Thailand

Country Facts
Population: 65,905,410
Languages: Thai
Predominant Religions: Buddhist
Time Zone: Seven hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 220 volts
Telephone Codes: 66, country code

Introduction:
Thailand offers something for nearly everyone. The capital, Bangkok, is alive with commerce and street-bustle almost every hour of the day and night. Whether in big cities, the country or on a pristine beach, Thailand offers travelers a safe, friendly atmosphere full of possibilities. Thailand has fabulous architecture, diverse hill-tribe villages, ancient ruins, beautiful islands, excellent shopping and all the amenities as well. Thailand offers a curious mix of the ultramodern and the simply delightful.

Despite Thailand’s well-developed infrastructure and a free enterprise economy, some of the problems that faced children decades ago still plague them today. These include malnutrition, exclusion from education, trafficking, child labor and other forms of exploitation. Too many children have missed out on the benefits of Thailand’s development — especially the children of ethnic minorities, migrants and the very poor. Development itself and the changes that come in its wake have also brought a host of new challenges for children and young people. These include the spread of HIV and AIDS, the breakup of traditional family systems, and a rising toll of child deaths from road traffic and other accidents.

The tsunamis that struck southeast Asia in December 2004 dealt a serious blow to Thailand’s western coast. The hardest-hit regions were Phang-Nga, Phuket and Krabi provinces, including popular resort areas in Phuket and Phi Phi Island. The area has recovered, however, and is once again attracting thousands of visitors.

Compassion in Thailand:
Compassion International’s work in Thailand began in 1970. As of 2010 more than 33,500 children participate in more than 230 child development centers. The Child Survival Program serves more than 470 mothers or caretakers and their babies through 12 centers. The Leadership Development Program serves more than 65 students. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Thai children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
- Thailand is justly celebrated for its tolerance and hospitality and the average tourist will have no difficulty adjusting to the local customs. All the same, as when entering any unfamiliar society, a visitor may find it helpful to be aware of certain dos and don’ts and
thus avoid accidental offense. Basically, most of these are simply a matter of common sense and good manners.

- Thais DO NOT normally shake hands when they greet one another, but instead, will press their palms together in a prayer-like gesture, keeping arms and elbows close to the body, bowing the head to touch the fingers, and say "sawatdi." This traditional greeting is called a wai.

- For most travelers, rather than initiating a wai it may be better to only respond to one. Sometimes, it can be difficult for visitors to discern the appropriate times to wai, which can cause Thais to take offense. For instance, never wai at a child or to someone who is providing a service for you, such as a waiter or a porter. The best policy is to stay alert and smile.

- Respect is important, especially for monks. Buddhist monks are forbidden to touch or be touched by a woman, or to accept anything from the hand of one. If a woman wants to give anything to a monk or novice, she first hands it to a man, who then presents it. If the woman wants to present it with her hand, the monk or novice will spread out a piece of saffron robe and the woman will lay the gift on the material.

- Never walk in front of Thais praying in a temple.

- Touching a Buddha icon is perceived as a sign of disrespect. All Buddha images, large or small, ruined or not, are regarded as sacred objects. Hence, don't climb up on one to take a photograph or, generally speaking, do anything that might show a lack of respect.

- Before entering a Buddhist temple, hats and shoes must be removed. It is all right to wear shoes while walking around the grounds of a Buddhist temple, but not inside the chapel where the Buddha image is kept. Women should ensure that their legs and shoulders are covered before entering a Buddhist temple. Please do not wear shorts.

- In addition to being illegal, public criticism of the Royal Family will quite likely send you to the hospital. The King is beloved by all Thais [and with good reason]. Other Royals are sometimes discussed in private, but only with very close friends and family. A visitor should never say anything that might be construed as even remotely critical.

- When attending a public event where a member of the Royal Family is present, the best guide on how to behave is to watch the crowd and do as it does. One must also stand in movie theaters when the Royal Anthem is played before the film begins. Failure to do so is a criminal offense, as is any criticism of the Royals, under the laws of lese majestie.

