

FIRST STEP TO FREEDOM

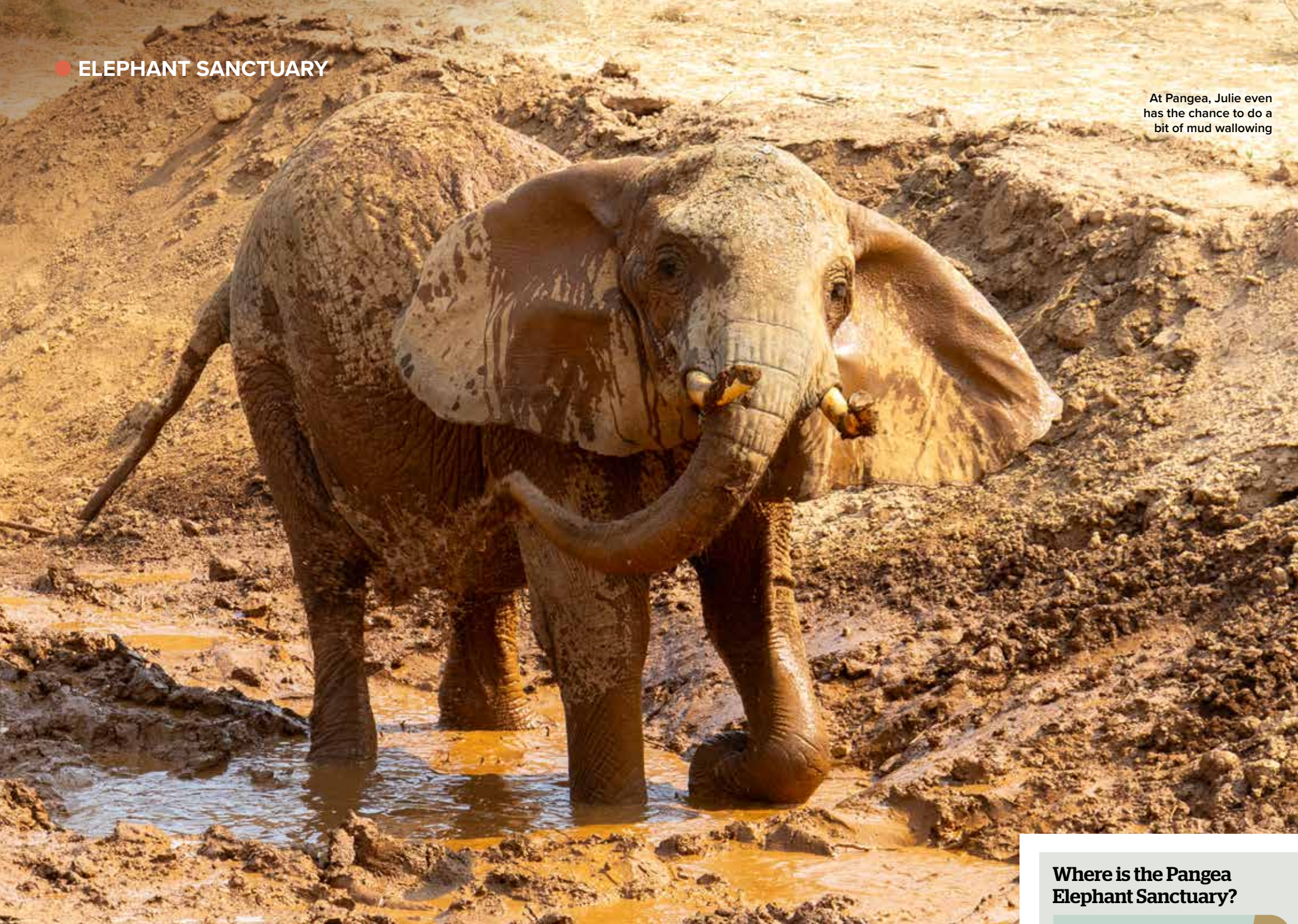
With more than 600 elephants living in captivity across Europe, the dream of a large rehoming sanctuary is now reality at Pangea, Portugal, which has just welcomed its first resident

