

Impressions of Thailand

In 1992 we spent two weeks in Thailand as part of a South East Asia trip. We spent one week in Bangkok and one week in the North, around the city of Chiang Mai. The following article describes some of my impressions of Thai culture.

Every few years I get to take an exotic trip somewhere in the world. I usually travel with friends and we create our own itinerary. Packaged tours have their place, but I prefer the adventure of finding my own way around. I typically spend up to a year studying about a country before going. I like the sense of adventure and challenge that comes from finding my way around a strange, exotic place. I always embark on a trip with a bit of a fantasy of being like James Bond starting a mission.

A Few Cultural Points

One main point of Thai culture is the idea of status. Thai society is extremely status-conscious. Your social status depends on many factors: monetary wealth, family connections, relatedness to the royal family, religious standing, and so forth. Personal interactions follow a rather strict protocol depending on the relative difference of social status between two people (most of this protocol goes completely unnoticed to foreigners). The Thai language has something like 28 different words for the pronoun "you" to be used between differing levels of status (i.e.; depending on whether you are talking to someone of higher status, lower status, and greater or lesser differentials of either, or if you don't know the status of the other).

Another dominant point of Thai culture is what we might call a strong element of superstition. For millennia the Thai people believed that innumerable spirits populated the land. These spirits (which are generally unpredictable) can favorably or unfavorably affect the lives of people. With this in mind, it becomes important to appease these spirits and avoid offending them. At least in some measure, you still find this kind of belief in Thai culture. And if this belief is not exactly literal, it is at least figurative or latent in that Thai culture is extremely conscious of fate and luck. Astrologers and fortune tellers are ubiquitous in Thailand. There also are numerous national lotteries, and one dominant cultural characteristic in Thailand is the constant search for the "lucky break."

People

The Thai people are exceptionally friendly, so much so that after a while you begin to distrust it (as if you were being set up for something). Occasionally you might really be set up -- I got my pocket picked on my last day in Bangkok. Oftentimes I think that the Thai people see a Westerner and just want to practice their English. You will be walking down the street and someone will just start talking to you as if they know you well. It can be fun, but it also can be so incessant as to become bothersome after a day or two.

Some Practical Points

The monetary unit in Thailand is the Baht (abbreviated "B"). The exchange rate is about 25:1 (i.e.; 1 B equals around 4 cents US). My trick was to remember that 100 B equals US\$4.00.

A map of Bangkok is a must. There are some good tourist maps that list interesting things to see. They are also good for overcoming language barriers with taxi drivers, bus attendants, etc. Your hotel or guest house probably sells maps, but if not, there are lots of bookstores around town.

One of the most important rules for Bangkok is **DICKER ON THE PRICE BEFORE DOING ANYTHING!** Except for the bigger stores, most prices are haggled. This includes taxis, tuk-tuks, street markets, food stands, etc. Especially before riding a taxi, tuk-tuk, or long-tailed boat, **ABSOLUTELY AGREE ON A PRICE BEFORE GETTING IN.**

Transportation

There are numerous ways to get around town in Bangkok. Taxis are the most luxurious mode, relatively speaking. Some are air conditioned, some are not. 50 B will take you pretty much anywhere in the downtown area. Tuk-tuks are a tradition in Thailand. These are three-wheeled, two-stroke motorcycles with a canopy over the back. Ex-kamikazes drive them. They are generally cheaper than taxis, but they are open-air vehicles that spew clouds of blue exhaust. Busses are fairly easy to figure out. There are bus maps at all the stops. The busses cost 4-7 B. For water transportation, there are three kinds of boats: water ferries (which simply go across the river), express boats (which travel up and down the river), and long-tail boats (which are the "taxi cabs" of the river and canals). For the water ferries and express boats, you pay at a ticket counter on the dock (1 B for the water ferries, 4-7 B for the express boat). For the long-tail boats, dicker for the price.

Food

Of all the oriental cuisines, Thai has always been my favorite. And I must say, the one thing that I most missed when I left Thailand was the food! Even an average Mom-and-Pop foodcart on a street corner had the best-tasting Thai food I've ever had. Thai restaurants in the US just don't seem the same to me anymore.

All the travel books warn about the food and drink in Thailand, and rightfully so. The books warn against eating from any street vendor. After a few days we regularly ate from the street carts, and we never got sick. Actually, you are more likely to get sick from the dishes than from the food, since the dishes might be washed in the local water. As a rule, you should avoid drinking any water or fluids that don't come from a sealed container. Avoid foods that could have been washed in water (such as salads, fruits, etc., although fruits that can be peeled, like oranges and bananas, are OK). Also avoid foods that have been sitting out for long periods of time.

In general, we thought we could judge if a given food stand was okay. The ones we ate from seemed to have fresh food that was made daily. Also, if you really get desperate,

there are plenty of McDonald's, Arby's, and the like (the ice and the soft drinks in these places were safe).

Religion and Culture

Religion is an overwhelmingly dominant characteristic of Thai culture. You cannot understand Thai culture without becoming acquainted with the religious heritage of the country, which revolves around Buddhism.

Buddhism came to Thailand around the 12th century when Buddhist missionaries traveled there from Sri Lanka. Thailand today is one of the most thoroughly Buddhist nations in the world (95% of the population). The country has 30 000 temples (450 in Bangkok, 300 in Chiang Mai). Thai Buddhism incorporates many of the animist beliefs that were prevalent before Buddhism came (such as beliefs in spirits of the land and the household). The result is a unique religious mix that sets Thai Buddhism apart from Buddhism in other countries.

