



THAILAND

A COUNTRY PROFILE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INC.

GEOGRAPHY

The Kingdom of Thailand is situated in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia. With over 198,000 square miles, the country approximates the combined size of Texas.

The main part of Thailand borders Myanmar (formerly Burma) to the west and north, Laos to the north-east, and Cambodia to the southeast. Thailand's southern isthmus adjoins the Gulf of Thailand to the east, the Indian Ocean to the west, and Malaysia to the south.

Thailand can be divided into four basic geographic regions: the densely populated central plain watered by the Chao Phraya River and its tributaries—one of the most fertile rice-growing regions in the world; a relatively dry and desolate northeastern plateau;

a mountainous north and west; and the southern isthmus composed of rain forest and beaches. One-third of the land is arable.

Thailand's tropical climate—dominated by frequent monsoons—is marked by three basic seasons: rainy (June-October), cool (November-February), and hot (March-May).

PEOPLE & LANGUAGE

Thailand has a population of over 64 million. One of the world's fastest-growing populations in the 1970s, a government-instituted family planning program has cut Thailand's annual growth rate from over three percent to less than half that. Just over 24 percent of the population is 14 or under.

Approximately 75 per-

cent of the people are ethnic Thai. Chinese Thai, about 14 percent of the population, make up the largest minority group. Others include Malays and Khmers.

The AIDS epidemic has had a major impact on the Thai population. Thai government officials estimate that Thailand has 570,000 (2003 est.) HIV carriers. Recently, the government has devoted substantial resources toward AIDS education and awareness.

Thai is the official national language and is spoken by almost all, though there are some significant differences in regional dialects. Thai is difficult for Westerners to learn since it is tonal; the same word spoken in different tones or pitches can have various meanings. English is used in some commercial transactions and among the

well-educated and is also taught in schools.

MAJOR CITY CENTERS

The capital of Bangkok, located near the northern edge of the Gulf of Thailand, is the country's heart and soul. Already home to some 10 million, Bangkok continues to attract people lured there by the promise of job and educational opportunities.

Other cities with large populations include Chiang Mai in the northwest (1.9 million) and Nakhon Ratchasima (2.6 million) northeast of Bangkok.

Most Thais live in rural villages, but the urban population is growing. Houses in these areas are generally simple wooden structures on stilts to protect against floods.

POLITICAL HISTORY

The first Thai kingdom, Sukhothai, arose in the 1200s among a people who had migrated from southern China. Rama Thibodi, a fourteenth-century ruler, left an indelible impression on the culture by establishing Theravada Buddhism as the official religion.

The region's first contact with the West dates to the 1500s and the arrival of the Portuguese. Thailand, however, is the only country in South and Southeast Asia never colonized by a European power—a source of great national pride. In fact, the name Thailand means “land of the free.”

Japan invaded Thailand in 1941 during World War II. Once Japan moved out, the U.S. played a key role in helping Thailand avoid the tentacles of communism, which ensnared several neighboring countries. The U.S. and Thailand continue to enjoy good relations.

Today, Thailand is governed as a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government. Since the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932, members of the military have staged several coups and exercised considerable government control. Recently, however, they have been

opposed by powerful pro-democracy forces, which have been buoyed by the emergence of an enlarging, well-educated middle class.

Regional problems facing Thailand include those posed by the hundreds of thousands of refugees from Cambodia and Laos who have streamed into the country. Thailand has a strong armed forces and in recent years has taken an increasingly active role on the international stage. When East Timor gained independence from Indonesia, Thailand, for the first time in its history, contributed troops to the international peacekeeping effort.

ECONOMY

The Thai economy returned to modest growth in 1999, chalking up a 4.2 percent gain in real GDP. This constituted a solid rebound from the sharp 10.2 percent fall in 1998, the year after financial crisis struck Thailand and spread through Asia.

Traditionally an agrarian society, about 60 percent of workers are still employed in agriculturally related jobs. Thailand is one of the world's largest food exporters; rice is the most important crop. Industrial activity, however, is expanding at a faster rate than agricul-

ture. Thai industry produces a wide variety of goods, including textiles, cement, integrated circuits, and plastics.

