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## Chiang Rai, Thailand: a tribal lodge in the clouds



We awoke on our first morning to a sheet of mist, pale as milk, hanging over the valley below. Slowly it dissipated to reveal the brown swirling waters of the Mekong River and the surrounding hills.

Lanjia Lodge sits halfway up the hillside in the village of Kiew Karn in northern Thailand. It is made up of four bamboo houses, built and run by local people with the aim of attracting travellers looking for a more insightful experience beyond Thailand's beaches and cities. I was staying there with my two boys, eight-year-old Dow and five-year-old Orly, as part of a year-long trip around Asia and Australia.

"Are we above heaven?" Orly asked from our comfortable king-size bed, cocooned by mosquito nets. "It feels like we're in the clouds." All around us were the sounds of Kiew Karn stirring: a cockerel crowed, a piglet squealed, a cow groaned. In the village live the Hmong and Lahu tribes who fled to Thailand from Laos during the "Secret War" of 1968-73. They have a school, a temple, a village hall and a scattering of mud-brick houses.

After a breakfast of noodle soup on our cushion-strewn veranda, served by Ling, a pretty, delicate girl who smiled at everything we said, we trekked up the hill to the far end of the village. We had arranged to meet Mr Laogee, a Hmong shaman, and found him lying on a bed, in the darkest corner of his windowless hut, as he escaped from the noise of his four children next door. He stood up and greeted us with a low bow.

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We were invited to sit on the bamboo mats on the damp earth floor and offered cups of steaming miang leaf tea. The role of the shaman in the Hmong tribe is not inherited as it is with the Lahu. To qualify for the role, the Hmong shamans, of which there are several, must have recovered from a coma, whether caused by illness or accident. The Hmong believe that only those who have done this can help others to recover from serious illness. To that end, a pig is sacrificed; and a buffalo horn is dipped in blood and stamped on the sick person's back. "I'd rather stay sick," muttered Dow.



*Chiang Rai's bamboo houses*

*are built and run by local people*

We bade farewell to Mr Laogee shortly before Orly's rock-star impression with the geng, a flutelike musical instrument played in sacred ceremonies, got out of hand. On the way back to Lanjia Lodge we passed Mr Yai Yoi, the Lahu shaman, who was also escaping from the noise of his many children inside his slightly lighter house.

The Lahu build their houses on stilts as protection from wild animals and evil spirits, and they have windows to cool the humid interior. The Hmong, in contrast, build their houses on the ground, because the spirit they worship resides there, and they don't have windows.

A young boy was playing with an old bicycle tyre, racing it down the slope, scattering chickens in his wake. Before long my two joined him, shrieking and kicking up the dust.

The next day we set off to explore the centre of the village. Here we met up with the Indigo Lady, as the boys called her, waiting in the shade of a bamboo shed. "Come, come," was all she could say in English. On a makeshift wooden table was a small pot of melted beeswax.

We picked out a pattern from a row of hemp handkerchiefs and took up the small fountain-pen-like tool that the Lahu and the Hmong use for their batiks. We dipped the pen into the beeswax and then drew over the outlined patterns. The beeswax seeped into the cloth and solidified. Next, we immersed our batiks in a pot of indigo, dying everything but the beeswax. Once this had been scraped off, the patterns beneath were sewn over with threads of gold, blue and bright vermilion. The Hmong make their ceremonial costumes in this way and a man will choose a wife according to

her costume. The their ceremonial costumes in this way and a man will choose a wife according to her costume. The more skilled the work, the better the wife.

After our tasks were done, the boy with the tyre appeared again and accompanied us down the hill. Dow and Orly got out their toy cars and took it in turns to race them down the track. By the time we reached the bottom, where a truck waited to take us to the Village Tree Project, Dow had given the boy his silver Land Cruiser as a gift. As we drove away I could see the boy running back up the slope, rolling his tyre with one hand and holding his jeep high with the other.

We bumped and groaned our way down the dusty track to the Village Tree Project, a herb garden and orchard given to the village of Kiew Karn by the present king, Rama IX. The villagers can take what herbs they need from the garden and plant the trees they want and teach the next generations how to do the same. We were each given a tamarind sapling and a small wooden placard on which to write our names in blue paint. The boys dug holes, planted their saplings and watered them.

When we arrived back at the village, the boy was waiting for us outside the entrance to Lanjia Lodge, this time with two tyres. The rest of the afternoon was spent with the three boys racing down the track, as the sun slowly set and the shadows of the banana plants lengthened.

