

Take three Thais, three Norwegians, four Dutch, two French, a Swede, two Americans and four Brits, mix them all together, and what do you get? Well, maybe not a joke, but what you might get is a heckuva trek in Thailand.

Getting There

I booked a sleeper up from Bangkok, a ten-hour journey up north into the hillier regions of Siam. When morning broke, and when I looked out the window from my bunk, our train was passing through rice paddies and jungle. Soon we were rumbling into a city, the northern metropolis of Chiang-mai.

The next day I signed up for a trek at the guest house where I was staying and I was issued a backpack. It was to be a three-day, two-night affair, with hikes through jungle, rice paddies, mountains, villages of indigenous peoples, a river-rafting leg, a visit to a shrine of Her Honorable Majesty the Queen of Thailand, and of course the obligatory elephant ride. Price: 1400 baht.

The following morning I was picked up at the guest house by a canopied truck with two benches bolted into the cargo area for us trekkers. The truck proceeded to other guest houses and hotels to pick up the other adventurers.

As we got on the highway, the discussion among the foreigners turned to price, as to who had paid how much for this same trek with the same company. Not too surprisingly, we'd all paid different rates, somewhere in the 1200 to 1500 baht range. And naturally the well-off international banking Dutch couple, staying at the local Shangri-la, got the cheapest. I guess the

promoters figured those with the most to lose needed the most coaxing.

After a stop at a local market and tourist trap, and the usual suggestions to buy more souvenirs, the truck proceeded on our way up into the mountains, to the trailhead.

Getting to that trailhead wasn't that easy. We traveled up what must still be the muddiest, bumpiest and most rutted road in the world. Perhaps I've been spoiled by smooth American asphalt, but this was extreme. At one point our vehicle became stuck in the mud, and we were ordered out of truck and ordered to push. Our efforts were successful and we proceeded on our way. I was glad for the break though, as I thought we would be flung out of the truck at any moment or go careening down the hillside due to all the heavy, jolting, erratic shaking. An earthquake might have been easier.



Joe, our native Karen guide *par excellence* against a backdrop of rice paddies.

Finally, we made it to the trailhead and began to make our way slowly into the dark green jungle.

On the Trail

Our guide was Joe, a university student on break, who was assisted by two others. Joe, a native of the Karen tribe indigenous to this area, spoke great English, as well as the Thai he learned in school, but his real

tongue was his hill-tribe Karen dialect. He could also speak two other distinct hill dialects. He'd also grown up in the very area we'd be trekking through, so he was the perfect guide to lead us through this semi-wilderness.

Generally we were an amiable lot, with the clear of exception of one Brit male and a male Swede, who I thought just might kill each other at any given moment.

There is a kind of fate at work when you sign up for one of these treks. You don't know who you are going to end up trekking with, but whoever you do get, you get them for three days straight in an unusual situation. It's understandable how tempers can flare when you're sweating your guts out hiking though hot and heavy humidity for days on end, and especially for those used to cooler climes. Even the local people don't go hiking around for three or four days straight, said Joe, just to go hik-

ing around. They're cozy in their villages and think we look pathetic. I had to agree.

Joe led us on to the first village, where we were met by small gawking children in birthday suits. They must have thought it was hot too. This was a small and poor village, said Joe. He was right. It did look very small and very poor. I felt a kind of kind of guilt in the whole thing,