



Travels on my Elephant

Mark Shand

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Started on a whim and pursued with a passion, modern-day adventurer Mark Shand's remarkable journey through India on the back of a 30-year-old elephant named Tara covered 800 miles, from the Bay of Bengal to the world's largest elephant bazaar at Sonapur on the Ganges. Rescued from a life of begging, Tara, scrawny and mistreated, was transformed through Shand's tender attention and care on their journey into a star attraction. Blessed by priests, entertained by princes, they shuffled happily through towns and villages, Tara sucking up rice and bananas from roadside stands and Shand scattering rupees in compensation. Everywhere they went, the adventurer, his unusual steed, and his five eccentric Indian companions drew an inquisitive crowd of admirers. Rivaling Kipling, this story of man and elephant is by turns exciting, terrifying and moving. Merely arriving at Sonapur on the Ganges was not the end of the story, and finding a good home for Tara was to present the greatest challenge of all for a man who had just traveled 800 miles through heat, hardship and danger. With an ear for the comic, an eye for the exotic and a taste for the bizarre, Shand informs as he entertains, painting a vivid picture of Indian life, customs and locale as he takes us through his daily adventures with Tara in this transporting memoir.

Travels on my Elephant Details

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Lisa says

I liked this book more for Tara the elephant than for the self-portrayal or writing style of the author. Shand's came off as an inauthentic, un-apologetically privileged pseudo-Indian/elephant expert. In the book, his only saving grace was his description of his mahout, whom I adored. However, being concerned about Tara's well-being and whether Shand's self-described love for her was genuine, a cursory google search found that Shand continued to visit her and became a life-long elephant advocate. I appreciated Shand his book much more afterwards. I will credit Shand's book with making me fall in love with elephants, which I had previously admired for their compassion; now I know they are amazingly intelligent, gentle and playful.

Chris Steeden says

Mark Roland Shand (28 June 1951 – 23 April 2014) was a British travel writer and conservationist, and the brother of Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall. Camilla married Charles, the Prince of Wales in 2006. That is the first sentence of his Wikipedia entry. I am sure that being privileged meant that he could become a travel writer and go off to India for months and ride an elephant. That line is not in Wikipedia although he does allude to it in his afterword.

Anyway, I did enjoy the book. It's not Theroux by any stretch as Theroux does not like gimmicks when travelling. What could be a bigger gimmick than riding an elephant for 750 miles in India? Shand makes the elephant, called Tara, the star of the show. She sounds like a wonderful elephant and damn intelligent as well. I found her intelligence fascinating. I'll give you an example. She was walking very slowly and gingerly at one point and to show Shand why she picked up the small sharp stones from the path with her trunk and put them on her head so he could see the issue. He immediately understood why she was taking her time. Wow.

The journey meanders through forests, game parks with man-eating tigers (no joke), lakes, ancient run-down palaces, colonial dwellings, villagers where the inhabitants throw rocks at them and cities. Colourful characters are met on the way. You know what I mean by colourful? Extrovert or, in some cases, dangerous, religious, angry, sweet, respectful, crazy and a lot of times, drunk. Quite an adventure.

What comes through is Shand's love of Tara the elephant. If he could have got married to her I actually think he would have. There was such a connection. Alright, maybe that's going too far but he really loved her and you can see why. 'She pulled me even closer and we rested against one another, like lovers in a long embrace'.

His obituary in The Telegraph reads 'But while travelling in India in 1988, Shand come across an emaciated captive female elephant being used for begging purposes by her owners: "My mouth went dry," he later wrote of the moment when he first saw her. "I knew then that I had to have her." He bought the animal, named her Tara and rode her 750 miles from Konarak on the Bay of Bengal to the Sonapur Mela, the ancient elephant trading fair at Patna on the Ganges. Travels on My Elephant (1992), his account of the journey, was a bestseller and won him the Travel Writer of the Year Award.'

He would go on to campaign for the Asian elephants' survival and would head up one of the most successful elephant conservation charities in the world. He details this in the Afterword that was penned in 2012. Can't argue with that. Great stuff.

Kim Stallwood says

Imagine an episode of Last of the Summer Wine in which Compo, Cleggy and Foggy are transported to India and charged with taking an elephant from one part of the country to another. Or what would have Three Men in a Boat been like if they had been joined by an elephant? Well, these imaginings aren't exact but they do help to convey what this book is like. The author, Mark Shand, buys an elephant, Tara, and takes her on a journey with friends and colleagues to market to sell her. Don't worry. She ends up in a good home. But along the way some things happen which gave me cause for concern. Nevertheless, the love for Tara and his descriptions of her by the author make for entertaining and informative reading. It's also a great book to read to learn more about life in India.

Jill says

The writer seems kind of pompous, but it's an interesting story and I'm glad I read it.

Behrooz says

was ok.

Anthony Fox says

A Love Story with a Difference

A few years ago, I travelled to India with a friend who was a photographer to photograph the Bengal tiger in its natural habitat. We spent several weeks in the jungle tracking the elusive Bengal tiger, every day aloft in a howdah (a wooden cradle) abreast an elephant. I always had a love of animals, but spending several weeks with elephants I became more aware of this love. Part of my role was to record and write an account of our travels. I decided to seek out more information about rural India, I wanted a different perspective and by chance I found a book by Mark Shand called 'Travels on my Elephant.'

