

Elephant Encounter Programme



Volunteering
Factsheet



About

In 2009, it was found that there was a serious lack of research done on captive elephants in South Africa, particularly with respect to their welfare and breeding, within their own unique environments. With this in mind, the project established the first elephant research unit dedicated to captive elephants - The African Elephant Research Unit, also known as AERU.

This research unit is a non-profit trust, with the following objectives:

- To conduct and facilitate research studies of the elephants based at the Knysna Elephant Park
- To work with parks and other captive elephant operations in South Africa
- To promote ethical and non-harmful research of captive elephants in South Africa
- To guide management of captive elephant operations through science
- To provide information relevant to wild elephants to improve their protection and conservation
- To carry out our mission, which is: conservation through education

create
stories
for a 
lifetime

What will you do?

The herd is comprised of 5 females (aged 17-35).

Usually volunteers work a 5-day week with weekends off. Occasionally, you may be asked to help on some evenings during the week.

In conjunction with the other activities, volunteers are asked to assist AERU collecting research data from the elephants including the following:

- Monitoring of behaviour - following and observing elephants in the field, recording behaviours such as grazing, drinking, playing, dusting and walking
- Recording social interactions between elephants - how they relate to, and communicate with each other using their trunks and bodies
- Night-time observations of elephant behaviour
- Observing and recording interactions between elephants and tourists
- Studies of feeding behaviour and plants eaten by the elephants
- Collection of dung for physiological analysis
- You will have the opportunity to get involved in many more different activities during your stay
- We also work closely with other elephant facilities. Depending on your length of stay, you may have the opportunity to visit and/or work at some of them.

What to wear?

You will be supplied with your own t-shirt, fleece and a sun cap (3+ week volunteers are supplied with two t-shirts) that you must wear during your working hours. You must be presentable at all times. You will need to supply your own trousers/shorts. These need to be hard-wearing and neutral colours (khaki, browns, greens, black, dark blue). Dark blue jeans are also suitable. Shorts must be no shorter than mid-thigh. Open-toed shoes are not appropriate when out in the field with the elephants. Hiking boots/trainers are most appropriate for while you are working.

Accommodation and meals

- Volunteers live in the AERU bunkhouse. There are five rooms, each with their own shower and toilet. The rooms have two to three beds, so you may or may not have to share, depending on the number of volunteers at the time.
- There are 2 extra rooms available with a kitchen and lounge when there are more volunteers.
- Bedding is provided.
- The AERU offices and lounge (library) are in the bunkhouse. The lounge has a Smart TV with Netflix etc. for volunteers to enjoy on their off days. The offices open onto a wooden deck and barbecue area which overlooks the dam and park.
- Volunteers who stay four weeks or longer get to spend a night in our luxury 'Elephant Lodge' located above the elephant boma. This four-star accommodation where you get to 'sleep with the elephants' is the only place in the world that offers you this type of experience!
- Meals are not included. There is a fully equipped kitchen area (stove, fridge, freezer, kettle, microwave & toaster) and you are responsible for buying and cooking your own food. shopping trips on Fridays are organised for you to buy supplies. There is a restaurant at the park, which is open between 08:00 and 19:00 every day.
- Heaters are provided in the winter, there are no fans/ AC in the summer.

What you need to know

- This is an animal-based project working with elephants near Knysna.
- Being a premier tourist destination, it is essential that volunteers are always neatly presented and can be identified as part of the team.

Minimum age

- 16 with parental consent

Minimum level of English required

- Intermediate to Upper Intermediate:
a strong understanding of English at a conversational level is required.
- Written English is very important

Skills/personality traits required

Volunteers are required to be dedicated, hard-working, mature and motivated. You should be in good health and reasonably physically fit (walking & physical activity involved), as you will be out in the fields following the elephants. Specific wildlife experience is not a necessity. Veterinary students, biology students and animal lovers will benefit greatly from this project.

Application

- Complete the application form





Arrival

At george airport on intake date

- Sundays for 1-week programme and Mondays for 3+ week programme
- Volunteers can extend the 1 week programme into 2 weeks
- Airport pickups are between 12pm and 3pm on intake dates - volunteers who arrive earlier will need to wait until 12pm.
- Airport pickups are for 3+ weeks. Shuttles are organized for Sunday arrivals
- If volunteers arrive after 3pm or have missed their flight it is their responsibility to be in contact with AERU management in order for them to arrange alternative taxi transport.
- Volunteers will be responsible for the cost of the taxi transfer and will need to have the cash available to pay the driver on pick up.
- Volunteers may arrive by long distance bus, but will need to make prior arrangements in order to get off at the correct bus stop

Departures

- Airport transfers for 3 weeks+ departures is on Mondays, leaving the park at approx. 10am, which means that all flights must be booked from 13h00 onwards, as check-in is 1 hour prior to departure and the airport is 95km from the park.
- The departure day for 1 and 2 week volunteers is on a Sunday at any time.
- If flight departure times are before 13h00 it is your responsibility to arrange alternative transport or ask AERU management for assistance. You will be responsible for the cost of the taxi transfer to the airport in this case.
- Volunteers may depart by long distance bus, but will need to make prior arrangements with the project.

