

# Guide to Thailand

## The Country

History of Thailand as we know it began when the kingdoms of Lan Na (Chiang Rai/Chiang Mai) and Sukhothai, the first truly independent Thai Kingdoms, established highly developed societies in the North and Central regions of Thailand in the 13th and 14th centuries. The Kingdom of Ayutthaya, which was heavily influenced by the Khmer's of Angkor, eventually conquered neighboring Sukhothai and dominated the region for the next several hundred years of Thai history. Unfortunately, first Chaing Mai and then Ayutthaya were overrun by Burmese invaders, who occupied the Lan Na capital for several centuries and sacked Ayutthaya, forcing the central Thai kingdom to relocate farther south, establishing a new capital in Thon Buri near Bangkok. After the short lived Thon Buri Period (1767-1772), the capital was moved across the Chao Phraya River, and the first of the current line of Kings, Rama I of the Chakri Dynasty, established the modern capital of Bangkok to commence the Ratanakosin Period of Thai history. The adroit diplomatic leadership of Kings Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1868) and Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910) were responsible for maintaining a remarkable 700 year Thai history during which the kingdom was never officially colonized by foreign powers; a turbulent 20th century witnessed the transition to a system of constitutional monarchy, currently overseen by Head of State, King BumibolAdulyadej (1946- present), is King Rama IX of the Chakri Dynasty and a tenuous but functional democracy has existed under the regency of this much beloved king. Thailand was known as Siam until 1939 when it officially became the Kingdom of Thailand. Thai People always referred to it as Thai – Meaning “free”

## Geography

Thailand is the 50th largest country in the world; most nearly equal in size to Spain. Located just 15 degrees north of the equator. Thailand is divided into 77 provinces, each with an appointed governor and local administration. These provinces are group into 4 regions – the North, North East, Central and Southern regions, each with its distinctive culture and customs. Bangkok serving as the political, commercial, industrial, educational, and entertainment capital of the country

Thailand is a country with abundant natural resources, including a wide variety of flora and fauna, and distinct ecological zones. There are over 100 Thailand national parks, including more than 20 marine parks, and each park features unique attractions, outstanding facilities, and opportunities to see animals in Thailand. Those interested in trekking, mountain biking, photography, birding, camping, scuba diving, or getting up close to exotic animals in Thailand have many options to choose from.

## **Weather**

Thailand has a tropical climate and temperatures typically range from 19 to 38 degrees C (66-100 F). The Thailand climate is controlled by tropical monsoons and the weather in Thailand is generally hot and humid across most of the country throughout most of the year. While Thailand's seasons are generally divided into the hot season, cool season, and rainy season, in reality it's relatively hot most of the year. The weather in central, northern, and northeastern Thailand (the landlocked provinces) is determined by three seasons, whereas the southern, coastal regions of Thailand feature only two, making the weather in Thailand quite easy to understand and plan a trip around

In Thailand's inland provinces the seasons are clearly defined: Between November and May the weather is mostly dry and the cool season and hot season occur from November to February and March to May respectively. The other inland season, the rainy season, lasts from May to November and is dominated by the southwest monsoon, during which time rainfall in most of Thailand is at its heaviest. The southern, coastal region of Thailand really has only two seasons – rainy season and dry season. Fortunately, for those planning a beach holiday, Thailand's two coasts have slightly different rainy seasons, allowing visitors to find sunny beaches nearly year round. On the Andaman or west coast, where Phuket, Krabi, and the Phi Phi Islands lie, the southwest monsoon brings heavy storms from April to October, while on the Gulf of Thailand or east coast, where Koh Samui, Koh Phangan, and Koh Tao lie, the most rain falls between September and December.

## **Religion**

While roughly 95% of the Thai people are practitioners of Theravada Buddhism, the official religion of Thailand, religious tolerance is both customary in Thailand and protected by the constitution. By its very nature however, Buddhism, which is based on the teachings of the Buddha, "the enlightened one" (nee Siddhartha Gautama), is a compassionate and tolerant religion, the aim of which is the alleviation of suffering. Consequently, Thai people are very respectful of the religious beliefs of others and are very open toward discussing their Buddhist values with visitors. In fact, there are many opportunities in Thailand to visit Buddhist temples to learn about or study Buddhism and perhaps to learn to meditate.

The next largest religion in Thailand, Islam, is practiced by only about 4% of the population; the majority of Thai Muslims live in the most southerly provinces near the Malaysian border. Other religions in Thailand include Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Christianity, which are generally practiced by those living in Bangkok, where a multi-cultural population includes citizens of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and European descent.

## **The Monarchy and the King of Thailand**

Thailand had been ruled outright by kings of various realms since the thirteenth century; it was not until 1932 that Thailand became a constitutional monarchy, a system not unlike that of the United Kingdom, in which the Thai King serves as Head of State and spiritual leader of the country, but wields no outright political authority.

