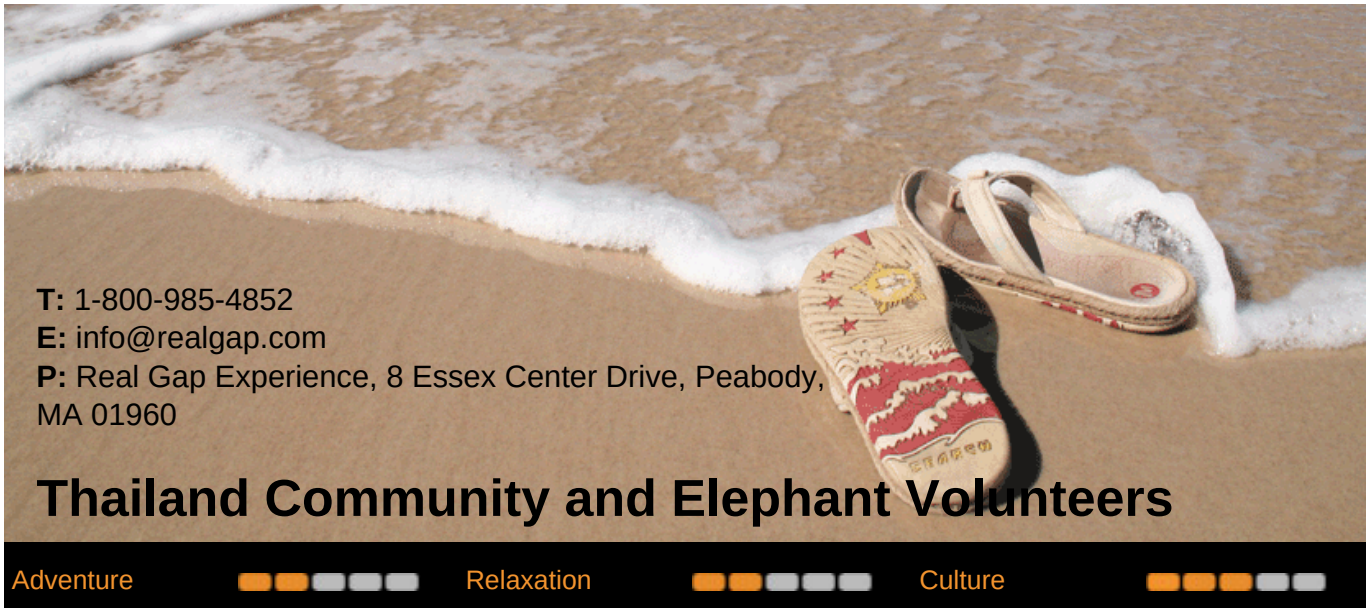

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Thailand Community and Elephant Volunteers

Adventure Relaxation Culture

Trip Name: Thailand Community and Elephant Volunteers **Trip Code:** THCE **Duration:** From 2 weeks

Trip Highlights

- Make friends with the largest living land animal in Asia
- Take a stroll and a bath with one of the beautiful elephants you'll live alongside
- Work on projects that help safeguard the elephants' futures
- Be more than just a tourist, live with Thai villagers and learn about their culture
- Learn to cook Thai-style

Overview

This programme offers you the opportunity to become part of the local Thai community and gain a true understanding of the Surin province and its people. The rewarding hands-on work at this elephant village in Thailand will involve helping maintain and plant crops to feed the local elephants, giving them a wash down at the river and offering support to the local communities. As a volunteer abroad in Thailand you'll really get under the skin of local life and see Surin from the inside.

Destination Info

Thailand is just a beautiful country – outstanding natural gorgeousness, impressive architecture, eye-catching temples, lovely, friendly people and just the best Thai food you ever ate and a lot cheaper than over here.

Tha Thum is the most northern district of Surin Province on the border with Roi Et Province. It is Surin's 'District of Elephants'. There are believed to be approx 250 elephants living in Tha Thum. The village where your homestay is located has about 50 houses along a main street. There is a school, two small shops and a river close by. This village is very typical of rural Thailand - you will be experiencing true Thai life first hand! Expect big smiles from the local people and an amazing experience with your elephant and homestay family.

