

GENERAL INFORMATION ON THAILAND

Country Code: + 66 **Time Zone:** GMT +7 **Currency:** Thai Baht (THB) **Voltage:** 220 V

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

Located in South-East Asia, Thailand is bordered by Malaysia and the Gulf of Thailand to the south, Myanmar and the Andaman Sea to the west, Cambodia to the east and the Lao People's Democratic Republic to the north and north-east. Thailand covers about 513,000 square kilometres, stretching approximately 1,715 kilometres from north to south and 915 kilometres at its widest point from east to west. As of April 2000 it had a population of 60.6 million, one of the most homogeneous in South-East Asia with a sprinkling of ethnic Chinese, Malays, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Burmese, Indians, non-Thai hill tribes and others. In terms of population it is the fourth largest state in South-East Asia.

The country can be divided into four natural regions: the mountainous north, where temperatures are cool enough for the cultivation of lychees and strawberries; the north-east, a rolling semi-arid plateau bounded on the north and east by the Mekong River; the isthmus of the south with its hilly rubber plantations, fruit orchards, coves and bays; and the central region, the basin of the Chao Phraya River and a most fertile rice-growing area. This region has become the administrative, political and commercial centre of the country.

Bangkok has a tropical monsoonal climate with high humidity, but it is located outside the typhoon belt. Most of the country experiences three seasons, the cool season from November to January, the hot season from February to April and the rainy season from May to October. The average rainfall (mostly in the form of heavy showers in the rainy season) is 142 centimetres and the annual mean temperature is 28 degrees Celsius, ranging from a night minimum of 20 degrees Celsius in the cool season to a maximum day temperature of 38 degrees Celsius in the hot season. With the high humidity the weather can be oppressive, but the widespread use of air-conditioners alleviates the heat and humidity.

Bangkok

Bangkok, known as Krung Thep (City of Angels) in Thai, has been the capital since 1782. It has grown rapidly in recent years as the percentage of urban residents in Thailand has increased to 40 per cent in 1999 from only 13 per cent in 1970. Bangkok's official population figures are 6.3 million, making it the predominant urban area in Thailand. Unofficially the total could reach 10 million. Almost all major domestic and foreign companies are located in the capital, as are all government ministries and most of the country's leading educational and medical facilities, and sporting and cultural activities. Bangkok is the focal point of Thailand's aviation, railroad and communications networks, as well as the first destination for the majority of tourists who come to occupy its more than 20,000 hotel rooms. Bangkok, with its huge and diverse population, its shopping centres and high-rise office buildings, its many Western-style apartment buildings, and its cosmopolitan sophistication, is truly an international city, but it still retains temple compounds, Chinese shophouses and a vibrant street life.

The rapid growth of Bangkok has severely strained its facilities, causing a number of serious problems. The city now has over a million registered motor vehicles and because of the limited road surface, traffic congestion is heavy in downtown areas. Traffic, construction work and industries located in the suburbs all contribute to an increasing pollution problem, with dangerously high levels of suspended particulate matter from diesel and two-stroke vehicle engines.

Western influence and the predominance of the young have created a taste for new fashions and new lifestyles, reflected in the growing popularity of tennis and golf, delicatessens and boutiques, music and drama, architecture and interior decoration. Fast foods from the West, such as hamburgers, fried chicken and pizzas, have become popular with young and old alike.

HISTORY

Historically Thailand has been a South-East Asian migratory, cultural and religious crossroads. Indeed there are conflicting opinions as to the origins of the Thai people. It was thought that they originated in north-western Szechuan in China about 4,500 years ago and later migrated to their present homeland. The first recorded mention of the Thai people occurs in the records of the southern Chinese kingdom of Nan Chao which existed in the Yangtze River region in 700 AD. However, the discovery of prehistoric artifacts in Ban Chiang in north-eastern Thailand, including evidence of a bronze metallurgy in 3000 BC, and a rice-growing culture going back to 4000 BC suggest that these people later scattered to various parts of Asia. A third theory suggests the Thais were originally of Austronesian, rather than Mongoloid, stock and migrated northwards from the Malay archipelago.