The current King of Thailand, His Majesty King BhumibolAdulyadej (Rama IX) is the ninth Thai king from the House of Chakri, which has ruled Thailand since the founding of Bangkok by King PhutthayotfaChulalok (Rama I) in 1782. H.M. King Bhumibol was born in Massachusetts, USA while his father, who did not serve as King of Thailand, was attending Harvard University. H.M. Bhumibol ascended the throne as King of Thailand in 1946 following the death of his brother and has since attained the distinction of being the world's longest reigning monarch and the longest reigning Thai King in Thailand's history.

While the King of Thailand has little direct power, under the constitution King Bhumibol is a symbol of national identity and unity; indeed, the Thai King commands enormous popular respect and moral authority, both of which he has leveraged on a few rare occasions to resolve political crises that have threatened national stability. In more recent years however, he has maintained a more hands-off approach, urging Thais to learn to resolve their differences in an amicable way for the good of their country.

The Thai King and the members of the Royal Family are deeply revered by the Thai people for the Royal Family's passionate commitment to the welfare its people. In Thailand, respect for the Royal Family goes beyond mere custom however, it is safeguarded by law: it is not only socially unacceptable to disparage members of the Royal Family or their likenesses; it is punishable under lese majeste law. Furthermore, it is required to stand in respect to the King at the commencement of films and to stop walking and/or stand during the playing of the national anthem at 8 am and 6 pm. On the lighter side, it has become fashionable to pay respect to the king by wearing a yellow shirt on Monday's since the 60th anniversary of the king's reign in 2006.

While both the King's official residence, the Grand Palace, and his traditional residence, Chitralada Palace, are located in Bangkok (where the King has instituted an agricultural research center), the King and Queen are typically found at KlaiKangwon Villa in the seaside town of HuaHin.

## **Thai People**

The vast majority (roughly 80%) of Thailand's nearly 65 million citizens are ethnically Thai. The remainder consists primarily of peoples of Chinese, Indian, Malay, Mon, Khmer, Burmese, and Lao decent. Of the 7 million citizens who live in the capital city, Bangkok, there is a greater diversity of ethnicities, including a large number of expatriate residents from across the globe. Other geographic distinctions of the population include a Muslim majority in the south near the Malaysian border, and hill tribe ethnic groups, such as the Hmong and Karen, who live in the northern mountains.

## Thai way of Living

Everyday Life: The following concepts are part of Thai everyday life:

"CHAI YEN" is more a way of life, it is to keep your temper whatever the situation.

Thai people are educated in the family and in school to keep frustration inside. Instead of showing their anger toward a problem or situation, Thai people show "CHAI YEN", i.e. calm or patience.

"CHAI YEN" concept can be seen when Thai people are standing and waiting for the bus during the hot summer without complaining. To show one's feeling to the others is not valued in Thai society. Respect of the other is highly valued. Especially in up-country villages where everybody knows each other, conflicts are always solved with the help of elderly people or monks. In big cities like Bangkok it is quite different because nobody knows anybody so behaviours are changing.

The sentence "CHAI YEN YEN" is often said when people start to lose control. It means to calm down.

"CHAI RON" is the opposite of "CHAI YEN", it means to lose temper.

"PHUT PRACHOT" is used when Thai people want to mask their feelings.

There is no exterior sign that they are angry. They keep it inside. But they can show it with subtle ways. By refusing or avoiding a direct confrontation with the person, they speak with an animal or with a child making him remarks that are in fact dedicated to the other person. They speak loud enough in order that the concerned person can listen and understand.

"KRENG CHAI" is the concept of respect to the elder or to other people.

"KRENG CHAI" is the way that Thai people try to avoid hurting other people's feelings. The elders shall not be criticized at all. For example professors are highly admired because they represent the knowledge. No students dare to ask a question that could embarrass the teacher. In Thai schools the pupils learn lessons by rote repetition. So they are not educated in a way of changing things, of innovating. There are still conservationists in Thailand and some Thai artists were obliged to withdraw their paintings due to conservationists' threats.

"KRENG CHAI" concept is also valid for monks. During summer 1998, there was a problem with a monk, who did make a Buddha statue that was not conforming to the Buddhist rules. Same things for art creation, especially for religious arts, there is not a total freedom. Students learning abroad bring to Thailand westerner ways of working, thinking.

"SANUK" means "to have fun".

An important thing in everyday life is "SANUK". Thai people love to have fun together. "SANUK" can represent many things: eat together, to be with friends and chat, to go out with friends. For Thai people "SANUK" happens with several persons. When coming back from business, Thai people often ask "was it funny?" before "was it successful?"

In Thailand, the group is more important than the individual. It is linked to Thailand's agriculture-based culture. An individual belongs to a group, such as family, institute or social class. These groups dictate who you are, what you are entitled to, how important you are, and so on. If you do not belong to a group, you are nobody. Hence, the key is to maintain relationships with others. We have to be careful not to harm any relationship with the group.