Itinerary

Historically elephants worked in 'logging' (removing trees from forests) creating an income for their owners. As logging has now been banned for many years in Thailand, domesticated elephants are now unemployed.

In an attempt to reduce the expense of caring for domesticated elephants, many of them are sent to the bigger cities and used for tourism. This is bad for two reasons; firstly many elephants are involved in traffic accidents while working in the cities and secondly elephants are grazers and need to be constantly eating to maintain their weight and health which is obviously not possible while living in the cities.

The aim of this project is to generate income for the families ensuring the elephants can remain in the rural areas. The elephants are well treated in this region and their handlers are proud of their standard of care.

You can actively get involved by helping the communities that look after the elephants in Tha Thum. Your duties may include; planting bamboo, wild grass and other crops to help feed the elephants during the dry season. Adult elephants can eat an incredible 250kgs of food in one day, so you can understand the importance of providing enough food for them. The project work also extends to supporting the local community with a number of development projects planned every year. These include helping local schools, poor families and planting and harvesting crops amongst others. You may also have the opportunity to learn traditional Thai fishing methods and kayak on the local river.

Most days you will volunteer in the mornings and into the afternoons, giving you the opportunity to learn a huge

amount about these magnificent creatures (and the local community) under the supervision of the elephant's handler (also known as a mahout). Some afternoons you will be able to take an elephant down to the river for a swim - something they love to do as they cool off and wash! This will be an amazing experience - one which we are sure you are unlikely to forget! On each Thursday afternoon you'll return to Surin city (well, more of a town!) giving you the opportunity to explore the local area or even venture further afield.

Day 1: You'll arrive into Bangkok (airport code BKK)and transfer to the world famous travellers' centre, Khao San Road, to stay overnight in shared accommodation in the heart of the action of Bangkok.

Day 2: Today is orientation day and a Bangkok city tour. Visit some of the most famous sites of the city including Wat Pho, Wat Arun and Wat Phra Keaw (the Grand Palace – note, entrance to the Grand Palace is not included and is optional). You'll get the chance to soak up the sites, sounds and atmosphere of one of the world's most vibrant cities.

Day 3: Today you'll transfer by train to Surin, an experience in itself! Taking around 6 -7 hours the train passes slowly through the suburbs of Bangkok before heading through the edge of Khao Yai National park and into Isaan – the heartland of Thailand. On arrival you'll transfer to our volunteer houses in Surin city and meet the team.

Day 4: Today you'll transfer in the morning to the Elephant village – where the adventure really begins. On arrival you'll settle into your homestay accommodation in the heart of the village. The accommodation is basic but clean and the host family are incredibly friendly. You'll meet the mahouts who you will be learning from and working with. The transfer to the village takes between 45 and 60 mins. Once you're settled in you'll be getting stuck into your project.

Days 5 – 7: Project work. During your time at the elephant village you will participate in some of the following activities:

Walking and bathing the elephants (and riding if you wish)
Planting and harvesting crops for the elephants (which of course depends on the season)
Making 'poo' paper – much more pleasant than it sounds and a great source of income for village
Feeding the elephants

Learning to cook some Thai food
Helping teach some English within the village (optional)
Visiting a nearby Elephant centre (optional)
Kayaking on the River Mon
Fishing (optional) Having the most incredible experience surrounded by beautiful elephants and some of the friendliest people in Thailand (compulsory)

During your time at the elephant village, 3 meals a day are included.

In the afternoon of Day 7 (Thursday) you will transfer back to Surin City and stay at our Volunteer House. A great opportunity to catch up on emails, see a different side of Surin and socialise with other volunteers.

Days 8 – 10: Enjoy some free time to explore the city, surrounding areas or even further afield. You'll have a bed in our volunteer house throughout this time if you want to relax and stay put. Many volunteers decide to head further afield over the weekend and trips to Khao Yai National Park (3 hours or so by train), Cambodia (1.5 hours by minibus) or even the beach (6 hours +) are common.