- Care should also be given to treat money and stamps [which bear pictures of the king] with respect. Never lick a stamp at the post office for this reason. There are sponges provided for moistening stamps.

- The sole of the foot is offensive to Thais. One should never sit in such a manner that the sole of the foot is exposed to another's sight. Many guidebooks also refer to the prohibition against "pointing the foot." This leads to confusion for many visitors who interpret it to mean "pointing the toes at someone." It is the sole of the foot that should not be seen. It's best to sit with feet on the floor or in the manner adopted by most Western women: legs crossed at the knees, but with both feet remaining parallel to the floor. The traditional way to sit is with the legs tucked under the body and to the side, "mermaid style."
• Thais regard the head as the highest part of the body both literally and figuratively. As a result, they DO NOT approve of touching anyone on that part of body, even in a friendly gesture. Similarly, if you watch Thais at a social gathering, you will notice that young people go to considerable lengths to keep their heads lower than those of the elder ones, to avoid giving the impression of “looking down” on them. This is not always possible, of course, but it is the effort that counts. Many Thais sit on the ground. Instead of walking over people seated on the ground, wait for them to make space for you to walk between them. As you pass, ensure that you bend your body as a gesture of respect.

• Ensure that your hands are visible at all times; keep your hands out of your pockets.

• Beckon with your palms half closed, moving them toward you. Moreover, it is considered inappropriate to beckon to anyone who is your equal or superior. The palm (of the right hand) must face down when beckoning someone. Beckoning with the palm facing up is only used for calling animals.

• Public displays of affection between the sexes are unacceptable here. It’s permissible, however, for members of the same sex to touch or hold hands with one another.

• Smiling or nodding is a sufficient greeting for people you see on a daily basis. Verbal greetings such as “Good Morning” or “Hi, how are you?” are unnecessary.

• When someone asks you “Where are you going?” simply answer “Down the street.” In Thai culture, this question is similar to “How are you?” in North America, so giving a detailed account of your daily plans is not expected.

• During your visit, you will observe that Thais tend to smile constantly, living up to Thailand’s reputation as the “Land of the Smiles.” Bear in mind that a smile is not always an indication of amusement; often smiling is used to mask embarrassment, nervousness or disapproval. Moreover, Thais will sometimes smile to indicate “I pardon you,” to avoid appearing critical.

• Losing your temper, especially in public, will more than likely get you nowhere. The Thais think such displays denote poor manners and you are more apt to get what you want by keeping a cool head and concealing your emotions.

• Do not be surprised if you are addressed by your first name. For instance, Mr. Bob or Miss Mary instead of by your surname. This is because Thais refer to one another in this manner, usually with the title “Khun” (Mr., Mrs., or Miss) in front. Follow the customs of the country as far as possible and you will make friends during your stay. And the more friends you make, the more you will want to return to Thailand.

Dos and Don’ts:

• Don’t eat bird’s nest soup or shark fin soup — these dishes are decimating the species.

• Do be careful what you buy because protected animals are often hunted for their hides.

• Do stand when you hear the national anthem (usually at 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.) in public zones such as airports and schools. The King’s Anthem is played before movies in theaters, and the whole crowd stands.

• Don’t go shirtless except on the beach. Shorts are fine, but you will see that Thai people generally dress very well and rarely wear shorts themselves. Even on the beach, many Thais wear long pants. Dress modestly [long pants or skirts] and behave seriously when
visiting temples. Always remove your shoes before entering. If men forget to take long pants to the Grand Palace, rent them from a shop across the street for a small fee. The Grand Palace authorities are very particular about what kind of sandals can be worn in to the general grounds; they must at least have a strap around the heel. Other temples may have extra pants that men can borrow for free.

