

Homeschooling in Thailand... a World Away

from Jennifer Tibbets

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[Editor's Note from Susan: One of the real delights of our work with homeschoolers is all the wonderful people we get to meet -- both face-to-face, and now virtually. The following is a letter that Jennifer wrote to me after emailing for info about some PA history materials for her 4th grade son -- whom they were homeschooling in Thailand. I was so happy to receive back this terrific detailed description of the special challenges and blessings of homeschooling life in Thailand. It made me realize that it would be really fun to have a different PA homeschooling family (or even a homeschool grad!) now living abroad share what life is like in another culture. Could be a great way for all of our kids to learn more about the world and all its peoples -- consider reading these stories aloud to your children as World Geography 101 at its best! Looking forward to hearing from all of you living abroad.]

Dear Susan,

You asked what it is like homeschooling in Thailand. I imagine that it's not so different from homeschooling anywhere else in some ways. We spend the mornings homeschooling. The boys are pretty self-directed, but ask me questions occasionally and I try to keep abreast of upcoming tests and quizzes, etc. Matthew is using ABeka material except for ACSI spelling and Sonlight readers. Joshua is using Sonlight curriculum except for Abeka language, cursive, math books and ACSI spelling.

However, as missionaries, our schedule is always getting interrupted, whether by crises like someone having a problem and showing up at my house in the middle of homeschooling, or moving our church (like we did last week) to a new building, so I needed to go over and clean and move things while the kids were at home continuing to homeschool. (My househelper was there and can make sure they are safe, but of course can not help them with any questions about homeschooling as she is Thai!) Also, we regularly have to attend camps, conferences, and seminars, either from the missionary or the Thai side, so this is very disruptive as well. We have no accountability to anyone (like an educational mentor), which is good since we aren't able to follow all of the normal patterns. We have no English libraries to look up extra resources, though we do have a few missionary-run libraries to borrow books from. Because of this, I order lots of Sonlight reading books every year so my kids have reading material and I've also brought out books or had books sent from the US.

I often feel that I can not give everything I want to homeschooling because of all the demands on my time - I need to study Thai, do ministry, etc. -- but I know the kids have enriching experiences simply by living in this culture and attending cultural events. Last week I was a bridesmaid in a Thai-Dutch wedding where the monks chanted and they followed customs like having each guest tie strings around the wrists of the bride and groom to give them good luck and "tie their spirits to them so that they would stay healthy" as well as pouring water over the bride and groom's hands to bless them.

We also attend Thai holidays like Loy Krathong where the Thai take a piece of banana palm and decorate it with flowers, leaves and candles. They put a few coins in it, light the candle and incense and sail it down a river to thank the Mother Spirit of Water for keeping them alive throughout the year as they use the water for bathing, drinking, cooking, washing, etc. They also hope that their sins will sail away from them down the river.

So my children learn a lot simply by living here and being part of our ministry. I am thankful that we can homeschool as many parents feel that they have no choice but to send their kids to boarding school which can be very difficult for both sides. Some countries do not offer much in the way of homeschooling curriculum and it is not supported by their governments. However, we may some day need to send our kids to boarding school as they get older and miss having peers that speak their language. Also, there is very little offered in the way of extracurricular activities here in Lopburi such as sports, music, etc. We continually weigh the benefits and disadvantages and seek the Lord's will.

Our kids struggle with the problem of making friends only to lose them and though they have some Thai friends, these relationships can be a problem too. Their parents often have different values than we do - letting them watch TV or play video games all day or watching movies that are very violent. They eat a lot of sweets. And of course, they are in the Thai school system so they are often not free to play when my kids are.

My kids attended Thai school for 2 years. They homeschooled in the mornings and went to Thai school in the afternoons. (Because the Thai educational system is very different than ours, we cannot send them to Thai school for their education.) I sent them to Thai school to make friends, have activities to do and learn Thai. This worked well to a point, but we also saw it creating incredible stress in our second son to the point that he ran away from home twice. (When he was only 6 years old.) The class sizes are large (up to 40 kids) and he didn't understand Thai very well so often didn't understand what his teacher was saying. The Thai put a lot of stress on reading and writing, so at the age of 6, he was having to spend hours each day learning to write Thai while he was learning to write in English with me. Also, because he is white with very blond hair, he would sometimes be surrounded by groups of kids chanting "foreigner, foreigner" -- not to pick on him, but because they were fascinated at his differentness. It's not easy to be singled out all the time.

This does not mean that my kids are not enjoying life in Thailand. They do. It is warm all year around and they can play outside each day. We take them to the zoo often, eat ice cream, have sleep overs. They spend more time with their parents than they probably would in the States. They have friends and play many games together. But there are definitely some additional stresses here. I wish my kids could play on a soccer team or take gymnastics. I wish they could go spend the night with their grandparents or be taken out for a special date with an aunt and uncle. These are things we have sacrificed. On the other hand, our missionary family is close and often takes the place of our relatives. We also have some close Thai friends who are an "aunt" and "uncle" to my kids.

My husband is in charge of our extracurricular activities. Three times a week he leads our four children in what he calls "worship time" when they sing praise songs, read a Bible passage, say memory verses, share prayer requests, pray and study the Westminster's Shorter Catechism for Children. The other two days a week, my two older children have

their own personal devotions. He also teaches art (drawing), music (learning to sing new songs), physical education (a variety of games and skills) and Thai handwriting.

It's neat that you have read a bit about Thailand. I too really enjoyed Anna and the King of Siam (the book), especially as I've been to the Grand Palace in Bangkok where the story took place. However, it is important to remember that that book is only based on the writings of the real Anna and the author states that her book is not entirely accurate. It is hard to know what actually happened at that time as the story is only told from a western point of view and Anna may have not really understood many things that happened. Also it is important to realize that at the time that book took place, slavery was still legal in the U.S. and many other atrocities were happening worldwide, so the King of Siam wasn't unusual or particularly cruel as compared with other rulers of his time period. Thailand has banned that book and the subsequent movies because they feel it is an unfair representation of their royal family.

As you surmised, "buri" means town or village and Lopburi is located about two hours from Bangkok - due North. If you want to know where it is, there is a map of Thailand on our web site which has Lop Buri on it (that's how they spell it). If you go to our web site (address below) and click on "Photo Albums" and then "Life in Thailand" and then hit "back" twice, you should come to the map. If you don't find it that way, just keep going through the pictures in that album and eventually you'll find it.

I am able to communicate pretty well in Thai, enough to teach the Bible and hold conversations on a range of topics. At the same time, my vocabulary and sentence structures still need improvement. We continually study Thai through 27 books, each of which takes a month to 5 weeks to complete depending on how much time we have to study. At Christmas time or other very busy times of the year, my language study slows down or comes to a complete halt. After each book, we go back to our language school (where we studied full-time for the first 6-12 months) and have a language check which is basically an oral exam and sometimes a written exam. I have completed 19 books and this Wednesday I will have an exam on my 20th and 21st books.

So, maybe in a nutshell, that gives you an idea of what it is like to raise kids in Thailand, at least from this missionary's perspective! Thanks for asking. If you would like to know more about our life and ministry in Thailand, please check out our web page at <http://www.geocities.com/sjtibbetts2000/> It also includes pictures [Note from Susan: be sure to check out the photo of the elephants strolling through town -- and the funny story about getting to feed the huge animals some bananas!].

Take care,

Jen Tibbetts