

Human Rights and Cultural Exchange in Southeast Asia

Week 1: Arrival and Program Orientation

Mae Rim, Northern Thailand

After flying more than 8,000 miles over the Pacific Ocean, we land in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The group will taxi to a nearby eco-retreat, spending the next 6 days building bonds, setting intentions, and building a foundation of positive group dynamics for the upcoming journey. This time will include basic Thai language study (and practice in the village!), an introduction to Theravada Buddhism at a neighboring monastery, Thai cooking lessons, and fun days exploring nearby swimming holes!

Week 2: Jungle/Forest Trek + Learning with Local NGOs

Chiang Rai District, Northern Thailand

The group has some basic learning of the Thai language and culture, and now it's time to connect with the environment. You'll spend 4-5 days on a guided trek through the northern mountains/forests near Chiang Rai. Along the way, the group will visit NGOs that work with political refugees from Myanmar. Topics of discussion will include migration/immigration, political asylum, the complexities of identity as it relates to documentation/citizenship/legal status, and more.

Week 3: Hilltribe Village Homestay

Chiang Rai District, Northern Thailand

Deepening our learning of Thai culture, the group will engage in 8-10 days of village homestays in a rural hill-tribe village. This is a rare and incredible opportunity to witness hill-tribe village life as communities navigate the complexities of balancing the traditional way of life with the pressures of technology and globalization. Days will be spent engaging in cultural learning, community-driven projects, and exploring topics of legal status, ethnic identity, and land rights.

Week 4: Chiang Mai Exploration

Chiang Mai District, Northern Thailand

The group has been living in remote areas, diving deeply into many topics related to Thai culture, society, and environment. Now it's time to enjoy some lighter days and explore! 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 take a few days to enjoy these aspects of Chiang Mai and prepare for the next leg of the adventure.

***Weeks 4/5: Sahainan Organic Farm
Nan/Thung Chang District, Northern Thailand***

Heading east by bus, you'll travel to the small town of Thung Chang. Here we transfer to Sahainan Organic Farm. Owned and operated by a local Thai family, the farm was an old cashew plantation that is now being rehabilitated through organic farming and permaculture. Realizing that old ways of farming were being lost, the family relocated with the goal of helping Thai people relearn what past generations already knew: how to live more harmoniously with the land. Their purpose is to build and maintain a sustainable way of life—one in which the well-being of our planet and all life that live upon it is of utmost importance. "We want to heal the damages inflicted by our modern society of overconsumption, fossil fuel dependence, and industrial agriculture". Here we get our hands dirty, learning the basics of farming and food production, and why food security is such an important principle and basic human right. Living is simple, but it is also beautiful, with discussions and agricultural work in the daytime, followed by delicious food and campfires in the evening.

***Week 6: Spiritual/Reflection Retreat
Southern Thailand***

You are near the middle of the journey, which is an excellent time to reflect on your journey thus far and to revisit intentions and goals for the remainder of the semester. The group will spend 5 days learning about different methods/practices of mindfulness. Time here includes wholesome, nutritious food, time for self-care, the opportunity to learn about spirituality and meditation, and time to reflect upon and integrate the learning and experiences you've had so far. Enjoy this time of rejuvenation and reflection!

***Week 7: Island Exploration and SCUBA
Koh Tao, Southern Thailand***

Take a few days to explore some of Thailand's wonderland of islands and beaches, and then head over to the island of Koh Tao for scuba! We work with a long-established, professional PADI-certified diving center. Complete your training dives, and head out into the crystalline waters to put those skills into practice. Learning to dive opens up an entirely new world of underwater exploration and adventure and teaches the confidence you'll need to continue navigating underwater realms throughout your future travels!

***Week 8: Student-Directed Travel
South Thailand-Cambodia***

Put your newly acquired travel skills to use! Your group will plan, organize and implement the adventures this week - how you get there, where you'll stay, how you manage your budget, and what you'll do are up to the group to decide. Your Overseas Educators will be there to assist along the way, though the group is primarily responsible for the structure of this week. The group will navigate from Koh Tao, cross the land border to Cambodia, and finish in Phnom Penh.

Week 9/10: Phnom Penh
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Arriving in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, we get our first experience of this fascinating nation. We spend a few days in the capital, learning the basics of our new host country, and then begin to explore Cambodia's tragic (and recent) history. We visit the Tuol Sleng genocide museum and Choeung Ek memorial. We bear witness to the history of the Khmer Rouge, a brutal political regime that led to tremendous violence and upheaval throughout the nation. The group will learn how Cambodia is recovering and healing from this terrible affront to human rights.

Leaving the city, we travel north along the Mekong River. We meet up with a local not-for-profit organization which aims to lift rural communities out of poverty through supporting conservation and participatory community-based approaches. We engage in projects related to environmental conservation, water and sanitation, food security, income generation, and/or renewable energy. By staying with the local community, we learn about Cambodian ways of living, while engaging in community development and cultural exchange. We may even get a chance to see the nearly extinct Irrawaddy River dolphin which still lives in this peaceful setting.

Final Days: Angkor Wat, Final Celebrations
Siam Reap, Cambodia

We make our way to the original seat of power in Cambodia, Siem Reap. Here we have the opportunity to learn about the ancient history of this incredible country. Established approximately 800 AD, Siem Reap is now a bustling center of tourism and trade. Our primary focus will be exploring ancient temples of Angkor, one of the largest religious monuments in the world, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Originally a Hindu temple paying homage to the god Vishnu, the site was slowly transformed into a Buddhist temple complex in the mid 12th century. At one time, the Angkor empire ruled most of present-day Southeast Asia. Catch a sunrise at Angkor Wat, look into the hundreds of faces of Bayon temple, and see the enormous Ceiba trees of Ta Prohm. Marvel at this testament to human ingenuity, 1200 years later.

Spend the last couple of days exploring these majestic temples, reflecting on the successes of the semester and reveling in each other's company in celebration of an amazing program!

****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.***