

My stay in Ma Kay Soam (Tomato Village)

Nora Suter – July to August 2008

This summer I spent several weeks with Benjamin's family in Tomato Village, a Burmese village close to Mae Hong Son. The village is located in the mountains in this northern region and during my stay in the rainy season it was colder than I would have expected. What surprised me most in the beginning was this typical climate of the mountains where it rains at least once a day.

From the very first moment I was very comfortable in Ben's family as they treated me like a family member but his daughter Saeng also took me on day trips to their farm, the Chinese village nearby or the King's palace. Almost every day Saeng or one of my students came to my hut and we went to the lake or to one of their homes. Therefore it was very easy for me to adapt to this village and the family of Ben, Saeng and her mother. Saeng's mother Toom is a very warm-hearted person and even though we couldn't communicate through a common language we understood each other perfectly. Sometimes Saeng would translate some of my questions and soon I learned to say: "This food is delicious" in Shan language, as she is a great cook. One rainy day we spent the whole morning sitting on their balcony cooking a Burmese specialty from banana leaves and sticky rice and other delicious ingredients. It were those moments that made me feel at home in this family.

From time to time I had very intensive discussions with Saeng, mostly about her future and dreams and the difficulties she faces to realize them. It was very impressive how realistic she is and how similar dreams are all around the world.

The discussions with Ben helped me to understand the situation of the Burmese villagers, the circumstance that five different ethnicities live together in one single village. Ben also gave me some books about the situation in Burma which helped me to understand the facts and the problems that Burma and Thailand are facing. It was always interesting to discuss about politics and the life circumstances of the Burmese refugees and the reasons which make life quite difficult in those villages. This background knowledge made it possible for me to acknowledge the effort he made to maintain this school, the need for this program and the difficulties and life tragedies of the people of this area.

Every evening I taught Class A with the best students and had great fun working in this school. Even for me as a language teacher it was a challenge to teach students of all these different ages without any workbook. I prepared a lot of games as most of the students were tired and the language learning had to be done through games. Never before I had such motivated students who were easy to commit in game-like learning activities.

The lake in Ruam Thai, the neighbor village of Ma Kay Soam, was a nice place to go during lazy afternoons, where I could prepare my lessons and visit some of the students on the way.

Mostly I didn't make plans for the weekend and I could just join the family: Either we went to Toom's family near Mae Hong Son and stayed overnight, Ben took me on a trekking trip or we drove to some special caves near Mae La Noi.

Even though I just stayed for a relatively short time I had a great insight in this community and the work of Benjamin. Through his status as a teacher in the village he knows most of the villagers and has a great understanding of their problems. I am very thankful for this opportunity I was given by Child's Dream whose members impressed me by their commitment. Thanks!