

Chiang Rai Hill Tribes The Hidden villages of the Hills

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On a recent trip to Chiang Rai I asked a friend to take me to see the hill tribe villages. The first day we went to some beautiful spots along the well-established tourist routes. It was scenic but the village folk were ready for the tourists, local crafts in hand. That night, I explained that I wanted to go somewhere outside the tourist areas. Actually, I wanted to go somewhere that did not get any tourist traffic at all. To my great surprise, I discovered that such areas do exist, very close to the town of Chiang Rai. The next morning we were off in the Toyota Tiger. An hour out of Chiang Rai we got to the end of the paved road and, in 4-wheel drive, headed up into the mountains that border Thailand and Burma. Within thirty minutes we had found an Akha village whose residents clearly lived close to nature. Their homes were all of local, handmade materials and there did not appear to be any electricity. Built onto the hillside, the village was a base for the agricultural activities in the surrounding hills and valleys. It was mid-morning, and many of the adults were off working in the forest and farmland. The remaining children and their caretakers were friendly, going about their daily business while allowing us to wander freely through the village. Hill tribes have been settled in the Chiang Rai area for hundreds of years. Scattered throughout the watersheds of northwest Thailand, the hill tribes include the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, and Mien. These are the descendants of nomadic people from southern China and northern Burma. The exact number of Akha living in Thailand is not known although 1995 statistics indicate a population of about 48,000 in over 258 villages. Newcomers continue to arrive.

Hill Tribe People of Northern Thailand Akhas

The Akhas make up 3% of Thailand's hill tribe population and are the most tradition-bound group. Many can recite the ancestral names of up to 50 generations. Once a highland tribe, the Akhas are slowly moving into the lowland valleys in search of more arable land. They are perhaps the most attractively dressed of all the tribal groups, wearing skillfully embroidered silken jackets in their everyday life.

Hmong

The Hmong are a fiercely independent tribe of Sino-Tibetan origin. Numbering about 65,000 in Thailand, they are scattered throughout the northern highlands where they cultivate opium poppies at a greater rate than any other tribal group. As with other nomadic tribes, the Hmong maintain much of their wealth in silver jewelry. The women are particularly distinctive with long dark hair woven with horse or human hair switches to create an enormous bun.

Karen With over 260,000 members, the Karens are the largest tribal group in Thailand and account for over half of the tribal people in the country. Originally from Tibet, these most western of assimilated Thai hill tribe people have been in Thailand since the 18th century. The Karens are most noted for their ongoing and often bloody struggle with the Burmese government for an autonomous homeland as another four million Karens live in Burma. The Karen people occupy low-lying areas, are excellent farmers and are not significant growers of opium. While at times it is difficult to identify them by their outward appearance, most wear silver armbands and don beaded sashes and headbands. Single women wear white.

Lahu Perhaps the most welcoming of all the tribal groups in Thailand, the Lahu number roughly 40,000 and live in villages situated above 1,000 metres. The Lahu farm poppies, dry rice, corn, and other cash crops. A singular cultural identity is not easily found among the Lahus, due to the continuing tumult of migration. They worship a deity that is Tibetan in origin and have borrowed the Buddhist practice of merit making. Many have absorbed Christian theology into their belief system. In addition, they practice a Lahu form of voodoo. They are also noted for their keen music skills.

Lisu

The Lisu are one of the smallest minority hill tribe groups in Thailand, representing only 5% of all tribal people. Arriving from Burma in 1920, the Lisu live at very high altitudes where they can grow subsistence crops. The Lisu are hardworking and extremely competitive in their day-to-day life. Even their clothing is brash, incorporating a multitude of bright colors, embellished with hundreds of silver trinkets. They lead well-structured lives and are among the most successful of all Thailand's tribal people.

Mien

The 33,000 Mien in Thailand are closely connected to their Chinese roots and still incorporate the Han language into their own. Considered the aristocrats of all tribal groups, they are ancestor worshippers and even celebrate the Chinese New Year. Mien farmers practice shifting agriculture depending more on rice and corn rather than poppies. Their silver work is among the most intricate and is highly prized, even by other tribes ..