

Open Mind Project Opens Our Hearts

Contributed by Cliff Gates

Open Mind Projects (<http://www.openmindprojects.org>) is a non profit organization based in Thailand. Their main goal is to help underprivileged children in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Nepal, learn about and use computers and also to learn English, so that the children have a chance to advance themselves. A second goal of the Project is to contribute to the fight against increasing threats to our environment, nature and animals. Open Mind provides volunteers to teach English skills to local guides. The goal is to help the guides improve their earning potential by increasing their English skills so that they can attract visitors to their area. In a sense, they encourage the guides to work with nature rather than continue to deplete it.

Open Mind is able to make this possible by providing international volunteers to work with local teachers and children. By offering international volunteers the chance to live with and teach in these communities, the volunteers experience personal growth and also provide a very important financial contribution to the villages. In our case, our role was to go to two remote villages in Laos to teach English to the local eco guides, and to contribute to the villages by paying for our lodging costs and meals. Even though this was very short visit one week in each case, our contributions were thought to be a useful contribution to these communities.



Why Volunteer?

My wife, Chris, and I really like to travel overseas to interesting areas, but in some cases we have been slightly disappointed by the lack of real communication with the local people. In many cases there is a real separation, almost a disdain, shown to westerners.

Since we were going to be away for two months, we wanted to find a way to meet with and work with local people rather than simply breeze in and out as tourists. So Chris went on to the web, did some research and she found the Open Mind Projects.

It is a fairly small organization, easy to work with, and their goals made sense to us. So after some reference checks, we decided to become Open Mind volunteers.



Our Journey to Open Mind Projects

First we flew to Bangkok – a 27 hour journey from Canada via Vancouver and Beijing. In Bangkok we stayed three days to catch up with the time change.

Bangkok is not for the faint of heart – it is a party town for western visitors and the local people really hustle for your business. After being cheated a few times, some-times quite elaborately, we were glad to move on.

Our journey to Nong Khai, in the north of Thailand, in an overnight second class sleeper train was also quite grueling. It was a huge relief to arrive at the Open Mind Training Center. There we were welcomed, given a place

to stay and shown around the town by local people from the office.



A “tuk-tuk,” a motor bike-driven taxi

Nong Khai is a town of about 100,000 located on the Mekong River. There is some industry there, lots of shops, it is a center for the nearby rice farming, and there is quite a bit of traffic going to Laos across the Freedom Bridge. It was an easy place to stay. There were great restaurants along the river and interesting shops and markets if you needed to get things.



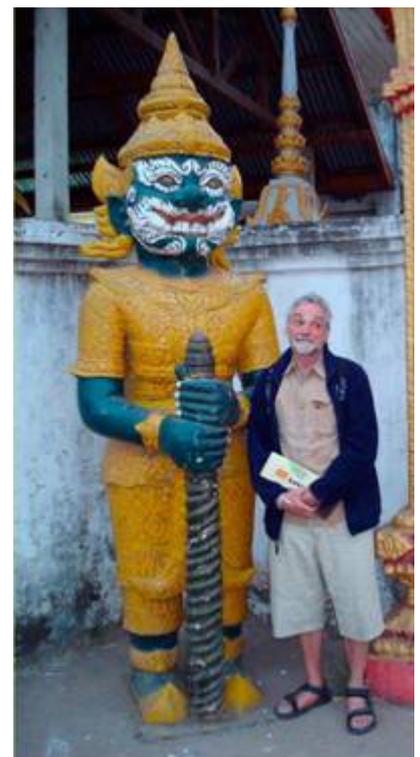
Once settled in, we received a three day orientation course with six other volunteers. We were taught about the customs, language, food and religion in this region. We learned about local customs and polite behavior when interacting with local Thai people. We learned some Thai and a little bit about the Buddhist religion. We sampled some wonderful local restaurants. We also had an opportunity to practice teaching an English class. It was a sobering task – much more complex than I expected.

Having learned a little Thai and knowing where to eat, we started to feel very comfortable in Nong Khai. However after five days, it was time to depart. We took a tuk-tuk, which is a motor bike-driven taxi, from the Training Center to the Thai Laotian border. Once across the border, we took a taxi to Vientiane, the capital of the Peoples Democratic Republic of Laos.



Vientiane, Laos

The capital of Laos is a sleepy former colonial town with wonderful restaurants and hotels and has become a favorite place for westerners to visit. While there we took a look at the sites and explored the place. We visited two temples (see picture) and the Lao version of the Arc de Triumph in Paris.





Two days later our “Siriya,” one of the workers from the Open Mind office, came across the border to escort us to our first village. We went to the southern bus terminal, and from there we traveled to our first location – the village of Ban Na. In the picture on the left, notice the motor cycle in the middle of the bus. Once we got underway, there were eight people on the bus, plus the motorcycle!



Ban Na, Laos

The small village of Ban Na is on the edge of a range of hills where most of the land is still bush and wilderness. Traditionally the 200 people here make their living from farming – raising livestock and growing rice in the nearby paddies. There is also some revenue generated by the local women, who make baskets from bamboo and rattan.

