants in tow, it's easy to imagine them gracing the Kenya savannah where they truly belong, free to roam wherever they choose. 🐘

**Global Elephant Sanctuary in Brazil**

This huge 2,800-acre sanctuary was founded in 2016 in Chapada dos Guimarães and currently hosts five female Asian elephants, given up by zoos. The founder, American Scott Blais, says they have capacity for eight to ten elephants. The number will soon increase when four more elephants arrive from Mendoza Zoo in Argentina. They include a father, mother and daughter, Tamy, Pocha and Guillermina – all Asian elephants – while Kenya is an African female, who will have a segregated space. The sanctuary is not open to visitors.

**Tennessee Elephant Sanctuary in USA**

The world's first elephant sanctuary has offered refuge to 28 elephants since its inception in 1995. Set within a large wilderness of 3,060 acres, the sanctuary is closed to visitors, allowing the resident herd to live out a semi-wild existence after lives in zoos and circuses across America. TES currently has four African and five Asian elephants, including the likes of Nosey, a Zimbabwean wild-born captured as a two-year-old, who endured 29 years in a circus before a public campaign to resettle her in Tennessee.