

An Exchange Student's Guide to **Living in Phuket**



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This is dedicated to ลูกปลา - My Best Friend Forever!

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Introductions

Well, welcome to Phuket (ภูเก็ต). As it states above my name is Brett Flegg. I am a Rotary exchange student from Brockville, Ontario, Canada. I am the inbound YE student for the rotary club of Toungkah for the 96/97 year. If you are reading this I am assuming you are an exchange student that will be spending the next year in Phuket. This document contains information I wish I had when I came. I am not an expert in Thai culture and I do not pretend to be; I make no claims to its accuracy, spelling, grammar, etc. It is just some helpful hints to start your year off. I ask you to read this with an open mind. Some of the information contained within, if not done so, may seem very cynical. Please feel free to change/add anything you would like and pass it on to other exchange students.

Where exactly am I?

Phuket (ภูเก็ต) pronounced “poo-ket”) is the smallest province in Thailand and the only island-province. Thailand has 76 provinces at last count. If you are a rotary exchange student you are in district 3330 which is made up of clubs in Southern Thailand (South of Bangkok) Phuket is a very big (yet diminishing) tourist destination for many Europeans, Japanese, and some north Americans.

Phuket Geography

Phuket is divided into three districts called “amphur”. There is Amphur Maung - this is the city. (Each province in Thailand has an amphur maung - it literally means “city district” and can be referred to by the province name i.e. Phuket Town). The city is located on the southeastern side of the island. Amphur Kathu is located roughly in the center of the island and includes Patong beach, etc. The third district is Amphur Talang and is located in the northern part of the island. You are best to get yourself a map of the island to help you find your way around. You can pick up a tourist map at any one of the hotels or at the TAT office (Tourism Authority of Thailand). These are available in many languages from English to French to Japanese.

Phuket Industrial History

Phuket’s first main industry was Tin mining. Many Chinese came to Phuket to work in the tin mines and when there was no tin left in the land was given to them. When the tin started running out, rubber trees became a big industry introduced in 1903. Even now the north end of the island is covered with rubber plantations. (cynical phrase: Phuket is the number one producer and user of latex on the planet).

All this time the beaches of Phuket sat virtually untouched. Then a bridge was built that connected the island to the main part Thailand. Soon hippies started to discover the beauty of the island and as history shows (supposedly) the general publics always follow hippies and hence you get the Phuket of today. The main industries today in Phuket are Tourism, Rubber, Coconuts, and Shrimp Farms.

Phuket’s Ethnic Makeup

Almost every native Phuketien has Chinese blood in them. Many of the Chinese who originally worked in the mines started up stores and the tradition remains today. Most of the traditional storefronts are run by Chinese families. Phuket also has a large (Compared to the nation as a whole) Muslim population. Finally there is the Phuket Sea Gypsy (native) population on the island. Because of its relatively prosperous economy, Phuket attracts people from all over the country. As you spend more time here you will find it easy to tell the difference (not only in language but looks and actions).

Thailand Population Regions

Thailand is basically split into 4 regions. Each region has its own food, culture, and language variation. Here is a list of the four regions and a quick description with relevance to Phuket:

E-San: E-San, which is the northeastern part of the country. The people here tend to be native rice farmers and the ones you will see in Phuket will tend to (but not always) work in low-paying jobs or work in the prostitution business. The Thai stereotype for the e-san people is that they are lazy, don't care about education, and are very naive. In my experience this is sometimes (but not always) true with the E-San public in Phuket. E-San men and women tend to be more strongly built than southern Thais and have a rounder face.

Neua - This is the northern part of Thailand that include Chaing Mai, Chaing Rai, etc. Depending on what province they are from they will be working anywhere from low paying to high paying jobs in the business, tourist, service, or prostitution trades.

Central - Again a very diverse sector. Much more westernized than other parts of the country. Central Thais work in all sectors of the economy of Phuket. However for the most part they are well educated and fairly affluent.

Dtai - Southern Thailand (south of Bangkok) In general southern Thais are very strong on family structure and education. However again it depends on what province the person is from originally.

The King

Everyone loves the king. The king and the royal family are a great source of pride for the Thai people. The current king is Rama IX. He is now the longest running monarch in world history. He has done many very good things for the country of Thailand. He took the position of King when his older brother Rama IIX was murdered under mysterious circumstances.

It is not only socially incorrect but also against the law to criticize the king or any member of the royal family. The king has no official power over the country but everyone looks to him for support and advice during a time of crisis.

The Government

There have been several problems with corruption in the Thai Government. Recently no Thai government has lasted over a year. Vote buying tends to be a big problem (mostly in the north where the people tend not to be educated and very poor). However, things are finally starting to change and hopefully soon they will have a proper functioning government. Major issues today include Bangkok traffic, Environment, Employment, etc.

The Police / Army

The police and army tend to be corrupt as well. There is a very large police force in the country. There are many good laws however they tend not to be enforced. For example the seat-belt law and driving on the left hand side or the laws against prostitution. Every male is in the army reserve and goes through training during school.

Cultural No-Nos

As they say, “When Rome, don’t do the same things the Romans don’t do.” (or something like that) However the same applies in Thailand. As in your country there are things that you consider rude that would not be here, the vice-versa is true. For example when you burp in Canada you are expected to say “Excuse me.”. A Thai person is supposed to smile in the same situation. So if a Thai person acted like this in Canada, that person would be considered rude and not realize it.

It would take me forever to list all of the things you are not supposed to do. I will let you find out the less serious ones for yourself.