"KIET" is the concept of repute. or "KU NA" is the concept of saving face.

Open and direct criticism is not valued in Thai society. One should flatter about the good qualities instead of saying direct critics. Many foreign bosses did confront such problems in Thailand. For example after harsh critics, some employees have pretended to have a sudden headache or their grandmother have died suddenly. They never came back in the office. Criticism in front of others employees are not a right thing because if Thai people lose face in front of other people they might seek revenge.

Thai people always wish to help. Sometimes when looking for a place, it is a good idea to ask Thai people. Even if they don't know, they indicate a direction. They would lose face if they say they don't know their country.

"MAI PEN RAI" means "It doesn't matter".

Thai people can use "MAI PEN RAI" for important or minor issues. Something important from a foreigner point of view can be seen minor from a Thai point of view.

Thai people use "MAI PEN RAI" to avoid making other people feel bad. Most of the time, "MAI PEN RAI" is a response to a problem. For example, a staff member forgets to bring a report to his manager. This report is not urgent. The staff member will be able to bring it in the afternoon. The manager will say "MAI PEN RAI. Bring it later this afternoon".

Kin Khao means "Have you already eaten ?" same as "How are you ?" in everyday speech.

Food takes an important part in Thai life. Thai people always talk about it, about next meal.

"BOONKHUN" means reciprocation.

In Thai society, people in contact ask for favors from time to time. It helps to endorse a relationship. If Thai person helps another Thai person, it creates dependencies and the possibility of reciprocation in the future if a favor is asked. This value creates personal connections and favoritism in both the private sector and government.

"CHOK DEE" means "chance".

Garlands ("PUANG MALAI" -พวงมาลัย) are supposed to bring luck.

Garlands can be found everywhere in Thailand. Every driver has got a garland in his car in order to avoid misfortune. Thai people are very superstitious. Odd numbers are supposed to be lucky numbers. Lottery tickets with odd numbers are likely appreciated. The number "9" is supposed to bring good luck. In Thai language number "nine" is closed to the word "rice" and to the word "to enter". So it is an important word of luck, food, improvement. For Buddhist ceremonies such as wedding or new shop settlement, nine monks are always invited. The number "9" is an auspicious number. The number "3" is also an important number because three multiplies three is nine. So in old times there were ceremonies for new born babies on the third day and third month of life.

"KHAO" means "rice". เก้า or "KAO" means "nine". เข้า or "KHAO" means "to enter".

◦ "MAI YAE SAE" means indifference.

Thailand is said to be a country of individualists. Thai people don't care a lot with social organization. For example, when going working abroad Thai people must borrow money at high rates. There is no philanthropic organization that could help them by lending money at low rates. Many children cannot continue their studies due to a lack of money. There is no philanthropic organization that could help these children. When being adults and working, they would give back the money and it could be used for another child.

Behavior of Thai drivers (it frequently happens to see a motorcycle, tuk-tuk or even cars driving in the wrong way in order to do a detour) is an example of Thai indifference.

## **Body Language**

Greeting somebody ( "WAI" ) is an important action in Thai society.

The way to "WAI" depends on the person you greet. The highest rank the person is the deepest and lowest your greeting must be. It is not like a hand shaking. People don't have to answer to it each time. For example if a waiter greets the guests, they don't have to answer. Answering to his greeting is a fault. The waiter would be embarrassed and would think the guests are kidding him. Younger people always have to greet first.

Thai society is changing in contact with westerner civilization. Now handshakes happen especially in Bangkok. It is smart to act like foreigners. In Thai greeting there are no contacts between bodies. The "WAI" is a greeting with no physical contact.

When dancing (traditional "RAM WONG"), there is no physical contact. Only the hands are moving in a beautiful way in the air. Of course the westerner friendly punch on shoulder or back is not appreciated. Also head shall not be touched because it is the most valued part of the body. No one shall be pointed using the foot. It is the worst insult because the feet are the less valued part of the body. Also holding hands between girl and boy is not appreciated. On the contrary holding hands between girls or between boys is tolerated because it is a sign of friendship. Of course a kiss in the street in front of everybody is not imaginable. Thai people are shocked. Same for holding one's arm, put your hand in your girlfriend's (or boyfriend's) jeans rear pocket. These are not Thai customs. Some Thai people do it but it is only a reaction against society. It is only a way of shocking the others.

When a gift is offered to Thai people, they always thank but might not open the gift immediately. It is not an offense. In Thai society, intense joy expressions are not shown to others. So the gift is opened when the person is alone. Anyway if the person doesn't like the gift, nobody see her disappointment! But now with the use of foreign customs in Thai society, the gift is often opened immediately. One thing not to do is to make a joke about the gift offered by a Thai people. The person might not appreciate the joke especially if she has searched for the gift during a long time. It is like losing the face in front of the others.