- Don’t touch the heads of Thais [not even children], and don’t sit so that the bottoms of your feet point at anyone, including images of Buddha. Also, aside from the ground, don’t touch anything with your feet. The feet are considered the dirtiest part of the body. Women, more so than men, should avoid touching monks.
- Do bring wash-and-wear clothing for mid-April, when the Thai-Buddhist New Year tradition calls for throwing water on anyone who passes by.
- Don’t throw or toss anything, except during sports activities. It is considered extremely impolite.

**Travel Tips**

**Personal Safety:**
In general, Thailand is very safe. Tourism is vitally important to the economy, and the government has zero tolerance for crime targeting visitors. However, the massive growth of tourism has resulted in an increase in pickpockets and purse-snatchers at crowded tourist sites. Muggings have also occurred. Use common sense and be aware of your surroundings. Guard your belongings if you venture to the red-light district of Bangkok and in dim alleys or walkways at night. In addition, you may be offered drugs, particularly in parts of Khao San Road and in nightclubs and bars — no one should even think about accepting them. Penalties are severe, and claiming ignorance of the local laws is no defense.

In recent years, Thailand has experienced a regular and persistent threat from Muslim extremists in the south. Bombings, shootings and beheadings are happening frequently, particularly in the provinces of Pattani and Narathiwat. Although few tourists have been affected by these troubles, caution is strongly advised when traveling in the deep south.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations – wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It’s a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them (purse, wallet, backpack, etc.) on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don’t take safety & security for granted.

**Health:**
Outside of Bangkok, Chiang Mai and major beach resorts, sanitary conditions in some restaurants can pose problems for travelers. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe, but peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables, choose meat that is cooked thoroughly, avoid local dairy products and assume that tap water is unsafe to drink [even in Bangkok]. Stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks. Some restaurants serve water that is a pale brown: They've boiled the water and added a few tea leaves to prove it. This water is fine to drink, but it's best to drink bottled water — make sure that the cap seal is unbroken [on rare occasions, used bottles are simply refilled with tap water].

Malaria is present in some of the border areas [although not in Bangkok or other tourist places]. Consult your doctor about obtaining malaria suppressants — insect repellent, long-sleeved shirts and long pants are also appropriate precautions. If you get nipped by a stray dog, even in Bangkok, have the dog checked for rabies if possible; otherwise, it might be wise to get the shots. Skin infections are possible — even the smallest wound should be disinfected and covered with a bandage.

We strongly advise you to contact the CDC (www.cdc.gov) or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations. Typhoid, tetanus, hepatitis, and rabies vaccinations may be recommended, as well as anti-malarial medication.

Money:
The currency is the baht, which can also be used in Laos [as can U.S. dollars] as a form of cash. ATMs can be found just about everywhere in Thailand, and most accept foreign cards. Look for the Cirrus or Visa symbol. They're the easiest way to exchange money and receive the best rate. Traveler's checks and cash can be exchanged at banks and shops, as well. Hotels and some other tourist locations may accept U.S. dollars [at a higher rate].

Weather:
The weather in Thailand is mostly hot and humid, although the northern highlands are generally 10 F / 5 C cooler. From November through February, the days are milder and the nights are cooler. March through June is especially hot, with average high temperatures in the mid-90s F / 32–35 C. The monsoon season is mid-May to October, when it's particularly humid and rainy [the streets of Bangkok flood easily]. Downpours are intermittent rather than constant, so they do not cause major problems.

Dress:
Thailand's year-round humid climate means that light, cool clothes are the best choice, day and night. If you are susceptible to sunburn, pack lightweight, long-sleeved clothing, a sunhat and sunscreen. Sandals are the best footwear throughout the day, but if you expect to do any cycling or any trekking in the hills, pack stout walking shoes. If you are traveling in the north during the cooler months, you may require a lightweight sweater or jacket in the early morning or evening. Likewise, in the rainy season, a lightweight rain coat or umbrella will come in handy. Those
items can be bought very cheaply all over Thailand. When visiting a temple, you will be expected to dress in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner — no shorts or sleeveless tops.

All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.