

## **THAILAND - INFORMATION SHEET**

### **BACKGROUND**

Thailand borders Laos, Malaysia, Burma and Cambodia. In 1939 its name was changed from Siam to Thailand. Most Thai people live in central Thailand. There are over 75 ethnic groups, mostly living in the north and north-east of the country. The population is over 62 million with 84% considered Thai. Thailand is a constitutional monarchy. The king involves himself in politics if it is for the good of the country.

### **LANGUAGE**

Thai is the official national language, spoken by almost 100% of the population. It is a tonal language, uninflected and predominantly monosyllabic. Dialects are spoken in rural areas. Principal other languages are Chinese and Malay. English, a mandatory subject in public schools, is widely spoken and understood, particularly in Bangkok and other major cities.

### **RELIGION**

Buddhism is the main religion in Thailand with more than 90% of Thais being Buddhist. Buddhists follow an eightfold path to enlightenment being: right speech, right action, right livelihood, right executions, right attentiveness, right concentration, right thoughts and right understanding. The values of compassion, self-control and wisdom are upheld. Buddhists believe in reincarnation.

### **RELIGIOUS and other FESTIVALS**

In Thailand most of the celebrations are associated with Buddhism or other religions. The most important secular holidays are related to the monarchy.

**SONGRAN** - is the Thai New Year. Celebrated in April, it lasts for three days. There are many traditions associated with it. One is to throw water over one another; an activity seen to bring good rains for the year ahead. Houses are cleaned thoroughly and Thais dress up to welcome the New Year. Special games are played. The statues of Buddha are washed with scented water and birds are released from cages and fish from bowls as a gesture of good luck to the members of the family.

**CHAKKRI DAY** - (6 April), commemorates Rama I, the founder of the Chakri Dynasty;

**CORONATION DAY** - (5 May), commemorates the coronation of the current royal king;

**ROYAL PLOWING CEREMONY** - (second week in May), an ancient ritual held near the Royal Palace in Bangkok to start the rice-planting season.

**CHULALONGKORN DAY** - (23 October), held in commemoration of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) Other secular celebrations include Constitution Day (10 December), New Year's Day and the birthdays of the king and queen.

### **SOCIAL CUSTOMS**

At age 20 most Thai men spend three months in a Buddhist monastery where they learn the 127 rules of Buddhism. Some choose to stay on at the monastery and become monks; most return to society. Before his stay in the monastery, a Thai man is regarded as a khon dib or 'immature person.' The daily ritual of bintabat (giving alms to monks) is observed to gain spiritual merit. People offer monks the first portion of their morning meal, receiving a blessing in return. This food is the monks' only sustenance for the entire day. Being kind to other living creatures is also a way to gain merit.

**CHILD REARING PRACTICES:** When a newborn is three days old, the family holds a ceremony called tham khwan believed to ward off evil spirits. A coin is given to the spirits by an old woman as a way of ensuring they stay away. The baby is also rocked in a basket. A ceremony marks when the baby is one month old, at which time the baby receives its first haircut. Children are given a lot of attention by their mothers. They remain in close proximity to the mother at all times. Generally pampered, young children are given considerable freedom of movement. Weaning usually takes place when a child is two or three years old. Another haircutting ceremony and family get-together is held when the child reaches puberty.

**NAMING:** Thais were originally known by a single name. In 1913 the King decreed that Thais take a surname. Thais, however, still prefer to be called by their first name or by a nickname. Khun can be used before the name to address both men and women, whether married or single.

**SOCIAL ETIQUETTE:** Buddhists do not touch a person on the head. The top of the head is considered the highest part of the body and patting a child on the head is seen to be dangerous to the wellbeing of the child. Younger people also try to keep their heads lower than those of older people to avoid 'looking down' on them. Similarly a person should not point their feet at anyone. It is polite to remove footwear when entering a house. It is traditional to greet a person with a prayer-like gesture called a wai. It is considered improper to lose one's temper or show too much emotion in public.

### **REFERENCES**

<http://www.cp-pc.ca/english/thailand/index.html> <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Thailand.html>