To show expression such as anger in front of other is not valued. It is the same for laughs. Especially for women as most of the time they put the hand before the mouth when laughing.

## Thai Language

While the official Thai language is widely spoken throughout Thailand, many Thais also speak and understand English, though more so in Bangkok and the major tourist areas. As visitors to Thailand also include many Europeans and other Asians, Thai people's language skills often also include these other languages to varying degrees. The Thai language itself is challenging to master, but Thai people are happy to help foreigners learn a few words to help them get around. However, English is typically the common currency for cross-cultural conversation as Thailand hosts visitors from around the world.

With so many visitors, the Thailand communications system has many features that make it very accessible to foreigners. In regards to telephone use, it is possible to get a Thai SIM card at most international airports and both rental mobile phones and SIM cards are readily available in destinations including Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket. Workers in post offices generally speak some English, and there are internet cafes throughout Thailand that feature Skype headsets specifically to cater to visitors wishing to communicate with friends and family back home. The Thailand communications system is both modern and convenient for visitors to use.

While the Thai language is the official language of Thailand, one could say English is its unofficial second language. As tourist and business visitors from around the world have traveled to Thailand, English naturally has become the common linguistic "currency" even while many of those visitors learned how to speak Thai. Consequently, population centers that host many foreigners, such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and the islands have many people who can speak both Thai and English quite well.

That said, visitors may experience difficulty picking up the Thai language as it is considerably different from many foreign languages. The Thai language features five tones: high, mid, low, rising, and falling, each of which changes the meaning of particular 'words'. Visitors unfamiliar with tonal languages often have difficulty pronouncing even the most basic terms when learning to speak Thai, but with some practice visitors find that Thai people enjoy helping them with their pronunciation of the Thai language.

Written Thai is based on an alphabet adopted from the Khmers of Cambodia and is said to have become standardized during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng during the Sukhothai period. The Thai alphabet consists of 44 consonants, 18 vowels, and 4 diphthong (tonal) notations. Learning to read Thai can be more complicated than learning to speak it as the pronunciation of written words does not follow a straightforward progression of letters and written Thai does not place spaces in between words. Fortunately, road signs are written in both Thai and English, and many tourist areas provide maps, menus, and other literature in both Thai and various other foreign languages.

One problem that does occur for foreigners trying to pronounce Thai words correctly is caused by the transliteration of Thai words into Romanized characters. An obvious example would be the island of Phuket, pronounced "poo-ket" rather than "foo-ket" as it would be pronounced in English.

Furthermore, there is no official standard for the transliteration of words and thus many Thai words are spelled differently on different maps or street signs (i.e. Even the BTS Skytrain features both Chitlom and Chidlom stations).

In addition, while most Thai's speak and understand the central Thai dialect, there are various regional dialects, including those of Southern Thailand and Northeastern Thailand, the latter of which is essentially just the Lao language (as most of the population is of Lao descent). In northern Thailand, which had been the independent kingdoms of Lan Na and Chiang Mai from 1259-1939, a distinctive form of Thai is still spoken by the local inhabitants, all of whom can also speak central Thai. All variants of Thai use the same alphabet.

## **Thai Government**

Thailand has existed as a modern nation-state since the founding of the Chakri Dynasty and the establishment of Bangkok as its capital in 1782. In 1932, a 'revolution' absolved the absolute rule of the monarchy and established a Constitutional Monarchy, removing the political authority of the crown and founding a nascent 'democracy'.

In 1946, direct elections were finally held in which the people of Thailand voted for members of a bicameral legislature (Senate and House of Representatives) to be presided over by a Prime Minister representing the executive branch. The Judiciary, including a Supreme Court, acts independently of the executive office and the legislature, though it was not until the 1996 constitution that more effective checks and balances were instituted.

From its inception 'democracy' in Thailand has been turbulent, with 17 coup d'états passing power back and forth between leaders of the military and an elite bureaucracy that borders on plutocracy. The country has also been governed under 17 different constitutions; the Kingdom's current constitution the result of the most recent coup d'état, a bloodless overthrow of then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawattra in 2006.

Currently, Thailand is embroiled in political wrangling over the implications of that coup and the subsequent legislative shake up caused by mass protests both against and in favor of the former Prime Minister. Nonetheless, the Thai people are very politically active and value their freedom despite their tenuous democracy.

## **Thai Festivals**

Festivals are the biggest fun factor for the people of Thailand especially the youth. There are many festivals reflecting the diverse culture and traditions of Thailand. The dates of some of these festivals are changing every year as they are due to the moon calendar.

### **New Year's Day Jan 1st**

In Thailand there are three New Year's days. The Western, on Jan 1st, the Chinese New Year on the first day of the First Lunar month, usually in February and the Thai New Year marked by the Songkran festival in April. Thais usually exchange gifts on January 1st.