People of Indian origin came to South-East Asia around the third century BC, bringing with them Buddhism and Brahmanism. By the ninth to the eleventh century AD an "Indianized" civilization, called Dvaravati, existed in central and western Thailand. Its people, the Mons, established Theravada Buddhism as the dominant religion, but little else is known of them. By the eleventh to twelfth centuries, Mon dominance was replaced by the Khmer empire to the east. This was a tightly organized society with remarkable capacities for territorial and cultural expansion. From its capital in Angkor, it stretched into the north-east, centre and west of Thailand. The Khmers played a significant role in the evolution of Thai art, architecture and court life.

In the thirteenth century as Khmer power was waning, the first uniquely Thai kingdom was founded in northern Thailand at Sukhothai. It was a brief, but brilliant era, during which the third king, Ramkhamhaeng, devised an alphabet for the Thai language, purified the local Buddhism, established diplomatic relations with China and encouraged a flowering of artistic expression in sculpture and architecture. During the latter half of the fourteenth century, poor leadership and the emergence of strong Thai states further south, particularly Ayutthaya, led to the decline of Sukhothai.

For over 400 years, Ayutthaya was the dominant power in the Chao Phraya basin. Thai culture flourished and the nation's political power was greatly extended, spanning parts of present-day Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia and Myanmar. To administer this kingdom a hierarchical social system, with the monarchs seen as god-kings, and a complex administrative system, precursor of the present Thai bureaucracy, was evolved. Foreigners arrived in the sixteenth century, international trade flourished and Ayutthaya became one of South-East Asia's richest emporia, comparing favourably with Paris and London.

Unfortunately, Ayutthaya's relations with its neighbours were not always cordial and in 1767, after a 15-month siege, the Burmese captured Ayutthaya, sacking and burning the city, and destroying most of its artistic treasures and official archives. Yet within a few years of this shattering defeat, a half-Chinese general, Phraya Taksin, had not only defeated all his rivals but also the Burmese invaders. He became king and established his capital in Thonburi, strategically situated near the mouth of the Chao Phraya River. However, the strain of fighting the invaders and building a new state took its toll on the king. Following an internal political conflict in 1782 a fellow general, Chao Phraya Chakri, was chosen king.

The new king, Rama I, established Bangkok as the capital and founded the Chakri dynasty of which the ruling monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, is the ninth king. The first three kings devoted themselves to nation-building. The following two kings, Rama IV and Rama V, through clever diplomacy and westernizing policies, were able to avoid the colonial fate of Thailand's neighbours. Rama V abolished slavery and corvée labour, introduced postal and telegraph services, built railways and secular schools and reorganized and modernized government ministries. For these achievements, he is the most loved and honoured of all past Chakri kings. The absolute monarchy continued until 1932, when the global economic depression and the return of Western-educated Thais led to demands for reform. The king (Rama VII) had written a new constitution, but before he could persuade his conservative relatives to accept it, a bloodless revolution took place, establishing a constitutional monarchy on 10 December 1932. Two years later, Rama VII abdicated and the throne passed to his nephew, the young King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII) who continued his studies in Switzerland. During the Second World War, the Thai Government allied itself with the Axis powers, but there was a very strong Free Thai movement, which was of great help to the Allies. Consequently, Thailand was spared having to make severe wartime reparations. Rama VIII returned to Thailand after the Second World War, reigning until 1946. He was succeeded by his brother, King Bhumipol, the monarch. Their Majesties King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit were very active in promoting numerous national development, agricultural and social welfare projects. They are highly respected and deeply loved by the entire population and thus were a strongly unifying force.

ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

The Thai economy is dynamic, with exports of goods and services accounting for over 70 per cent of GDP in 2008. Main export commodities include rice, textiles and computer technology. Tourism also contributes significantly to the Thai economy, accounting for about 6 per cent of GDP.

