

My love affair with Thailand

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Project:Travel to Teach

Work:teach English

My love affair with Thailand started when I visited as a tourist in 2000 and again in 2002. I knew I wanted to return for a longer period and not as a tourist, but as a volunteer. I wanted to get involved and get to know this wonderful people and their enticing culture. So I started to surf the net and although there were quite a few sites, Travel to Teach was the one which kept drawing me back. I liked the idea of an organization which was not out to convert people, but was there to offer a cross culture experience where both the Thais and the volunteers could exchange knowledge and learn from each other. Being rather conservative and a bit nervous about going out into a strange country where I did not speak the language, this seemed like the perfect solution. An introduction into Thai society surrounded and supported by an organization. It felt "safer". Well, at the ripe old age of 52, you get kind of nervous about setting out into the big wide world on your own. Kerstin's personal mails of encouragement, especially calming my doubts of being the oldest volunteer there were the final push I needed to commit to the idea. So I tied up loose ends, packed a bag and flew over. I had never taught in my life. I am a staid banker from Israel!! So at first I watched the others, and slowly gained enough confidence to do it myself. I started at the high school. The first day I was invited up on the stage with the principal who introduced me to 2800 high school students!! I nearly fainted when he handed me the microphone and asked me to say a few words. It appears that they didn't get to see too many foreigners and so he had to explain my sudden appearance on the grounds. I taught classes of 56 teenagers (between the ages of 13 and 18) and you cannot believe the respect, the attention and the enthusiasm I encountered there. I later also taught at the tourism school and adult classes at one of the wats where we went in the evenings. I also taught smaller groups at our dorms, sitting on the floor on mats in the "sala" outside. At first my bones creaked something awful, but I improved with time. The joy in watching your pupils bloom from shyness to confidence, using the words you taught them last week to invite you to their home and give you directions, is indescribable. Nong Khai is a little town where nothing goes unnoticed. I became friends with the fruit lady, the hairdresser and the parking attendant. The ladies at the massage parlor had spotted me in town long before I went for my first foot massage (heavenly) and the dressmaker rang her bicycle bell and waved when she passed me in the street. All these people spoke no English at all and were not pupils of mine, but they were so friendly they became part of my day. And I made real and lasting friendships with Thai and Farang residents of this wonderful place. More than friendship, I found family. Age is important here and I was treated with love and respect by the young staff of Travel to Teach who called me Aunt or Mom. Nested along the banks of the Mekong, overlooking Laos there is magic here. The Thai Buddhism casts a spell of peace and kindness found nowhere else in the world. The best time of my life and a place I will return to visit again and again.

About the Author

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Source: <http://www.volunteer-guide.com>