### **Phra Buddha Baht Fair**

It is held at the temple of the Holy Footprint at Saraburi, 236Km north of Bangkok, from 31st January to 1st February. There are many activities such as music and outdoor drama.

### **Bosang Umbrella Fair**

Held in Chiang Mai during January, it features colorful paper umbrellas and other local handicrafts.

### **Chinese New Year**

1st day of the first Chinese Lunar month, usually in February. Businesses close for 3-4 days giving families time to get together and worship at one of the Chinese Buddhist temples. There may also be public celebrations with acrobats, Lion Dance and firecrackers. The latter are believed to frighten away "foreign devils".

### **Flower Carnival**

Held in Chiang Mai during February it features parades and colorful floats exhibiting the local flora.

### **MakhaBucha Day**

End of February/beginning of March, depending on the moon. This commemorates the day when 1250 of Buddha's disciples gathered spontaneously to hear him preach. Buddhists visit temples (Wat) and make merit by such acts as releasing caged birds. In the evening the celebrations culminate in a candle lit procession around the main temple building.

### **Chakri Day 6th April**

Commemorates the founding of the Chakri Dynasty, of which the present King Bhumipon is the 9th King. Portraits of the King and Queen are prominently displayed and decked with tributes of flowers.

### **Songkhran 13-15th April**

This is the celebration of the old Thai New Year. Buddhists visit the temple for the ceremony of Rod Nam Dam Nua. They sprinkle water on the Buddha images, and on the hands of the monks and novices at the temple, as an offering to express confidence that the supply of water will be adequate to cover the dry season.

Songkhran is a time when the Thai family will try to be together, and many people will travel back to their home village.

This holiday has now become secularized, with exuberant merry-makers taking to the streets throwing water at each other, and you, by the cup full, the bucket full, or even with a hose. To add to the fun, talc is mixed with the water and may be daubed on your face. Take it all in good spirit, no one is exempt, not even the policemen. The cool water may even be a welcome relief as the festival coincides with the time when the sun is due overhead and the weather can be very hot.

### **Pattaya Festival**

It is held during the second week of April in Pattaya on Thailand's Eastern Seaboard. It features processions, floral displays, and other special events plus a spectacular fireworks display.

### **National Labour Day - 1st May**

This holiday follows the lead of many western countries, whose workers now celebrate Labour Day.

### **Coronation Day - 5th May**

This celebrates the coronation of the present King Bhumipon, Rama IX. Tributes are paid at shrines and portraits of His Majesty.

### **Royal Ploughing Ceremony**

This is an ancient Brahman ceremony, held under Royal patronage in Bangkok during May, which celebrates the beginning of the rice planting season.

## **Fruit Fair**

A festival is held in Rayong during May and another in Chantaburi during June. They feature locally grown fruit such as rambutan, durian, and jack fruit.

## **VisakhaBucha Day - Full moon of the 6th Lunar Month.**

This celebrates the birth, death and enlightenment of Buddha, and is therefore the most sacred day on the Buddhist calendar.

## **AsalahaBucha Day - Mid July**

This is the day before the start of Buddhist Lent. Many young men, who are about to become monks, hold parties on this day.

## **Buddhist Lent - Mid July**

This marks the start of KhaoPansa, period similar to the Christian Lent. During the period monks do not travel to other monasteries, their religious duties are strictly observed, and the novice monks receive their training in the teachings of Buddha.

## **Candle Festival**

It is held in UbonRatchatani on KhaoPansa Day. Candles carved from bees wax are paraded through the streets.

## **H.M. Queen's Birthday - 12th August**

Tributes are paid to Her Majesty, and donations are made to the many charitable organizations that are patronized by the Queen.

## **Chulalongkorn Day - 23rd October**

This commemorates the death of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, who reigned between 1868 and 1910. He is renowned for his achievements in the fields of education, modernization and progressive thinking.

## **Buffalo Races**

Held in Chonburi (80Km east of Bangkok) during October.

## **Loy Krathong - Full Moon 12th Lunar month, November**

The festival is believed to date back to the Sukhothai period, but its exact significance is uncertain. Krathongs, or lotus flowers made of natural materials, containing a candle, incense sticks, a coin or two and beautifully decorated with flowers are launched into the sea, or any convenient stretch of water, as a thanksgiving to the water spirits, and a cleansing of sins.

## **River Kwai Bridge Week**

A weeklong series of historical exhibitions, light and sound shows, and vintage train rides held in Kanchanaburi during the last week of October.

## **Annual Elephant Roundup**

It is held during the third week of November at Surin in North East Thailand.

## **Trouping of the Colour - 3rd December**

Their Majesties the King and Queen preside over this annual event which is held in the Royal Plaza, Bangkok.

## **H.M. King's Birthday - 5th December**

People demonstrate their respect for King with flags, displays and other tributes.

