

Memories of Mae Hong Son

Nature reserves the most vivid greens for the flora of Thailand. It stains the Thai soil the rustiest orange, and it dyes the sky the most refreshing blue. The nation is art, painted with the boldest acrylics in the softest strokes.

Tucked into Thailand's northwest corner is perhaps its greenest region, Mae Hong Son. Covered 85% in rainforests, the rural province is celebrated for its natural beauty. Backpackers and cyclists alike embark on journeys to explore Mae Hong Son's 4,800 square miles of quiet mountains and valleys.^[2, 7] Burmese territory until 1824, the province's history is rich and diverse. The land was gifted to Siam – Thailand was formerly named Siam – in the late 1800s.^[13] Today the rural province remains relatively undeveloped, a sharp contrast to Bangkok, the Thai capital four hundred miles to the southeast.^[7]

I visited Mae Hong Son in the summer of 2018. I, along with fourteen strangers, traveled to remote villages to improve infrastructure. Mae Hong Son, I learned, is full of small villages inhabited by hill tribes. The seven hill tribes – the Lisu, Lahu, Karen, Hmong, Lawa, Pa-O, and Padong – are mountain-dwelling agricultural communities who collectively contribute to 60% of the province's population and who each have unique language and traditions.^[3, 14] I visited Karen communities. Alongside village engineers and chiefs, my group worked to build water tanks. Unfortunately, Karen communities, and many other rural communities in Thailand, lack the facilities to harvest water for the dry months. The Ministry of Public Health's Report on Drinking Water Quality from 2009-2019 found that only 40.8% of water available to Thai households was potable.^[15] Rural regions face especially high risks. The threat of water insecurity forces many villages to rely on handbuilt water tanks to capture and preserve rainfall from May to October, the wet season.^[1] Our arrangement was simple: in exchange for building

water tanks, providing English lessons, and constructing part of a school, three Karen villages would offer us homestays.

En route to our first village, our leaders started running through logistics. We would first stop at a second-hand market to purchase clothes. I learned that packing light (read: packing no clothing) offers visitors an opportunity to contribute to local economies. After that stop, we would arrive at our first homestay, a small village on the outskirts of Mae Sariang. There, we would meet the kind families that were hosting us, and we would eat together (our group traveled with a chef so as to not take away from the village's resources). We would then meet the chief and head village engineer, who would explain the project at hand. It all sounded lovely, but still, I was having a difficult time visualizing how life would be for the next month. I wondered how I would communicate with my host family when the translators were busy. I questioned my ability to teach in the village school. I even worried that an old injury of mine would hinder my construction capabilities. Eventually, I decided that speculating was unhelpful, so I stopped thinking and, instead, stared out the van's window as we weaved through endless mountains. I wondered how many mountains stand in Mae Hong Son. Thousands, it turns out, though only 265 are named.^[10]

Today, I still think about those mountains. I didn't know it then, but I was admiring parts of the Thai Highlands – a silly name, I find, considering that same range stretches across the border into Myanmar.^[9] I remember how intimidating those mountains seemed as I sat in that van. They were monsters, towering over the landscape like the giant hovered over Jack (of course, replace beanstalks with rice plants). Why then, when I look at the pictures from my trip, do the mountains look small? My camera roll tells me that those giants were barely medium height, almost unremarkable. Maybe I am misremembering.

I adjusted to my temporary lifestyle well. By my second day in the first village, my host family and I had developed a decent hand-signal communication system. By the third day, I knew how much water to add to the concrete mix to get the perfect texture. By the fourth day, I was snapping the thin green stems of the wide-leafed *Jatropha curcas* plant alongside the children, blowing bubbles from the sap and laughing every time it worked; the *Jatropha curcas*'s sap is 40% oil and 100% entertaining.^[10] The plants – bamboo that made scaffolding, flowers that produced bubbles, ferns that recoiled at human touch – never failed to fascinate me. Thailand's biodiversity features over fifteen thousand plant species, and for me, one always stood out: rice. Every chance I could get, I admired the rice paddies that blended with the village landscape in a seamless, craftful way.

Rice paddies, also known as rice fields, are a quintessential component of northern Thai landscape. Some lie tucked in the valleys, while others climb the side of a mountain in a step-like arrangement. No more than a foot below ground below, the dug-out paddies are flooded with fresh water, and rice seedlings are neatly planted in tight rows. The seedlings, as they grow, stretch above the mud-brown water and extend their thin green leaves. A portion of the harvested rice, traditional white or sticky, remains in Thailand; rice and rice noodles are staple carbohydrates of Thai cuisine. Much of the rice, however, is distributed globally. In 2022, Thailand was the world's third largest exporter of rice.^[12]

I remember the awe I felt when I saw, for the first time, the glistening tops of the paddy fields, miniature compared to the towering (average sized) mountains behind them. The sunlight reflected off of the brown water in a brilliant, enchanting way. To the best of my recollection, never again have I seen water and sunlight compliment each other so perfectly.

