

Conservation and Cultural Exchange in Thailand

Week 1: Arrival and Program Orientation in Chiang Mai, Thailand

After flying more than 8,000 miles over the Pacific Ocean, we land in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Steeped in history, Chiang Mai was the ancient capital of the Lan Na Kingdom, established in the year 1294. Now a modern, vibrant city, Chiang Mai is a cultural hub that hosts many traditional festivals, weekly markets, Buddhist temples, and a growing artistic community. Settling in near the old walled city, the group will spend the next 4 days building bonds, setting intentions, and setting the foundation for the upcoming journey.

Weeks 2-3: Mirror Art Foundation, and Trekking in the north, Chiang Rai, Thailand.

We travel by bus to the city of Chiang Rai. We have a few days to rest and get oriented to our new surroundings before volunteering with The Mirror Art Foundation. Here, we will explore the topic of immigration, human rights, social justice. Many refugees and immigrants come to Thailand in an effort to escape violence, extreme poverty, or in hopes of securing a better future through education and work. Many of these people are from various Hill Tribe ethnicities and have no legal status in Thailand. They often face extremely difficult challenges in finding work and accessing basic services. Mirror Art seeks to aid refugees in Thailand by providing legal services, and educational opportunities for children of refugees. We spend 10-12 days volunteering on one of multiple projects that Mirror Art works on. The current focus of Mirror Art are building a large school for children of migrant laborers, or working on modernizing infrastructure in a small Akha village. While working on the projects, we learn about the history and current situation of Hill Tribe members and see what steps Mirror Art has taken to improve the lives of this vulnerable population.

After having learned of the situation of many Hill Tribe communities, we take the opportunity to go for a trek in the mountains north of Chiang Rai. We walk from village to village with our local guide, staying in a different Hill Tribe community each evening and being hosted by new friends. We return to Chiang Rai for a few days of rest, and prepare to dive deep into Thai culture through home stays and language study in Mae Rim.

Weeks 3-4: Mae Rim village, Thailand.

Leaving Chiang Rai, we head to the small town of Mae Rim about 1 hour north of Chiang Mai. Here we dive into learning the basics of the Thai language, a complex tonal language spoken by more than 20 million people. We stay with local families, allowing insight and further

understanding of Thai culture, social emphasis on close family systems, and opportunities to practice our new language skills. Days will be structured with morning language lessons, a break for lunch, and afternoon activities including traditional Thai dancing, Thai cooking classes, informative discussions about Buddhism, and walks in a nearby national park. In the evenings, we spend time connecting with our families, including attending a ceremony at the local Wat (temple).

Week 4: Wat Pa Tam Wua Forest Monastery, Thailand

It's time to take a breath and reflect on all that we've seen and done! We head to the monastery of Wat Pa Tam Wua, near the community of Mae Hong Son for your mindfulness and meditation retreat. Wat Pa Tam Wua is surrounded by beautiful limestone karst mountains and lush forests. Here we spend four days learning about the Buddhist tradition of Thailand, engaging in multiple different forms of meditation, and turning our focus inwards cultivating awareness for the journey to come.

Weeks 5-6: Pun Pun Center for Self Reliance, Thailand

We have a few days of rest after the retreat, possibly returning to Chiang Mai, or maybe exploring the mountain town of Pai. We make our way to the Pun Pun Center for Self Reliance, about an hour outside of Chiang Mai. Pun Pun is an organic farm and learning center cooperation between Thai and American partners. Here we get our hands dirty, learning the basics of farming and food production, seed-saving practices, and why food security is such an important principle and basic human right. In Thailand, there's been a huge influx of local farmers using heavy pesticides without understanding the environmental and health ramifications of such tools. Pun Pun has been running educational workshops for local farmers showing them how to get nearly the same yields of produce and grains from their fields without the use of harmful pesticides. Living is simple, but it is also beautiful, with discussions and agricultural work in the day time, learning the principles of natural building to harmonize with the landscape, followed by delicious food and discussion in the evening.

Week 6: Student Directed Travel, Thailand.

After spending over a month in Thailand, it's time for Student Directed Travel. This is your group's chance to take the reins and put into practice all the travel skills you have learned thus far. You have six days to decide, as a group, where to go, where to stay, and how to get there. The Overseas Educators will take a mindful back seat and allow the group to create their own itinerary. We start at Pun Pun Organic Farm in the north of the country, and need to end in the capital city of Bangkok. What adventure will you choose?!

Weeks 7-8: New Heaven Diving School and Marine Conservation, and departure, Koh Tao island, Thailand.

Wrapping up your student directed travel in Bangkok, we catch a short flight to the island of Koh Samui in the south. Here we catch a ferry to the small island of Koh Tao, where we join with New Heaven Diving School. New Heaven Diving School, since it's founding has been committed to conserve the marine environment. Over the years, New Heaven has worked with a variety of partners, in the community and beyond, in order to fulfill its sense of obligation to better understand and protect the reef. Koh Tao is one of the most popular tourist destinations for scuba diving in Asia. With a population of approximately 2,000, it strives to maintain a small island feel.

We are here to literally dive into the ocean waters and earn our Scuba certification. Complete your training dives, and head out into the South China Sea to put those skills into practice. Learning to dive opens up an entire new world of underwater exploration and adventure and teaches the confidence you'll need to continue navigating underwater realms throughout your future travels!

Following our 4 day certification course, we stay a further 3 days to dive into a concentrated Marine Conservation study. Marine conservation has been at the heart of New Heaven dive school since it was started over 22 years ago. The New Heaven Reef Conservation Program was founded at the dive school in 2007 to teach divers about coral reef ecology, research, and restoration. New Heaven believe that the people most closely connected to the reef should be the ones that care for it, and thus are trying to get more and more divers involved in marine education and conservation through courses and practical training. Through various ongoing marine conservation projects and ocean monitoring studies we engage in the many facets of marine conservation that Thailand has to offer.

Finishing up our time on Koh Tao, we head back to Koh Samui for our last day. We have a final night out, taking the time to enjoy a last dinner together as a group, and giving those last heartfelt gritudes to your traveling family before heading to the airport and returning home.

****Carpe Diem reserves the right to make changes to the program at any time, and indeed has the responsibility to do so in some instances; changes may be required to provide the best possible experience, protect the safety of participants, or respond to changes in weather or political conditions.***