Thailand has had a long history of international dealings and trade with other countries that have influenced its economy. Thailand has been fortunate to have a rich supply and diversity of natural resources, as well as large stretches of fertile land and favorable growing conditions. This base of natural resources and cultivatable soil gave Thailand a strong agrarian foundation on which it has built a complex, multifaceted economy, which is now well established in the industrial and high technology sectors. In the 1970s, an industrial sector based on import substitution began to emerge. By the 1980s, the emphasis had changed to export-oriented manufacturing based on labor-intensive products. This enabled Thailand, from the mid-1980s, to embark on a decade of rapid economic growth, averaging close to 10 per cent a year. By the 1990s, the fastest growing export commodities were higher technology goods, such as computer accessories and motor vehicle parts. The standards of living improved dramatically, an aspiring middle class emerged, and skyscrapers dominated Bangkok's skyline.

As a focal point of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, Thailand was severely hit and a decade long economic boom ended with a sharp GDP decrease of 10 per cent in 1998. The country's economy recovered, however, and reached annual growth rates of around 5 per cent over the recent decade while considerably reducing poverty. As the world experienced economic crisis in late 2008, GDP contracted in tandem with most countries. However, the Thai economy was more resilient than in 1997 due to regulatory reforms over the past decade and prudent macroeconomic management.

The Thai currency is the Baht, which is divided into 100 satang. Coins are issued in 10 Baht, five, two and one Baht, as well as 50 and 25 satang, denominations. Notes are issued in denominations of 1,000, 500, 100, 50 and 20 Baht. The current US dollar to baht exchange rate can be found on the following web sites: www.ethailand.com or <http://bangkokpost.com>.

RELIGION

Buddhism is the national religion of Thailand but there is total religious freedom and all major religions can be found in practice. Many of the Thai festivals are linked not only to Buddhist, but also to Brahman rituals. There is absolute freedom of religion – Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and other faiths are practiced and protected by the constitution. Buddhism is the faith of 95 per cent of the population, 4 per cent are Muslims, 0.5 percent are Christians, and the remainder Hindus, Sikhs and other religion.

CULTURE

The Thai people are traditionally noted for their politeness, tolerance, peaceful way of life and love of freedom. Although Thailand has suffered periodic invasions, and was occupied by Japan in the Second World War, the strong desire for freedom has not been dampened. Bloodless coups and the absence of civil wars are evidence of the strong desire for a peaceful way of life. It is a society of relationships, not one of law. To understand Thai culture, knowledge of Buddhist philosophy is helpful. The Thais have a genius for absorbing outside influences while retaining their own identity. For example, from about 1850 until just after the Second World War there was a

steady flow of immigrants from China who established themselves in commerce throughout the country. The Government has successfully encouraged the assimilation of the Chinese people, with the result that second and third generation Tae Jiu, Cantonese and Hokkien regard themselves first and foremost as Thais.

There are certain recognizable Thai cultural markers that, if ignored, could make life in the office a little difficult. Well over 90 per cent of the ESCAP General Service staff are Thai nationals. Some of these markers will be familiar to other Asian peoples:

1. Face

People are accorded their own personal dignity, so it is considered very impolite to cause them to lose their dignity through confronting them over a mistake or embarrassing them. Avoiding confrontation, embarrassment or negativity allows people to "save face".

2. Sanook (fun)

Anything worth doing should have an element of fun or it becomes pure drudgery. Of course, this is easier if several people are working together rather than in isolation. This possibly dates back to the days when the whole community would be involved in the rice harvest or in building someone a new house. One of the meanings of the Thai word for "work" is "party".

3. Relationships/deference

Since the time of Ayutthaya, Thai society has been hierarchical in terms of age, social class, wealth and power. Therefore, it is difficult to find two people who are equal in all respects. In order to lubricate this rather rigid system, a set of duties and rights for unequal relationships has been evolved. It is sometimes called the patron-client relationship. The clients respect the patrons (for example, subordinates do not challenge their boss in meetings, preferring to work behind the scenes) and the patrons are obligated to care for or sponsor their clients (for example, the clients can ask for favors involving money and jobs and the patron always has to pay the restaurant bill!).