Feet - The general rule is to keep the bottom of your feet to yourself. You should not point the bottom of your feet at anyone older than you, a statue, food, a monk, etc. However with all rules in. The best way to do this is when you sit, sit cross-legged, or with your legs tucked in under and slightly to your left. Also never put your feet on the pillow (or the top part of the bed) that you sleep on or put shoes or socks in a high place or use your feet to point at something. Most of this will come to you over time. This stems from the Buddhist religion that the foot is the “least holy” part of the body.

Head - This is also another custom that stems from the Thai Buddhist background. The head is considered the most holy part of the body and you should never touch the head of someone the same age or older.

Calling someone - When asking someone to come to where you are you should always place your hand palm down and flap your hand toward you at the wrist. When you first see this done you might think that the person who is actually calling you is telling you to sit down! This should be the only hand gesture you use when calling someone.

Public displays of affection/nudity - Neither of these are accepted in Thai culture. This includes hugging, kissing, and (in many cases) holding hands, etc. Please refer to the section on Thai dating for more information.

Monks - Monks should be treated with respect. Women are not allowed to touch monks or their robes. This is not discrimination against women but a protection for the monks as one of the rules for monks is abstinence. A woman may not hand something directly to a monk. Instead she should place it in front of him. Also if you pass by a monk you should crouch down to below his height. A woman bends at the knees and a man lowers his head and leans forward.

Emotion - The general Thai rule is to keep emotion to yourself. Whether it be surprise, happiness, hate, love, and most importantly anger. Public displays of emotion are frowned upon. Never raise your voice in public, etc. The key thing to remember is jai yen yen - “keep it cool”.

Buddhist Images - Make sure you treat these with respect. You should not pose for a picture in front of an image without first asking permission. Never point your feet at an image, etc.

Helpful Hints on Culture

As I said before there are many, many aspects to the culture. I could not possibly list them all for you and even if I could you would not be able to remember them all. Thailand has a very unique culture that has formed over thousands of years. Some days you will hate the culture with a passion and other days you will love it. A large part of the culture comes from the religion. With this in mind it is a good idea to study up on Buddhism if you want to understand your friends. A key thing to keep in mind is that the idea: “Everyone is the same with just different colour skin” is totally wrong. The Thai and Western religions can really not be that easily compared. A vague way to explain it is basically that Thai people “think” differently than Western culture. The logic is not the same. Sometimes you will think something is very obvious but a Thai person does not have a clue and the same in reverse.

I strongly recommend you read up on the Buddhist religion (even if you are happy with your current religion) just to help you understand. A good beginners book is *Teach Yourself Buddhism* which is available in many of the local bookstores.

I do not pretend that I understand the Thai culture. Many times I have no idea what is going on. It took me three months in Thailand to admit this to myself. I have, on occasion, wondered how the Thais have ever survived and painted a very dim picture for their future. But I (as you do to) have to remember that this culture has been around a lot longer than yours or mine.

Image

If you keep in mind that image is a very important part to the Thai culture things will start to make sense. Cloths, hair, speech, friends, etc. must be kept neat. Mothers won't send their children to school unless their uniform is perfect and yours should be too.

You will likely have people tell you that you are too fat or are too skinny, etc. These may seem to be very rude (by western standards) but are not meant as insults and they should be responded to with a smile. They are just observations on your image.

But this is just the external view of image. The same applies to what people think of you and how your friends think people see them. The basic idea is to try to look presentable and be careful what you say at all times.

Saving Face

The concept of Saving face can be tied to the internal image. On many occasions you will have Thai people (who you consider very close friends) lie to you in order not to hurt you or them. For example, maybe your friends went out on a trip for the weekend that you were not invited to. When you ask your friend what they did that weekend they will simply say "I studied." Even if someone else told you that your friends went out on the weekend they will tend to stick to their story. This will at times will really frustrate you, but you will get used to it over time.

In the above example you contradicted your friend. In real life however you should only do this sparingly. If you catch someone it a lie it is usually best to let it go. If you confront them they lose face (makes them look bad). The best thing to do is ask another friend at another time.

Saving face is one of the most important (and hardest) concepts to understand and accept of the Thai culture. The easiest way to explain it is by examples. For example if you trip and fall or get an answer wrong your closest friends will laugh at you. They are not laughing at you. Instead they are laughing with you in order to save your face. If this happens you should just laugh along with your friends. Also if you tell someone that you love them (and the person you tell doesn't feel the same way) they will laugh at you. You and they both know you are speaking from your heart but they will laugh and pretend it is a joke.

Whatever you do you should not lose your temper in public. When this happens it ends up with everyone around losing face. If you must yell and scream, excuse yourself, and do it in private. Losing your temper is one of the worst things you can do in Thailand and is an embarrassment on you, and your family.

ผิวดำ *Pieu dum* – Black Skin

In traditional Thai culture the colour of ones skin determines their class. White skin is considered high class and beautiful where as black skin is considered low class and ugly. This tradition goes right back to the Buddhist texts. In theory it is because the people who have to work out in the sun have black skin and the others who have more comfortable jobs work inside. This goes against modern western views that basically state that skin colour doesn't matter.

The implications of this are seen everyday. For one thing look at high school girls on motorcycles when it is sunny outside. They will usually hold a piece of paper in front of their face to keep it from becoming tanned. A women doesn't like to date a man who has skin darker than her and a man would not seriously consider a women with darker skin than his own. Thai people balk atฝรั่ง (Farang) - white people who come and purposely try to get sun tans.

However now things are starting to change. People still do not want dark skin for themselves or their boyfriend/girlfriend but friends and business acquaintances are acceptable. Even today though if you look at the top people in business they will have light coloured skin.

เพื่อนไทย *Peun Thai* – Thai Friends

A question you will most likely ask yourself at least once in the year is “Do I have any friends?” The reason for this is that Friends in Thailand are not the same as Friends in the Western world. You may think that you are very close to someone and you find out months later that that person has a boyfriend that you never knew about. The thing to remember (as always) is to keep an open mind. Also try to have other friends that are not students. This will help when you discover new things about your school friends that you didn’t know about.

