

Thailand

We could have been hiking the hills in any rugged area of Europe or America on this particular Sunday, but there were a few differences that would suggest not. It was a December afternoon and we were all wearing summer clothes, perspiring in the humidity. The sun was shining brightly through the forest canopy and the temperature lingering near 90 degrees.

Our walking sticks that were needed for the steep hills were cut fresh from bamboo trees by our guide, a rather short, dark haired man, wearing surplus combat attire. His name was Sam and he was Thai. We in fact weren't in Europe or America but in Sam's native Thailand.

My wife and I were about half way through our tour of Thailand when we were 'roughing it' on the trekking section. We had four days of walking deep in the hills of northern Thailand, but only for a few hours a day. Each day the goal was to walk to a different village of Thailand's hill tribes and spend the night in one of their huts, soaking up their way of life.

It's not an experience for those who couldn't be without the luxuries of a hotel. We stayed in the villages of the Karen, Akha and Lahu tribes; each having their own customs, dress and way of life. All live life quite primitively, with virtually no modern amenities.

The huts we stayed in were made of bamboo and straw and our group slept on the floor in sleeping bags. No glass windows, no running water. The toilets were outhouse style and the only water available for washing was the central village tap for all to use.

Our group, which was comprised of Americans and Europeans, sometimes felt as if we were intruding, but it was an experience for both cultures. Us Westerners learning that there are still peoples who can live without the conveniences of blow dryers and mobiles phones; and the villagers finding benefit by receiving an income from the tours staying in their village. One of their traditional crops, opium, is being stamped out by the government who wish to make Thailand a drug free country.

Thailand meaning 'Land of the Free', is an appropriate name as it's one place in Southeast Asia that was never colonised by the French or British! The Thai's remain fiercely proud of their past and their royalty.

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