## **Constitution Day - 10th December**

This marks the day in 1932, when the monarchy became constitutional, at the very beginning of democracy on Thailand.

## **New Year's Eve - 31st December**

### Thai Time

Often problems can happen with Thai people about timetable misunderstandings. From a Buddhist point of view, time is not so important because before reaching enlightenment many lives are needed.

Thai Time is divided in five sections :

◦เช้า or "CHAO", the morning, from 6 AM to 11 AM.

◦บ่าย or "BAI", the afternoon, from 1 PM to 3 PM.

◦เย็น or "YEN", the beginning of evening, from 4 PM to 6 PM.

◦ทุ่ม or "THUM", the evening, from 7 PM to 11 PM.

◦ตี or "TI", the night, from 1 AM to 6 AM.

◦เที่ยง or "THIENG" means midday.

◦เที่ยงคืน or "THIENG KEUN" means midnight.

When using Thai language no confusion is possible. But when using English language confusion may appear. Thai people often translate the Thai time into English language but without any English background. So when a Thai person says four o'clock, it is better to check if it is four o'clock in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening or the night. No problem with bus, train or plane because timetables are displayed through international standards (i.e. 24 hours mode).

Thai people don't bother about time as much as foreign people, especially about past and future. Past is not important. It's over especially bad events. Future is not so important also. What is important is present, the current time. For future they will see later.

## Thai Food

Thai food is internationally famous. Whether chili-hot or comparatively bland, harmony is the guiding principle behind each dish. Thai cuisine is essentially a marriage of centuries-old Eastern and Western influences harmoniously combined into something uniquely Thai. Characteristics of Thai food depend on who cooks it, for which it is cooked, for what occasion, and where it is cooked. Dishes can be refined and adjusted to suit all palates.

Originally, Thai cooking reflected the characteristics of a waterborne lifestyle. Aquatic animals, plant and herbs were major ingredients. Large chunks of meat were eschewed. Subsequent influences introduced the use of sizeable chunks to Thai cooking. With their Buddhist background, Thais shunned the use of large animals in big chunks. Big cuts of meat were shredded and laced with herbs and spices. Traditional Thai cooking methods were stewing and baking, or grilling. Chinese influences saw the introduction of frying, stir-frying and deep-frying. Culinary influences from the 17th century onwards included Portuguese, Dutch, French and Japanese. Chillies were introduced to Thai cooking during the late 1600s by Portuguese missionaries who had acquired a taste for them while serving in South America. Thais were very adept at "Siameseising" foreign cooking methods, and substituting ingredients. The ghee used in Indian cooking was replaced by coconut oil, and coconut milk substituted for other dairy products.

Overpowering pure spices were toned down and enhanced by fresh herbs such as lemon grass and galanga. Eventually, fewer and less spices were used in Thai curries, while the use of fresh herbs increased. It is generally acknowledged that Thai curries burn intensely, but briefly, whereas other curries, with strong spices, burn for longer periods. Instead of serving dishes in courses, a Thai meal is served all at once, permitting diners to enjoy complementary combinations of different tasters.

A proper Thai meal should consist of a soup, a curry dish with condiments, a dip with accompanying fish and vegetables. A spiced salad may replace the curry dish. The soup can also be spicy, but the curry should be replaced by a non-spiced item. There must be harmony of tastes and textures within individual dishes and the entire meal.

Approximately 4,000 years ago, the Thai people migrated from southern China to Siam (modern-day Thailand). Thai food is therefore influenced by Chinese cuisine; for example, the form of stir-frying (Phad). Thai uses its own spices, herbs, vegetables, sauces and cooking techniques to incorporate its own taste, which is different and unique. Indian cuisine has also influenced Thai food in the form of curry (Gang). Not all Thai food is spicy. In some dishes, such as fried noodle (Phad Thai), spiciness is optional. However, the majority of Thais love spicy dishes, such as curry, (Gang), Thai style soup (Tom Yum), and Thai style salad (Yum).

Thai food is unique and delicious. Most Thai dishes are a combination of sweet and salty, and sour and spicy. Each dish has its balance; for example, Phad Thai noodle has a sour and sweet taste; a trace of salty and spicy is optional. Curry is spicy, but you will find sweetness and a trace of salty as well. Thai

food is healthy because it contains fresh vegetables, herbs, and relatively small portions of bite-sized meat. (Thais do not use a knife at the table).

Thai culinary is an art. A Thai dish contains at least a dozen ingredients. Thai cuisine uses a variety of sauces, such as fish, soy, chili, and oyster. Other ingredients include lime and lemon juices, tamarind juice, coconut milk, garlic, lemon grass, galangal, basil, cilantro, cayenne, and black peppers, bean sprouts, etc. Traditionally, Thais use only fresh ingredients, such as fresh-made coconut milk (Ga Ti) and curry paste (Krung gang) for use in curry dishes. It takes almost a day to make a curry dish. Thai cooking is labor and time consuming.

