

Mai Pen Rai

Accounts of study and travel in Chiang Mai

Story and photos by Elyse Briggs

There are no pretenses in Chiang Mai. Things are what they seem and that's ALL that there is. My journeys to Thailand, in search of the culture and spirituality upon which Thai Massage is based, continue to provide life-altering experiences and way more than I ever expect.

My first trip in 1997 was one of those experiences that one never forgets. At the time, as a teacher of Massage Therapy, I was adept and competent in conveying and applying all practical aspects of client and practitioners' body mechanics with a fair amount of expertise. When I first discovered Thai Massage in 1996, all else paled by comparison. I had little else on my mind other than wanting to inhale it. So what was a girl to do? Get on a plane and GO!

Upon arrival in Chiang Mai, the second largest city in Thailand located just west of the Burmese border and south of China,

I was greeted with modest smiles, prayer positioned hands, bowing heads and "Sawadee" (the Thai word for welcome, hello, good morning, good night and good-bye.) The very first thing I noticed was that I wasn't in Los Angeles anymore. A tornado dropped my house in the middle of Chiang Mai and the "Good Witch of the North" followed me every step of the way. After having learned the basics of how to say, "Sawadee-ka" ("Ka" because, I'm female), "How are you?", "How do you get to...?" and "Where's the bathroom?", my journey into the soul of Thai Massage among the most gracious people in the universe, began.

Ancient Thai Massage, (Nuad Boran) is a unique form of body therapy dating back to ancient times (2500 years or so, ago). This traditional form of massage incorporates elements of gentle rocking, deep stretching and rhythmic compression to create a unique therapeutic massage experience.



A great grandfather and his great grandson, outside Chiang Mai.

Although I have since studied with many other Masters and Teachers, my first Thai-based learning experience was through I T M, International Training Massage in Chiang Mai. The charming, smiling, welcoming master, Chongkol Setthakorn and his wife Atchara saw to it that every request, concern and desire was seen to. This behavior was true of all the people of Chiang Mai. Lessons began every day at 9 A.M. with an hour of instructed Yoga using many of the positions (including some Tai Chi) utilized in performing Thai Massage. Chongkol demonstrated as he talked about moving and freeing blocked energy and the body's own ability to heal



*Entrance to ITM, in Santitham, Chiang Mai.
photo by Bob Haddad*

itself if given the opportunity. Day after day, we were given different instruction and time to practice on each other. My fellow students included people of all ages from Israel, Belgium, Switzerland, Great Britain, Canada, South America, Australia and South Africa, just to name a few of the countries represented. Some were massage practitioners beginning and advanced, some teachers, some students and some just massage enthusiasts. It was suggested by the staff at ITM that anyone who intends to take the course, MUST receive a massage by their trained staff on the belief that "it is beneficial to experience the feeling of Thai Massage before or during the course." No problem! On the wall in the classroom is a poster which states, "The length of massage ranges from 1-3 hours. A 1 hour massage will give a very basic idea of Thai Massage. We recommend a massage of anywhere between 2-3 hours for a more complete and fulfilling massage experience. 1 1/2 hours is OK, 2 hours is GOOD, 2 1/2 hours is BETTER, 3 hours is THE BEST." They were right...3 hours really was best!

Being a partner in the dance of a 3 hour Thai Massage was extraordinary at the very least. Part of the first hour I found my body and mind adjusting to the rhythm of the movement and ambiance in the room because it was NOT a quiet and relaxing atmosphere. The session was carried out in a clinic-like atmosphere with many people lying on mattresses placed very close to each other. Mothers were receiving massages while their children ran around and the practitioners spoke to each other in Thai about what could have been shopping, daily activities and maybe even a little gossip. I was thankful I couldn't understand much.

Not long into the second hour I was no longer 'present.' All noises seemed to fade and I remember feeling like I was floating. My surroundings felt as though they were in liquid form and every now and then, when my practitioner asked me to turn or inquired if I was feeling OK, I eased back into the here and now, but only for the moment. My 3 hours seemed like an hour and a half and I THINK I took a red cab (I'll explain about these later) back to my guest house.