For example, everywhere you go in Thailand, you see what look like fancy birdhouses in front of buildings. Some of these "birdhouses" are very ornate, like miniature temples. In reality, these are "spirit houses." One characteristic of these spirits is that they are very capricious and easily offended. A big part of the culture for centuries has been to appease these spirits and avoid offending them. One way of doing this is to keep them away from you, especially out of your house. But how do you get spirits out of your house? Answer: build them a house of their own, of course. But how do you guarantee that they will leave your house and go to the spirit house? Answer: make the spirit house "better" than your house. You also want to make sure the spirits know you have not forgotten them (they might be offended), so you leave little offerings (food, flowers, incense) at the spirit house from time to time.

The highest-ranking social class in Thailand is the Buddhist monk. (The King ranks #2 behind the lowliest monk.) For this reason, there are many rules for social propriety when around the monks and temples. For example, when in a temple, never sit in a lotus position. This is the position that the monks sit in, and for a layman to sit in this position is to say that you are equal in status to the monk. (The proper way to sit is to bend down with your knees to the floor, knees together, sitting on the heels of your feet, with your feet pointed behind you.) If a monk approaches you at a temple, a Thai Buddhist will bow down three times with his face to the floor (the symbolic meaning is that the layman's head is lower than the feet of the monk).

Monks live a very simple lifestyle. They are forbidden to have money. They live in very austere quarters. They have very few possessions, mainly consisting of their saffron robe and a food plate. Monks are allowed to have at most only two meals a day: one at daybreak and one at midday. The midday meal must be completed before noon, after which the monk may not eat again until daybreak the next day. If you rise early (around 6:00 AM or so), you will see the monks wandering the streets gathering their food for the day. In Thai culture a monk collects his food from the people. He wanders the area with his food plate (which looks like a large pie plate) and the people bring food items and

put them into the plate. When the plate is full, the monk has collected his food for that day. Here in the West we might look on this practice as freeloading, but in Thailand it is seen as a service. Buddhism in Thailand (unlike the philosophical varieties that I have heard described in the US) is an elaborate system of "works righteousness" (i.e.; it consists of rituals and deeds designed to acquire heavenly merit.) One way for a layman to gain heavenly merit is to give food to the monks. So, by wandering around early in the morning, the monks are providing a service to the people by giving them an opportunity to gain heavenly merit.

One of the biggest ways to acquire heavenly merit is to become a monk. Thai men are not required to become monks during their lives, but they are strongly encouraged. The minimum "tour of duty" is one rainy season (about 1-3 months -- my sources differ on the exact duration). To become a monk, you must be a man (most men who become monks do so around age 20). There is an ordination that takes place in July (the beginning of the rainy season). You must vow to obey 227 rules of conduct, including poverty, chastity, etc. You can choose to remain a monk for as long as you want after the minimum stay. In the Buddhist scheme, becoming a monk not only gives merit to the man, but also to the man's whole family. Hence you see mothers urging their sons to become monks so that the whole family can benefit. Thai women can become Buddhist "nuns", but this does not carry the same status (or heavenly merit) that comes from being a monk.

Buddhist temples are fabulously ornate. They usually contain many gold images of the Buddha in any of five postures (two in a lotus position, two standing, and one reclining -- each posture has a particular significance). Conduct inside a temple is often different from a Westerner's expectation. Particularly, we tend to equate a Buddhist temple with a Christian church. The significant difference is that the Christian church service is a corporate affair, where the people assembled participate as a group. In the Buddhist temple, though, the worshipers are very individualistic. Each person is carrying out an individual ritual strictly for himself or herself, so you can walk around, watch, engage in conversation, etc. (i.e.; without seeking to be arrogant or obnoxious) and you will not be intruding upon the activities around you.

A typical Buddhist ritual consists of the individual bringing (or buying) some incense sticks, candles, and a piece of gold leaf. The worshiper bows down before the Buddha statue, engages in some ritualistic prayers while shaking the incense sticks, then lights the incense and the candles, makes his or her requests to Buddha, then finishes by applying the gold leaf onto the Buddha statue. Requests might be for such things as a good mate, success in business, winning the lottery, or some other kind of good luck.

Redlight Districts

Bangkok is world-famous for its redlight districts. Sex is an outright industry in Thailand. Our guest house happened to be two blocks from Patpong, one of the famous districts from the Vietnam era.

Virtually anywhere in Bangkok you can get pestered about the sex parlors, but this

especially happens near the redlight districts. The parlors employ people to stand out on the sidewalks and solicit customers. Particularly if they see a Westerner, they walk up and begin their pitch: "What you looking for?" "Wanna massage? Wanna massage?" "Nice girls! Nice girls!" If they stick with you long enough, they will even pull out their color glossy brochure about their sex parlor.

The unfortunate reality is that many of the girls in the parlors are only teenagers (as young as 13). Many of them are from country farms where the family needs money so the father basically sells his daughter into slavery. In addition, about 70-80% of the girls are HIV positive. Thailand today is one of the worst hotbeds for AIDS in the whole world. It's not just risky to indulge in the sex parlors, it's a virtually assured infection.

Final note

Thailand is a fascinating, exotic, exciting place, but it's also very wearing. Throughout my time there, I never once felt in any kind of physical danger (and we walked all over, city and country, at all hours of the day). But, strangely enough, at no time did I have the feeling I could let my guard down. Particularly in Bangkok, the place never rests. There is the air pollution...the incessant activity...the traffic...being hounded by tuk-tuk drivers...being approached by street vendors...can I eat or drink this?...dickering the price for everything. By the time we left, we were both mentally exhausted. We are both experienced world travelers, but the culture shock still got to us. I am glad I went, but I will have to take a good long rest before I go back.

- Ken Ewing, Beaverton, Oregon, USA
kene@sequent.com