

THAILAND : HISTORY

The Thai peoples are believed to have migrated from either Mongolia/Tibet or from southwestern China to the settle along the borders of the Khmer kingdom. In approximately 1238 AD. as the Khmer empire was losing power, two Thai princes led a rebellion that successfully overthrew the empire. This began a long history of many dynasties and various geographical borders for the new Kingdom of Siam.

The colonial era saw many European nations exert power in Southeast Asia. Though Thailand lost control over land in what is now Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia, they managed to maintain the kingdom. Thailand remains the only country in Southeast Asia that has never been colonized by a foreign power.

In 1932, a student-led coup against the absolute monarchy of Siam resulted in the formation of a constitutional monarchy similar to the British system. Later attempts to return to an absolute monarchy failed and the constitutional system continued to develop—despite occasional coups. The name of the country was officially changed from *Siam* to *Thailand* in 1939.

Thailand has a population of approximately 62 million people. Over 1/3 of all Thais live in urban areas—over 11 million of them in Bangkok. Seventy-five percent of the population are ethnic Thais; however, there is a large Thai-Chinese population scattered throughout the country, and a substantial concentration of Malays in the southern peninsula. The majority of the population (94%) consists of cultural Buddhists. Approximately 4% of Thailand's population is Muslim and they tend to be concentrated in the South. The Muslims are usually poorer and are often looked down upon by the Buddhists. They are also less interested in or accepting of Christian influence. Only 0.6% of Thailand's population is Christian.

Communication is more than knowing the right words....

- Body language, tone, and your face often communicate as much as your actual words.
- When you talk to someone, smile at them. It is part of the culture and makes you less threatening.
- Westerners often do not realize how loudly they speak, even in normal conversations. Try to be soft spoken in ALL conversations, with Thais and when in a group with other *farangs* (westerners).
- When speaking with people who are learning English, SPEAK SLOWLY.
(Note: Speaking louder does NOT help with comprehension, so do not yell to get your point across. You would be surprised how many do this!)
- Avoid yelling in public places, especially if you are angry.
- Avoid confrontation and expressions of anger.** The Thais are very non-confrontational people. Westerners tend to “bring issues out into the open,” while Thais will do everything possible to avoid any exchange that would lead to confrontation. So, try to find ways to get your point across very gently and indirectly. Do like they do and be passive-aggressive. :)

THAI GOVERNMENT and POLITICS

NEVER criticize the king, the royal family, or the government. At best, this will offend the Thai people, at worst it will get you in jail. If you hear the national anthem played over a loud speaker or at any type of performance, you should stop, stand, and remain still/ quiet until it is finished and activities around you resume (this usually occurs at 8:00am and 6:00pm).

The prime minister and members of the more powerful “lower house” (4 year terms) are elected, but the senators of the upper house are appointed (6 year terms) by the prime minister. In 1997, Thailand’s Constitution was revised for the 16th time since 1932 and included such things as compulsory voting, 12 years of free public education, and the creation of some watchdog/anti-corruption entities. Since the 1932 revolution, the military has had a substantial influence on the government and politics in Thailand. The military includes the: Royal Army, Navy, Air Force; and National Police Dept.

The Thai king represents the country. Though he has no formal political power, the king and the royal family are deeply concerned for the well-being of the Thai people, who have the highest respect for their king. The current king, His Majesty Bhumibol Adulyadej, took the throne in 1946. He is the longest reigning monarch in Thai history & the worlds longest reigning, living monarch.

CHRISTIANS IN THAILAND

- Christians can face strong resistance from their family when they accept Christ. They can be seen as denying their family’s heritage and responsibilities. From a Thai parent’s Buddhist point of view, their child becoming a Christian threatens the destiny of their souls.
- Christians generally have only role-models from other religions and have no one to model the Christian life for them.
- Christians often have only one option for the type of church, youth group, or Bible study they can attend.
- Christians only recently have had the ability to buy Christian literature in the Thai language. They now have a modern translation of the Bible.
- Christians are tempted in very different ways living in a Buddhist culture, where ancestor and idol worship is the norm.
- Christians often don’t know many eligible Christians of the opposite sex when they reach the age of marriage.
- In Thailand, Christians are never seen as normal.

THAI CULTURE

- Do not refer to people in Thailand as driving on the wrong side of the road. This country follows the British pattern of driving on the left side of the road.
- The Thai culture is the product of centuries of development. Nevertheless, Thai society is not as exclusive with regard to foreigners as Japan, China, or a number of other nearby nations. A few basic principles of conduct will help foreigners make the transition to Thai culture more easily.

- Working in Thailand requires that we adopt a flexible outlook as we are constantly readjusting our plans to fit the culture and circumstances we meet. In other words, make the best of each new circumstance. Keep in mind that although things may be different from what you anticipated, God is still in control and His ways are not our ways.

SAVING FACE

The Thai people do not like confrontation or embarrassment. As a result, they will do everything they can to “save face” - to avoid causing confrontation or embarrassment to themselves or another person. They will expect you to do the same.