Here is a good place to mention about secrets. Thai people love their secrets. You may very well not see very much of your friends outside of school. When you ask them what they did they will always say they studied but in actual fact, in most cases, they have whole other lives outside of school. They may have a boyfriend or girlfriend that you didn’t know about or family problems. You should never pressure one of your friends to tell them one of your personal secrets. If they feel comfortable telling you (and in many cases they won’t) you should let them alone. Not doing so can create tension in the friendship. It is important to remember this is not a judgment on you instead it is simply the culture and tradition.

This is a real shock for western students because for the most part they are used to sharing their feelings with their friends. Also, talk about your personal life should be limited to a certain extent.

ยิ้ม *Yim* – Smiling

This is a very important part of the Thai culture is the smile. It can mean many different things in many different situations. It can mean everything from “Hello” to “I’m sorry” to “Hey, you’re kinda cute!”

Mastering the ability of smiling can truly mean the difference between having friends in Thailand or not. It is hard to explain exactly when and where to smile but if you watch the Thais you will soon get the idea (if you are smiled at... smile back).

สนุก *Sanook* – Fun

Sa-nook is a very important part of Thai culture. Everything that is worth doing to a Thai person should have at least some sa-nook in it, whether it be school, work or play. Smiling is a good way to add sa-nook to something. Nothing speaks lower of something then saying it is *ไม่สนุก* mai sa-nook (Not fun).

ไหว้ *Wai* – Wai

The Wai is the standard form of Thai greeting, much like the western handshake but with different rules of use. This is something that reflects on your image and so it should be something you practice.

First of all you should always wai (verb) some one older then you first, Rotary members, teachers, parents of friends, etc. Someone younger then you wai you first and depending on their age (if older then 6 yrs old) you should wai them back. If they are under about 6-8 years old you should respond with a smile and a slight nod.

You should wai a person once when you first meet them that day and once when you are about to leave. You should also wai someone older then you if they give you something of importance (i.e. a gift, money, etc.). Always wai them after you receive the item. Finally you can wai to apologize for doing something wrong and should be done along with the words, “Kor toht”.

You do not need (and in most cases should not) wai your friends or people the same age as you. However it can be done in fun when you have done something wrong and your friend scolds you for it you can wai them and smile at the same time and say you are sorry. This adds a bit of sarcasm to your apology.

There are many different wais depending on the age and social status of the person you are wai-ing. The standard wai is accomplished by putting your palms together with your fingers extended upwards under your nose. Your thumbs should be touching the bottom of your chin and your wrists over your heart. With a formal wai a man should lean forward and down slightly and a woman bend her knees slightly. This form is mainly used for meeting strangers older than you. For your parents the thumbs should be held under your nose and for a monk held under your eyes. The general rule is the higher the status of the person you are wai-ing the higher the hands on the body. For friends or people the same age the tips of your fingers should be just touching your chin and finally for people younger than you just holding the wai at your chest is enough.

Don't go a wai everyone off of the street (i.e. the girl at 7-Eleven or the tuk-tuk driver) This would be the same as of walking down the street and offering a hand shake to everyone. Speaking of hand shakes sometimes (Thai businessmen mostly) will offer you a handshake when you first meet them. You should shake their hand but right afterwards wai them.

Sounds a bit complicated eh? Don't worry. After a while it will become as natural as breathing.

พี่/น้อง *Pee/Nong* – Older/Younger

There is a strong sense of hierarchy in Thai culture. This takes a couple of different forms. The most basic is the Pee-Nong relationship. As mentioned earlier someone younger must always wai the older person first! Pee literally means older brother/sister but is used to classify anyone older than you. The person of lower status gives the higher person their loyalty and in return the person of higher status looks after the person of lower status. In other words if you go out to dinner the person of higher status always pays for everyone, even if he can not really afford to do so.

This relationship is very strong in the Thai culture. Other things that can consider who is of higher status is age, employment, education, job status, etc. It would be considered very rude for the person of lower status to insist on paying. Splitting the bill is given the derogatory name American Share and is sometimes laughed at by Thai people. If you feel very guilty about accepting a gift from someone you may offer once to pay but if it is refused you should leave it at that. Not to do so might be considered a challenge on the status of the person.

The Three D's

Drinking / Drugs

In Thailand it is considered acceptable for any male over the age of 12 years old to consume alcohol. However traditionally it is not acceptable for women to consume alcohol at any age. This is now changing but even today most girls under the age of 18 in Phuket have never tried alcohol.

Drugs, are an other matter. Thailand is known for its opium but also has some marijuana. You can get yourself in a lot of trouble with the Rotary and Thai police. The punishment is a long prison sentence while you await trial and then death when you are convicted. Life is not too pleasant in the Thai prisons so you should think twice before trying any drugs.

Driving

If you have any kind of heart condition you should not drive let alone ride in a car in Thailand. Thai people tend to have a problem with anticipating and it can get them (and you) into trouble. The basic strategy is to just be concerned with what is in front of you and nothing else. Everyone seems to do this and it works in some sort of chaos like way.

You will see signs saying, "Please drive on the Left!" Most of the residents say that this should be also written in Thai. The standard Thai driver thinks they are the only one on the road and tend to drive right down the middle.

Phuket is heavily populated with motorcycles. For most people this is the only way they get around. You will notice the spray painted outline of bikes all over the roads. These symbolize where accidents happened (usually where someone died). You will most likely see someone die from a motorcycle accident during your time here. It is hard to find a Thai youth that does not have 2-3 scars on their body attributed to motorcycle accidents. If you are caught by the Rotary driving a motorcycle or car you will be sent home.

