

Thailand: The Land of Smiles

by Jesse Nash & Rob Stelboun

Thailand has been called the Land of Smiles, and it doesn't take long to see why. There is a tremendous warmth and openness about the Thai people that is incredibly refreshing. A spiritual place, Thailand is rich in culture, a sheer delight as we discovered for ourselves during an adventure to three of its regions, each one unique.

DREAMLAND: CHAING MAI AND THE NORTH

The north of Thailand is fantasy-like -- as if you've been transported to an ancient time when kings ruled Siam and a simple people were cradled and nurtured by the lush and majestic mountains. The northern provinces have changed little over the centuries; the Thai people have long lived in harmony with the land. The soil is rich and water is plentiful, and the people take from the Earth only what they need. Everywhere we traveled in the north we smelled the smoke of burning fields, marking the transition from one crop to another. This beautiful, simple incense is how we will always remember the region; it is associated with all of the things we did there.

Our visit to Chaing Mai (New City) was the most impressive. We started our adventure the way every visitor should, with a traditional Thai massage. For about two hours, we were pounded, pulled and stretched, and when it was over, we felt revitalized, reborn and extremely relaxed. Upon entering the massage room we found that some rather bizarre clothes had been set out for us: the shirts were seemingly constructed backwards, like a stylish straight-jacket; the pants had about a 50 inch waist and no drawstring. By the time our masseuse arrived, we were hysterical with clothing confusion (and the effort to keep our pants up), and the laughter heightened the experience. With the massage costing only about 500 baht (about 12 dollars U.S.), we enjoyed one almost every day.

About an hour from Chaing Mai, along the Mae Wang River at the Khun Win Elephant Camp, we did some elephant trekking. Elephants are the most revered creatures in Thailand. There are about 7,000 of them in the country, mostly in the north. Intelligence and gentleness are evident when you look into an elephant's eyes, but you don't realize how large the animal is until you climb onto its back. You ascend a rickety wooden staircase, pull yourself over, and finally sit upon a square platform; your head is about 15 feet off the ground. The trainer sits on the animal's neck, barking commands that are sometimes obeyed, but mostly not. After about an hour of rocking and bouncing our way through the rain forest, the trainer asked if either of us wanted to take his spot. We didn't need a second invitation, and the experience was one of the highlights of the trip. The elephant's skin was bristly -- covered with wiry



hairs, but when each of us took our turn and slipped down behind her ears, we felt something amazing: she gently wrapped her ears -- which were warm, soft, and strong -- around our legs. It seemed a gesture of both affection and protection, and it felt as though we had actually made a connection with another species. It was quite magical.

The many sights, smells and tastes we experienced in Thailand were special gifts that we will cherish always. The beautiful countryside, the many colorful Temples, the elephants and monkeys, the beaches, the long tail-boats, and the city, all made lasting impressions. But it was the faces and the joy of the Thai people that moved us most; they have been etched indelibly into our memories. You can add our grateful smiles to the Land of Smiles.

