

WHERE IN THE WORLD?



Quick Facts:

Area: 513,113 sq. km.
Population: 62,354,402 (July 2002 est.)
Capital: Bangkok
Language: Thai, English, regional dialects
Religion: Buddhism 95%, Muslim 3.8%, Christianity .5%, Hinduism .1%, Other .6%
Currency: baht (THB)
Web site: www.learning-inter.org



Introduction

Thailand (known as Siam until 1939) is so much more than what one may know from the American movie "The King and I". From its delicious cuisine to its famous gems, to its key location in Asia, Thailand has close and important connections to the USA.

Thailand has been the country's name for about sixty years, thereby restoring a name first chosen in 1238, but then set aside in favor of the name Siam at the time when the Burmese were ousted in a decisive battle. Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country never to have been taken over by a European power.

Short Facts

Area: 513,113 sq. km. Although mostly landlocked between Burma on the west and northwest, Laos to the east and northeast, Cambodia to the southeast and Malaysia at the southwestern tip. It is also surrounded by the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand.

Climate: Thailand is generally hot, particularly between March and May. The monsoon season runs from June to October, during which the climate is still hot with torrential rains. November to February is considered to be the cool season.

Population: Thailand has about 62 million inhabitants, approximately 75% of which are Thai, 14% Chinese and 11% of other ethnic groups.

Language: Thai is the official language, but many students also speak English (the favoured second language of the elite). French is also a popular second language, and regional dialects of Thai abound.

Religion: The overwhelming majority of Thais are Buddhist (95%). Four percent of the population is Muslim, and the remaining 1% is made up of Christian, Hindu and other religions.

Government: Thailand is a constitutional monarchy which supports a multiparty system. The constitution was last revised January 1995. The government consists of 3 branches: executive (the king, who is chief of state, and the prime minister, who is acting head of the government); legislative (the bicameral National Assembly); and judicial (three levels of courts, the highest of which is the Supreme Court). The monarch appoints a Privy Council; the Prime Minister heads the government. For administrative purposes, Thailand is divided into 76 provinces.

History: Archaeological discoveries in the Northeast part of the country suggest that the world's oldest Bronze Age civilization was flourishing in Thailand some 5,600 years ago. Successive waves of immigrants gradually entered the area from southern China. By the 12th century, Khmers ruled much of the area from Angkor. By the early 1200s, Thais had established small northern city-states, and in 1238 two Thai chieftains rebelled against Khmer sovereignty and established the first independent Thai kingdom at Sukhothai, in northern Thailand. During this period Theravada

Buddhism became established as the main religion, the Thai alphabet was created, and distinctly Thai art forms began to appear.

In 1782, the first king of the present Chakri dynasty, Rama I, established his new capital on the site of a riverside hamlet called Bangkok. In the mid-1800s, when the rest of Southeast Asia was being colonized by the French, Dutch and British, the Thai monarchs, through skilful diplomacy, enabled their country to remain independent.

Until 1932 the monarchy was an absolute one, but in that year a peaceful coup imposed constitutional limits on the monarchy. Thai politics were dominated for half a century by a military and bureaucratic elite. Changes of government were affected primarily by means of a long series of mostly bloodless coups.

Beginning with a brief experiment in democracy in the 1970s, civilian democratic political institutions slowly gained greater authority, culminating in the 1988 democratic election of the prime minister (the first in over a decade). Three years later, another coup ended his term.

Shortly afterwards, the military appointed a head to a mostly civilian interim government; following inconclusive elections, a former army commander was appointed prime minister. The Thai reaction was to demand an end to military influence in the government, and demonstrations were violently suppressed by the military. In 1992 democratic elections took place. Normal relations with Thailand were restored.



WHERE IN THE WORLD?

Thailand



Various coups and elections, none of which lasted very long followed, and with the dissolution of parliament in 1995, the Thai Nation Party won the largest number of parliamentary seats. Its leader, Banharn Silpa-Archa, became Thailand's 21st prime minister. The king has little direct power under the constitution, but he remains a symbol of national identity and unity.

Economy: Thailand is rich in natural resources and arable land, so it is an active trade and export country. Tin, rubber, natural gas, timber, fish and fluorite are a few of its resources; rice, corn, manioc (to make tapioca), sugarcane and soybeans are a few of its crops. Thai industries include tourism, textiles and footwear, computers and jewellery. Two-thirds of Thailand's exports are mining and manufactured products. Its major trading partners are the US, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and the European Union.

The Thai unit of money is the baht, which is divided into 100 satang.

Education: Nine years of education are compulsory for Thais. The country's literacy rate is 94%. From elementary school to high school, the 1st semester starts late in May and ends in the middle of October, and the 2nd semester starts in November and ends at the end of March. In college, class begins early in June. Summer vacation starts late in March till May.

Family life

Typical Thai family life is similar to that of other Asian countries; the family is one of the most important units in society. Traditionally, the Thai family is an extended one with several generations living under one roof or at least under several roofs in the same compound. Respect for elders is taught very early. One of the prime responsibilities of children is to care for parents in old age. Each family member understands his or her place in the family hierarchy. The

father has the final word on family decisions; the mother takes care of family finances and physical and spiritual well-being. Tact, compromise, and tolerance are important features of family relations. In relations with other people it is important to follow a few social rules: Thais greet each other not with a handshake but with a prayer-like palms-together gesture known as *wai*.

Thais also believe that one should never point at people or things with their feet, as these are the lowest physical and spiritual parts of a person. The head is believed to be the highest, so one is expected never to touch someone on the head.

Meals: Despite influence from Chinese and Indian cuisine, Thai food is distinctive. Thai meals are heavily based on rice accompanied by soup, curry and a number of side dishes followed by dessert. Dessert would most likely consist of fresh fruit. Thai food blends five major tastes: sweet, sour, salty, bitter and hot. Common spices used are: coriander, garlic, turmeric, ginger, lemongrass, cardamom, and basil.

Accompanying most meals are shrimp paste, fish sauce and tamarind sauce. At the table, all dishes are served at the same time. The idea is to take a spoonful of rice and top it with a spoonful of one of the dishes; the foods are then eaten one by one in this combination. Chopsticks are not used for eating Thai food. The correct method of eating is with a spoon and a fork. The fork is held in the left hand and used to push the food onto the spoon. Traditionally, Thai food is not served with alcohol. At an informal meal, though, beer may be served.

Recreation: The *wat*, or Buddhist monastery, is the centre of activity for the community; temple fairs are a common feature. Parks and public gardens are popular spots. In Bangkok, there is a lively nightlife. Thailand's beaches are becoming an ever-more popular attraction as they are relatively unspoiled and uncrowded. Traditional theatre and puppet performances are found throughout the country.

Common Phrases

English	Thai
Hello!	Sawat di!
How are you?	Pen yangai!
Thank you?	Khawp Khun
Excuse me	Kaw that
What is your name?	Koon! Cheu ah!-ry!
My name is ?	Cheu _____

Sports, including soccer and *takraw* (a game in which players keep a wicker ball in the air using their bodies) are most popular; jogging and water sports are also becoming popular.

YFU in Thailand

In 1998, the first Community College students came to the US from Thailand.

Exchanges with: Germany, Japan and the USA.

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