

Travel and Become Part of Thai Community

Have you ever wondered how life would look like when living in an entirely different surrounding, in an entirely different culture with an entirely different way of living? Nowadays, developments in tourism can give you the possibility to realise this vision. In contrast to common forms of tourism, where big companies and multinationals are in control of a region and its economy, CBT (Community Based Tourism) aims on empowerment of, and fair benefits to the local community, with the development and preservation of the community as the main goal.



In return, the tourist can experience the authentic way of living, in a unique natural and cultural setting. Instead of staying in an ordinary hotel, resort, bed & breakfast or guesthouse, one will experience the real family-life by staying in a so called homestay. In short, this type of accommodation differs itself from others by adding an extra dimension concerning interaction: the guest is part of the family, and is therefore closely related to, and more easily integrated into the community. As a result, guests are not only able to engage in normal tourist activities, but are regularly involved in activities with the locals.

Mae La Na Community

One of the communities that have successfully executed CBT as a tool for development and preservation is Mae La Na. In the upper North of Thailand, nearby the Myanmar border, Mae La Na is situated in a valley in the Mae Hong Son district, surrounded by a stunning mountainous and relatively wild landscape, rich of natural resources of various kinds.

The vast majority of the indigenous people, the 'Shan', maintain a Buddhist way of life and belief.

The villagers believe in, and observe religious practices, and are very hospitable by nature.



They attend food-offering to the monks every day, and make merits at the temple on every Buddhist holy day. Mae La Na is a relatively modern and well developed village, but tourists still have more than enough possibilities to experience the authentic way of living. The total population of Mae La Na counts 535 inhabitants, comprising 121 households. Thirteen households within the community also serve as a homestay to enable CBT.

Local Activities

In Mae La Na and its surrounding area, several activities can be undertaken. Undoubtedly the most famous touristic activity in the region is a visit to South-East Asia's longest cave: the Mae La Na cave.

Accompanied with a local guide from the community, one can spend hours in the dark cave, admiring stalagmites, stalactites, waterfalls, bats, rare eyeless fish-species and more. Going through the whole cave is also a possibility, but because of its length, an overnight stay is required.

Furthermore, the marvelous area is extremely suitable for spectacular trekking tours. After an exhausting day, one should definitely go to the local sauna. A traditional medicine-man fills a small barn with herbal smoke, creating an extremely relaxing atmosphere. Afterwards, one can enjoy a locally made cigarette, made of tobacco with additional herbs, held together by a special banana-leaf.

Moreover, the community itself has numerous other activities on offer on a voluntarily base. One can think of working in the rice fields, educating the children at the local primary school, producing

sesame oil in the traditional way, catching frogs at night, maintaining the villages' irrigation systems and so forth.



Experiences

During a ten days stay in May in this extraordinary setting, our group of six both German and Dutch students was assigned to three different homestays in the village. A rotation system was used every three days to spread the group equally over the homestays, in order to divide revenues accordingly and to get to know the community-members better.

We were participating in the local life and spent time with our host families during some parts of the day, ate with them, and had conversations, as far as our basic Thai knowledge, their basic English knowledge and gestures allowed us to. The first three days were used to attend the regular tourist activities. The remainder we worked within the village on a research-project for CBT-I (www.cbt-i.org) and participated in several local (working) activities; an excellent way to discover the real community, its members and the daily life. It shows how different, relaxing, friendly and intriguing community-life in this village can be in comparison to the modern western society.

Some general facts one can expect include a general 9 pm curfew, delicious food with rice as a main ingredient, the idyllic sound of cowbells ringing on the rice-fields (although depending on the season), an extremely refreshing shower in either the local stream or the shed where you can wash yourself by using a bowl of water, unimaginably friendly and open people, and a perfect climate combined with one of the best views on earth. If this appeals to you just as much as it did to us, do not hesitate for a second to pay the community of Mae La Na a visit to enjoy all this beauty, and at the same time support the community to develop and preserve its natural and cultural resources.

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