Days 11 – 14: Return to the elephant village and carry on with the work as per week one.

Day 14: If you're staying for two weeks, return to Surin in the afternoon. If you're staying for four weeks the itinerary will follow the same or similar schedule as above.

Please note: Itineraries and activities are subject to change. We ask that you are flexible with the itinerary; the more you are, the more you will get out of the programme.

How have previous volunteers helped the project? We asked our in-country team…

“The impact that volunteers have is largely ongoing. Volunteers assist the local community with farming and are constantly planting and harvesting crops needed to feed the elephants, often hundreds of kilos each week!

Volunteers have helped with the construction of an elephant enclosure for a mother and baby elephant at the home-stay. This means that the mother and baby can stay close to the family that care for them. The birth of a new elephant is an extremely important and happy time for those at the village and we are delighted to share their experience.

We've worked closely with the village to discourage questionable practices such as tourists paying to ride the elephants on so called 'elephant-treks' and continue our dialogue with the community to ensure that our impact is as responsible as possible.

A contribution from the placement fee goes to the home stay at the Elephant village. This gives the community a reliable source of income allowing them to support the elephants as well as their families. In the past many of the Elephant handlers were forced to bring the elephants into the city to beg for money, Thanks to volunteers taking part in the programme, these families and their elephants now have the choice to stay comfortably at home.”

Accommodation

During the project you will be staying in basic homestay accommodation with the village elder and his family. You will be staying in a mixed room sharing with all other volunteers. A toilet and shower/ bucket bath will be available for you to use. Please note that if it's really busy, then from time to time other houses in the village will be used.

If you are volunteering at the project during the months of June, July and August your accommodation will be a guesthouse close to all the town's amenities. You will be staying in a room, sharing with one other person, and all the rooms have fans and are ensuite with showers and hot water. There is also Wi-Fi and a security desk.The guesthouse is very clean, quiet and safe and is a great place to relax with your fellow volunteers at the end of the day.

At the end of your volunteering week you will be taken back to Surin to spend the weekend in the town or you can make travel arrangements to visit other areas. In Surin you will stay in a volunteer house in a twin share room.

Programme Services and Facilities

Telephone

The international telephone access code for Thailand is +66. To place an outgoing, direct-dialled international call, dial +44 for the UK, followed by the telephone number. If you have bought a Thai sim card (very sensible) there are a number of different prefixes that you can add to make overseas calls a lot cheaper. Talk to your local team for more information.

Don't forget to contact your family once you are in Thailand, to let them know you have arrived safely!

Laundry

Laundry facilities are available at the volunteer house accommodation in Surin city (where you'll be at the weekend) for a small fee per kg of dirties!

Internet

There are many internet cafes in Surin city and costs per hour are very reasonable, making getting in touch with friends and family online at the weekends, very easy.

Meals

Whilst at the elephant village you will share three meals a day with the mahouts and your fellow volunteers, allowing you to experience real rural Thai food. You are encouraged to help your host family to prepare your meals, a great way to learn the skills of Thai cooking. There are also a couple of small shops in the village where you can buy snacks and drinks.

During the weekend you have the choice of a huge number of food stalls and restaurants in Surin city, serving some of the best food in the country (be warned though, Surin people like their food spicy!). The volunteer house also has a basic kitchen including utensils and amenities if you wish to self-cater.

Our team in Thailand will do all they can to help you with any food preferences/allergies but please note that Thailand doesn't seem to suffer from the same set of allergies/intolerances that we have in the West and therefore not all areas will be fully understood - either by our guides or by local restaurants. There is no reason that this should stop you travelling but we do need to ask that you are understanding of the local situation and please don't expect their either to be labelling (i.e. regarding nuts/gluten etc) or a real understanding of why this is an issue.