A herd of 40 wild Asian elephants that live in the nearby hills sometimes come down to the rice paddies to eat – causing havoc and resulting in some nasty confrontations. These elephants are sometimes very dangerous and had become a problem for the village.

A few years ago, the village received international help to build an observation tower for visitors to view the wild elephants. Placing salt on nearby rocks would entice the elephants to visit during the night. The tower provided a safe viewing point for the visitors and their guides.

The idea is you trek up to the tower in the afternoon, being careful to avoid elephants on the way (I think they exaggerate this a bit, to make it more exciting). You have to be in the tower by 5 p.m., and then you wait for the elephants to show up. Sleeping blankets and breakfast are provided.

While we were in the Ban Na area we saw two or three visitors to the tower every day. There is a fee to stay at the tower and you have to have a guide. The revenue from the tower has been a huge financial gain for the village and at the same time it has provided a major incentive for the villagers to preserve the elephant herd and keep their habitat intact.

Guides who speak good English make the experience much more interesting for visitors and will help this program succeed. The goal of our visit to Ban Na was to help the guides improve their English speaking skills.



Change of Plans

When we met Mr. Bountanom, the head guide at Ban Na, there was a long discussion in Lao between Siriya and Mr. Bountanom, while we wondered what was up. Finally we were informed that there had been a change of plans. Chris was to teach the guides, and I was to teach the village children. Well that was a surprise and I was a bit put out by it –until I met the children.

The children were full of energy, curiosity and mischief. They were totally curious about the two westerners and quite willing to come to class in the evening to learn a little bit of English.

They loved to have fun and were delighted to sing the colors of the rainbow song or to dance the “Okay Okay” with me. I had as much fun as they did.



When I showed them some of our magazines, I discovered they did not have books in the village. They were fascinated to get a glimpse of our western world through the pictures in my magazines.

Even a simple thing like a sticker for a reward was a big deal for the children.

Every afternoon as we prepared for the evening class, we were interrupted by the children, particularly when I had my art materials out.

To keep them happy I let them try painting and discovered this was of huge interest. The girls in particular were quite skillful. I shared my paints, paper and brushes with them and showed them how to paint flowers and animals. Before long we had an afternoon art lesson as well as the main English class in the evening. The week flew by.

For Chris and I, it all ended way too soon. On the last morning a ceremony was held for us before we made our way to the next village.

A chicken was killed (a particularly loud and annoying rooster) and a feast of chicken and buffalo stew was prepared. Strings were tied to our wrists for good luck, prayers were offered up and then we all got to tuck in to the food and toast each other with whisky Li (a rather potent local brew.)





After a few hours of this, Chris and I and the Ban Na guides jumped in Mr. Bountanom's truck and drove to Ban Hadkhai - our next destination. There we enjoyed another big celebration with our new guides from Ban Hadkhai. Mr. Bountanom donated a crate of beer Lao and there was a long and noisy welcome session.



Ban Hadkhai

This is a more remote village than Ban Na. Again there are about 200 villagers and they primarily live off farming, basket making and fishing in the river that runs through their village.

The nearby hills are similar to Ban Na, but here the treks are to waterfalls high up in the hills. It is a pretty area to visit, but not as obviously interesting as Ban Na. Even so I would guess that there are visitors every other day to Ban Hadkhai and the revenue must be quite significant for the village.



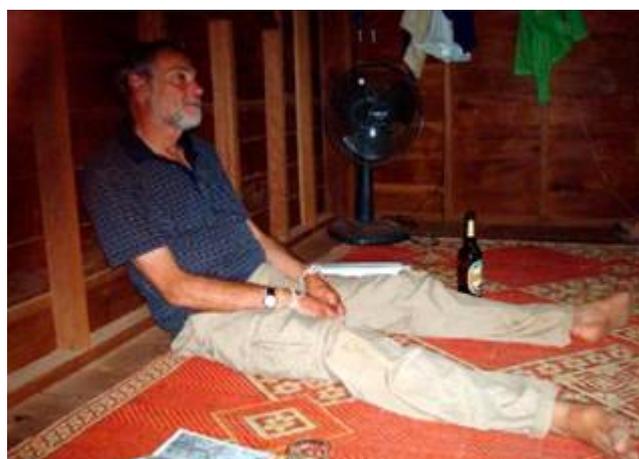
Again, Chris was asked to teach the guides but this turned out to be harder than in Ban Na because they knew much less English. Also, for various reasons, attendance was lower that week so there was less for her to do. Some nights she helped me with the children.

The children's classes became a hit in the village and we had 16 or more energetic students from 2-20 years old.

Based on my previous experience, I decided to incorporate art into my lessons, so we had one and a half hours of English and then an hour or more of painting and drawing. The English classes were always boisterous, but once they started to paint and draw, the children all seemed to calm down and focus.

Once again it was an amazing experience and once again the week flew by.

At the end of the week there was another ceremony and we made our way back to Vientiane on the bus. We both lost weight on the trip; we were exhausted from the effort of teaching every day, from the heat and monotonous food. Fortunately the beer Lao kept me going (as you can see from the picture after my last class).



It was a great experience.

