

Thai Culture Spotlight : Northern Hill Tribe People

The words “hill tribe” refer to ethnic minorities living in the mountainous northern regions of Thailand. Each tribal group has its own language, customs, native dress and spiritual beliefs. Most hill tribe people migrated to Thailand from Burma, China, Tibet and Laos over the past 200-300 years. There are believed to be over twenty different ethnic groups numbering over half a million people in Thailand today. Of these, the six dominant tribes are Yao, Karen, Akha, Lahu, Hmong and Lisu. Though in the past, many tribal groups cultivated opium for resale, government-sponsored initiatives have provided funding and education to empower the people to grow other crops such as beans, coffee, vegetables and flowers. These same education programs encourage the hill tribe people to abstain from slash-and-burn agriculture, which over extended periods of time, causes serious damage to hardwood forests.



Each tribe and village have their own preferences for style and design of houses. For the most part, houses are built based on two basic designs: either on the ground with a beaten earth floor, or elevated off the ground on stilts. Materials commonly used are bamboo poles, split bamboo and planks of wood, natural rope and thatch for the roof, such as fronds of palm leaves. In current-day Thailand, contact and trade between tribal village people and city dwellers are frequent. The younger generation often migrate to the cities in search of education, jobs and long-term careers. Some of them return back to the villages to live and work, but many of them remain in the mainstream of Thai culture, and return to the village only occasionally to visit family and friends.

Tourists to northern Thailand will often see many tribal people selling their handmade products and souvenirs. These days, most of them speak enough English to use in their trade, and some speak other Western languages as well.



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