Dating

The Thai system of dating is very different from that of the western world. Of course what I explain here tends to deal mostly with Phuket and the south of Thailand. In Bangkok things are closer to the Western style and the north has a style all of its own.

Traditionally in the south the man has most of the control over the relationship. And may, if he wish, take on a **เมียน้อย** (Minor wife). By law this is illegal - but in Thailand no one pays any attention to the laws. The women's role in the marriage is very limited. Her job is to take care of the children and her husband. The husband's job is to provide a salary to his wife and kids and support where necessary. However things are changing and women are starting to get much more control in the relationship. Now many women have jobs outside the home and keep their salary for themselves and have more control in the relationship.

A Thai woman basically looks for the following characteristics in a man:

- Handsome (light skin, tall)
- Not a playboy (most Thai men are this)
- Good job (or good student)
- Older

A Thai man usually looks for the following characteristics in a women:

- Beautiful (light skin, tall, etc.)
- Playful / flirty
- Controllable

Southern girls are known for giving men major headaches. Because Thai people are not that open to emotions a Thai women will usually not tell a suitor why she is angry at him. So from the man's perspective the women will totally cut things off for no reason.

Southern Thai women are very slow in developing a close relationship with a man. They tend to be very picky on who they choose. The standard process goes as follows:

- Man shows interest in the women (smiling, talking, etc.)
- Man tries to become close to the women and her friends
- Man invites the women and her friend out to drink/eat
- Women and friend accept
- Last two steps are repeated, perhaps many times
- Man meets women's family and perhaps takes them out to dinner, etc.
- Man and women start to go out alone together
- Man and women officially become a couple

Thai men try to move fast in relationships. As I have said before the women traditionally have much control in the relationship and this is still true today. Female exchange students should be very careful if you are considering dating a Thai man no matter how nice he is in public given the opportunity he might try to force himself on you. This has happened to a female exchange student this year.

For reasons like this now most Thai women put their education and career over any man because they know they can not count on them in the future. Many decide not to get married at all.

In school some of the girls have boyfriends but these are not made known to even the closest friends. Public displays of affection in Thailand are frowned upon. In the younger grads many of the people have "puppy love" boyfriends / girlfriends. Taking the step from holding hands to kissing is a big one in Thailand. In many cases this is considered the consent for sex.

Farang Price

In Thailand there tends to be a two tier pricing system. One price for the Thai people and one price for the foreigners. This will take you some time to get used to. You are coming to Thailand to be integrated into the culture. However whatever you do you will always be a Farang and hence will be subject to Farang price. For example... it might cost a Thai person 150B to buy a shirt where it costs you 200B to buy the same shirt. This two tier-pricing scheme seems to be fully embraced by the government. When you go to the royal palace it costs a Farang about 40B more to enter than a Thai person.

This pricing scheme goes back to the roots of Thai culture. It is presumed that Farang have more money than do the local Thai population hence it is OK for them to pay more. The line you will likely hear in excuse is: "One of your money is worth twenty five of mine." It is useless to explain the error in this statement to a Thai person. You will have to find a way of dealing with Farang price by yourself.

Thai Food

The base for most Thai food is of course rice. A standard meal will include a hot plate of rice with a variety of side dishes. For example you and your family might eat the following dishes for dinner:

ข้าว (kow) - rice for everyone

ผัดผักหมู (pat puk moo) - fried vegetables with pork

ไข่เจียว (kai geeo) - plain omelet

หมูผัดเผ็ด (moo pat pet) - spicy fried pork

แกงสะตอ (gaing sa-dtaw) - a spicy red curry

ปลาผัด (blah pat) - fried whole fish

แตงกวา (dang gwah) - cucumbers (handy fire extinguishers)

Everyone sits with a plate of rice in front of him or her and each of the other dishes are set out on the table. In a proper restaurant each has a serving spoon but for the most part it is ignored and if it is just family there are no serving spoons. Each person has a spoon and a fork. The spoon is held in the right hand and is used to take the food from the plate to the mouth. The fork is held in the left hand and is used like we use a knife.

It is tradition to first eat one spoonful of plain rice and then you can start with the other things. The meal turns into a free-for-all as people start to eat. A spoonful of one of the side dishes is lifted to the person's plate (whether it be some egg or vegetables or curry) This is then eaten with a bit of rice and you go back for more until your rice is finished. Usually some of the spicy curry is mixed with the rice at the beginning to give everything else some flavour. Let's say for example that I wanted some omelet. I would reach across the table with my fork and spoon and cut a small piece (1 or 2 bits worth) and carry that back to my plate. Then I would cut it up into two pieces and put some rice on my spoon with the egg. This as I say is continued until everything is finished.

If your mouth starts to feel like it is on fire (and it does after a while) you first start by eating a bit of plain rice. If it is better then OK, if not then you eat something like a piece of cucumber. Water is not used to put out a fire so to speak. It would be like putting water on a grease fire; instead of putting it out you just spread it.

When you are eating out alone you obviously can not eat food in this same way. Instead you go to a small street side restaurant that has the sign ข้าวแกง Kow Gaing and there you will usually find a 40-year-old mother of five sitting behind a clear glass counter. There you will see metal tubs filled with different types of curries and dishes. You start with a plate of rice and just pick and choose what you would like. Next you just sit down and eat. This type of meal varies in price with what you choose to eat. At school it costs about 10B (drink included) In the real world it might be somewhere closer to 20B - 25B. At school there are about 10 of these counters all lined up each selling different types of things. Some sell drinks, some sell rice, some sell noodles.

