

Makay Soam – my time in the Tomato Village

After I got Marc's agreement per email, I was really happy, of course. Now, it is sure, that I am going for four weeks to this tiny village close to the Thai – Burmese border. I already had read a lot about it on the webpage of Child's Dream and I was quite excited. Arriving in Chiang Mai I visited the new office of Marc and Daniel. Everything was still under construction and some friendly volunteers were having fun painting the furniture or the walls. I was welcomed by Marc, who tried to coordinate the five or six Thai workers around the house. Marc gave me a lot of information about Makay Soam and its people.

A few days later I stood in front of Mae Hong Son's airport, waiting for Ben, the teacher and headmaster of the small English-school. Well, I won't be able to miss him, I thought, because this airport might only have the double size of my village's train station at home in Germany.

About fifteen minutes and six interested questions asking Tuc – Tuc drivers later, suddenly a lonely motorbike loudly appeared on the horizon and a lean man with warm eyes approached. "Hello, are you Christin? I wasn't sure if to look for a girl or boy!" That's Ben. When you meet him, you will put him into your heart at the latest after one minute. Ben can speak English nearly perfect and can tell a lot of interesting stories of his life and about the sad situation in Burma.

Up to the village I went by the famous yellow car which shuttles between Makay Soam and Mae Hong Son twice a day. The 90 – minutes trip contains around one-thousand narrow curves and steep mountains. I was fascinated that the driver can take this pick-up with 32 people, 250 kg rice and a cupboard up to the village without an accident.

The people in Makay Soam live a simple life. Most of them are rice-farmers and have a low income and a lot of children. Around 70 children come to the Community Learning centre every evening.

My first lesson: When you enter the classroom, everybody stands up:"Good evening, teacher!" If you forget to say "Sit down, please!" like me, for example, they may keep on standing there for the rest of the lesson...Although I was quite nervous during the first lesson, and I tried to avoid any mistake, in the second lesson you feel as if you know your students for a long time. They are always very kindly and interested. To the older girls you can talk without any problems. Although they younger pupils don't know too many words, yet, it is always working somehow.

After wandering around the village and preparing the next English lessons during the daytime, we started teaching between 6.00 and 6.15 pm, dependent on what time the school car arrives with the students. A lot of them directly come after public school to the lessons, everyday and without complaining. Respect. Of the three standards, A, B and C, assistance-teacher John Bosko was working with the youngest class, while Ben and I decide to take turns with A and B. It is quite useful to have an English-Thai dictionary for unknown words with you all the time when you are teaching the B-standard. And it's very important, too, to concentrate on playing games or doing funny activities.

It turned out to be a very good idea to invest time at home and prepare some teaching material and games for the lessons. I think the most popular games were "Domino with words", "Hot Seat", "Running dictation" and a game with Numbers, in English of course.

You need to get used to the simple life, first. You have to know, that there is no chance to avoid being woke up because of the 63,5 cocks running around in the village. Also you have to develop your own technique of how to take a shower using a nap. Well, after a few days there won't be any problem.

People are always very kind and Benjamin's wife is a great cook. On nearly every weekend the students will come after breakfast to pick you up. For a lot of times we went swimming in the lake or playing volleyball. Once we tried to make pancakes. This time another volunteer came from Singapore. Senglee had been there for the second time and taught English and Chinese to the A -standard. (I tried to learn some Chinese, too, but it not easy for me!)

We also visited Pang Tong Palace, to which one day the Queen of Thailand herself came for visit. On those days there were more soldiers than families in the small villages.

For me it has been really a great experience and I can only recommend going there, not for holidays but for helping. When Ben told me to leave my heavy things, like sleeping bag and books in the room for the next time, I did.

Christine Prötzel from Munich

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