What's Included

- Airport meet and greet
- Arrival airport transfer
- Accommodation
- Food whilst in Tha Thum on project

What's Not Included

- Flights
- Travel insurance
- Food whilst in Surin at the weekends
- Return transfer from Surin to Bangkok

Is This Trip For You?

You may be the only volunteer at your chosen project at any one time. However, you will still have the full support of your in-country team and those at the project. If you are looking for a group volunteering experience we have plenty of options for you to consider.

Additional Information

Orientation

On arrival into Bangkok your coordinator will help you settle in to your accommodation before going for evening drinks on the famous Khao San Road. The following day you will be taken on a tour of Bangkok and the local area as well having a welcome meal so you can get to know your fellow volunteers. Your guide will also talk you through your volunteer schedule.

The following day you will be travelling to Surin city where you will meet the local team who will deliver an orientation about Surin and the project. You will travel by train to Surin which takes approximately 7 hours.

There may be occasions during your volunteer project where regular work is disrupted by special school events, exams etc - whilst we do our very best to know these dates in advance, unfortunately the way in which projects in rural areas operate mean that they themselves often don't know until a matter of days before the event takes place. We ask that all volunteers are flexible and during these periods we will endeavour to provide alternative activities.

What to Pack

Please note that this kit list is intended to help you plan what you may need to take with you and, therefore, you may not need all of the listed items on your travels nor is it exhaustive.

Personal Admin

- Photocopies of important papers such as passport, airline tickets and insurance documents

General

- Mosquito net
- Bedding is provided however some people like to take their own cotton liner and pillow case
- Day bag / rucksack (for excursions)
- A torch
- Mobile phone
- Camera & batteries
- Phone charger with a two pin adaptor plug
- Playing cards for free time
- Diary – you will have so many amazing experiences to remember
- MP3 player and speakers (if you wish)
- Tissues
- Plastic bags
- Snacks (cup of soups, biscuits etc)
- Pocket-knife
- Towel

Clothing

- Walking shoes / trainers
- Flip Flops
- A hat to protect you from the sun
- Rain coat
- Clothes; Long sleeve shirts and trousers are great.

Medical Kit

- Small medical kit containing plasters, medicine for diarrhoea, head ache tablets, anti-histamine cream and any medication you will need
- Mosquito repellent
- Contraception including condoms
- Antibacterial soap gel (does not need water to rinse off)
- Travel wash for clothes

Minimum Age

Minimum 17 years, maximum decided on potential participant's health. Please be prepared that you may be working with volunteers of all ages.

Minimum Numbers

There are no minimum numbers on the trip.

Please note: you may be the only volunteer at your chosen project at any one time. If you have any questions about this, please feel free to contact us

Flights

To receive your included airport pic- up, your flight to Thailand should arrive at Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport (BKK) on your programme start date between 6am and 10pm. Your return flight or onward travel should be arranged on your programme end date.

To book your flights, please contact us on 01273 647219 so that we can search for some great flight deals.

It is important that once you have booked your flights you add these details to your online account or alternatively you can contact us with your departure date, the flight number and arrival time at your destination.

FAQs

1. **What are the typical group sizes?**
   Groups sizes vary depending on the time of year, but generally you can expect to be with between 2 and 5 fellow travellers.

2. **How much spending money would you recommend I take?**
   If you are on a tight budget you can get away with £80 per week. If you want to do some travelling in your free time then you will need a bit more.

3. **What are the average ages of travelers on this trip?**
   The majority of participants on this program are aged between 18-30, however it is popular with travelers of all ages.

4. **I am a first time traveler, and a bit apprehensive about travelling on my own. Do many people do this by themselves?**
   The majority of our participants are solo travelers, so you will be one of many in the same position. We e-mail out a buddy list 2-3 weeks before you start, so you can begin to get to know one another beforehand.

5. **Is Thailand safe?**
   Absolutely, and you have co-ordinators with you at all times to ensure your safety.

6. **Do I need to take a sleeping bag?**
   All bedding is provided but if you wanted to take one as well then you can.

7. **Do I need to take a mosquito net?**
   This is up to you, they aren't provided but if you take care of the room and close the windows etc then you shouldn't need to take a net with you.

