

THAILAND

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I reclined in the decaying wooden chair in front of my home watching the villagers stroll down the dusty path of my homestay village outside Chiang Mai, Thailand. As I watched, an older Thai man who lived across the street pushed his way towards me in his wheelchair, a determined look in his eyes as he gripped a tattered book in one hand. Upon reaching me, he smiled triumphantly and unfurled the worn paper book in his hand. Grinning encouragingly, he gestured for me to take the book and read through it. Upon opening it, I discovered that it was full of English-Thai translations of jokes, many of them inappropriate. As I flipped through the pages of the book I came across one joke that made me laugh uncontrollably. In response to the man's questioning look, I pointed at the Thai version of the joke in the book. The Thai man read over it and joined in my laughter as we shared a moment of pure joy. I remember this one moment of my experience in Thailand especially vividly, as it was so incredible that I was on the other side of the world, laughing at a joke with a Thai villager who spoke a completely different language, yet we were able to laugh over the same joke without a word being said. This memory is just one of many from my experiences in Thailand that I will cherish forever.

Every day spent in Thailand was the start of a new adventure. Whether it be a new historic sight to see, a temple with breathtaking architecture housing Buddhist monks, zip-lining through the canopy of trees, or waking up in my homestay to experience another day with my host family in a Thai village, I knew that each day was guaranteed to be full of rich experiences. One city that we spent a large part of our time in was a city in Northern Thailand called Chiang Mai. By the end of our stay, I had begun to think of that city as home. The smell of the street

food and yells of the local vendors at the markets became a familiar aspect of my everyday life. On our last day in Chiang Mai, it truly hit me how much I had grown to love the small city in Thailand. As we drove away from the familiar streets, I made the decision that I will return to Chiang Mai one day.

During our time in Thailand, we took part in two different homestays. The first homestay was with a family in a village in a valley in Northern Thailand. It was an incredible experience to live with a family in a Thai village while taking part in their daily activities. I was very surprised at the amount of technology in my first homestay. While their home did not have a functioning shower, toilet, or even a secure roof, they had wifi and smartphones. In fact, during first night I spent in the homestay my host sister came home from school and immediately took out her smartphone and began to watch Thai cartoons on it, completely ignoring me. Finally, her mother turned the wifi off and she immediately began to play with me. I was shocked at this aspect of my first homestay, as I was expecting a completely rural experience. I believe that this greatly demonstrates globalization and the growing focus on technology all across the world. Despite the amount of technology present, I thoroughly enjoyed learning about their lives and becoming a member of their family. Upon leaving, my host mother told me through google translate that I will always have a home to come back to should I pass through Thailand again.

During the first homestay we spent several days working at a local school, teaching the children English, painting the school, and building a playground. This experience had a strong impact on me as I saw the differences in the American educational system vs. the Thai educational system. The children at that school were primarily taught through video lectures, rather than by a teacher. Our in-country guide, Kit, explained to me that this is primarily because the teachers in that village have a low level of education themselves. He also explained that the

younger, more educated teachers, all transfer to bigger cities with higher pay, leaving the children in the villages behind. It was very eye-opening to see firsthand the educational system of a country other than the United States.

Spending time at that school also had an effect on me as I became close to the children who attend the school. Seeing their bright smiles everyday and their passion for learning warmed my heart. They were much more respectful than American children, stemming from the drastic difference in the culture of Thailand from that of America. I truly had a sense of fulfillment after painting their school and building a playground for those children. As we left the school on the final day to return to our host families, I remember feeling satisfied in knowing that they would be able to play and run around the playground structures that we built for years to come.

While the first homestay was very enlightening, I enjoyed the second homestay much more than the first. The second homestay was with the Lisu Hill-tribe, high up in the mountains of Thailand. This homestay felt much more authentic to me as they did not have any technology, unlike my first homestay. The second homestay was completely isolated from the influences of modern culture. My host parents wore the traditional Lisu outfits and lived their lives as their parents had before them. I felt completely at home in that small mountain village and enjoyed taking part in the simplicity of their life. It was fascinating to compare the differences in the way of life of the hill-tribe and the people living in Chiang Mai only a few hours away. In the hill-tribe, life had a peaceful, relaxed flow. They did not use clocks, but rather oriented by the sun. Everything they could need was within walking distance, which eliminated the need to ever rush anywhere. Chiang Mai, however, was full of people bustling by on motor bikes, hurrying to get to their destination. The second homestay offered a unique way of life that I had not encountered prior to the homestay.

As a whole, my experiences in Thailand have molded how I view the world and expanded my understanding of different cultures. I am still in awe that I went to such a beautiful and diverse country, and I fully intend to return in the future. It would be impossible to contain all my experiences into a small essay; these are only some of the many experiences that affected me. I am extremely grateful to the Naples Council on World Affairs for the opportunity to experience another country so fully. I know that these memories will stay with me for the rest of my life.