

Not like home

Our daughter loves Nongkhai and her new friends, the Thais and foreigners in the Openmind Houses. They have loads of fun in their free time. The only thing she finds difficult is adapting to the Thai life-style. The school where she is volunteering is a lot different to Swedish schools.

For example, the lessons are not always on time or they may not even have a lesson. Maybe the teacher doesn't show up. So sometimes she doesn't feel like she's of any use or that she is needed. But that is Thai culture. The children love her and she loves them. And she does feel that she is doing something good for the children.



One day at Ban Chieng-Ard

At eight o'clock one morning we get picked up by a teacher, Nitaya Pinkhots, at the OPM House. We are on a day tour at the Ban Chieng-Ard School. That is the School where our daughter is volunteering. It's about 20 km east of Nongkhai, out in the country. Nitaya tells us in her local English that there are about 435 students at the school between the ages of 4 and 15.

The uniforms and food are free; the students don't have to pay for them. It's a school for poor kids. The richer kids go to nicer schools in town. In this poor part of Thailand, the grown-ups often move to Bangkok when the kids are a few years old. In Bangkok the parents work in some kind of factory. That means that the kids stay with their grandparents. The parents send money home every month. They only get to see their kids about four times a year. This has been going on for generations.



Simple living conditions

On the way to school, we pass houses where most of the kids from the school live. We also pass some nicer houses on the way to school. Nitaya tells us that in nicer houses like these, you often find a Thai woman married to a Western man. That's a common way for uneducated women in Thailand to have better life.

But Nitaya tells us that in school they work very hard to make the girls understand that there are other options. By getting an education and getting a good job, they can have an even better life.

The kids are laughing and screaming "farangs" when they see us. "Farang" means "western." But it began as an expression for French people.

Every morning the kids line up in the schoolyard where they sing the national anthem and raise the flag. We get to join them and it's really a solemn feeling to see them standing in long rows in their uniforms.

The kids are very friendly and happy, and they really try to understand every English word we say. And they repeat everything we say. They really glow all over.

Row 1 in the VIP tent

Today it's the yearly mass aerobics competition between the five nearby villages. Even though we're in an area that's very poor, they have built a large stage with big speakers. It's almost bigger than a rock concert. The music is loud from all the shows. These competitions are one of the year's biggest events among the village children. And all the really fashionable people seem to be there as well. In the middle of the first row in the VIP tent, they've put a leather sofa. And that's where Nongkhai's mayor is going to sit. We are placed in the same row.

We can't stay all day, but we get to join them in an exclusive opening ceremony and also join the thousands of people in the aerobics. It is really nice.

A lot of kids and teachers wear costumes. It's a good time. And some girls walk around to make sure everyone has water because it's really hot.

Eventful Day

We get to join in some English lessons and computer lessons. I try to be a computer teacher, but it's not easy because the children barely know any English. Pretty soon I know the Thai word for computer mouse and start menu. Everything is written in Thai, but luckily they have symbols, so I understand them.

We eat good Thai food for lunch and then it's time for us to go back to Nongkhai with Nitaya.

OpenmindProjects

OpenmindProjects has projects in this part of Thailand, but they also have projects throughout the country. At the moment, they have about sixty ongoing school projects. In addition, they have projects in eco-tourism and tsunami relief.

The founder of OpenmindProjects is a Swede, Sven Mauleon. He has worked for many years with the World Bank and UN on development projects in both eastern and western Europe

Sven tells us that in the 90s 'the digital divide' became a big concern, that it would increase the gap between rich and poor, between people who had access to IT technology and those who didn't. And it also divided old and young people. Sven has traveled to Thailand and Asia over many years. At the beginning of the twenty-first century he got the idea to try some form of project to increase the IT skills among poor kids in Thailand. He wanted to start far from Bangkok to find areas that had few opportunities, and the choice was Nong Khai, in northeastern Thailand.

Volunteers

Reports of his work spread and soon a lot of people requested to volunteer, especially from English-speaking countries like the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia. A lot of these were teachers. And it was thus by chance that OpenmindProjects became a volunteer-type organization: instead of fighting for money from big organizations to finance the projects, Sven saw the volunteer model as a better alternative. In most of these volunteer organizations the volunteers themselves pay to participate. Sven's idea was to have a minimal organization to keep the cost to volunteers low.

Sven hired some young Thais. He was cautious about the choices so as not to choose the rich and well off. In a short period of time they had their website, and that's how people learned about OpenmindProjects.

They began to realize that English is important to create good opportunities for the Thai children and teenagers. So computer and English lessons became the foundation for the organization to build on. Computers were donated from countries far and near.

Additional resources

The volunteers are careful not to take over the work at the schools, and that they remain only *additional* resources. And they try not to become permanent at any particular school. The idea is that the activities will live on even when the volunteers leave. The volunteers usually stay one to six months.

Sven's thought is that the Western volunteers will give the Thai children **an idea** of the world and an opportunity to hear good English. The young Thais who work for OpenmindProjects serve as good role models for other young people because they are living proof that you can go further in life with meaningful jobs.

Sven hopes that the many different projects will be handled by the young the Thai people so that way he can start new projects and OpenmindProjects can expand to new places

Volunteer work is a good way for young people to travel around the world and to get to know new cultures. They get to meet lots of people and get thrown into everyday life, which gives them a lot of experience, and at the same time they're doing something meaningful.

About the author
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A travel happy 48 years old guy living in Tanumshede, Sweden. Can mostly be found at marketing department of Extra Film, outdoors, with his camera, the Friskis&Svettis work out, on a bike, on a trip or at home with his wife and a nice dinner with a glass of Italian red.

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