8. **Will there be a safe/safety deposit box available?**
   Yes, there will be somewhere for you to keep your valuables.

Police Check

This trip requires a Police Check to be carried out - please contact us for further information on how to do this.

Support & Advice

Your safety is paramount which is why all our programs have been visited and assessments have been conducted to ensure any major risks have been minimized.

In addition, you will have access to a 24 hour emergency contact number so you can contact one of our staff at any time should you need to. In addition our overseas partners and coordinators are on hand in-country to assist you.

Financial Security

We know that the last thing you want to worry about when you're planning your trip of a lifetime is whether your money is in safe hands. As a leading global gap year provider it's our job to make sure your finances are secure,

so when you book with us you can be confident that we do just that.

Real Gap Experience is part of TUI Travel Plc, one of the largest travel organisations in the world, and these days in the travel industry, large means secure.

Insurance

Whether you're traveling for two weeks or two years, trekking the Amazon in Ecuador or on safari in Africa, insurance is an essential part of your adventure and will help you enjoy your travels, secure in the knowledge that you have the protection you need. In fact, everyone traveling with us must have adequate cover before their trip begins.

Of course you are free to buy insurance from any provider, however at Real Gap Experience, we have partnered with World Nomads to offer policies that have been specifically designed to meet the needs of global travel. If you think you're already covered by an existing policy, such as those offered by credit card providers, check the policy wording very carefully to ensure it covers you for your Real Gap Experience.

For more information on travel insurance please contact us to speak to one of our travel advisors.

Money Matters

The unit of currency in Thailand is the Baht (THB; symbol). There are 100 Satang to the Baht and coins come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 25 and 50 Satang or 1, 2, 5 and 10B. Paper bills come in 20B (green), 50B (blue), 100B (red), 500B (purple) and 1000B (beige).

US Dollars are the other most widely accepted currency and credit cards can be used for a fee in most large cities or at resort hotels but are not often accepted by small locally run businesses. ATMs are found in all major cities and almost all provincial banks.
Meal, Inexpensive Restaurant around $3
Domestic beer (from a local store) $2
Domestic beer (at a restaurant) $3
Coke/Pepsi (0.33 litre bottle) $0.53
Water (1.5 litre bottle) $0.5

(Prices quoted in US Dollar)

Passports and Visas

You should ensure that you have a full passport that is valid for 6 months beyond the intended length of stay. It is your responsibility to have the correct personal documents and to obtain your own visa, if one is necessary, in accordance with the regulations of the country you are to visit. The information provided below is to help you with that process. We are not responsible for the actions of local immigration and customs officials, whether at points of entry or otherwise, and any subsequent effects.

Citizens of the UK, the USA, Ireland, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and most European countries do not require a visa for stays of less than 30 days. For stays of between 31 and 60 days you can obtain a 60-day tourist visa for a fee from a Thai embassy or consulate before you travel. For stays of up to 90 days, you can extend the 60-day visa for a further 30 days while you are in the country, for a fee.

Visa courier service

For those of you who would prefer to use a specialist visa service to help you obtain the right visa for your travels, we have teamed up with VisaCentral, to offer you specialist assistance and advice - making preparations for your trip easier and more straight forward.

Click on VisaCentral to find out more about their services and prices.

Cultural Considerations

Whilst parts of Thailand are developing very quickly and Bangkok can feel more modern than many Western cities, much of the country is still very poor and people have challenging lives. The accommodation you will be staying in is very basic and you will not have the luxuries that you may have in this country. Please respect that this is the way locals live and take the opportunity to experience this new way of life. The friendly people, the great atmosphere and beautiful location will more than make up for this. Most travellers enjoy this change in lifestyle. It is very healthy, refreshing and opens your mind to a new world.

Religion

Religion is an important part of Thai day-to-day life and the main religion is Buddhism. Around 4% of the country are Muslim (largely concentrated in the far south of the country) and there is a small Christian population.

