

Thailand



Map



Background

- **Land and Climate:** Thailand extends down the Malaysian Peninsula in Southeast Asia. Covering 514,000 sq km. Thailand is larger than the state of California. Its central region is dominated by fertile agricultural land and the capital city of Bangkok. The northeastern third of the country consists of the Khorat Plateau. Forested mountains and steep, fertile valleys form the northwestern quarter. The warm southern peninsula is comprised of rain forests and rubber and coconut plantations. Thailand's climate is mostly tropical. Cooler temperatures prevail in the north between November and February, but the rest of the year is fairly hot. Rains fall mostly from June to October.

People

- **Population:** Thailand's population of 65.1 million is growing by 0.7 percent annually. About one-third of the population lives in urban areas. Bangkok is the largest city, with roughly seven million people. Other major cities include Chiang Mai, Nakorn Ratchasima, Nonthaburi, and Udon Thani. About 75 percent of the population is comprised of Central Thai, Northeastern Thai, Northern Thai, and Southern Thai ethnic groups. The Chinese form the largest minority (14 percent of the people); they live mostly in Bangkok. However, many generations of intermarriage have made it difficult to distinguish between the Chinese and the Thai. There are also many Thai of Malay, Khmer, Vietnamese, and Lao ancestry. Ethnic Khmer, Vietnamese, and other refugees live mostly in Thailand's border regions. About 500,000 mountain people form a number of distinct ethnic groups, or hill tribes.
- **Language and Greeting:** Central Thai is the official language and is used in schools. Other Thai dialects are spoken in various regions. Lao predominates in many northeastern areas, and Khmer is spoken along the Cambodian border. Thai is a tonal language, so a given syllable can have different meanings depending on the inflection with which it is pronounced. Central Thai has five tones. Vowels are placed before, above, next to, or below the characters, and tones are placed above. Many people also speak Chinese and Malay. Those with advanced education often speak English. Some minority groups, such as the Mon and Hmong, speak their own languages. Thai greet with a *wai*: one place the palms of the hands together at chest level with fingers extended upward and bows slightly; women curtsy. A younger person greets first, and the more senior person responds with the hands forming a *wai* in a lower position. It is an insult to not return a *wai*, unless there is great social or age distance between the two people. For example, an adult does not return the *wai* of a small child. Buddhist monks never return a *wai*. In performing the *wai*, men greet with *Sawasdee kraab* ("Hello" or "Good-bye"); women say *Sawasdee ka*. A *wai* can also express thanks or an apology.
- **Religion:** Although Thailand guarantees freedom of religion and many religions are represented in the country, 95 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist. Muslims comprise about 4 percent of the population. A small number of Christians also live in Thailand. Traditionally, all young men were expected to become Buddhist monks for at least three months to study Buddhist principles. Buddhism in Thailand also incorporates rites and principles from Hinduism and animism, which espouses a reverence for life based on a belief that all living things possess spirits. Buddha's teachings were meant to release people from the misery of life's cycles (birth, life, death, and rebirth).
- **General Attitude:** *Thailand* means "Land of the Free," and Thai are proud of the fact that their country has largely avoided foreign rule throughout its long history. The king and queen are the most respected and honored persons in Thailand. For example, rather than lick a postage stamp with the king's picture on it, one wets it with a damp sponge. It is illegal to say or write anything offensive about royalty. Thai are proud of their cultural heritage and often are offended by those who see "development" as a need to Westernize

and change people's religious and cultural habits. Thai are warm, friendly, and generous. They are extremely loyal to family and show great respect for elders. Thailand is often referred to as the Land of Smiles. A sense of humor and a pleasant attitude are highly regarded. Social status is measured by education, occupation, wealth, and, to some degree, family name. Doctors and engineers, for example, are highly respected. Cleverness is admired, and personal connections are seen as an important means of achieving success and wealth.