At night avoiding the mosquitoes I started to read Mark's book and found myself falling in love. The book is about Mark's trek across 1600 kms of India with a female elephant called Tara. Mark's book is a documentary of the real India and how he ended up falling in love with Tara. As I turned each page I got to know Tara and could not stop myself from feeling the same as Mark. Each day I spent with the elephants in the jungle tracking tigers my understanding of their plight became more pronounced.

I won't tell you what happened to Tara because I think it's up to you to find out. All I can say is that love is a many flavoured spring, it can appear and sprout from anywhere, just as it did for me each day with beautiful glimpses into the lives of these amazing animals.

Meli says

I persevered with this book because of who Mark Shand is and the organization (The Elephant Family) he then went on to build. However I found the endless names of the towns he travelled through and their history really boring. he seemed to go on endless drinking binges which was also boring. Its hard to read about how this elephant was treated at first, but he does fall in love with her and through her, with her species. To be honest I skimmed through a lot of this as it was just plain tedious, it's the end of the story that is the most heartfelt.

Josette Garcia says

Can you fall in love with an elephant? I surely did. Tara and Mark Shand took me to a different land and a different life style but were the same human characters can be found - but maybe not always for the best. I believe this type of travelling will be soon forbidden as it is damaging the back of the elephant. It makes me feel very sad that for hundreds of year we have captured, domesticated such wonderful animals and that we are now pushing them to extinction because of our greed for ivory and new pastures by killing their natural habitat.

Sarah Handley says

I love elephants & I explorers too so this seemed an ideal book choice for me. Mark Shand was a great storyteller & his travels with Tara & crew are well documented, funny & heartwarming.

Elizabeth says

Occasionally I write to authors to tell them when I've enjoyed their books. Mark Shand is the only author ever to send a viciously obnoxious response. This ruined his books for me permanently, hence the low rating. I threw away my copy and I have never again read anything he has written. I have nothing but contempt for this vile little toad, who obviously writes in the hope that no-one will read his books.

Ffiamma says

dopo aver letto i due libri di mark shand ambientati in india posso dire che doveva essere un vero eccentrico (ma anche così ricco da potersi permettere la stranezza)- qui il suo rapporto con tara, elefantessa capricciosa e a volte imprevedibile, dà luogo ad avventure spassose, irritanti e a momenti di grande commozione (come il finale strappalacrime). a volte l'autore è irritante nel suo essere incosciente o prepotente e mi sarebbe piaciuto conoscere meglio alcuni personaggi che appaiono brevemente, ma la lettura scorre e fa venire voglia di visitare molti dei luoghi di cui parla.

Kanika Sood says

Shand dives straight into the story, with a phone call to a friend in Delhi to help him procure an elephant and a few paragraphs of introduction to the reason of his elephant-riding urge. But soon, like any proud Englishman, he starts using long complacent sentences when describing himself. However, the book itself moves fast (its just 200 pages) and goes from one mini-adventure to the next in just a short paragraph.

He stays with erstwhile kings and is protected by the police wherever he goes. This made me Google him mid-way the book and it turns out that he is the younger brother to Camilla Parker Bowles. But the royal connection doesn't pump any blue blood into the book. Case in point, Shand is photographed naked from waist up (and deliciously tanned) in three picture spreads in the book.

The author has interspersed the travelogue with interesting excerpts about behavior of elephants from late 19th century and early 20th century texts which otherwise I would have no chance of reading. Shand travels across Orissa and Bihar, describing vividly the geographic and demographic terrain. Most travel writing on India seems to be centered around the much too familiar golden triangle and this was the first time I read about the two states. I hope I can some day visit the Jalan family's collection at Quila Mahal described in the book. (B/w they have a website too. Some of their collection was recently damaged and consequently, much of it has been removed to storage)

Lastly, Tara continues to live and be loved at Camp Kipling. There website has pictures of her, looking a little older but as docile as in the book.

Nancy Eudeikis says

This book already had my vote because it was about an elephant. There were humorous parts like the butterfly attaching itself to the end of Tara's trunk and her having to "blow" it off because swinging her trunk wildly didn't work. Naming the parts/town he went through bored me because I wasn't familiar with the territory. Too many sad parts when they had to poke her, creating pain that made her scream and then the blood running from the wounds. Too much and too sad. Even though Mark didn't like it when this happened, he found himself doing it to her too. He was repulsed by it and it made me so angry. The anger is what made me only give this book 3 stars. I cried so hard at the ending by him having to leave her, and she cried a tear when he said goodbye to her. My heart is so sad.

Gerald Sinstadt says

The late - and widely lamented - Mark Shand conceived the idea of buying an elephant and riding it on a journey through India. The result is an enchanting tale of adventures and misadventures, alive to the wonders of the country, its people and customs but never turning aside from poverty and hardship, nor from danger and cruelty.

As the author first buys Tara, then learns to ride her until by the end he is accepted as an equal by the professional mahouts, he develops a relationship with the animal which is close to a love affair. Loyal, cantankerous, mischievous and obstinate. Tara will live in the reader's memory long after the book has been

closed.

Travel writing does not get much better than this.

Les Dangerfield says

I always enjoy travelogues of India after having lived there myself for four years and enjoyed my own travels there. It is not an especially strong travel book so perhaps four stars is a bit generous. However, traveling on an elephant certainly made it different to others. He crosses Orissa and Bihar (before Jarkhand and Chattisgarh became separate states). I read his other India travel book, 'river dog' a few years ago and his death earlier this year prompted me to read this, his more famous Indian tale.