Clothing

Note to all regarding clothes: Thailand is a very conservative country and, away from the beaches, people generally like to dress as smartly as possible and, even in rural areas you will see that most people are very conscious of being in clean and conservative clothes. Although no-one expects you to wear a suit and tie, and when at your project old t-shirts and shorts/jeans are totally appropriate, please do remember to cover up and try not to show too much flesh.

Boys – please note that wandering around without wearing a shirt/t-shirt is frowned upon (away from the beach) and in urban areas can draw the attention of the police.

Girls – please try not to expose too much flesh. Try to avoid t-shirts that expose too much and don't wear short shorts.

NOTE: When visiting a temple you are expected to cover up. Wear trousers or skirts and cover your shoulders, midriff and back.

There are plenty of opportunities to sunbathe and swim whilst in Thailand, so remember to take your bikini, swimsuit, swimming shorts etc. Flip-flops are the easiest and coolest footwear to take with you. Whenever you enter houses, temples, or home stays you will need to remove your shoes and leave them at the door. This will soon become habit and you won't even realise you are doing it. Remember to take some trainers with you as well for the outdoor activities.

There are many opportunities to buy cheap clothes from markets. These are cool, cheap and ideal for the climate and social norms.

Smoking, Alcohol and Drugs

Smoking and drinking is acceptable in Thailand and readily available. However, please respect other people. Smoking is not permissible in volunteer apartments or the host families' homes. Drinking is only permissible in moderation and must not impact upon any volunteer work you undertake. While we want you to have fun in your free time, antisocial behaviour will not be tolerated.

It is absolutely forbidden to carry drugs into Thailand. Being caught in possession of drugs can lead to at least a prison sentence and a hefty fine if you are lucky but remember there is still a very real threat of the death penalty

for carrying drugs in Thailand. Always keep an eye on your luggage while travelling. Never bring anyone else's luggage through customs.

Bathroom Facilities

You will experience a range of different shower and toilet facilities. Unless you are staying in a hotel you will rarely have hot water. The cool water takes a little getting used to but we are sure you'll find it refreshing after a hot and humid day. Toilets will be a combination of western and Asian. Remember to put all toilet tissue in the bin provided and not in the toilet.

You'll find that many places don't have soap or toilet/tissue paper in the bathrooms. Without going into too much detail, that's what the water can be used for (as well as flushing) or often a small water spray pipe next to the toilet. It can be useful to carry a small bottle of antibacterial gel for washing hands and small packets of tissues.

Vaccinations & Health

Travel health can often be something people forget about before going away, but a little preparation and knowledge can go a long way to help you stay fit and healthy while abroad. The risks to your health whilst travelling will vary depending on your general health and the type of activities you are going to be partaking in and the length of your stay.

Since we are not medically qualified, it is recommended that you consult with your Doctor or a recognised Travel Medical Advisory Service who will assess your particular health risks before recommending vaccines and/or anti-malarial tablets and advising you on what precautions you should take.

Safety

As in most countries there are people who try to take advantage of tourists. The following advice is intended to help you keep safe:

- Always keep your personal items such as passport, money and camera with you and in a safe place. You can buy mini padlocks to prevent people from going into your day sack without your permission.
- Always walk around in groups, never go off with strangers and people that you have only just met
- Never go out alone after dark
- Stick with the escorted trips. If you do go out in the evening unescorted, you do so at your own risk. Please tell the co-ordinator or your home-stay family where you are going, what time you will be back and ensure you sign the release from.
- Please do not get into fights, or arguments with local Thais. We cannot guarantee your safety and it could provoke future attacks on other travellers
- As in this country there have been reports of drinks being spiked on the islands. Please do not leave your drinks unattended and do not accept drinks from strangers.
- Most importantly of all, if you wouldn't do whilst your at home, then don't do it whilst you are away!

This information is not intended to scare you. Unfortunately, bad things can happen, as they can do in any country and we want you to be prepared. We want you to stay safe and have a good time.

We would like to add that the majority of the locals are friendly, warm and hospitable people who love meeting our travellers. Please be friendly, respectful and stay aware and you will have a great time.

