

Parting Shot 1

Farewell to the World's Biggest Snorkeler

Rajan, India's famous swimming elephant, recently passed away at the ripe old age of 66. Widely celebrated for his willingness to pose for photographers while swimming in the clear waters of the Andaman Islands, this gentle giant was born in southern India around 1950, then brought to the remote Andamans as a young adult to labor in the logging industry. His life was not easy, but Rajan did find time for romance, eventually meeting a female with whom he was clearly smitten. Relationships between the sexes are typically fleeting affairs with elephants, but their case must have been an exception, as the two were seen together frequently over the years. The female was an avid swimmer, and Rajan soon followed suit, often joining her for a refreshing dip in the sea after work. Swimming was also something of a job requirement, as the logging companies occasionally swam their elephants between neighboring islands, rather than hiring barges to transport them. The pair lived happily together for several decades, until a few years ago the female was bitten by a cobra and succumbed to complications.

Grief stricken, Rajan was

inconsolable and slipped into a deep depression for more than a year following her death. Normally a hard worker, he became disinclined towards his log-hauling duties, and therefore useless to his employers. With no hint of when or if he might get his mojo back, the elephant's future looked grim. Fortunately for Rajan, it was about this time that movie director Tarsem Singh heard about his affinity for the sea, and tentatively cast him in a film called "The Fall". Rajan's then-current location was not suitable for the shoot, so arrangements were made to move him to Havelock, an idyllic, mostly undeveloped island in the central Andamans. Apparently the surroundings and job description agreed with him, and Rajan gradually regained his former Joie de vivre.

After filming was completed for the movie, the photogenic pachyderm settled easily into the sleepy pace of life on Havelock, spending much of his time foraging in the forest with his mahout (handler). Before long, however, his owners announced their intention to ship him back to the mainland, where he would likely have spent his remaining years chained



Nikon D200 in a Seacam housing, 10.5mm lens, 1/200th @ F5.6, ISO200

to a temple wall. Thankfully, the owners of Barefoot Resort, who'd been looking after him during his time on Havelock, came to the rescue. Rajan's owners had demanded a huge sum for the animal, so the resort enlisted Rajan to raise the money via paid photo sessions with visiting divers. Averaging only a few sessions each month, Rajan eventually raised enough cash to earn his freedom, and

officially retired from underwater modeling in 2014. Since then, he could often be seen wandering in the forest near the resort, enjoying his well-deserved retirement while entertaining visitors and locals alike.

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