

Cultural Considerations

Thailand Excursion



Growth International Volunteer Excursions

The Roots of Change

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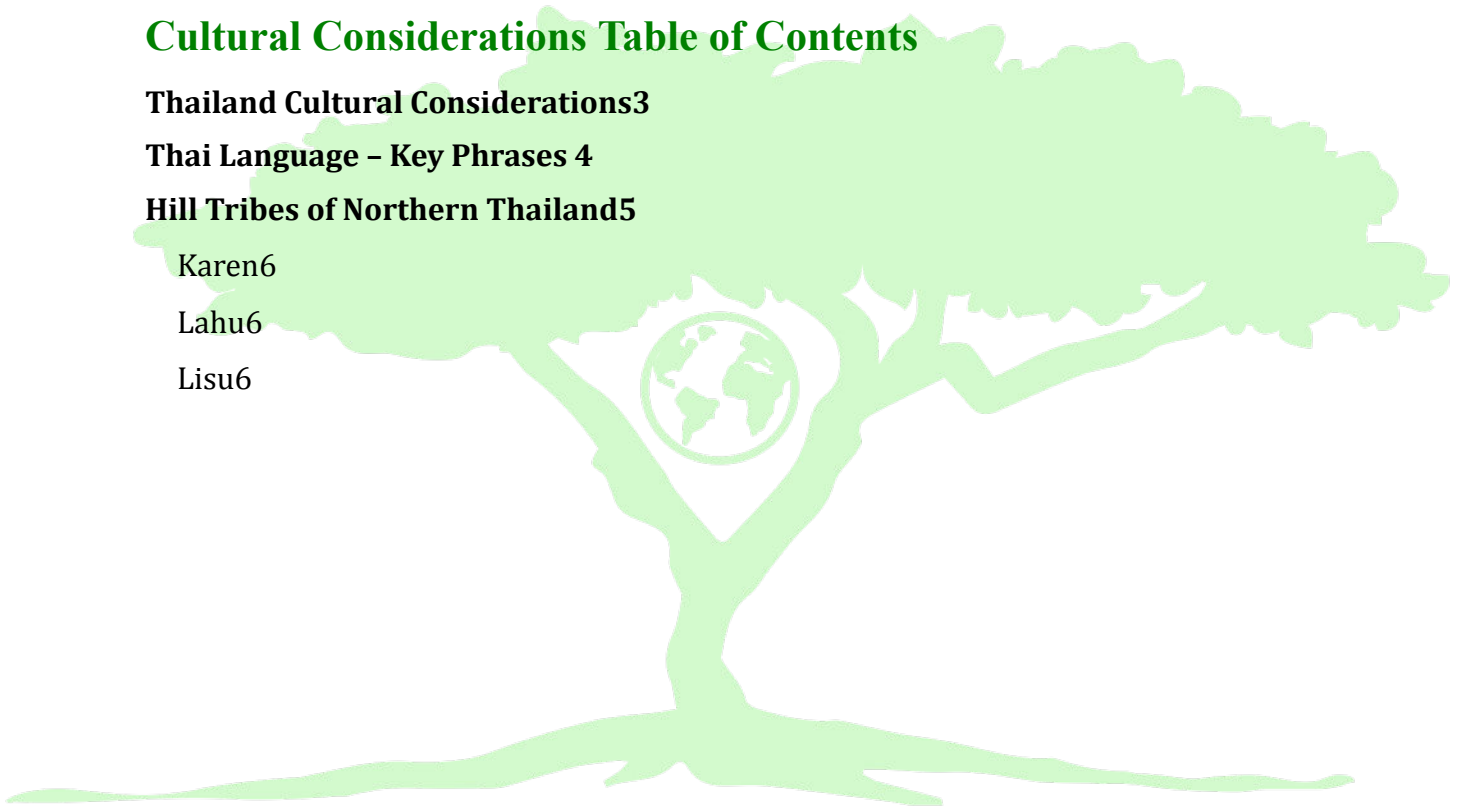
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Thailand Cultural Considerations