When we left the next day our luggage included a worn bicycle tyre. And we left behind a toy Land Cruiser and two saplings with the boys' names on, the lettering slowly fading in the mist that fills the valley first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

## **Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai essentials**

### **GETTING THERE**

Thai Airways (0844 561 0911; [thaiairways.co.uk](http://thaiairways.co.uk)) flies twice daily from Heathrow to Bangkok, with a 90-minute onward flight to Chiang Mai, from around £600. For special promotions check out the website. Air Asia (0066 2 251 5999; [airasia.com](http://airasia.com)) also flies from Bangkok's Don Maung airport to Chiang Mai (and no longer from Suvarnabhumi). Kiew Karn is a four-and-a-half-hour drive from Chiang Mai and about an hour and a half from Chiang Rai.

You can book transfers directly with Lanjia Lodge or the lodge can organise car hire.

### **PACKAGES**

Audley Travel (01993 838115; [audleytravel.com](http://audleytravel.com)) organises tailor-made itineraries throughout Thailand and South-east Asia.

It offers a 12-day trip, to include Lanjia Lodge, Bangkok, Chiang Mai and time on Koh Samui, from £2,495 per person, including all flights and transfers, with accommodation on a b & b basis, with the exception of Lanjia Lodge, which is full board and includes trekking and activities.

## THE INSIDE TRACK

- Lanjia Lodge organises a range of activities at no extra cost: fishing, trekking, wildlife walks, cooking, village craft and design.
- Make sure you leave time to wander the village and interact with the locals.
- Carry a torch as the electricity is sporadic and sometimes too faint for reading at night.
- Bring pens and books for the local school.
- Leave space in your case to shop, as the money will go directly back into the community.

## WHERE TO STAY IN CHIANG MAI and CHIANG RAI

### **Lanjia Lodge, Kiew Karn ££**

This delightful lodge is owned and run (with local staff) by Asian Oasis, which also offers lodges in Chiang Mai province. It offers a full programme of activities, from trekking and cruising on the Mekong to visiting the Golden Triangle ([asian-oasis.com](http://asian-oasis.com); from £52 per person for two days and one night).

### **Puripunn Baby Grand Boutique Hotel, Chiang Mai ££**

A delightful 30-room hotel inspired by the design of traditional colonial homes. Well located for the Night Bazaar and only a short drive from the temples of the old city (0066 53 302898; [puripunn.com](http://puripunn.com); from £115 per night).

### **Phu Chaisai Mountain Resort and Spa, near Chiang Rai £££**

This lovely hotel is hidden in the bamboo forests about an hour's drive from Chiang Rai. The 50 rooms, cottages and villas fan out over three hills and as a result all have beautiful views; as does the chic infinity pool carved into the hillside (53 918636; [phu-chaisai.com](http://phu-chaisai.com); from £80).

## THE BEST RESTAURANTS

### **Lung Eed Local Food, Chiang Rai £**

Rustic food shack serving authentic "local" dishes. Always busy (Th Watpranorm; no phone).

### **Coffee Doi Chaang, Chiang Rai ££**

The best coffee shop in a town increasingly full of them. Great locally grown coffee, plus pastries; also lasagne, burgers and similar (intersection of Thanon Phahon Yothin and Baanpa Pragam Road).

## **Hong Tauw Inn, Chiang Mai ££**

Full of old clocks and antiques, this is as much an antique shop as it is a restaurant. Huge choice of reasonably priced Thai dishes (95/17-18 Nantawan Arcade, Nimmanhaemin Road; 53 218333).

### **WHAT TO AVOID**

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- Don't drink tap water or even brush your teeth with it.
- Malaria can be prevalent in this part of Thailand so speak to your doctor about protection before you go. Dengue fever, which is carried by a mosquito that bites both day and night, is also a risk, so wear repellent at all times.
- Internet access is widely available in the bigger towns, but don't expect it in rural areas. There is no internet at Lanjia Lodge, but I did get sporadic mobile reception.
- Don't ignore the dress code. In the Hmong village women should cover their shoulders and men should not wear vest-style T-shirts.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

The Hmong were left with the harshest lands when they arrived in the Mekong region in the 19th century, so opted for opium cultivation

- For more ideas for holidays in South-east Asia, visit [telegraph.co.uk/travel](http://telegraph.co.uk/travel)