Words by **SUE WATT**

JULIE STEPPING OUT OF BARN: RENATO LAINTO/PANGEA

A former circus elephant, Julie steps out from her barn into her extensive hillside surroundings for the first time

● ELEPHANT SANCTUARY



At Pangea, Julie even has the chance to do a bit of mud wallowing



Julie is carefully guided into Pangea's spacious barn, her new home



The Cardinali's circus truck arrives at Pangea with Julie on board

“Back then, crates of baby elephants would arrive on our shores, destined for faraway zoos or circuses”

WHEN I FIRST ENCOUNTER JULIE AT Pangea Elephant Sanctuary, I'm surprised to see she's tinged red all over, using her trunk to spray herself with water from a terracotta-coloured mud wallow and happily flicking soil over her shoulders. She genuinely looks like she's living her best life.

Where is the Pangea Elephant Sanctuary?



Pangea Elephant Sanctuary is located in the Alentejo region of southern Portugal, approximately 200km east of Lisbon, not far from the Spanish border.

Pangea's intense heat, golden grasslands and shrub remind me of Kenya's Tsavo National Park, famous for its ochre-tinted elephants. But we're a long way from Africa: this is Alentejo in southern Portugal, home to Europe's first large-scale elephant sanctuary. In June, it welcomed Julie as its first resident.

NOW IN HER 40S, DETAILS OF Julie's early years are sketchy. Her documents state that she arrived from Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of Congo) as a young orphan in 1981, joining the Circo Víctor Hugo Cardinali in 1988 from Lisbon Zoo. Back then, it wasn't unusual to have crates of baby elephants arriving on our shores, parents culled and offspring destined for faraway zoos, safari parks or circuses.

Some 600 elephants now live in captivity across Europe, many of them alone, which is particularly tough for these social animals,

renowned for forming strong bonds within herds. Animal welfare concerns have influenced legislation across many countries to improve conditions in zoos and ban wild animals in circuses. Julie was the last circus elephant in Portugal.

“Our understanding of animal welfare was very different then, and zoos and circuses are dealing with that legacy,” Kate Moore, Pangea's CEO tells me. “We're not here to pass judgement, but to offer a solution. The government created legislation to ban elephants from circuses. But with nowhere to go, nothing changes for them.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue is an award-winning travel writer based in London. She specialises in conservation stories from Africa.





Ryan employs the protected contact method of training

“Pangea provides a life in nature offering dignity and a sense of freedom in their final years”

Captive elephants can't return to Africa. In the wild, their deep-seated knowledge gleaned over generations leads them to water and ancient migratory routes, but this isn't available to repatriated orphans. And integration into established herds isn't easy. Spanning 405 hectares, Pangea provides the next best thing: a life in nature offering dignity and a sense of freedom in their final years, enjoying the companionship of 20–30 elephants with similar stories.

MILLENNIA AGO, ELEPHANTS roamed the Iberian Peninsula. Pangea, with its warm climate and diverse habitats, is well suited for their return. The reserve was chosen after a detailed feasibility study on various territories across Europe. In 2017, the Pangea Trust became an independent NGO with two UK charities, the Olsen Animal Trust and Born Free, as founders, later joined by Fondation Brigitte Bardot and World Animal Protection. They cover core operational costs, with fundraising focusing on capital appeals and rescues.

Julie's rehoming took a year of discussions with Cardinali's circus. “She'd been with the family for nearly 40 years and she was healthy, happy and well cared for,” said Carlos Carvalho, president of the Portuguese Association of Circus Enterprises and Artists, who was closely involved. “When the new law came in, they chose Pangea because the team showed immense respect for the circus from the beginning. Also, Julie would remain nearby, and we could be part of her life, maintaining our bonds of friendship.”

Coming from a travelling circus, Julie was used to trucks and her three-hour journey must have seemed like just another working day, albeit a momentous one for the Cardinalis and Pangea. On arrival, escorted by Victor Hugo Cardinali Junior, she walked calmly into her vast barn, which leads out to two paddocks spanning three hectares on a gentle hillside, complete with shrubs and oak trees, water sources and that beloved mud wallow. In this new world, she has the freedom to come and go between them as she pleases. On her first venture outside



Julie's new paddocks are a wide expanse of shrubs, trees and water sources



Aerial view of Pangea's elephant playground

later that day, her natural elephant instincts drew her to bathe in the mud, something she'd never before experienced.