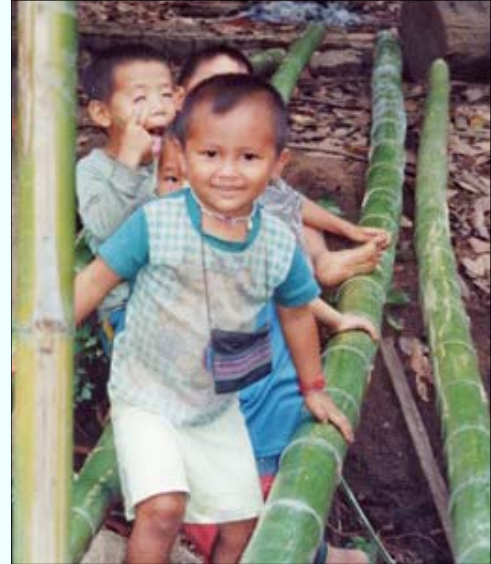
Motorbike for three, Chiang Mai.

Patience and temperance prevail in Chiang Mai. The Thais have a saying, “Mai Pen Rai.” It means it’s okay, it was nothing, it doesn’t matter, never mind. Nothing really DOES matter. Buddhism is the predominant religion and at least on the surface, worries are non-existent. Living in the moment is a way of life because, let’s face it, that’s all there is. I just forget sometimes. Crime is also non-existent, or at least it seemed to be from my perspective. The exchange rate of the Thai *baht* is about 40 to the US dollar, and a three-course dinner is about 80 baht or two U.S. dollars. Salaries are low but so are living expenses, and despite the often austere living conditions, everyone appears cheerful most of the time.

There are no traffic laws and yet I haven’t seen many accidents or wrecked cars. Men and women in hi-fashion business suits can be found straddling motor bikes. Taxis are pickup trucks and *tuk-tuks*, a motor scooter with a cab welded onto the back. Seat belts are not always available. Why bother when you’ve got your three kids sandwiched between you and your significant other on a motor bike? “Mai Pen Rai.”

Walking alone at night is no problem. If you’re alone and a little lost, anyone will go out of their way to help you. They may even take you there themselves. It’s hard not to love everyone you meet. My tendency is to hug those who help, but the Thais generally don’t hug. They bow in hand prayer position. I’m happy to report that since my first visit the hugging ratio has risen in Thailand.

My personal love affair was with the children. There are lots of children and they are all loved. The family is a revered concept. Sometimes nine or ten live under the same roof. Early in the morning everyone in the family is working, opening the business, preparing food, cleaning the kids. Older children coddle and feed younger kids. Each day as I passed and extended the greeting “Sawadee-ka,” parents helped their very young children form hand prayers, “Sawadee, sawadee!”



Children play with bamboo logs, Chiang Mai

It's my last day in Chiang Mai, I hail a taxi (a red pick-up truck) to go the Old Medicine Hospital to get a Thai Massage from Song (he and his wife are the best, should you ever visit there). The usual fare is ten baht. The driver looks me over and tells me "Hok-sib" (60 baht!). Before I even get a chance to haggle, which is customary and expected, a woman, probably in her late 60s screams at the driver from the back of the cab in Thai! They start to scream at each other. And I know what's going on. She motions for me to get in...and I do. She tells me in broken English that he's a crook (I was sure there weren't any in Chaing Mai!) and that he was trying to take advantage of me. She says that I should tell drivers like him that I've been living in Chiang Mai for five years and that I will only give him only ten baht!!! Well, it comes time for her to get out of the cab and I hear the driver tell her "Yi-sib" while pointing to me. He was telling her that my fare was now 20 baht! At this, she took my hand, pulled me out of the back of the cab, yelled some more of what I'm sure were obscenities, at the driver, didn't pay him HER fare and ushered me onto another red cab and told the driver "Sib baht!" She took my hand in hers, assuring me that the ride to the Old Medicine Hospital would only be ten baht! "Be careful," she said. I responded "Khap Khun-Ka" (Thank You). She smiled, "Mai Pen Rai." Mai Pen Rai.



A sangthaew, a red public taxi.

Upon returning to the USA, my phone rings, "Welcome home, I need a massage. Can you fit me in?" My daughter fusses over the wrong dress. My dog, once again on the wrong side of the door demands his morning walk. My understanding husband urges me to hang on to my newly found state of "calm" as long as I possibly can.

Now, many years later, my Thai Massage classes at The Massage School of Santa Monica and Yoga At The Village are thriving. With each new group of students, I look forward to sharing with them the treasures I received from the irresistible people of Chiang Mai: treasures in the form of knowledge, warmth and the gift of *Mai Pen Rai*... because everything really IS okay.

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