



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Thailand extends down the Malaysian Peninsula in Southeast Asia. Covering 198,455 square miles (514,000 square kilometers), Thailand is larger than the state of California. Its central region is dominated by fertile agricultural land and the capital city of Bangkok. The northeastern third of the country consists of the Khorat Plateau. Forested mountains and steep, fertile valleys form the northwestern quarter. The warm southern peninsula is comprised of rain forests and rubber and coconut plantations. Thailand's climate is mostly tropical. Cooler temperatures prevail in the north between November and February, but the rest of the year is fairly hot. Rains fall mostly from June to October.

**History.** Thailand's early history, some four thousand years ago, is linked with that of southern China. Studies show migration occurred first from Thailand to southern China and later from China to Thailand. Between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, present-day Thailand was part of a vast Khmer empire that covered much of Southeast Asia. Upon overthrowing the Khmer, the Thai established a kingdom at Sukhothai in 1238. A Thai ruler, Ramathibodi, introduced Theravada Buddhism to the country in the 14th century. Sukhothai was conquered in 1438 by the kingdom of Ayutthaya, ruled from an island-city on the Chao Phraya River.

Ayutthaya was overthrown in the mid-1500s by the Burmese. Power transferred back and forth between the Thai and the Burmese until the Burmese reestablished control in the mid-1700s. After a struggle against the Burmese in the 18th century, Rama I founded the Chakri Dynasty and established Bangkok as the capital in 1782. At that time, the Thai kingdom was known as Siam. The Thai successfully kept European colonialists from their soil by acceding to some colonial

demands and by carefully balancing one foreign power against another. The wise rule of King Mongkut and the reforms of Rama V (Chulalongkorn) kept the kingdom independent in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Military leaders forced the government to become a constitutional monarchy in 1932. The government changed the nation's name from Siam to Thailand in 1939 to promote a stronger sense of Thai identity.

During World War II, Japan occupied Thailand for a short time, and Thai leaders allied with Japan. After the war, however, Thailand allied with the United States and became an important base for U.S. military and intelligence activities in the region during the 1960s and 1970s. Since 1975, Thailand has been home to many Indochinese refugees. The present king has ruled since 1946. He is known as Rama IX, but his name is Bhumibol Adulyadej. Although the nation has struggled with several military coups, terrorist violence, drug trafficking, crime, and problems with neighboring nations, Thailand's king has always been a revered symbol of national unity and stability. In May 2000, King Rama IX became the nation's longest-living ruler, surpassing Rama I.

Thailand's military has long been politically active, often overthrowing a civilian government to impose its will. A 1991 coup led to riots, a violent military response, and then royal intervention. Political instability plagued Thailand for several years, even after 1996 elections brought General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh to office as prime minister. A severe financial crisis and other issues in 1997 forced Chavalit to resign after a new constitution had been approved.

Billionaire businessman Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister when his party, Thai Rak Thai, won parliamentary elections in 2001. Thai Rak Thai overwhelmingly won the

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next elections in 2005, but Thaksin's tax-free sale of his family's shares in a Thai telecommunications company to Singaporean investors sparked mass protests calling for his resignation. He was also criticized for his hard-line approach to a Muslim insurgency in the south. Thaksin called a snap election to maintain control in April 2006, but opposition parties boycotted the poll. The military intervened in September 2006, overthrowing Thaksin in a bloodless coup. Elections in 2007 brought Samak Sundaravej to power as prime minister.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Thailand's population of 65.1 million is growing by 0.7 percent annually. About one-third of the population lives in urban areas. Bangkok is the largest city, with roughly seven million people. Other major cities include Chiang Mai, Nakorn Ratchasima, Nonthaburi, and Udon Thani.

About 75 percent of the population is comprised of Central Thai, Northeastern Thai, Northern Thai, and Southern Thai ethnic groups. The Chinese form the largest minority (14 percent of the people); they live mostly in Bangkok. However, many generations of intermarriage have made it difficult to distinguish between the Chinese and the Thai. There are also many Thai of Malay, Khmer, Vietnamese, and Lao ancestry. Ethnic Khmer, Vietnamese, and other refugees live mostly in Thailand's border regions. About 500,000 mountain people form a number of distinct ethnic groups, or hill tribes.