Every day, Julie is discovering that life in Pangea is different. In the circus, she lived by the laws of ‘free contact’, a training approach devoid of barriers between elephant and human, governed by the handler's dominance and the bullhook. In her new home, adhering to ‘protected contact’ (PC) principles, her training is gentle, respectful

and rewarded, limited to just four brief 10-minute sessions a day while she's learning simple actions for her essential medical checks. Soon she will voluntarily assist in her own welfare by offering her feet, trunk and ears for examination and blood tests.

Gail Laute, Pangea's elephant transition coordinator and a renowned expert in animal behaviour, pioneered the kinder PC approach in the early 1990s. It's now used in most elephant facilities worldwide.

“In free contact, the elephant must comply with all commands, and the human uses the sharp-pointed bullhook for negative reinforcement and punishment,” she explains. “In PC, based on positive reinforcement, both keeper safety and elephant welfare are addressed. The handler stays outside the elephant's space behind a barrier, no longer needing protection. So the



A bucket filled with colourful fresh fruit and veg serves as positive reinforcement in training

trainer is no longer dominant, the elephants are free to say ‘no’, and their non-compliance and mistakes are accepted.”

MEET RYAN HOCKLEY, PANGEA'S sanctuary manager, who has more than 30 years' experience of caring for elephants, in Julie's vast barn. To the uninitiated, it might seem like a zoo building. It's anything but, with the gate always open to her paddocks should she wish to wander outside and its indoor fence of steel poles serving only as the all-important safety barrier for protected contact. “We never share the same space with her,” Ryan confirms. “Wherever she goes is her zone.”

He holds a long yellow pole between the steel posts and Julie calmly walks towards it, touching it with her forehead. He moves it away and she follows, then he positions

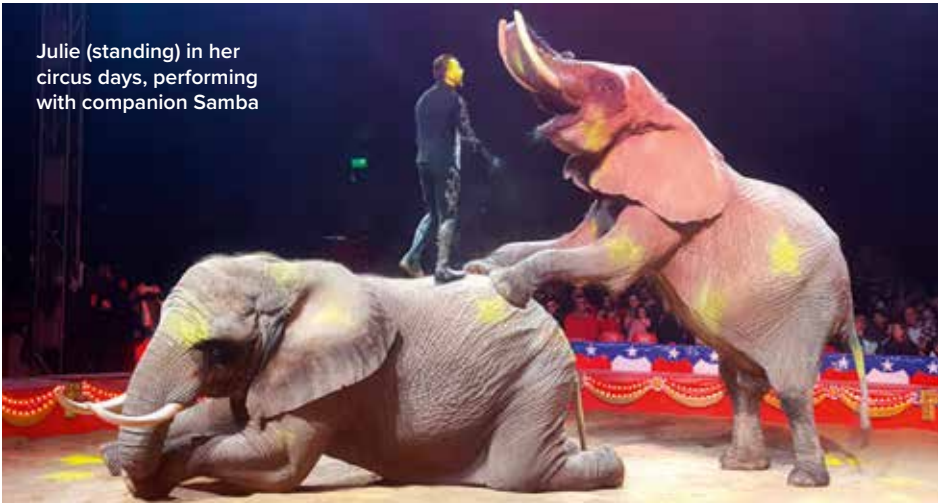
● ELEPHANT SANCTUARY

it lower down, and she picks up her foot to touch it. Between each movement, Johnny Nascimento, Pangea’s elephant caregiver, blows his whistle and she gets some juicy fruit or veg as her positive reinforcement reward. Apparently onions are her favourite. “We change location and vary rewards so she doesn’t get them every time. But we always tell her, ‘good girl,’” Ryan says. “Julie is so robust and clever – a joy to work with.”