The heart of a Thai meal is rice (Kaow). Thais eat rice as Westerners eat bread (KaNomPhun). There are several varieties of rice grown in Thailand. The most famous is Jasmine, or fragrant rice. To add flavor and more nutrition to a Thai meal, a stir-fry dish, soup and/or curry are added, which is then known as GupKaow.

Thais eat rice for every meal: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Normally, a person eats rice with one dish of GupKaow. At the Thai table, everybody eats rice and shares dishes of GupKaow, which is served at once.

# DOs or DON'Ts in Thailand

## Introduction to the Thai society & mentality

Before I give you advises about DOs and DON'Ts I will tell you a little about the Thai mentality. Thais are an easygoing lot on the whole, usually minding their own business and going about their daily chores without fuss or complaint. This makes them warm and friendly. They are friendly. But at the same time no one would like to be offended, especially where revered customs and habits are concerned. This is important to bear in mind from the very beginning. With exceptions, Thais can be aggressive if seriously offended and/or pushed to a corner.

However, there are two noticeable aspects of the Thai easiness that describe the Thai mentality pretty well; Mai Pen Rai and Chai Yen Yen. It means 'never mind' and 'take it easy' and if you stay in Thailand for a while you will hear it many times.

### Plus Side

- Patience: Thais display a commendable amount of this quality.
- Tolerance: Thais have a beautiful capacity of tolerating inconveniences for a long periods and great suffering.
- Temper: Thais do not easily lose their heads at anything or everything. To lose one's temper is most unbecoming of the person and thought of as a person with low character or poor upbringing.

### Minus Side

- Sensitivity: Thais are ultrasensitive, so that even jokes could cause embarrassment or displeasure to them. This makes it touchy to be candid and encourages one to speak only that which should be spoken. It makes the atmosphere very uneasy and hard sometimes. A Thai will have no second thought in dropping a friendship over a misunderstanding.

This also means that if a male Caucasian says 'I like you very much' to a Thai lady, she can misconstrue this to mean he loves her and tell mom and dad etc. So be careful with these words!!

- Unpunctuality: Even when there is money to be made, Thais, many times over, simply cannot keep to time.

## · Advices

Do exercise tolerance, particularly when it comes to order food, pay a bill or waiting for change.

One of the main reasons people travel is to explore other cultures and establish how other countries and cultures do things. It is then quite remarkable then to see people wandering around the kingdom imposing their cultural approach on the situations and events they encounter. Often these leads to confusion, worse, it sometimes leads to ugly scenes that are entirely avoidable with a modicum on insight on how things are done in Thailand.

What follows then is a list of Dos and Don'ts for when you are in the kingdom:

1. Don't be upset ... Expect it to be done (whatever it is) in a longer time than where you come from.
2. Don't lose your temper at all.
3. Don't feel let down if you have done a favor for a Thai and he does not seem to bodily express his thanks.
4. Don't hug a Thai to show him your appreciation . In Thailand, a firm 'Thank you very much' is enough. Thought your intensions are good and clean, he will not like it. The good thing about this custom is that nobody can hug or kiss your wife for whatever reason.
5. Don't touch anyone's head for any reason. The head is the most important part of the entire body.
6. Don't point with the forefinger at anyone.
7. Do offer and receive anything with your right hand always.
8. Do keep both feet on the ground when sitting.
9. Don't place your feet so that they point towards a person, religious image or picture of the royal family.
10. Don't step over any part of another person.
11. Do use the 'Wai'(salute) correctly. A Westerner should never Wai first and anyone who is paying for any service is the boss and the bosses don't Wai first.
12. Don't keep your valuables in a hotel safe deposit box. This is a thought one. Some safe deposit boxes are the most unsafe places for safekeeping, the reason is that not all staff really care for their guests. Entrust your valuables only to respectable hotels, which you have to decide by yourself.
13. Don't leave your postcards to the hotel reception; they will probably never reach the destination. To be safe, go to the post office or post them into the public mailbox yourself.
14. Do ask for a receipt if you pay for a room/apartment in advance more than a day.
15. Do make sure your laundry is your laundry when its returned.
16. Do make sure you know a person well before accepting a tempting offer.
17. Don't walk into someone's house with footwear on.
18. Don't step on the door threshold.
19. Do sit in the place indicated by your friend.
20. Do 'Wai' an elderly person.
21. Accept things with your right hand.

## The Monarchy

The monarchy is revered by all Thais and people will simply will not tolerate any lack respect towards any members of the royal family – past or present. If you come from a culture like that in the United Kingdom, where royals are often in the news and are sometimes subject to criticism, be especially careful. Criticism of the king and royal family is not just frowned upon in Thailand; it is against the law – a punishable offence that is taken very seriously. As an example to underscore the importance of this issue, in 2002 two journalists from the Far Eastern Economic Review published a short article about the relationship between, Thaksin Shinawatra, the country's prime minister, and King Bhumibol Adulyadej. As a result of the article, the journalists were threatened with expulsion for contravening Thailand's tough lèse-majesté laws.