4. Comportment

Thailand is a relatively formal country where looks and behavior are important and can determine how foreigners are perceived and treated. A neat and clean appearance, discreet relations with the opposite sex, and subtle, quiet modes of expression are respected. Thus, casual leisure wear is not seen in the office and

displays of impatience and temper are very much frowned upon. Skimpily beach wear, loud behaviour and an unkempt appearance are offensive to Thai people.

5. Respect for the monarchy and religion

It is taboo to speak disrespectfully of the royal family and of Buddhism. Not to stand for the royal anthem or to enter a temple wearing shorts and a singlet is considered very disrespectful. Any derogatory act that can be construed as *lèse-majesté* is a criminal offence.

In addition, there are certain social norms, such as the “wai” (the placing together of both hands and raising them to the chest or face) rather than the handshake. Some social taboos are as follows:

Do not:

- Touch another person's head
- Point with the feet (be careful when sitting with one leg crossed over the other)
- Wear shoes in the house or in a temple
- Touch a monk, however inadvertently, if you are a woman
- Make public displays of affection between the sexes

LANGUAGE

Thai is the official language of the country, taught in all the schools, with four distinct dialects in the different regions. It is a tonal language with five tones: rising, falling, mid, high and low. This means that one letter may have several different sounds and one sound may be represented by different letters. Mostly monosyllabic, Thai has few tenses, but a great abundance of pronouns that are used to reflect status. The literacy rate is 93.8 per cent. The English transliteration of Thai words may vary considerably, for example, the street on which the United Nations Building stands can be written as: Rajdamnoen, Rajdamnern, Rajadamnern, Rajadamnoen or Ratchadamnoen.

THAI CUISINE

Thai cuisine is justifiably world famous. It is a subtle and complex blend of Chinese, Indian, Malay and Polynesian influences. Seasoned with garlic, ginger and chillies, it mixes lime juice, lemon grass, fresh coriander, basil, galanga root, tamarind juice, ground peanuts and coconut milk. Dishes range from pungent curries, spicy salads, barbecued meat and seafood, to mild noodle dishes that can be made spicy by adding different sauces. It surprises in its mix of meat and

seafood in the same dish and in the way it is served. There are some very sweet desserts, some deriving from Portuguese dishes, and a great range of tropical fruits. In a Thai meal, all the dishes are put in the center of the table to be shared, but only one serving at a time is eaten with the rice. Serving spoons are not always provided. Thai food is eaten with a spoon in the right hand and a fork in the left hand. Chopsticks are used for noodle dishes.

MISCELLANEOUS

Local weights and measures.

The metric system is generally used, although the following Thai weights and measurements are still in common use:

(a) Surface measurements

- one *rai* equals 1,600 square metres (one acre = two and a half *rai*; one hectare = six and a quarter *rai*);
- one square *wah* equals four square metres (1 *wah* = 2 meters)
- one *niew* equals one inch

(b) Weights

- one *keed* equals 100 grams

Electricity supply: 220 volts and 50 cycles; equipment using 110 volts can only be used in Thailand with a good transformer.

Calendar: Although the Western calendar is widely used, the official Thai calendar follows the Buddhist era (BE) that begins with the nirvana of the Lord Buddha 2,548 years ago. The difference between the western and Thai calendar is 543 years. Thus, the conversion formula is to add 543 to the western year to arrive at the Thai year. (For example, 2005 in Western calendar is 2548 in Thai.)

DVDs and Videocassettes: The PAL system is used, although television sets, DVD players and VCRs can be bought which are dual-voltage and multi-system. In addition, Thailand falls under region 3 of the DVD standard. This means that the DVD encoded for use in a different region may not play in Thailand unless one has a region free player or a player that allows the region to be selected. Recordable DVDs such as those created on a home computer should be playable in any DVD player.

USEFUL SERVICES

Banks

There are foreign banks in Bangkok, including the Bank of America, Bank of Tokyo, CitiBank, Standard Chartered Bank, Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, and many local banks such as Bangkok Bank, Siam Commercial Bank and the Kasikorn Bank. But most of these banks are difficult to get to during office hours.