DURING MY VISIT, FOUR WEEKS after Julie’s arrival, she seems to be thriving in nature and growing in confidence. We watch her exploring outdoors, trying new food, mostly branches and grasses, and bathing and dusting herself, all typical wild elephant behaviour. She burrows her shortened tusks – their tips trimmed by the circus crew who were concerned they were going to become crossed – into piles of hay Johnny has scattered around the paddocks as supplementary food, and with her wayward trunk, throws some over her head as if she’s playing. She has even started sleeping out under the stars, something she’s been deprived of for decades. Flattened vegetation and piles of poop in the mornings are testament to her new nighttime habits. It will take time and money to complete the planned infrastructure around Pangea, and the team is taking a phased approach. “If we raise the funds, our next project is to open another 28 hectares of habitat by the end of this year,” Kate says. “That’s more than 100 times the size of a standard European zoo enclosure for elephants. It will increase capacity and give our elephants the space and diverse experience they deserve.” Pangea intends to have both African and Asian, male and female elephants enjoying its rich environment. “Previously, the land was used for cattle grazing, eucalyptus plantations and hunting, contributing to a



Pangea’s elephants will share the sanctuary with Sorraia horses and Tauros cattle



Julie (standing) in her circus days, performing with companion Samba

“Julie rumbles, a lot, and I think she’s expressing her realisation that her life has changed in a very good way”

somewhat degraded landscape,” explains conservationist José Fontes, who worked with Rewilding Portugal to improve the habitat for pachyderms and native wildlife. Deer, mongoose, wild boar, foxes and vultures all share this landscape. Alongside the removal of dominant plant species such as *esteva* (rockroses), natural grazing is central to Pangea’s habitat renewal. “We introduced native herbivores – Sorraia horses and Tauros cattle – to graze year-round, restoring ecological processes,” says José. “They eat different parts of plants at different heights, graze in

different areas and together contribute to a vegetation mosaic that boosts biodiversity and reduces the biomass that fuels wildfires.” We spot the mixed herd on the hillsides, restoring the land through grazing, trampling and dunging. The four Sorraia horses, handsome with golden velvety hides, are a rare Portuguese breed with the genetic heritage of ancient Iberian wild horses. Around 200 survive and this natural grazing helps conserve the species. The robust Tauros, says José, “are heavy-duty grazers, selectively back-bred from ancient breeds that retain high percentages of aurochs’ DNA, a now extinct wild bovine.” Pangea won’t be open for visitors – the elephants here will have served their time

DUST BATHING: WILL WHITFORD; SORRAIA AND TAUROS: WILL WHITFORD; CIRCUS: PANGEA; JULIE IN BARN: RENATO LAINHO/PANGEA



Dust bathing regulates body temperature, acts as a sunscreen and keeps biting insects at bay



Victor Hugo Cardinali Junior escorts Julie to her retirement quarters

entertaining people. But it holds open days allocated by lottery for a limited number of supporters and local people from neighbouring towns Vila Viçosa and Alandroal. Ana Margarida Alberty visited the sanctuary before Julie arrived. “It’s fantastic that the elephants are coming here,” she says. “People are proud that Alentejo has been chosen – they love the elephants.”

OUTREACH VISITS TO SCHOOLS are being organised, teaching children about elephants and the importance of coexisting respectfully with wildlife,” Kate says. “And we’re planning an offsite discovery centre in Alandroal with webcams

and interactive experiences to connect people to the elephants while always putting animal welfare first.” The local economy is already benefiting through employment in construction and labour. José is optimistic about further opportunities: “Pangea has potential to create green jobs, encourage local businesses and inspire communities to take pride in a wilder future where caring for nature is imperative.” Julie’s future is looking promising too. She’s settling in well, seemingly confirming this in her own special way. “An elephant ‘rumble’ is a positive vocalisation, an expression of comfort, contentment, even joy,” Gail tells me. “And Julie rumbles... a lot! I think she’s expressing her realisation

that her life has changed in a very good way.” Soon, another female elephant called Kariba, currently in a Belgian zoo, will join Julie as Pangea’s second resident. Everyone is hoping they’ll become ‘friends’, having lived on their own since their companion elephants died two years ago. “We can’t say how they’ll get along, so they’ll have their own barns and outdoor enclosures initially,” Ryan says. “Elephants are like us – highly intelligent with high emotions. They’re all individuals.” For now, Julie is the star of Pangea and she’s becoming braver and more ‘elephant’ every day. This is her time to shine – in nature, with dignity and freedom – without the circus spotlight beaming down on her. 🐘