**Language.** Central Thai is the official language and is used in schools. Other Thai dialects are spoken in various regions. Lao predominates in many northeastern areas, and Khmer is spoken along the Cambodian border. Thai is a tonal language, so a given syllable can have different meanings depending on the inflection with which it is pronounced. Central Thai has five tones. Vowels are placed before, above, next to, or below the characters, and tones are placed above. Many people also speak Chinese and Malay. Those with advanced education often speak English. Some minority groups, such as the Mon and Hmong, speak their own languages.

**Religion.** Although Thailand guarantees freedom of religion and many religions are represented in the country, 95 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist. Muslims comprise about 4 percent of the population. A small number of Christians also live in Thailand.

Buddhism deeply affects people's daily lives. Buddhist *wats* (temples) dominate Thai communities. Traditionally, all young men were expected to become Buddhist monks for at least three months to study Buddhist principles. While the practice is not strictly enforced today, large ordination ceremonies are often held for boys entering their training. Monks may not own anything, so they receive even their food from villagers who line up to *tak bhat* (scoop rice into alms or offering bowls) for the monks. Some people work in the temple kitchen as part of their worship.

Buddhist worship incorporates ancestor veneration along with honoring Buddha. Food is offered in memory of deceased relatives, and special ceremonies at a temple or in the home serve to remind the living to honor the dead. Buddhism in Thailand also incorporates rites and principles from Hinduism and animism, which espouses a special reverence for life based on a belief that all living things possess spirits. Buddha's teachings were meant to release people from the misery of life's cycles (birth, life, death, rebirth).

**General Attitudes.** *Thailand* means "Land of the Free," and Thai are proud of the fact that their country has largely avoided

foreign rule throughout its long history. The king and queen are the most respected and honored persons in Thailand. A Thai would be offended by any joke or ill reference to them. All images of the king are treated with respect. For example, rather than lick a postage stamp with the king's picture on it, one wets it with a damp sponge. It is illegal to say or write anything offensive about royalty. Thai are proud of their cultural heritage and often are offended by those who see "development" as a need to Westernize and change people's religious and cultural habits. People living in Bangkok have more easily adopted Western customs, but life in rural regions remains largely unchanged.

Thai are warm, friendly, and generous. They are extremely loyal to family and show great respect for elders. Thailand is often referred to as the Land of Smiles. A sense of humor, laughter, and a pleasant, smiling attitude are highly regarded. The Thai expression, *Mai Pen Rai* (never mind), characterizes a general feeling that life is to be enjoyed for the moment; problems and setbacks should not be taken too seriously. A loss of face or public embarrassment is taken seriously, however. Thai are a reserved people and usually consider criticism of others to be in poor taste. Speaking loudly or showing anger in public is offensive and may cause one to lose another's respect. Social status is measured by education, occupation, wealth, and, to some degree, family name. Doctors and engineers, for example, are highly respected. Cleverness is admired, and personal connections are seen as an important means of achieving wealth.

**Personal Appearance.** Western-style clothing is very common in Bangkok and other cities, but villagers often wear traditional clothing. The costumes of traditional Thai dancers are highly stylized, but most clothing is simpler. Farmers frequently wear straw hats because of the heat and strong sun. Women wear a simple blouse, a wraparound skirt known as a *sarong* or *pa thung*, and flip-flops. Men might wear pants and a shirt in public but change into a *pa kao ma* (similar to a *sarong*) at home. Men and women of Chinese descent wear loose jackets and calf-length pants. Intricate headdresses may accompany the traditional clothing of the mountain people. Sandals are popular, but shoes are worn in formal situations. Rural people may wear rubber flip-flops or go barefoot. Students wear uniforms (white shirts, blue or black skirts for girls, and shorts or pants for boys) to school.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Thai greet with a *wai*: one places the palms of the hands together at chest level with fingers extended upward and bows slightly; women curtsy. A younger person greets first, and the more senior person responds with the hands forming a *wai* in a lower position. More pronounced bows and curtsies, as well as higher hand placement, show greater respect. Fingertips only go above the eyebrows to reverence Buddha or to greet royalty. For other honored persons, the fingertips may reach to between the eyebrows, with the thumb tip touching the nose. It is an insult to not return a *wai*, unless there is great social or age distance between the two people. For example, an adult does not return the *wai* of a small child. Buddhist monks never return a *wai*. In performing the *wai*, men greet with *Sawasdee kraab* ("Hello" or "Good-bye"); women say *Sawasdee ka*. A *wai* can also express thanks or an apology.