At school at least the drinks are served in a little bowl filled with ice and whatever type fresh fruit juice you want. It is drunk with a utensil similar to a soup spoon. You have a basic selection of coconut, pineapple, lemon, sweetcorn, and any other type of fruit you can imagine. You get part of the fruit as well so if you order pineapple drink you get the juice but you also get some cut up pineapple pieces. There are also some interesting combinations that I have yet not dared tried.

As I mentioned before there are also noodles. These are served in a bowl and eaten with chopsticks and the same type of spoon as the drinks. There are many different kinds (rice noodles, egg noodles, etc.) And each in many different forms. The noodles are eaten submerged in a flavoured water with pork, fish, chicken, vegetables, shrimp, crab (or whatever is desired) a lot like a soup. My personal favourite is “Batmee Luang sai pak lair moo daing” (If I tell you that Batmee means round noodle, Luang means yellow, lair means and, and daing means red - you should be able to figure out the rest if you were paying attention. Noodles are great if you are in a rush because they can be eaten quickly.

There are also fried noodles, which are very good as well. The south is famous for its “Pat Thai” which is supposed to be the spiciest in the country. This is basically fried yellow noodle mixed with chilies, pork, and greens served with a bit of spouts, crushed peanuts, and yes more dried chilies. If you can eat spicy food you are well rewarded.

Thai people are known for their spicy food but that is just part of it. Thai people like to eat things on the extremes. Very Spicy, very sour, very sweet, etc. They are discussed with Farang food because it is so bland. If you have problems eating very spicy food you can always just offer them mustard because it is too spicy for them. However you can see the disappointment in their faces when a Farang can eat their food with no problem. Especially if you can eat a food that they find spicy you can see them looking at you with a big smile on their face as they say “pet mai” (is it spicy). Their face will always change to a surprised/disappointment when you eat it with a strait face and say “mai pet” (not very spicy at all). However if it is really too spicy for you as soon as they are not looking you can quickly eat a few cucumbers and rice to cool off.

There are also prepared rice dishes that I haven't mentioned yet. My favourite is of course pork fried rice but there are many more. Here is a list of some of the better ones:

ข้าวเหนียวไก่ kow mun gai - chicken rice

ข้าวขาหมู kow ka moo - pork leg rice

ข้าวหมูแดง kow moo dang - red pork rice

ข้าวผัด(กุ้ง, ปู, ผัก, หมู, ไก่) kow pat (goong, pboo, puk, moo, gai)

Since the last is my favourite I will explain how to cook pork fried rice. The cooking is usually done on a walk over a gas flame. First oil is added. Next pork pieces are added and cooked a bit. Next an egg is added to the pan. The egg and pork are mixed around for some time. Next rice (pre-cooked) is added and the mixture is mixed around vigorously. Fish sauce and onions are added. You know it is done when the rice is all evenly cooked. It is served on a plate with cucumbers and eaten in the way described above. Each person adds more fish sauce, chilies, and lemon juice to their own liking.

Just one more thing I will tell you about Thai food and that is Esan style. This is the northeast of Thailand. The standard meal includes samtem (a spicy salad type dish) kow neiew (sticky rice) and guy tort (fried chicken).

A Taste of Home

Phuket now has a wide variety of western style restaurants. If fast food is your thing KFC is the big hit among Thai people. This is because it is a lot cheaper than the KFCs in the west. The Farang special is the chicken burger meal, which costs 60B. However if you go with a group of Thai people they usually order a plate of chicken, Pepsi for everyone, and a couple orders of french-fries.

If beef burgers are your thing then you should check out Burger King and Mc Donalds. There is a Mc Donalds in Patong and one beside the Robinson in town. The two Burger Kings are in sight of each other downtown.

When I first came there was only one place to get good western food and that was Jimmy's Lighthouse. It is located in Ao Chalong. This is a nice open-air restaurant and bar that has a unique taste of home. It is basically a hangout for all the sailors in Phuket. Meal start at about 80B and drinks are about 20B (non-alcoholic).

If you walk the strip in Patong or Kata you will find several good restaurants (even though expensive) that will suite your individual needs. Finally if you are interested in Japanese food you can check out the small Japanese restaurant in behind Jimmy's Lighthouse.

Books, Newspapers, and Mags

Books are really nice because they allow you to escape the island of Phuket and live in your own culture for a while. Phuket is very fortunate to have a wide variety of bookstores with English books. One of the best is 'The Books' which is located across from the Mail Boxes Etc. in town. They have a variety of novels in English that you can purchase for around 200B-300B. Other bookstores that are worthwhile visiting in Phuket town are Saingho (near Street Phuket School), and one just down the street from The Books. Finally there is a large used bookstore in Kata beach near the circle. It is well worth checking out.

If you can not afford to buy a book you can always borrow one from the Patong library. Here there is a large selection of novels available. When you go for the first time be sure to bring along two wallet size pictures of yourself and some money for your registration. As long as you can get to Patong on a regular basis it is a good service.

There are two daily English newspapers in Thailand. They are *The Nation* and *The Bangkok Post*. Both are very good and it is up to you which one you want. Both have international sections and daily specials like (Outlook, Byteline, etc.) They can be purchased from any bookstore for about 15B.

The other newspaper worth buying is *The Phuket Gazette*. It is a newspaper for ex-pats (Foreigners living in Thailand). It is published every month and is available for free in many hotels and restaurants.

Finally if you would like to read your favourite magazine (and don't mind if it is a few months late) you can usually find it at The Books, or Saingho. If you have no luck you should cruise the minimarts at Patong, which sometimes carry them.

Books You Should Own

If you plan to do any traveling in Thailand you should spend the 600B to get the *Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit—Thailand*. This book contains all the major destinations in Thailand. It lists the best (and cheapest) places to stay, eat, visit, etc. The other book you should get if you are interested in Thai writing and reading is *Teach Yourself Thai*. This is the book I used to learn how to write and it is very useful. Once you can read you can get yourself a Thai-English dictionary at the bookstore for 60B.