## Religion

Thailand's national religion is Buddhism (although there are significant numbers of Muslims and a minority group of Christians) and it is very important to be respectful as far as the religion is concerned. Always dress 'politely' when entering a temple or religious shrine. As you are on holiday in a hot country, your perspective of polite dress might be colored by the situation you are in. However, shorts, bikinis, tops that show your bare arms, skirts that show your legs, open-toed sandals and generally dirty or unkempt attire is considered inappropriate. In some of the larger temples like Wat Prakeaw guards will actually forbid you from entering if you are dressed inappropriately, and you may have to hire sarongs and strips of material to cover yourself up before being permitted to enter. At the smaller temples you are on your own – do the right thing!

## Buddha Images

Buddha images are sacred, whatever size or condition. Never climb on a Buddha image, and be very careful about taking photos – some images are so sacred photographs are forbidden. Abide by this rule or you may even be asked to leave. If you can't cross your legs, don't sit on the floor in front of temple's Buddha image – in doing so you will point your feet at the Buddha which is an act of sacrilege (see Feet below). The 2004 film 'Hollywood Buddha' caused an uproar in Thailand and other Buddhist countries in the region when advertising posters for the film showed a central character sitting on the head of a Buddha image. Their reaction was most un-Thai like. Be warned.

## Monks

Buddhist monks are not allowed to touch or be touched by a woman or accept anything a woman might offer. If a woman wants to give something to a monk it must first be given to a man, or put on a piece of cloth. The monk will then drag the cloth to him before picking the item up. Likewise a monk will not shake a man's hand – that type of contact is forbidden. Monks travel on public transport and require the same respect there as they would receive at the temple. If a bus or train, etc. is crowded and a monk is likely to come into contact with people, do not hesitate to give the monk your seat. Often special seats are allocated for monks only – don't sit in them!

## Shoes

Do not wear shoes inside a temple where Buddha images are kept. Take your shoes off before entering someone's home.

## Greetings

Thais do not shake hands; they 'wai' (Thai way of saluting) – a gesture made by placing your hands together in front of your face a bowing a little. Generally, you should not 'wai' to a child and a younger person should 'wai' an older person first. However, these rules are possibly a little more flexible as far as a foreigner is concerned, the Thais you 'wai' will generally very much appreciate you delving into the local custom and practice.

## The Head

Whereas in the west a friendly pat on the head, especially the head of someone a bit younger than you, will be regarded as a friendly and supportive gesture, in Thailand any gesture towards the head will cause Thais to recoil and will be greeted with shock and possibly annoyance. Thais regard the head as the highest part of the body – the temple of the body as it were. As such touching someone's head is entirely unacceptable.

## The Feet

Whereas the head is the highest point of the body, the feet are the lowest. Do not point at things with your feet, and do not point the palms of your feet at anyone (see Buddha Images above).

## Shouting and Shows of Annoyance

In Thailand shouting and shows of annoyance are entirely frowned upon, whatever the situation. There may be times when you face frustrations, do so quietly and calmly. Shouting and showing annoyance are signs of lack of discipline and in doing either you are in fact showing yourself up. This might lead to the Thai you are talking to trying to help you 'save face' by smiling and possibly even laughing to defuse the situation. For westerners in particular, there could probably not be a less appropriate reaction and often it serves to exasperate a situation. The results are often explosive. Rather than deal with the subtle intricacies of this aspect of culture, simply do not get angry – things will work themselves out much better if you can avoid it.

## Drugs

Thailand takes drugs very seriously and is trying to eradicate unlawful drugs entirely. Don't either partake or trade in illegal substances. Clubs and places of entertainment are sometimes raided and people made to put forward urine samples. If you test positive, penalties will be harsh. Trading in drugs will lead to the death penalty or likely decades in prison.

## General

Kissing, cuddling and similar behavior are frowned upon if in public – especially amongst older Thais. Younger Thais are unlikely to be as shocked, but to avoid their possible discomfort, avoid the behavior.

Thais are generally shy people and few are likely to walk up to you and engage in conversation. If this happens, and the conversation moves towards the purchase of gems, gold, jewellery or other such items, beware. Every year people get caught up in purchases of items at entirely inflated prices that have little or no value because they are told they can sell these items at a profit in their home countries. Remember you are here on holiday – not here to make a fast buck. If something seems too good to be true – it is.

Smoking in the street is illegal – you can be fined 2,000 Baht.

Dropping litter in the street is illegal – the same fine applies.

Do not engage in purchase of wild animals whether protected or not. Aside from the moral issues, punishments are very harsh.