Scientists have heavily researched memory. Memories are formed through a neuron-firing process associated with the brain's hippocampus, and that process is considered reliable – that is, memories in a healthy person are stored accurately and wholly.^[4] Nevertheless, psychologists have analyzed many ways that humans subconsciously romanticize and glamorize their memories. When memories are recalled by the brain, they are reconstructed. Northwestern University equated memory to the “Telephone Game” that kids play, whispering a phrase from one person to the next until the last person exclaims the phrase, almost undoubtedly different from the original. Every retrieval distorts the original memory in a way that lends to bias and error. At least ten types of memory bias have been identified, including rosy retrospection bias (remembering the past in an overly optimistic way) and confirmation bias (remembering the past in a light that supports what you want to believe).^[6] The permeability of memory jars me. I want to recall my past with certainty, but how can I?

My favorite piece of art comes to mind: Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*. A staple work of the surrealist movement, the painting has long made me question the meaning and functions of memory. It features three melting stopwatches and a fourth, flipped over and covered in ants. For years, I hated those ants. I found them disruptive; now I see a larger theme of decomposition and of defenselessness. The ants comment not on the stopwatch, but on memory and its inability to defend against erosion. Dali encourages questions about the past, our perception of time, and how our memories persist. The use of the word “persistence” almost feels wrong to me now. It seems that memory does not persist; at least, it does not persist consistently. Rather, memory evolves. Maybe Dali's later work, *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, is more accurate.

One day, I was lucky enough to walk in a rice field. I followed a kind farmer, a native Karen, along the maze of raised land between paddies. I was half nervous, half excited. The paddies were a gorgeous mystery that I was eager to investigate. I watched as, in a few swift movements, the farmer removed his shoes, rolled up his pants, and hopped into the paddy. He then put out his hand for me. I removed my shoes, rolled up my pants, and stepped into the paddy, cautiously and tensed. Instantly, I recoiled. I had not been prepared for the slimy, sinking mud below my feet. The farmer laughed, and I laughed too.

I spent the next thirty minutes walking around the rice paddy with the farmer. We did not talk much (the language barrier made sure of it), yet I felt a connection to him. How special it was that I was invited into his field. He taught me how to steer the mud churner, which is used to smooth out uneven piles under the water. It was a clunky machine, a manual. It was red and metal and had two handles which formed a Y, kind of like a wheelbarrow. The end opposite the handles was rectangular and narrow. On either side of the body was a wheel, as tall as the machine, constructed with thin metal and identical to a water wheel. The narrow metal rods rearranged the mud as they made contact. I wondered how mowing over the rice did not damage the plants, but the farmer did not seem worried at all. He controlled the machine with ease, standing behind it, one hand on each handle. His grip was light, and his movement was effortless. He held the reins loosely to allow her to trot along, kicking up the mud in a perfectly messy, organized manner. She was calm, easy, and smooth; then he handed the reins to me. What power she had! Sensing my incompetence, she broke into an unpatterned canter that I could not control. I steered her (she steered me) left and right in a chaos that forced the farmer to intervene when mud started spattering about. He reigned the machine in, laughing all the while. I learned that day that mud churning is not an inherent gift of mine.

That thirty minute adventure is one of my favorites from my trip. Though my inability to steer an engineless machine is embarrassing in hindsight, I felt nothing but bliss in the moment. The bond I formed with the farmer felt pure, juvenile, like the bond between toddlers when one shares her toy with the other.

I made many of those fleeting friendships in Thailand; I learned quickly why the country is called “The Land of Smiles”.^[7] I saw joy there – joy like I have never seen before. The men who wore the same boots every day, the women who slept on wooden floors, the children whose schools had no walls...they were all happy. Not happy in a shallow, temporary way; they were deeply happy. I went to Thailand to learn and to contribute, and along the way, I met the most radiant minds. I felt a happiness, too, like I never had before. I think about that happiness sometimes. A warmth floods my body, and time ceases. Those memories, now, are not pure; followed by that insurmountable joy crashes a wave of nostalgia and yearning. How convenient it would be to pause my memories, and to bask in them for as long as I choose, without interruption and without any longing.

When I speak of my trip now, I often leave out these tiny anecdotes. People ask me what I learned, and I pass along interesting tidbits. I explain that Mae Hong Son was originally founded to raise work elephants, I matter-of-factly relay that the province is the least populated of Thailand’s seventy-seven^[11], and I gush about a rooftop cafe in the city of Pai (a hippie-trail favorite). I find peace in saving the meaningful moments – the rice paddy wonder, my farmer friend, the mud churning disaster – for myself. I guard them like a stolen treasure.