The Siam Commercial Bank has a branch in the United Nations Building, on the first floor of the Service Building. Banking hours are from 0830 to 1530, Monday to Friday. Remittance facilities are provided by the bank subject to exchange control regulations. United Nations staff may maintain offshore deposit dollar accounts.

Staff members may bring into Thailand unrestricted amounts of foreign currency, such as traveller's cheques, drafts, letters of credit or other banking instruments that may be exchanged for Thai currency at the prevailing exchange rates. It may be necessary to declare the amount of foreign currency on arrival to customs at Bangkok International Airport.

Hospitals

There is a Medical Centre on the fourth floor of the Service Building with a full-time medical doctor and a registered nurse in attendance. They not only provide immediate medical help, but can prescribe repeat medications and advise on specialists in Bangkok hospitals.

There are several excellent private and public hospitals in Bangkok, some with doctors trained in the United States and the United Kingdom and therefore English-speaking. Most of the hospitals have dental units, eye clinics as well as the usual Ear, Nose and Throat departments. Names of hospitals where the United Nations Medical Service usually refer patients to are: Bumrungrad, Bangkok, BNH, Mission (Bangkok Adventist), Phya Thai, Samitivej and Vichaiyut. There are some private medical care centres providing qualified nannies, but most of them do not speak English.

Postal services

Postal services are comprehensive, but occasionally unreliable and vulnerable to theft. Airmail from Europe takes three to seven days, surface mail six to ten weeks. Airmail from North America takes five to ten days, surface mail seven to ten weeks. Parcel post is available to nearly all countries. All incoming packages are subject to customs inspection so it is important to register articles of value. This is also advisable to avoid theft. There is a Thai post office in the United Nations Building, which is open from 0800 to 1600 hours. Overseas telephone calls and fax transmissions can be made at the post office at government-regulated charge rates. For official purposes only, there are United Nations pouch services twice weekly to New York and weekly to Geneva, Rome and Vienna and some countries in the region.

There is a home mail delivery service in Bangkok, but it is recommended that the office address be used for personal mail.

Communications

Thailand has an international telephone service through satellites, with excellent connections worldwide. However, the Bangkok telephone network is overloaded and misconnections are common, hence the phenomenal increase in mobile phones. Long-distance and overseas calls are relatively expensive. Internet-based phone services and phone cards are becoming increasingly popular although the quality varies.

Domestic services

Domestic help is still available and common in Bangkok. Houses and most apartments have servants' quarters. Household help can be found through reputable agencies, or through recommendations from colleagues. Standards of English (and other languages), competence and honesty vary considerably, so it is important to check references, to ask for copies of ID cards, to pay for a medical examination and to have a month's trial period.

Wages for full-time positions range from Baht 10,000 to 20,000 with accommodation and three meals. For part-time positions, the rates range from Baht 500 to Baht 1,000 for four hours.

Internationally recruited staff may be entitled to sponsor one household help from his/her home country depending on the family situation. For further information, please contact the Human Resources Management Section and Protocol Office at the following email address: escap-hrms@un.org or at fax no. 662-288-1045.

Religious services

The main places of worship are:

Catholic:	Assumption Cathedral, 23 Oriental Lane, Charoen Krung Road Holy Redeemer Church, 123/19 Soi Ruam Rudee, Ploenchit Road
Muslim:	Haroon Mosque, Charoen Krung Road (near the General Post Office) Darool Aman Mosque, Petchburi Road (near Rajthewi Circle) Masjid Jamiul Khoyriya, Banthadathong Road Rajathewee District (nearest to ESCAP)
Jewish:	Jewish Association of Thailand, 121/3 Soi 22, Sukhumvit Road
Episcopalian/Anglican:	Christ Church, 11 Convent Road
Protestant:	Calvary Baptist Church, 88 Soi 2, Sukhumvit Road International Church, Soi 19, Sukhumvit Road

Seventh Day Adventist: Bangkok Ekamai Church, 57 Soi Charoenchai Ekamai Rd.

Bangkok Chinese Church: 1325 Rama IV Road