HEAD, HANDS and FEET

- The head is considered the sacred part of the body. Do not touch anyone, even a child, on the head!
- It is respectful to bow your head when walking by people sitting down.
- Don't point at people or call people over by pointing your finger and motioning. Instead call someone over by motioning with the palm down, and fingers straight.
- Use your RIGHT hand when giving something to another person.
- Avoid touching people of the opposite sex.
- Friends of the same sex often hold hands.
- The feet are considered the lowest part of the body and are therefore offensive. Never...use your feet to point at anything or to do anything other than walking or standing. Never...point your feet toward anyone, or show the bottom of your feet. When sitting in a chair, do not cross your legs so the bottom of your feet show. When sitting on the floor, tuck your legs under you or to the side and try not to point your feet at anyone.
- Don't touch people with socks or use them for games.
- Never step on a coin or paper money. It has a picture of the king on it.
- ALWAYS remove shoes when entering Thai homes, a wat, or anywhere you notice a pile of shoes by the door!
- Do NOT step over anyone, including beggars, or walk through groups of people.

The Thai Greeting: THE WAI

The traditional Thai greeting and sign of respect is done by placing the palms of the hands together, with fingertips in front of the nose and elbows down. Social class and position determine the height of your hands, how far to bow your head, and the length of the wai. You will not be expected to know all of these details, but it is proper and polite to greet people in this way.

- Always wai people who are older than you.
- Let children and workers wai you first and respond with a nod of the head.
- Thai's rarely shake hands or hug as a greeting.
- Thais will expect to be flattered when they ask you what you think of Thailand.
- Thais think most Americans are Christians and judge Christianity based on what is seen on TV. Essentially, they do not know anything about Christianity.

- In formal situations, Thais go by a title then their first name. “Khun” is the Thai equivalent of Mr. or Mrs.. “Ajahn” is the title for teachers, including missionaries and pastors. “Phra” is used for monks and deity.
- Thais use nicknames in casual situations. They are generally monosyllabic and easier to remember than first names.
- Smile a lot. Thais and westerners differ in their reasons for smiling. The latter smile when they are happy, the former smile in almost any situation to express any number of emotions.
- Criticisms of Thailand and her people are never appreciated. The Thais are very proud of their country.

HEALTH & SAFETY

- Pedestrians DO NOT have the right of way! LOOK ALL DIRECTIONS BEFORE CROSSING THE STREET -- including one-way streets!!!
- Wear sunscreen when outside in the sun and insect repellent at dusk and at night.
- Drink and brush your teeth with BOTTLED water.
- Eat only fruits/veggies that you know have been cleaned/cooked properly or that you can peel (like bananas, apples, and pineapple).
- AVOID foods that are NOT freshly made, soups/curries NOT boiling, and fruits that are already peeled. Milk products like custards, cheeses, creams, mayonnaise should be refrigerated and buns containing meats should be hot or refrigerated.
- When out at night, go in pairs or groups.
- Be careful where you carry your money and documents. A billfold in the back pocket is an easy target for pickpockets. However, a money pouch under clothing is a safe way to carry money.
- Always keep your passports, customs declarations, plane tickets, and money in a safe place. A safe place does not necessarily mean you carry your documents in your backpacks or money pouches, but these are the safest places.

Medical Concerns

Virtually all medications are available at any pharmacy without a prescription. Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and many provincial centers, including Phrae and Lampang have good hospitals. Doctors and hospitals often expect immediate cash payment for health services. U.S. medical insurance is generally NOT valid outside the United States.

Squatty Potty

Most guesthouses and places you will stay will have western toilets, BUT be prepared to use the infamous SQUATTY POTTY where you squat over a porcelain hole in the ground. It is also wise to carry small packets of tissues with you just in case.

APPROPRIATE DRESS

WHEN TEACHING OR IN FORMAL SITUATIONS, men should wear long pants with a collared shirt. Women should wear capris, long pants or knee-length skirts with a sleeved blouse or collared, sleeved shirt. Jeans are okay to wear. T-shirts will be too informal. Shirts that are sleeveless, have deep necklines (showing or near-showing cleavage) or that ever allow skin to show are impolite. Tennis shoes or sandals are fine.

IN CASUAL SITUATIONS, T-shirts are fine. Women should not wear sleeveless blouses unless they wear a shirt over it. Long (to the knee) shorts are becoming acceptable in public places. You are expected to maintain a personal dress code that reflects well on the team and your work.

BRING a hat, sunglasses, sun block, insect repellent, a pair of good walking shoes, and an umbrella (optional).

PHONE

Local calls in Thailand cost 3 Baht. Silver pay phones will take coins, green phones take cards. If you have an unlocked GSM world phone, you can buy a pay-as-you-go SIM card in Thailand and buy refills at the local 7- Eleven.

MONEY

Thai currency is in Baht. The current exchange rate is \$1.00 U.S. = 29 Baht
Notes come in denominations of 20, 50, 100, 500, 1000. Coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10. The smallest coins are rarely functional but remain in circulation and are represented at the cashier as “.25” or “.50.” They will round up and ask for an additional baht. If you have a small, golden coin with a 25 or a 50 written on it, you can use it. They are called “satang.” 100 satang = 1 Baht Please accept all change that you are given! Credit cards may be used only in major hotels, stores, and restaurants. You may use your debit card to obtain cash at ATMs.

References and Further Reading

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