Traveling in Thailand is a roller coaster for all five of your senses. You'll see the most colorful and elaborate temples when you land in Chiang Mai, smell and taste flavors you didn't know existed walking through local markets, hear the beat of drums as you learn traditional dances around a bonfire, and feel the warmth of our hosts as you live and work alongside them. It's a fascinating region of the world – our mission is to provide you with a better understanding, genuine appreciation, and inspiration to explore even more of it. Here are a few cultural considerations to keep in mind in order to become fully immersed in your Thailand experience:

1. **Affection in public** – The GIVE family is a tight one and we do like to share the love, but please understand that Thai people generally do not kiss or show a lot of affection in public beyond holding hands. Please be respectful while you're here and always aim to be discrete.

2. **Confrontation** – Thai people generally speak softly and avoid confrontation at all costs. Please do not shout or raise your voice in public. If you ever feel like confrontation is a possibility, inform your GIVE guides immediately. GIVERs are all about sharing the love so this shouldn't be much of a concern.

3. **Dress conservatively** – Dressing appropriately is very important to Thai people. Both women and men will generally cover their shoulders and knees when out in holy places, rural villages and important events. Women need to wear bras when out in public. Although you may see other foreigners wear revealing clothes, please consider what makes us unique as GIVE Volunteers: we are not just average tourists, but conscientious and respectful visitors in these communities. Stop by the local markets to pick out some new threads and dress like the locals do!

4. **Temples and Holy Places** – These religious landmarks are extremely influential in Thai culture, so it's very important to show respect while visiting. You will always need to cover your shoulders and knees. Also, women are not allowed to touch Buddhist monks or their robes and should try to avoid handing them things directly. Your GIVE guides will be sure to coach you on temple etiquette throughout the trip.

5. **Feet low/Head high** – In Thailand your head is considered high and holy while your feet are considered low and dirty. Here are some important things to remember to avoid any awkward mishaps: It is considered very rude to raise your feet above someone else's head (especially if they are older than you). Pointing at or touching something with your feet is also considered rude. Remember to remove your shoes when entering a Thai person's home or a sacred area. Touching someone's head is also considered impolite; you might notice Thai people affectionately touching the heads of children, but we will certainly avoid this. It is also considered very rude to step over someone's outstretched legs or feet. Instead, you should walk around the end of their feet. It might seem like a lot to remember, but generally speaking - the head is sacred and feet are gross, so act accordingly. :)

6. **Respect for the King** – Thai people have tremendous love and loyalty for the Thailand Royal Family, so we should always display this same respect as visitors here. Lese-Majesty laws state that, “Whoever defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent, shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years.” This can be anything from speaking badly of the Royal Family, defaming a statue or picture, or writing an insulting article. Most of us come from very open societies where discussing politics and questioning government leaders' decisions is commonplace. Please understand that this simply isn't possible in Thailand and should be avoided at all costs.

7. **Gifts for Children** – Although we certainly encourage you to bring donations to aid the communities we work with, please do not distribute gifts directly to children as it encourages begging. Instead, you can GIVE donations to an established organization or village elders. All volunteer donations will be graciously accepted and ultimately given to the children who need them most, but it's important to follow the social guidelines here.

8. **Sabai Sabai** – There are no two words in the Thai Language that do a better job of describing its people. This common phrase means to “take it easy” or “relax”, which is more a way of life than a piece of advice here. Thai people approach life at their own pace and things tend to happen a little more slowly than we're used to in the western world. Please try your best to be patient, appreciate the moment, and don't expect things to happen in a hurry.