Thai respectfully address one another by first name, preceded by *Khun* (for example, *Khun Sariya*). Surnames are reserved for very formal occasions. In English settings, *Mr.*,

*Mrs.*, or *Miss* precedes a first or last name. Less formally, Thai refer to each other with familial titles, even if not related. A slightly older or higher-status person is called *Pee* (older sister or older brother); younger or lower persons are called *Nong* (younger brother or sister). *Pa* (aunt), *Lung* (uncle), and other titles are also used. They are used alone with strangers, or they precede a person's first name or nickname. Close friends address one another by nickname and do not use the *wai*.

**Gestures.** The Thai consider a person's head to be sacred, so one should neither touch another's head nor pass an object over it. Parents pat their children's heads, but this is the only exception. People try to keep the level of their head below that of social superiors. The bottoms of the feet are the least sacred part of the body and should never be pointed in the direction of another person. Thai avoid stamping their feet, touching people with them, or using them to move or point at objects. Feet must never point at a Buddha statue or monk. One does not stand directly in front of a Buddha or a monk. Women must never touch images of Buddha or a Buddhist monk. All religious monuments and shrines are sacred and should not be defiled or treated disrespectfully.

Body posture and physical gestures are extremely important in polite company and speak volumes about one's character and regard for others. It is offensive to cross an ankle over a knee while sitting in a chair, especially in the presence of an older person. Placing one's arm over the back of the chair in which another person is sitting is offensive. Men and women generally do not touch or show affection in public. However, good friends of the same sex sometimes hold hands. Among urban youth, it is becoming more common for members of the opposite sex to hold hands.

**Visiting.** Thai are very hospitable hosts, but most visiting is by invitation or arrangement. It is popular to socialize in restaurants or other public settings; home visits are less common. In any setting, how one sits, walks, or otherwise interacts with others depends on the status of each person present. It is customary to remove one's shoes when entering a Buddhist temple or private home. Because Thai tradition says a soul resides in the doorsill of a *wat*, visitors avoid stepping on the doorsill.

It is not necessary for guests to take gifts when visiting. In the home, people commonly sit on the floor. Women generally tuck their legs to the side and behind them, and men sit cross-legged. Men might also sit with their legs tucked to the side to show special respect to the hosts. Guests offer compliments on the home or children, but they avoid excessively admiring any specific object because this may embarrass the hosts or cause them to offer it to the guest as a gift.

**Eating.** Dinner is the main meal and is eaten as a family; breakfast and lunch might be eaten separately due to different schedules. Thai hold a spoon in the right hand and a fork in the left, pushing food onto the spoon with the fork. Knives usually are not necessary because food is served in bite-size pieces. Rural Thai families may eat around a straw mat on the floor. In northern areas, people eat steamed sticky (glutinous) rice with their fingers. Chopsticks are used with noodle dishes and in Chinese homes. Guests usually receive a second helping of food and are encouraged to eat as much as they can. Diners choose small portions from various dishes at the center of the table to eat with rice. Bones are placed on the plate, along with other such items. When finished, Thai place the utensils together on the plate. Urban residents, especially in Bangkok, eat out often. Markets, roadside stands, and restaurants offer a wide variety of foods.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Thai families are close, and several generations may live in the same household. The oldest male is customarily the patriarch of the family. Parents usually have two or three children. Children are to obey their parents and respect their wishes, even as adults. Young adults remain at home until they marry. Parents provide completely for their children, even paying for college, but then grown children must help support elderly parents. It is common for children, especially eldest sons, to give part of their paychecks to their parents.