- **Personal Appearance:** Western-style clothing is very common in Bangkok and other cities, but villagers often wear traditional clothing. Farmers frequently wear straw hats because of the heat and strong sun. Women wear a simple blouse, a wraparound skirt known as a *sarong* or *pa thung*, and flip-flops. Men might wear pants and a shirt in public but change into a *pa kao ma* (similar to a *sarong*) at home. Men and women of Chinese descent wear loose jackets and calf-length pants. Intricate headdresses may accompany the traditional clothing of the mountain people. Sandals are popular, but shoes are worn in formal situations. Rural people may wear rubber flip-flops or go barefoot. Students wear uniforms (white shirts, blue or black skirts for girls, and shorts or pants for boys) to school.

Lifestyle

- **Diet and Eating:** *Kao* (rice) is eaten with nearly every meal. It is plain in southern and central regions, glutinous in the north. *Kao* is usually served with spicy dishes that consist of meat, vegetables, fish, eggs, and fruits. Popular dishes include *pad Thai* (pan-fried noodles), *satay* (barbecued pork or chicken on a stick with peanut sauce), *yam* (spiced salad), *kaeng* (any kind of curry), and *tom yam* (lemon-flavored soup usually with shrimp). Dinner is the main meal and is eaten as a family; breakfast and lunch might be eaten separately due to different schedules. Thai hold a spoon in the right hand and a fork in the left, pushing food onto the spoon with the fork. Knives usually are not necessary because food is served in bite-size pieces.
- **Recreation:** The most popular sports in Thailand are soccer, table tennis, badminton, volleyball, and basketball. Playing *Takro* (a traditional sport played by trying to keep a rattan ball in the air without using hands) and flying kites are favorite activities. The youth enjoy various martial arts. Bangkok residents like to shop. Movies and television provide leisure entertainment. “Thai chess,” played without a queen and under unique rules, is a popular urban spectator sport. Urban families might take short vacations to the beach or elsewhere in Thailand; rural people rarely travel.
- **Holidays:** Public holidays include New Year's Day (1 Jan.); Chakri Day (6 Apr.); Labor Day (1 May); Coronation Day (5 May); the Queen's Birthday (12 Aug.); Chulalongkorn Day (23 Oct.), honoring the “beloved monarch” (1868–1910) who abolished slavery and introduced many reforms; the King's Birthday (5 Dec.); Constitution Day (10 Dec.); New Year's Eve (31 Dec.); and the Buddhist holidays (set by the lunar calendar) of *Makha Bucha*, *Visakha Bucha*, *Asanha Bucha*, and *Khao Phansa*. For *Songkhran* (Thai New Year, in April) people throw buckets of water on each other as part of the festivities. *Loy*

Krathong honors the water goddess for providing water throughout the year; people float small “boats” with candles, coins, or flowers on waterways.

- **Commerce and Currency:** Offices are open 8.30 to 4.30 pm, Mondays through Fridays, although some are open till 6pm. The currency in Thailand is the Thai Baht. The exchange rate is 1 US dollars to 35.58 Thai Baht.

Society

- **Transportation and Communication:** Most large cities are connected by rail, highways, and air service. Local transportation is by bus, taxi, *samlor* (three-wheeled motorized taxi), and *silor* (mini-cab). In rural areas, pedicabs are most common. Traffic moves on the left side of the road. Canals (*klongs*) are often used for transportation in rural and some urban areas. The Chao Phraya River carries merchant and commuter traffic in Bangkok. Urban residents usually have telephones, televisions, radios, and access to other forms of communication. Rural people continue to rely on radio and word of mouth, though each village has a few homes with televisions.
- **Health:** Health services have expanded greatly in the last decade, but they are still limited in remote rural areas. Tropical diseases are common outside the cities. HIV/AIDS is one of the country's most serious problems. Buddhist and Christian leaders work to revive traditional values, teach preventive measures, and care for those affected by AIDS. A government-sponsored education campaign has helped lower the HIV infection rate among some segments of the population.