Tin is the premier mining industry, but the country also mines a significant amount of gemstones. Thailand's fishing industry is another important component of the economy.

Tourism has been Thailand's leading foreign exchange earner in the last decades. Visitors are attracted by, among other things, Thailand's many ornate temples, a variety of gems and handicrafts, and numerous beaches and resorts.

Much of the country's economic prosperity is concentrated in Bangkok, with a small percentage of the people making most of the money. The Chinese minority, in particular, controls a substantial portion of the wealth in Thailand. Also, some resources—especially once-abundant timber—have been depleted.

EDUCATION

Children are required to attend six years of school. The attendance rate drops from 96 percent in elementary school to 30 percent for secondary school.

College graduates make

up a small percent of the population, although an increasing number now attend college in Thailand. Applicants face stiff competition to gain entrance into one of Thailand's over 80 universities. Entrance exams are a time of extreme stress among high school students, as one's performance on those tests determines much about one's career and future. College education in Thailand emphasizes lectures as opposed to outside reading.

Education has traditionally been regarded as important in Thailand, and even more so as of late. In the last few decades, the government has opened a substantial number of new public schools, and education is now a top priority in the Thai budget. The results have been promising. For instance, literacy has risen from 50 percent in 1960 to the present 96 percent.

More than 9,000 students from Thailand enrolled in colleges and universities in the U.S. during the 2002/03 academic year. The majority of Thai students here are enrolled in graduate level programs. Overseas degrees confer status in Thailand.

CULTURE

The Thai are generally reserved, easygoing, gra-

cious people, earning Thailand the nickname “the Land of Smiles.” Adherence to tradition and the overriding influence of Buddhism are hallmarks of the culture.

Social harmony is valued. Thais, therefore, will go to extremes to avoid conflict. Direct confrontation is taboo.

Leadership positions are granted to those who gain the respect and admiration of the group as opposed to those who try to seize power by self-assertion. Thais are, as a rule, not overly competitive or aggressive. Respect is accorded to those who help others and are virtuous.

Thais are, however, strongly nationalistic. Group unity and loyalty to the monarchy are stressed. There is a notable harmony among the various ethnic and cultural groups.

Thai families are typically close-knit, with most households headed by the senior male in the family. In rural areas, several generations often live together.

One’s elders, both within and outside the family, are deferred to. Even grown children obey their parents’ advice. Children take very seriously the responsibility of caring for their parents in their old age.

Most young people choose their own spouses, though some marriages are still arranged. Especially in rural areas, the groom often moves in with the bride’s family, at least for a short time. Thai women have access to greater opportunities than their counterparts in most other Asian nations.

The country does face some formidable problems, including widespread prostitution and AIDS, drug trafficking, and child labor abuse.

In general Thais are regarded as fun-loving people. Popular sports include soccer, basketball, table tennis, badminton, snooker, and volleyball. Thai boxing, where participants use their fists, knees, feet, legs, elbows, and shoulders to batter opponents, is a national passion.

HOLIDAYS

Thais enjoy celebrating numerous festivals and holidays throughout the year. Most celebrations are connected with Buddhism, the annual rice-farming cycle, or the honoring of Thai kings. Music, dancing, and colorful parades often mark these occasions.

Some important Thai holidays include:

- Mahka Puja—Buddhist national holiday (February);
- Visakha Puja—the holiest day for Buddhists, celebrating the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha (May);
- Songkran—Thai New Year (April 13);
- Loy Krathong—people gather around rivers and lakes to launch small decorated floats with offerings to the “Mother of Waters” (November);
- Chulalongkorn Day—honoring the “Beloved Monarch,” who abolished slavery and established a public education system during his reign from 1873-1910 (October 23); and
- The Birthday of the King (December 5).

RELIGION

Thailand has perhaps the largest concentration of Buddhists in the world. Ninety-five percent of Thais claim Buddhism as their religion; the majority are Theravada Buddhists.