We advise that you check your government's advice before travelling abroad. For UK, American and Australian customers please see the relevant links below;

UK: www.fco.gov.uk

USA: www.travel.state.gov

Australia: www.smartraveller.gov.au

ATM Theft

It is very likely that you will need to withdraw cash at some point during your travels. Please be cautious when withdrawing money from an ATM and ensure that you are vigilant of other people near the ATM, especially those that offer unsolicited assistance if your card is detained. It has been recognised that individuals are operating unlawful withdrawals by placing 'traps' in ATMs whereby personal bank cards are being detained, causing the victim to believe their card transaction has not been completed, and leaving their bank card in the ATM which is then later retrieved by the thief.

If your card is confiscated or you are concerned that your card has been tampered with, please report immediately to the bank or cancel your card.

Thailand Terrorist Threat

Thailand is one of the most popular destinations for visitors to Southeast Asia. Most visitors enjoy a trouble-free stay. However, Thailand does have a history of political instability and has experienced a number of military coups since 1932. The political future of the country remains uncertain, though the situation remains stable.

Over the past 3-4 years there have been a number of political demonstrations in Bangkok and some other urban areas. Tensions rise and fall but other than in 2010, most protests are usually peaceful and Thais still go out of their way to be hospitable to visitors. However, it's always advisable to avoid large gatherings and listen to the advice of the team in country

Language Guide

Here are some useful phrases to remember when you get to Thailand. We also suggest you obtain a Lonely Planet or language guide for the destination(s) you are travelling to.

Hello (Male speaker) - *sawatdee krup*
Hello (Female speaker) - *sawatdee kaa*
How are you? - *sabai dee reu*
Thank you - *kop koon*
I can't speak Thai - *phoot Thai mai dai*
I don't understand - *mai kao chai*
Do you understand? - *kao chai mai*
Where is the rest room? - *hong nam yoo tee nai*
How much does this cost? - *nee tao-rai*
What is this? - *nee aria*
Good-bye - *la gon*
Sorry/Excuse me - *kor thoad*
The bill please - *Gep taang*

Food & Drink

It's normal in Thailand to eat rice dishes for breakfast and it is all part of the cultural experience. In fact, rice and noodles are served with all meals. The food is gorgeous, with fresh vegetables tasting far better than they do back home. Vegetarians will be happy, as Tofu is widely available as is plenty of fresh fruit. And meat lovers will also be tantalising their taste buds visiting the many local markets where you can buy chicken satay (marinated kebabs), beef kebabs and other types of meat. It is very cheap too. Remember to let us know before you depart if you have any special dietary requirements.

Public Holidays

When planning your trip, you should be aware of the major national holidays celebrated throughout the country. However, although businesses and government offices are closed on public holidays, tourist attractions and shops are almost never closed. The main impact on the tourist of these holidays is the increased competition for travel and accommodation from Thais who use long weekends to get away from the big city.

Weather

Thailand's equatorial climate remains tropical and warm for most of the year, with the south getting the best of the weather. The monsoon season falls between May and October, bringing warm and humid air and dipping to a minimum of 18ºC. This means that Thailand is a great destination at most times of the year, though the best months are between November and February when temperatures are comfortable and rains have slackened off.

Time

Thailand is 7 hours ahead of GMT.

Electricity

The electricity in Thailand is 220 volts and frequency 50 Hertz. Devices that do not accept this voltage will need to be used with an adapter. Outlets in Thailand generally accept 2 types of plug:

Flat blade plug

or

Two round pins

Trip Note Disclaimer

The information contained in this trip note has been compiled with great care and is provided in good faith. Any itinerary featured is correct at time of release. However, our itineraries may change as make improvements that result from travellers' comments, our own research or from time to time as a result of reommended travel advice.

You can rest assured that it is always our goal to provide you with the most rewarding trip and experience ever!

Our Details

If you have any questions about this trip please do not hesitate to contact us and we'll be happy to answer them.

Phone: 1-800-985-4852
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