Polygamy was legal until 1935, and having many wives was a sign of wealth. Because traditions change slowly, many men openly keep mistresses in addition to their legal wife. However, Thai women are becoming less accepting of the practice, and younger men are more willing to commit to one woman. Traditionally, a family's youngest daughter would inherit the parents' home. In return, she and her husband would care for the parents in their old age. However, today the eldest son commonly inherits the family house.

**Housing.** Traditional rural homes are wooden and built on stilts so that cool air (in the hot season) and any flood waters (in the rainy season) can pass underneath. Livestock, such as buffalo, are kept under the house. One enters the house by ladder, though many homes now have stairways. The house usually consists of one large room without partitions. Bedding is stacked on one side of the room during the day and brought out at night. A small shrine often consists of a Buddha statue and sticks of incense. Walls may be decorated with photos of Thailand's king and queen. The room is usually unfurnished—people sit on the floor—though many families have a television and stereo. Today, some concrete houses are built on the ground, but their layouts and furnishings are the same as in stilt houses. Most urban families live in apartments, where living arrangements can be cramped. A family of five may share a one-room apartment; cooking is done on the balcony, and a bathroom is shared with other families. A family may also occupy a shop house, in which the ground floor is used for a business or restaurant and the family lives on the upper floors.

**Dating and Marriage.** Although Western-style dating is popular in Bangkok, it is not common in other areas of Thailand. Except at school, young people have little contact with members of the opposite sex until they are adults. Even then, they socialize in groups. According to tradition, if a young man wishes to marry a young woman, he must first become well acquainted with the entire family and make himself agreeable to them. He then sends his parents to the young woman's family to make his wishes known. If both families agree on the marriage, a wedding date is set. The groom traditionally pays a bride-price to the bride's parents as compensation for raising her. Some parents later return the items or cash to the couple as a wedding gift. Pink is the traditional color for bridal gowns. Grooms wear either a Western-style suit, or pants and a high-necked jacket (*sua phrara-chathan*). Rural newlyweds often live with the bride's parents until they have a child.

**Life Cycle.** Three months after a birth, the family takes the baby to the local temple, where monks cut a lock of hair from the baby's head. Senior members of the extended family then each cut a lock, and the head is shaved. This cleansing ritual is considered the true beginning of the baby's life.

A funeral lasts up to five days. Never left alone, the deceased's body is laid in a white coffin in a temple's funeral building. Floral wreaths and portraits of the deceased surround the coffin. Monks chant prayers each night while mourners sit

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in silence, burn incense, and give money to the family to cover funeral expenses. Each night a different group connected with the person (such as work colleagues, members of a sports club, or school friends) provides mourners with a meal. At the end of the mourning period, the body is cremated and the ashes are placed in a temple vault.

**Diet.** *Kao* (rice) is eaten with nearly every meal. It is plain in southern and central regions, glutinous in the north. *Kao* is usually served with spicy dishes that consist of meat, vegetables, fish, eggs, and fruits. Popular dishes include *pad Thai* (pan-fried noodles), *satay* (barbecued pork or chicken on a stick with peanut sauce), *yam* (spiced salad), *kaeng* (any kind of curry), and *tom yam* (lemon-flavored soup usually with shrimp). Street food and snacks are plentiful, as are a wide variety of tropical fruits.

**Recreation.** The most popular sports in Thailand are soccer, table tennis, badminton, volleyball, and basketball. Playing *Takro* (a traditional sport played by trying to keep a rattan ball in the air without using hands) and flying kites are favorite activities. The youth enjoy various martial arts. Bangkok residents like to shop. Movies and television provide leisure entertainment. "Thai chess," played without a queen and under unique rules, is a popular urban spectator sport. Urban families might take short vacations to the beach or elsewhere in Thailand; rural people rarely travel.