Radio / Television

There is no 24-hour radio station in Phuket. However you can be treated to 3 hours of music every night on one of two radio stations. The first show is produced locally in Phuket and is aired every night from 11:00 pm to 2:00 am. It is 89.0 fm. The guy is a bit warped and the music is not all that great but at least it is local. The second option is 96.5 fm every night at the same time. It is a satellite link from Bangkok and from Monday to Saturday the music is generally up-to-date. On Sunday is the Retro show if your are interested in that kind of thing. 96.5 is the one that I prefer. Also it has a mini-news broadcast every night at 11:30 and 12:30.

There is no free English TV channel in Phuket. There is however a few options on cable. It is possible to get HBO, CNN, MTV, and the StarTV channels available through cable. Most hotels as well as some bars will have these channels.

School

The school system in Thailand is a relatively good one. There have been concerns voiced that the system does not concentrate on creative learning instead it concentrates on repetition. There is a large population of school aged children in Thailand now and the schools are flourishing. In the pre-university years school is divided into two sections. There is Pratom, which has 6 levels, and there is Matiyom, which also has 6 levels.

The grades in Pratom are numbered one through six and are the equivalent of the western educational system. They are called Pbaw 1, Pbaw 2, etc. After Pratom there is a test to see what Matiyom school you can get into. A school like Stree Phuket (for girls) or Phuket Witeali (for boys) is preferable to one of the lower government schools.

Matiyom is basically split into two groups (1-3 (the equivalent to grades 7-9) and 4-6 (the equivalent to grades 10-12). They are called Maw 1, Maw 2, etc. By law every Thai child is required to graduate from Maw 3. After Maw 3 there is a test to be accepted into Maw 4.

As I mentioned before Phuket Witeali and Stree Phuket are the two premiere schools in Phuket (and for that matter in the south) for Matiyom education. Stree Phuket has been setting itself up as a language school where as Phuket Witeali is setting itself up specializing in the sciences. From M1-M3 the sexes are separated (girls in Stree Phuket, boys at Phuket Witeali) If students can pass the test they then have a choice of attending M4-M6 at either Stree Phuket or Phuket Witeali. Many girls decide to transfer over to Phuket Witeali for M4 but not many boys transfer to Stree Phuket. School is not free and there is a charge (about 2000B per term) plus the cost for the uniforms and books. Because of this the law to keep kids in school is not that well informed and many times you will find children kept home to work.

Education is taken very seriously in the south and a lot of the time there is a lot of pressure from parents for their children to become engineers, (which is considered a high paying field). After M6 there is a series of nation wide tests termed ENTRANCE, which every Thai student dreads. Each university puts out its own entrance test that is written by everyone interested in attending the school. Going to a government run university is preferable to a private (more expensive one). Students do not have a choice of what program they will take instead they may just choose the faculty.

Touring Thailand

It can be very cheap to go on trips (เที่ยว (TeeOs) termed TOs by most exchange students). It is always best to go with a group of exchange students. Wherever you are you can usually find a hotel for about 150B per night. Food and transportation are also cheap (even if not always reliable). If you are considering traveling I would suggest you buy Lonely Planet's Travel Survival Kit for Thailand - available for every bookstore. If you get lost most of the time if you smile there will be someone willing to help you. If you want tourist information on a specific place you should visit the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) available in most major tourist centers (including Phuket)

Buses

The cheapest way (besides hitch hiking) to get around Thailand is take a bus on the extensive bus route. There are basically two or three classes of buses in Thailand. The cheapest are the orange buses called รถแม่ (Rote Mae). These are cheap but tend to be slow and uncomfortable. They are OK for trips that take less then four hours (for example from Phuket to Phung-nga). The next step up is the aircon busses called รถแอร์ (Rote Aer). These are usually a lot

more comfortable however they can get very cold so dress warmly. The top level of bus are the VIPs. These tend to have a little more room than the aircon buses. These too tend to be very cold. In many places you can also get a 999 bus which is much more comfortable and usually a better temperature.

Make sure you are prepared for any bus trip. Dress warmly for aircon buses and bring along 1-2 bottles of water plus some food. You should not accept any food from strangers on the bus as there have been some cases of drugging/robbery.

Trains

There is unfortunately no train available in Phuket. However if you are going long distances the train is the preferable choice. You have the ability to buy food or drink at almost every stop and also the ability to move around a bit more than the bus. There are many different class choices depending on the distance you will travel:

- 3rd. class - This is basically a hard seat in a cramped car (sometimes no seat)
- 2nd. class - A nicer seat but with no air conditioning
- 2nd. class air - A comfortable seat in an aircon car
- 2nd. class sleeper - A top or lower bunk in a non-air car
- 2nd. class sleeper air - Same as above but with air. (Very nice for long trips)
- 1st. class etc. - Nice seat food, etc.

There are also different levels of trains you can take including:

- Standard - very slow, stops everywhere!
- Rapid - A little bit faster than Standard
- Express - A little bit faster than Rapid

Air

By far the nicest way to travel in Thailand is by air. However it is also the most expensive. A one-way ticket to Bangkok will cost you about 2000B. If the Rotary is floating the bill you will usually fly. Thai Airways is considered one of the most comfortable in Asia (along with Cathay Pacific). The food is not all that great but they do serve beer to those who are interested! It takes about 1 hour to go from Phuket to Bangkok with flights leaving regularly.

Getting around Phuket

Phuket does not have much of a public transportation system compared to many of the other cities. Part of this is because of the stubbornness of the tuk-tuk drivers who make their living gouging tourists.

