

# GOLDIE'S BIG ADVENTURE

The earth's last giants are in retreat – man is driving them into extinction. Yet as Goldie Hawn discovered, elephants and humans have similar instincts about family, caring and staying together. Sally Beck reports. Photography by Paul Massey

Goldie meets her elephant at Kipling Camp, India, with 17,000 to 22,000 wild elephants and 2,000 captive ones, contains at least 35 per cent of Asia's elephants. That any should co-exist here among some 900 million people shows the Hindu reverence for all life – a concept known as *ahimsa* – and for elephants in particular.





The breathtaking view from the Amber Fort, Rajasthan. Above: Goldie, en route by train to Kipling, at Ooti, a hill station. Above, right: meeting the children in Jaipur



**G**OLDIE HAWN ADMITS that her passion for elephants began as nothing more than romantic idealism. She went wildlife-spotting on a trip to India seven years ago and was moved when she met a blind mother elephant. The incident prompted her to start a collection of elephant figures and knick-knacks for her three homes in America. Now she has returned to the same place in southern India to make a television documentary which she hopes will draw attention to the threat facing the Asian elephant. And she has been rewarded for her efforts with a sighting of that same mother elephant, still alive, still healthy and now with a new baby snuggling beneath her.

"I can't bear to think what the future holds for the Asian elephant," says Goldie. "Two-thirds of India's elephants have been killed in the past 100 years, that's around 36,000. As India's human population explodes — a baby is born every second — the elephants' habitat is being threatened. They're being made homeless. We have to act fast to protect the few that are left."

Goldie, who turned 51 this month, has been making the documentary with the help of conservationist Mark Shand, brother of Camilla Parker Bowles, and author of the award-winning *Travels on My Elephant*. The trip took her to some wild locations in very down-to-earth circumstances, including paddling a hand-made coracle through the backwater lairs of alligators, and being carried in and out of a murky watering-hole to give an elephant a body-rub. For these sequences, Goldie appears dressed in simple stone-coloured shorts, and flat sandals with socks, yet still manages to look a picture of petite neatness.

Now, she is talking to me in the luxurious surroundings of the Rambagh Palace in Jaipur, one of India's most romantic hotels. Her suite holds two enormous beds, covered in red velvet. Goldie is lying on one and I am on the other. She is not wearing her usual micro-skirt or spray-on trousers, but is dressed in ethnic green and pink. Indian bracelets jangle on her wrist and there is a gold necklace at her throat hung with five citrines the size of small eggs.

Today she is serious, vulnerable, nothing like the giggly Goldie we all know and love from *Private Benjamin*, *Shampoo* and her latest smash hit, *The First Wives Club*. From time to time she cannot hide her emotion as she talks about her own family. She explains how studying the social habits of elephants has led her to reflect on the preciousness of those close to her, and the role of the family in general.

"Elephants take care of one another," she says. "The aunts, the uncles, the sisters, the brothers. They all stay together and look after each other. In our society, the family is breaking down, therefore society itself is breaking down, because everything is learned from family dynamics: morals, a code of ethics, humanity, reverence for your elders. If we could watch how elephants behave together as a family, then we could really learn from them."

Since her last visit to India, Goldie has lost her own mother, Laura, who died two years ago. When Goldie saw the elephant mother and how she protected her new baby between her legs, it made Goldie begin to think about "the love and protection I felt under the wing of my Mom". And it brought back memories of their last few years together.

"In the elephant world they support their sick relatives until they can't hold them up any longer," she says. "I did that with my mother. I held her up until she couldn't stand any more."

Laura had a heart attack in 1987, and doctors did not expect her to live for more than a couple of years. In fact, she survived for another seven. "In 1987"

Goldie pays her respects to Ganesh, in a ritual with Tara. Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of omnipotent Shiva, is the deity most often called upon in India



Tara's owner, Mark Shand, shows Goldie how to wash an elephant. Left: Goldie's first elephant ride, during her mahout (elephant handler) training





Elephants need a lot of room to live – consuming up to 500lb of vegetation and 50 gallons of water a day – and humans have become their direct competitors for space. Killing elephants for their ivory, below, still goes on



the end I was nursing her, taking care of her and also paying for nurses because I couldn't be there round the clock. My youngest son, Wyatt, would turn down her bed at night, and then my daughter, Katie, would come in. We'd all come visit Grandma.

"I remember those were the times she would look at me and say, 'I love you', with all her heart. And I know that I cared and loved her in life as much as anyone could possibly have done. Nothing was left unsaid. We had a perfect relationship.

"When it was her final day, we sort of knew it because she had faded, she'd sort of disappeared. But she looked at me and said: 'You go and do what you have to do'. She didn't mean go cook the dinner, she meant go do your life, it's OK. I got all choked up because I knew that was my exit. The next morning, she died." Tears run down Goldie's cheeks, not for the first or last time during our interview.

Goldie's own children are a source of great pride to her. Twice divorced, she has lived with actor Kurt Russell for 13 years, but they have never married. They have a 70-acre ranch in Colorado, a summer home in Canada and a house in Pacific Palisades, California, which is where, for most of the year, their extended family live a Waltons-like existence. Goldie has two children – Kate, 17, and Oliver, 20 – from her second marriage to singer/comedian Bill Hudson. She and Kurt have a son, Wyatt, 10, and 16-year-old Boston, Kurt's son from his first marriage, is a regular visitor.

Goldie's relationship with them all is extremely close. "They are open with me because I'm open with them, because I revere them as individuals and not just as a possession of mine. Obviously, you create rules and regulations which they don't like, and they're going to slam doors and stuff, but my kids didn't run away from me and say, 'I hate you'. They didn't stay out all night and get in cars and drive away and not call. Never. They have never destroyed

anything or taken drugs. My kids don't do drugs, none of them. Like all teenagers, they had to try it, but when they did, they didn't like it and they told me."

Goldie says she makes a conscious effort to have candid conversations with her children about sex and relationships. "Oliver called me up one day – he was having a terrible time with a girl. He said: 'She's really nice and I like her a lot, and I tried to make love to her. I was kissing her and I was very tender with her, but I could tell that she didn't want to do it. I couldn't force myself on her. I could never make a girl do something she didn't want to do.' I said: 'Oliver, I love you. You did the right thing.' Then we had a discussion about what the problem might be."

Goldie is brimming with pride about her own children, and is clearly moved by the memory of emotional family moments.

In her elephant documentary, she is back on top form, displaying all the happy-go-lucky, lively characteristics she is famous for. Luckily her constant laughter doesn't scare off the animals. When an alligator raises its ominous hooded eye from the water, close to her flimsy-looking little coracle, she jokes that it's just "a handbag with a vicious set of teeth".

But she's not joking when it comes to her genuine fears for the future of the elephants, feelings that deepened during the close contact while filming. "There's nothing like being so close to 30 million years of evolution. If we really care, then we have to do something now."

*If you would like further information on the Asian elephant appeal, contact: Fauna and Flora International, Asian Elephant Appeal, FREEPOST ANG6034, Great Eastern House, Tenison Road, Cambridge CB1 2YA. Freephone donation and enquiry line: 0800 132696.*

*In the Wild, Asian Elephants With Goldie Hawn will be screened on ITV on December 20 at 9pm.*