



THE INVISIBLE ISLANDS

Tony Perrottet

Author, *The Sinner's Grand Tour*



THE INVISIBLE ISLANDS

Tony Perrottet

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

HISTORY - NATURAL AND OTHERWISE

Chapter 2

HAVELOCK UNLOCKED

Chapter 3

FINDING THE JARAWA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

COPYRIGHT

INTRODUCTION

“Just don’t swim in front of him,” whispered Sanjit Biswas, a worker at the jungle lodge where I was staying in the [Andaman Islands](#). “That can spook him.” My guide from [Bangalore](#) nodded in solemn agreement. “Rajan’s a little bit fussy. Sometimes he just won’t go in, and nobody can really force him.”

Okay, I thought, as I tiptoed through the shallows of Beach #7 to meet my monstrous swimming buddy. *No sudden moves or I could be squashed like a chapati.*

Rajan finished off a pile of bananas and thudded down to the gently-lapping waterline. His [mahout](#), a wiry villager named Nasur, stepped up onto one tusk and slipped over his back as casually as if he were hopping on a bicycle. As for me, I still hovered uncertainly. I mean, swimming with a 12,000 pound pachyderm is a bit more ambitious than cavorting with a dolphin in Florida. What if he panicked?

Turns out I shouldn’t have worried; Rajan was more comfortable in the water than I was.

The story of the swimming elephant of the Andamans has all the elements of a modern fairy tale. Rajan was first brought from mainland India as a youngster in the 1970s to work for local logging companies, and he spent a grueling 30 years hauling felled trees through the jungle, underfed, overworked, and underpaid, not unlike his human co-workers. At the time, there were some 200 elephants on the archipelago, and the only way companies could move them between islands, once the hardwood trees had been extracted, was to have them swim. Then, in 2002, the Indian Supreme Court banned logging in the Andamans to protect their biological diversity.

Most of the elephants were shipped back to the mainland to labor at [Hindu](#) temples. But one lucky beast, Rajan, whose rich owner was in no hurry to sell, was left on [Havelock Island](#) in the care of his old *mahout*. There he enjoyed an enviable life, grazing, dozing, and, about once a week,

swimming in the sea, an activity that he gave every indication of enjoying immensely. The swimming elephant became Havelock's unofficial mascot and a celebrity amongst the few travelers who made it here. But in 2008, his owner received a lavish offer from a temple in [Kerala](#) - about \$75,000 - and Rajan faced a return to a harsh, often cruel work regime. So the owners of a small jungle lodge, Barefoot, put out an Internet appeal to former guests and raised the cash to buy Rajan outright, so he could enjoy his old age on Beach #7.



Luckily, the morning I swam with him, the [Indian Ocean](#) was like a warm bath - just the way Rajan (and I) liked it. I first treaded water a few feet away, watching him step like a delicate matron into the water. He raised his trunk to breathe as if it were a giant snorkel, and his *mahout* slid off his back and swam alongside him; soon Rajan was pedaling away with his feet, gliding through the deep blue with unexpected ease. In my goggles and fins, I drifted alongside, admiring Rajan's graceful, slow motion movements and, at one stage, brushed my palm along his wrinkled flanks. For one unforgettable stretch, I swam beneath Rajan, watching him from below; weightless and drifting in silence, I had the strange sensation that we were all flying.

I'd already learned that the Andamans were insanely exotic; but this was taking things to a new level, more like a Hindu fantasy - Babar gone Bollywood.