Beaches

Even though you are not here as a tourist you will likely want to hit the beaches a few days out of the year :-). Phuket is known for its beaches and is one of the main reasons it is such a tourist destination. The following is a list and description of beaches in the area (these are just my opinions so don't shoot me down for them please.)

Patong - By far the best known beach in Phuket is Patong. It is well known for several reasons - some good and some bad. In its prime it was a very beautiful beach with white sand and turquoise blue sea water. However over the years Patong has developed a culture of its own that you may or most likely not enjoy. Patong is a very expensive place to stay (Farang - white people) are always taken advantage of there. The prices are very expensive, the water polluted, the tuk-tuk (taxi) drivers corrupt, and the sex industry is out of control. Patong is the reason that Phuket attracts more single male tourists than any other group. Prostitution is rampant and women (and men) should be wary about going alone at night. Soi Bungla (Soi means lane) is lined with ago-go bars which specialize in "take-out". This all said when the beach is empty (during the rainy season) it is a nice place to visit and if you can bargain you can get some cool souvenirs.

Karon - More "family oriented" (but not much more) than Patong. The beach is not as nice as Patong once was but is still very nice. It is also littered with euro-tourists. Hotels are very expensive and so is everything else.

Kata - Actually this consists of two beaches: Kata noi (literally "little kata") and Kata Yai ("big kata"). Kata noi is a very nice beach albeit expensive. Kata Yai is also nice.

Nai Harn - This is one of my favourite beaches. There is a river that separates it near the left-hand side. On the left you will find all of the Thai bathers on the right all the Farang. **Rawai** - This is a much more Thai beach. It is not much of a swimming beach but boats can be taken to surrounding islands and there are many excellent restaurants as well as a few shells around.

Chalong - Is not as much a beach as it is a harbor for sailboats and some cruise ships.

Panwa - Another "Thai" beach it is cut off from tourists and is quiet. Not the best swimming in the world but nice to relax.

Mai Kao - Near the airport, this beach is not developed and is nice for relaxing but too dangerous for swimming.

Nai Yang - Again this beach is in the north of the island. It is dangerous for swimming. It has one hotel but is crowded every weekend by Thai's on the island.

Bang Tao (Laguna) - Is a very expensive beach development. Nice beach (developers tried to keep things natural)

Kamala - Nice beach now. Developers who hit Patong are setting their sights here. Be *warned: It is very dangerous to swim during the rainy season - More the 7 people drown a year at the beaches. There is currently no lifeguard system setup and the undertow is very bad (particularly at the north) If there is a red flag at one of the beaches don't swim*

Waterfalls / Other Attractions

There are no huge waterfalls in Phuket. Make sure you don't visit in the hot season because the rivers dry up. But near the end of the rainy season it provides a good photo op. My personal favourite is the Ton Sai waterfall located in Thalang. This is a very easily accessible waterfall that is very beautiful. There are actually two main falls both up the road from the parking area. The first one is obvious but the second is hidden off to the left of the first. It is well worth taking a trip to see. The second main waterfall in Phuket is the Bang Pae Waterfall also located in Talang. It is a bit of a hike over the mountain to see, but the path is well worn. You should wear rubber soled shoes when going to see this as opposed to sandals because the rocks are slippery. Finally there is the Kathu waterfall located in Kathu. I have never been here so I can not tell you much about it, but it might be worth the trip.

There are many other tourist attractions in Phuket. I will list a few that are more relevant to Thai people (The rest are in all the tourist books).

The Two Sisters Monument - On your way in from the airport you most likely saw this. This commemorates two women who are important to Phuket's history. Many, many, years ago Phuket's was in danger from invading Burmese armies. Phuket's main leader and most of the men of the island were injured. These two sisters rallied the island's women together to dress - as men to war - and, when the Burmese saw the number of "men" that defended the island were frightened away. The king at the time honoured these two women with special names and recognition.

Talang Museum - Find all about all about the Two sisters at the Talang Museum located East of the monument!

Wat Chalong - The most famous temple in Phuket is well worth at least one visit.

Aquarium - Located in Cape Panwa it is a good place to find about local marine life

Lam Pomme Tape - This is where every Thai tourist to the island has to go. It is located between Nai Han and Rawai beaches. It is best seen during sunset.

Gibbon Project - Is located at the Ban Pae waterfall and is an attempt to return pet gibbons back to the jungles.

Saphan Hin - This is reclaimed land from the sea and provides a nice view of the ocean. The monument on the way in is a tin dredge - a monument to the many years of tin mining.

Gao Sea Lay - This is an island attached to By a bridge. It was once a garbage dump and the tin mining there has ruined most of the beaches. However it is a nice place to drive through. There is also the Main Sea Gypsy Village on the island.

Viewpoint - This is a good photo-op. It has a beautiful view of the Kata and Karon beaches. (Located between Nai Han and Kata Beaches.

Shell Museum - Located near Rawai (whatever anyone tells you it is not a museum). But never the less it is a good place to legally buy beautiful shells.

Kao Rang - Rang Mountain is a nice place to get your bearings straight. Located near the northwest of the city it provides a beautiful view of the island. To make things there is an excellent (though expensive) coffee shop on the top that sells the best Ice Coffee on the island (Thung-ka Cafe)

Talking with Home

Phone Calls

The simplest (and the most expensive) way to communicate back home is using the telephone. Thailand has an extensive phone network that allows you to connect easily with home (no matter where home is). You have two or three options for international calls. First is just using an ordinary desktop phone in your house. The standard cost for this is about 500B for 10 minutes. You may also use a tele-direct phone service that allows you to use your own country's phone service (you must find out the information before coming to Thailand). You can not use a card phone to make these kinds of phone calls. Thirdly you can go to the CAT (Communications Authority of Thailand) and use one of their international phones.