Starting/intake dates 2025

1 week/2 week									
05 Jan	16 Feb	30 Mar	11 May	22 Jun	13 Jul	03 Aug	14 Sep	26 Oct	07 Dec

3 weeks+																	
13 Jan	03 Feb	24 Feb	17 Mar	07 Apr	28 Apr	19 May	09 Jun	30 Jun	21 Jul	11 Aug	01 Sep	22 Sep	13 Oct	03 Nov	24 Nov	15 Dec	05 Jan 2026



Which transfers are included?

- Arrival & Departure for 3+ week, if flights on Monday 1pm and later.
- Transfer to and from local bus stations, if AERU schedule allows, otherwise a taxi will be booked
- Weekly shopping

What to bring?

- A waterproof jacket or poncho is always a good idea whatever time of year you are planning to visit the park, as the weather can be very unpredictable.
- It is a good idea to bring lots of extra socks, as you will be doing a lot of walking.
- Water boots (gumboots)

Other items you will need

- Alarm clock
- South African plug adaptors
- Towels
- Camera
- Good pair of walking boots/trainers
- Weekend clothes can be casual / normal clothes
- Warm tops / fleeces or jacket (waterproof trousers may come in handy in wet weather. Night temperatures can drop to 0°C). Cold during winter
- Clothing for layering is always good as it often warms up during the day.
- Small backpack for out in the field neutral colours
- Water bottle
- Insect repellent (during the summer months: November – March)
- Sun cream (SPF 30 or more)
- 20-30 pairs of latex gloves (for picking up dung samples)
- 1 pair of working gloves (the gardening 'leather' type - for cleaning out elephant pens and bringing branches in for the elephants). Important - work with gloves every day.
- There is a token operated laundry facility which has washing machines and tumble dryers. Tokens are approximately EUR3.00 per wash and EUR4.00 per dry.
- Volunteers need their own laundry detergent.

Other useful items you may wish to bring

- Swimming costume (we have some of the most beautiful beaches in the world on our doorstep, which you can visit over the weekends)
- Books, games, movies, music, etc. for the evenings
- Binoculars and personal first aid kit

Volunteers can keep the uniforms that they get from us (t-shirts, fleece, cap). If you wish you can purchase extra AERU branded t-shirts, fleeces and beanies, which you can use as part of your uniform in the field, then take them home with you and help spread the AERU message.

Vaccinations

- Consult your local doctor/travel clinic

Where is the project based?

- Country: South Africa
- Region: Located between Knysna and Plettenberg Bay



Working?

- Minimum duration: 1 week
- Maximum duration: 12 weeks
- Daily hours: working hours will be discussed but you will be busy for 5 days a week
- The project is open all year round

Costs?

- Placement fee: **€400** (non-refundable)
- 1 week: **€665**
- 1-3 extra weeks: **€575 p/w**
- 4-7 extra weeks: **€425 p/w**
- 8-11 extra weeks: **€380 p/w**

Probation?

- No probation period.
Termination of volunteer program if they don't abide to rules & regulations in code of conduct / any inappropriate behaviour

Sick days?

- The project must be notified as soon as possible if you are going to be absent due to illness.

What is included?

- Project placement and all correspondence with the project
- Arrival & departure transfer at the project (scheduled dates)
- Arrival orientation
- Accommodation and basic bedding at the project
- Weekly shuttle for supplies
- Wifi
- A South-African lunch / dinner
- Branded t-shirt, fleece and cap
- Elephant lodge night if you stay for 4 weeks or longer
- Support services from both the project and EC Cape Town
- 24/7 assistance on EC Cape Town's emergency phone for the duration of your stay

What is excluded?

- Visa application fees
- Travel insurance (available at €22 per week if booked with EC)
- Flights
- Meals
- Laundry
- Towels
- Spending money
- All other local transport requirements
- Excursions



Terms and conditions?

- Standard EC Terms and Conditions apply.
- In addition, please note the following Project Booking and Cancellation Policy:
 - ◇ 25% cancellation fee if cancelled 8 weeks prior to arrival
 - ◇ 50% cancellation fee if cancelled 30 days prior to arrival
 - ◇ 100% cancellation fee if cancelled 14 days prior to arrival
 - ◇ 50% payment on confirmation of booking and balance payable 30 days prior on arrival