I alone recall the breathtaking view of Mae Hong City (the provincial capital) from 3,500 feet above, standing at the top of an admittedly taxing stairway to the Buddhist temple Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu.^[8] I keep private the joy I felt when the children and I filled a Ziploc bag with

air to create a makeshift volleyball. I remember the weight of a jackfruit – jackfruits can weigh over forty pounds – freshly picked and eaten with hands still muddy from construction.

I feel a sense of loss when I share those stories, like something is being taken from me. But why? Do my memories become less valuable, less meaningful, when they're shared? I sure hope not. I believe in sharing; I do (the whole purpose of my trip was to share cultures and resources!). But maybe this time – just this one time – I can be selfish.

On occasion, when my brain starts to wander, I ask myself: if I go back to Mae Hong Son, will I be disappointed? I wonder if my glamorization will render the real thing lackluster. Perhaps the rice paddies will still glisten under the sunlight, but that glistening won't be so majestic. The mountains, too, may not be so tremendous that they compete with Everest. Maybe that tractor, just three feet tall, would not be as overwhelming as I remember.

I want the memories to be true. I was happy in Thailand in a deep, unremitting way that I had never been before. Why, though? I had always considered myself a generally happy person, yet Thailand introduced a joy to me that dulled every joy before it. There must be something special about Thailand that made me feel that way. The country – my time there – approaches perfection. Now, I crave that profound, peaceful bliss, which has since evaded me in my day to day life. Each time I yearn for Mae Hong Son, I think the mountains grow a bit taller in my brain. Regarding Thailand, my memory does not persist; it evolves. When my brain fires its neurons, my objectivity likely falls victim to the biases that lead to misremembering, and maybe that's okay. If preserving, even augmenting, the warm, radiant feeling of Thailand only comes at the expense of a tiny sacrifice to my memory's authenticity, I can live with that.

Works Cited

1. "Climate and Average Weather Year Round in Mae Hong Son." *Weather Spark*,
<https://weatherspark.com/y/112648/Average-Weather-in-Mae-Hong-Son-Thailand-Year-Round>.
2. Forbes, Andrew. "A Season in Mae Hong Son." *CPA Media - The Asia Experts*,
<https://www.cpamedia.com/articlephp?pg=features&aid=120619125035>.
3. "Hill Tribes." *Mae Hong Son Holidays*,
<https://www.maehongsonholidays.com/hill-tribes/>.
4. "How Are Memories Formed?" *Queensland Brain Institute*, University of Queensland,
23 July 2018,
<https://qbi.uq.edu.au/brain-basics/memory/how-are-memories-formed#:~:text=The%20brain%20simmers%20with%20activity,strength%20of%20connections%20between%20neurons>.
5. Lawler, Moira, and By. "Jackfruit 101: Nutrition, Benefits, Side Effects, and More." *Everyday Health*,
<https://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/jackfruit-nutrition-benefits-weight-loss-effect-recipes-and-more/>.
6. Le Cunff, Anne-Laure. "Memory Bias: How Selective Recall Can Impact Your Memories." *Ness Labs*, 19 Nov. 2020, <https://nesslabs.com/memory-bias>.
7. "Mae Hong Son." *Mae Hong Son Holidays*,
<https://www.maehongsonholidays.com/mae-hong-son-info/>.

8. “Mae Hong Son, the Far Northwest.” *InThailand.Travel*,
<https://www.inthailand.travel/mae-hong-son/#:~:text=Ban%20Rak%20Thai-,Mae%20Hong%20Son%20Temples,you%20to%20hit%20for%20sunset>.
9. “Mae Hong Son Province.” *Peak Visor*,
<https://peakvisor.com/adm/mae-hong-son-province.html>.
10. Maria, Cheryl Santa. “This Magical Plant Blows Real Bubbles into the Air.” *The Weather Network*, 1 Feb. 2023,
<https://www.theweathernetwork.com/en/news/nature/animals/nature-jatropha-curcas-the-magical-plant-that-blows-real-bubbles>.
11. “Thailand Population 2023 (Live) .” *World Population Review*,
<https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/thailand-population>.
12. “Thailand Targets Higher Rice Exports of 7.5 Mln Tonnes This Year.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters Products , 8 Sept. 2022,
<https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/thailand-targets-higher-rice-exports-75-mln-tonnes-this-year-2022-09-08/>.
13. United States, Department of State, The Geographer Office of the Geographer Bureau of Intelligence and Research. *Burma - Thailand Boundary*, No. 63 ed., 1966, pp. 4–5.
International Boundary Study.
14. “10 Facts about Mae Hong Son - Did You Know That ?” *Thailand Hilltribe Holidays*,
<https://www.thailandhilltribeholidays.com/10-facts-about-mae-hong-son-did-you-know-that/>.

15. “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development .” *United Nations* ,

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>.