Local phone calls are also easy to make. There are two types of public phones in Phuket. The first is the Card Phone. These are the green phone booths around the city. You can buy a phone card from any 7-eleven or hotel in 50B and 100B sizes. To call you simply put the card in the machine and wait several seconds for a click. You will then see the amount of money you have left. Now simply dial the phone number.

The second option with local phone calls is to use one of the red phone booths. These are just standard coin operated machines. The only big problem with these is that they will not return any change to you. So make sure you use the proper denominations.

If you have access to a phone line in your house be warned that it costs 2B per local phone call. It is not like the Canadian/American systems where you can make unlimited local phone calls. The country code for Thailand is 066 and the area code for Phuket is 076. When dialing from abroad you do not type in the 0s.

You will notice a large number of people in Thailand have a cellular phone. This is because it used to be hard to find a reliable phone. However times are changing and the phone service is becoming more and more reliable. (Interesting note: It is easy to tell which girls in school have boyfriends because she will have a pager. Boyfriends give the their girlfriend a pager so when they want to talk to the girl all they have to do is page them. This means that the girls parents won't find out about the boyfriend as easily.)

Snail Mail and EMS

Thailand has a local mail service. For the most part it is as reliable as the American postal system (i.e. not that great but it works). It costs 2B to send a letter anywhere in Thailand. With this you have a good chance of the letter getting there. The next level up is EMS, which is a company that provides a somewhat better chance of a package getting to its destination in a reasonable time. You will have to check at the post office for rates and estimated time of delivery.

E-mail and the Internet

Perhaps the best way to get news from and to home is by using the Internet. There are a few service providers in Phuket. Your best bet is to find a family member who has access because it tends to be fairly expensive. You can also use one of the Internet cafes in Phuket and in some even get an e-mail address. Standard rates for Internet access run about 800B for 10 hours / month. At Friendship beach (between Ao Chalong and Rawai) there is an Internet cafe with good service. Express Data / KSC is one of the better service providers in town (and is a Rotary owned business!). The phone number for Friendship is 381-281 (ask for Dave or Kathy) and for KSC is 214-496 (ask for Chaisak)

Other than e-mail, chances are you can access your hometown paper as well as other international news. Check out which allows you to search the Internet news services. Also you can use IRC to chat live with people back home. The best way to do this is set a time by e-mail weeks ahead and then meet on-line. The only other service you might find useful in Thailand is Usenet, which is like a huge bulletin board that anyone can post a message on. There is a section on Thai culture, which occasionally has something useful.

Thai Writing

Thai writing was originally developed from Sanskrit. It has 44 consonants and about 28 vowels. If you put a few hours a day in studying you should learn it in no time. I have included the consonants separated into their classes here as well as the 28 basic vowels. If you are interested you should get the book *Teach Yourself Thai*.

Consonants (* indicates obsolete character still included in Thai alphabet)

Low Class

	ค	ค*	ฆ	ง	ช	ซ	ฌ	ญ	ท	ฒ	ณ	ฑ
Initial	k	k*	k	ng	ch	s	ch	y	t	t	n	t
Final	k	k*	–	ng	t	t	t	n	t	t	n	t
	ฐ	ณ	พ	ฟ	ภ	ม	ย	ร	ล	ว	ฬ	ฮ
Initial	t	n	p	f	p	m	y	r	l	w	l	h
Final	t	n	p	–	p	m	–	n	n	–	n	–

Mid Class

	ก	จ	ฎ	ฏ	ด	ต	บ	ป	อ
Initial	g	j	d	dt	d	dt	b	bp	silent
Final	k	t	t	t	t	t	p	p	silent

High Class

	ข	ช	ฉ	ฐ	ถ	ผ	ฝ	ศ	ษ	ส	ห
Initial	k	k*	ch	t	t	p	f	s	s	s	h
Final	k	k*	t	t	t	p	–	t	t	t	–

Vowels (There are several additional compound vowels not listed here for sake of simplicity.)

Short

เ	เ	เ	อ	เ	แ	โ	เ	เ	เ	เ	เ
ah	e	eu	ou	ae	aa	oh	au	eu	iea	eua	oua

Long

เ	เ	เ	อ	เ	แ	โ	อ	เ	เ	เ	เ
ah	ee	eu	ou	ae	aa	oh	aw	eu	iea	eua	oua
เ	เ	เ	เ								
um	ai	ai	ow								

There are so many different rules for determining the tone of the word that I won't even attempt to explain. For example: ลูกปลา sounds like: *Luke/blah* (falling tone/mid tone) and น้ฐ sounds like *Nut* (high tone).

In Closing

In closing I would first like to thank you for taking the time to read this entire article. It has taken me a few weeks to write. As I have mentioned before I am not and do not pretend to be an expert on Thai culture. I am simply an exchange student telling things how I see it. If you do not like what I say, that is fine with me. I however hope that this information is helpful to you. I know it would be to me if I had it to begin with. I would like to wish you the best of luck on your exchange. You will discover more about yourself in the next year then you ever have (and likely ever will). I will miss Phuket. But at the same time I am happy to be getting away from here. It has a strange way of demoralizing a person. Feel free to show this to your mother, father, sisters, brothers, friends, and even your neighbor's cat. If you do please make sure my name and address are included on it. Also please feel free to add your own information and give it to the next exchange student coming in.

Who is Brett Flegg?

Brett Flegg AKA นั้ฐเีียวหวาน was born in Toronto, Ontario Canada on September 4, 1979. He now resides in Brockville, Ontario, Canada and attends grade 13 at Brockville Collegiate Institute. He is a future Computer Science grad at the University of Waterloo. He has 15 years experience with computers and currently owns and operates a computer programming company called Peak Software. You can contact him any of the following ways:

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