**The Arts.** Religion plays an important role in Thai art. Buddhist temples feature ornate decorations such as mosaics, tiled roofs, and carvings of mythic creatures. Mural paintings of nature are common decorations. Literature is mainly based on traditional stories. Especially important is the *Ramakian*, based on the *Ramayana*, an Indian epic that tells stories of the Hindu god Rama. Masked plays (*khon*) feature ornate masks and costumes. Thai dance is heavily influenced by India and to a lesser extent, Cambodia and Laos. Thai artisans are adept at making silk, glazed ceramics, weavings, wood carvings, mother-of-pearl inlay, and metalwork.

**Holidays.** Public holidays include New Year's Day (1 Jan.); Chakri Day (6 Apr.); Labor Day (1 May); Coronation Day (5 May); the Queen's Birthday (12 Aug.); Chulalongkorn Day (23 Oct.), honoring the "beloved monarch" (1868–1910) who abolished slavery and introduced many reforms; the King's Birthday (5 Dec.); Constitution Day (10 Dec.); New Year's Eve (31 Dec.); and the Buddhist holidays (set by the lunar calendar) of *Makha Bucha*, *Visakha Bucha*, *Asanha Bucha*, and *Khao Phansa*. For *Songkhran* (Thai New Year, in April) people throw buckets of water on each other as part of the festivities. *Loy Krathong* honors the water goddess for providing water throughout the year; people float small "boats" with candles, coins, or flowers on waterways.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej is head of state but has few executive responsibilities. The prime minister (currently Samak Sundaravej) is head of government. The National Assembly has two houses: a 150-seat Senate and a 480-seat House of Representatives. The prime minister leads the majority party or coalition in the House of Representatives. In villages, local chiefs are elected. The voting age is 18.

**Economy.** Agriculture employs roughly half of the labor force, but the percentage is declining as more Thai seek jobs in the

## POPULATION & AREA

Population .....	65,068,149 (rank=20)
Area, sq. mi. ....	198,455 (rank=49)
Area, sq. km. ....	514,000

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank .....	78 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women .....	70 of 156 countries
Real GDP per capita .....	\$8,677
Adult literacy rate .....	95% (male); 91% (female)
Infant mortality rate .....	18 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy .....	65 (male); 75 (female)

industry and service sectors. Industry employs 15 percent and provides the bulk of Thailand's export earnings. Tin, textiles, fish products, rice, tapioca, and jewelry are among the most important exports. Thailand is one of the world's largest producers of tin. The country manufactures electrical appliances, furniture, integrated circuits, car parts, and plastics. The service sector employs nearly one-third of the labor force. Tourism is an important revenue source for local economies. Asia's financial crisis (1997–98), which resulted in the closing of half the nation's banks and soaring unemployment, prompted significant fiscal reforms. The currency is the *baht* (THB).

**Transportation and Communications.** Most large cities are connected by rail, highways, and air service. Local transportation is by bus, taxi, *samlor* (three-wheeled motorized taxi), and *silor* (mini-cab). In rural areas, pedicabs are most common. Traffic moves on the left side of the road. Canals (*klongs*) are often used for transportation in rural and some urban areas. The Chao Phraya River carries merchant and commuter traffic in Bangkok. Urban residents usually have telephones, televisions, radios, and access to other forms of communication. Rural people continue to rely on radio and word of mouth, though each village has a few homes with televisions.

**Education.** Universal, free, and compulsory education lasts for nine years. Nearly all primary-age children attend school, but enrollment drops to less than half by 10th grade. Entrance to universities is by examination; there is stiff competition for limited places. Most college students study in Bangkok. Boys from distant provinces have a greater chance to attend school than girls because they can live in a *wat*; girls must live in boarding schools and hostels, which can be expensive. Marriage is discouraged until one's education is complete.

**Health.** Health services have expanded greatly in the last decade, but they are still limited in remote rural areas. Tropical diseases are common outside the cities. HIV/AIDS is one of the country's most serious problems. Buddhist and Christian leaders work to revive traditional values, teach preventive measures, and care for those affected by AIDS. A government-sponsored education campaign has helped lower the HIV infection rate among some segments of the population.

## AT A GLANCE

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