9. **Remember to smile :)** – Thailand is affectionately known as “The Land of Smiles,” but smiling can mean a great many different things here. There are over a dozen words in the Thai language that refer to all different types of smiles. Thais use smiles to express emotions of politeness, happiness, embarrassment, frustration, indifference, condescension, nervousness, or just to mask their real feelings. It's often difficult to decipher exactly what a local's smile might mean, but, as a rule of thumb, just greet everyone with a smile and they will be sure to return the favor. Thai people are sure to become some of the most gracious and friendly people you will ever meet and it all begins with a smile :)

10. **Thai Wai** - Reaching out to shake somebody's hand will certainly get you some confused looks from Thai people. They have a very different and uniquely charming way to greet friends and strangers alike. The Thai greeting, referred to as the *wai*, consists of a slight bow, with the palms pressed together in a prayer-like fashion. It has its origin in the Indic Añjali Mudrā, like the Indian namasté. The higher the hands are held in relation to the face and the lower the bow, the more respect or reverence the giver of the *wai* is showing. The *wai* is traditionally observed upon formally entering a house. After the visit is over, the visitor asks for permission to leave and repeats the salutation. The *wai* is also common as a way to express gratitude or to apologize.

Thai Language – Key Phrases

Hello / Goodbye - *sà-wàt-dee*

How are you? - *sà-baai dee mai?*

I'm fine, thanks - *sà-baai dee*

Thank you - *kòp khun*

What is your name? - *khun chêu a-rai?*

My name is ____ - *pǒm chêu* ____ (m)
chăn chêu ____ (f)

Where are you from? - *kun maa jàak tee nǎi?*

I'm from ____ - *pǒm maa jàak* ____ (m)
chăn maa jàak ____ (f)

It's nice to meet you - *yin dee têu dái róa jàk*

Delicious - *aroi*

Excuse me / Sorry - *kǒr tôht*

How much is this? - *táo rài?*

No worries / You're welcome - *mái bpen rai*

Have you eaten rice yet? – *gin khao ru yung?*

Where is the bathroom? - *hông náam yò têu nǎi?*

Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand

Northern Thailand is an amazingly diverse region of the world, both in its environment and culture, and is home to a variety of indigenous communities living in remote hill tribe villages. There are seven different tribes of varied origins, usually having migrated south to this region from China and Myanmar to escape political oppression and preserve their unique way of life. Even within Thailand, though, these communities have generally been excluded from the vast economic growth seen throughout the rest of the country over the last sixty years.

We will interact directly with 3 of these tribes – the Karen, Lahu and Lisu villagers - working alongside them and learning more about their unique language, culture, dress and spiritual beliefs. Most importantly, each of these tribes will provide us with their own perspective on the difficult yet fascinating history of these scenic hills.

Karen

Population: approx 300,000, Origin: Myanmar

This is the largest of the minority groups and many of the Karen were converted to Christianity by the missionaries, with some tribes still practicing animism or being Buddhist. The Karen wear woven v-neck tunics of various natural colors and turbans. Unmarried women wear distinctive long white v-neck tunics. The Karen occupy lowland areas, engaging in agriculture, including rice cultivation. They are also skilled weavers and the most environmentally conscious of the hill tribes - practicing crop rotation, thus preserving the forest.

Hello / thank you – Tablu!

Lahu

Population: approx 73,000, Origin: Yunnan, Myanmar

Also known as Musor, the Lahu are concentrated near the Burmese border and have five sub-groupings: Red Lahu, Yellow Lahu, Black Lahu, White Lahu and Lahu Sheleh. The Black Lahu is the largest sub-grouping, making up close to 80 per cent of the Lahu population. The women wear very distinctive black and red jackets and skirts and the men wear baggy green or blue pants. They have a reputation as excellent hunters, and survive off vegetable cultivation.

Hello / thank you – Abo ru ja!

Lisu

Population: approx 28,000, Origin: Tibet / Yunnan

The Lisu women are distinguished by their brightly colored tunics, worn over long pants; some of the older generation continue to wear tasseled turbans on their heads. Occupying villages above 1,000m, they keep livestock and cultivate corn and vegetables. Unlike other hill tribes, they don't usually live in stilted houses. The Lisu men and women are

also recognized as some of the most physically attractive of the hill tribes and marriage outside of their tribe is not uncommon.

Hello / thank you: *Aki bomo!*