Buddhism is a powerful and cohesive social force. Children are nurtured in Buddhist philosophy from an early age, both in school and in the home. Traditionally, young men have been expected to serve a stint as Buddhist monks, and many still do. To forsake

Buddhism for another religion is to dishonor and disrespect one’s family.

Buddhist practices and teachings have a profound influence on daily life in Thailand. The numerous Buddhist temples (wats) are the centerpiece of most villages and cities, serving as both the social and religious hum of the community. Thais frequently give alms and food to the country’s highly respected Buddhist monks, donate to Buddhist temples, and regularly worship at the wat. Thais also often set aside a room in their homes for family Buddha images and a small altar.

Though Buddhism is the official national religion of Thailand, religious freedom is granted.

Other religions have been viewed favorably as allies in defeating the threat of communism.

Muslims are the largest religious minority, accounting for over three percent of the population. They are concentrated among the Malays in the south. Many Chinese Thais adhere to Confucianism and other traditional Chinese religious practices, often combining that with a belief in Buddhism.

Astrology and spirit worship are other key

facets of religious life. Many people consult astrologers to determine when and whether to proceed with a variety of major undertakings, from taking a trip to getting married. Most Thai households have a spirit house for guardian spirits.

CHRISTIANITY

Thailand has the smallest proportion of Christians among Southeast Asian countries. Christians account for less than .5 percent of the population.

Roman Catholics, composed largely of Vietnamese and Chinese Thai, slightly outnumber Protestants. Catholic missionaries first appeared in the region in the 1500s with the arrival of the Portuguese traders. They made some inroads among the local population, much of which were then wiped out during violent persecutions in the eighteenth century.

Protestant missionaries arrived in the 1800s. Despite intensive missionary efforts ever since, Christianity has never experienced a period of great growth.

Besides the omnipresence of Buddhism and its unifying effect on the culture, many Thais consider their spiritual

beliefs too personal to be discussed. Thai young people, especially, may feel free to consider other spiritual views only when away from family.

Also, Christianity is often misunderstood and lumped together with all other religions, with each considered equally valid. Some Christian teachings, such as man and women's sinfulness and the belief that there is only one way to salvation, are foreign concepts to Thais.

Other factors also limit the influence of the church including the fact that many Christian congregations are found in poor, rural areas. In other parts of the country, there is no viable evangelical witness. The Thai church also is hampered by nominalism, syncretism, and a high level of backsliding.

Christianity in Thailand, however, may face a more optimistic future as a new generation of Christian leaders has placed an increasing emphasis on evangelism and church growth. Also, despite being viewed as a foreign religion, Christianity is highly regarded for its numerous contributions to health and education.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The Royal Thai Embassy
1024 Wisconsin Ave.
NW, Washington, DC
20007
www.thaiembdc.org

SOURCES

Background Notes—Thailand. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1988.

Countries of the World and Their Leaders Yearbook 2004, Vol. 1, Status of the World's Nations. Gale, Thomas: ISSN 0196-2809.

Culturgram—Thailand. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, 1984.

The Encyclopedia Americana International Edition. Danbury, Conn.: Grolier, Inc. 1992.

"Growing Pains." George J. Church. *Time*, June 1, 1992, pp. 68-71.

Open Doors 1990/1991. New York: Institute of International Education, 1991.

Operation World. Patrick Johnstone. Waynesboro, Ga.: STL Books and WEC International, 1987.

Passport to the World—Thailand. Pasadena, Calif.: The Lausanne Committee

for World Evangelization Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center, 1992.

Thailand Handbook. Rainer Krack. Bielefeld, Germany: Peter Rump Publishing Co., 1991.

The World Almanac and Book of Facts—1992. New York: Pharos Books, 1991.

The World Book Encyclopedia. Chicago: World Book, Inc., 1992.

World Christian Encyclopedia. David B. Barrett (Ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

The World Factbook, CIA, January 2004:
<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/th.html>.

For more information about International Students, Inc., call 1-800-ISI-TEAM or (719) 576-2700, fax (719) 576-5363, email information@isionline.org, or write: ISI, PO Box C, Colorado Springs, CO 80901. Visit our website at www.isionline.org.

