

Child's Dream
Miiika Malinen (volunteer)
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VOLUNTEERING AT TOMATO VILLAGE

I found out about Child's Dream through the Internet. I had been looking into possibilities to volunteer as an English teacher in northern Thailand after a previous teaching experience close to Bangkok. After a few days of e-mails and an interview we agreed with Sallo on a few work days in the Child's Dream office. For two days I helped out with computer files and also managed to learn about the foundation from the busy yet very helpful staff. On an early Saturday morning I jumped on a bus and headed towards Mae Hong Son.

Benjamin, the director and head teacher of the school, and Christine, the German veteran-volunteer of Tomato Village, were at the bus station to welcome me. On two motorcycles we started up the winding roads towards the village. The hour-or-so that it takes to get there takes you across rivers and through fields and forests. Benjamin, whose bike I was riding on the back seat, pointed to the vast mountain ahead and said we are climbing up there. I learned how literally he meant with "up there".

I was immediately attracted to the mountains and the hilly scenery which my own country has an extreme lack of. Since it was a Saturday I had two days to settle down and look around to get my bearings. Christine's helpfulness in showing me the surroundings was astounding, and it would continue throughout the three and a half weeks that I would be there. I learned about the different peoples who had come over the border from Burma and how they coexisted in the village, about their dress and their architecture. We also managed to visit some of the neighboring villages, all of which have their own characteristics and histories, bringing in tourists and some income. Our evening talks enlightened me to many of the realities of northern Thailand.

When I arrived it still rained a few times, but later on it began to get quite cold and dry. Cold is good for mosquito-wary foreigners, but not so good if your stereotype of Thailand is a sunny beach. Equipped with four blankets and a mosquito net provided by the house, sleeping in my little shack and staying at Benjamin's place became a delight. The food he and his wife prepared was always delicious and (more than) plentiful. Their hospitality was amazing. Waking up to the roosters crowing or the dogs barking and the pigs snorting is preferable to traffic and masses of people, I tell you. Ask any Thoreau, Tolstoy or Gandhi why they would move to live a village farm life.

Not yet mentally ready to give up on accessories, I contemplated renting a motorbike for a month. However, I decided to manage with the yellow pick-up truck that makes a trip to town twice a day. My weekends I spent in Mae Hong Son for the most of the Internet and the Sunday and evening markets. My days were spent reading, walking up and down the mountain, and just enjoying the calm. I did, of course, try to prepare for lessons as well as possible.

In the evenings the school provides the cost-free language studies to the youth of the region. I taught English to the more advanced A-class and the beginners' B-class. Because of the different festivities and the rice harvesting in the month of November the amount of students varied on a daily basis. A-class had an average of eight students and B-class an amount between twenty and thirty. Due to the character of the teaching with much repetition of a subject on a number of days this did not become a problem, and I am not aware of any student lagging behind on a large scale.

At first it took me a few days to realize the level of English of the students. This also varies a bit with some students being stronger in some areas of the language, yet with nobody trying to dominate the class too much. Compared to my previous teaching experience in public schools, I was positively surprised by the ability of English the students of Tomato Village and its neighborhood possess. It led me to trying out more challenging conversation exercises in classes, in different tenses, and in different contexts and settings. Teaching included reading and writing, yet with a concentration especially on the speaking. It did not take much encouragement to have the students conversing in English; they seem quite confident with it.

Included in my nearly four-week experience worthy of mention were two days in Benjamin's paddy field, which I felt in parts of my body for a number of days afterwards, and the eternity of a ten-second encounter with a snake in the forest, which after giving a description of to Ben turned out to be poisonous (fortunately, we parted ways without exchanging saliva). Witnessing Loy Krathong festival up close in the village as well as in Mae Hong Son was the highlight of it all. I felt welcome by Benjamin and his family, Christine, and all the students. The last night before I left we prepared and ate some sticky-rice-in-bamboo with the students.

I can recommend this experience to any prospective responsible language teacher. I recommend that you stay longer than three weeks for the students', as well as your own, sake.

Miika Malinen