

Northern Thailand Hill Tribes

●●● The Akha

The Akha are arguably the most colorful and everyone's idea of what a hilltribe should look like. They are therefore the most well known minority by both the temporary tourist and by academics looking for a PhD subject. The Akhazan-the way of life-is the guiding code to all Akha activities, from allocating land to how to conduct the ancestor ceremonies to building a house, it has the answer to how to do it the correct way. It is handed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next because there is no written language. A fun loving but hard working minority distributed from southern Yunnan, through Burma and Laos, to northern Thailand about 100 years ago, they are trying to adapt to modernization. There are numerous tours to Akha villages surrounding Chiang Mai.



●●● The Hmong



The most independent and aggressive of tribes. **The Hmong** are characterised by a desire to be left alone, to be independent. They will fight for space, for their future if they think it is threatened. In Thailand they sided with the communists because they were promised freedom; in Laos they sided with the anti-communist forces because communism threatened their culture. They are the most nomadic of the tribes, villages splitting and migrating to new areas to gain independence. Migrants to the USA have continued this mobility constantly moving to seek out new opportunities. Wherever they are they keep their traditions and as with all the other groups the most important is the New Year ceremony held at the end of the agricultural cycle, which usually coincides with the Christian Christmas or the new calendar year.

●●● The Karen

The Karen are the longest established tribal group in Thailand, excepting the Lua. They crossed the Salween River at least three hundred years ago and established themselves in the border areas. There are two main subgroups, the majority Skaw, and the Pwo in Thailand but many other affiliated groups in Burma. They speak a Tibeto-Burman language which linguists find very difficult to categorize. They tend to live in permanent settlements in the lower valleys cultivating wet or paddy rice. They are probably the best forest conservers of all the minorities. They are skilled weavers and make some of the finest baskets. They probably number about 400,000 but there have been recent large influxes from Burma as the authorities there have tried to suppress a long running independence movement.

●●● The Lahu / Muser

The Lahu are probably the most christianized of the hilltribes with the possible exception of the Karen. Sir George Scott in his 'Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States' describes them as splendid men and good fighters. The tribal title of 'great hunter' recognizes their prowess with gun and crossbow. Today they are having problems integrating into mainstream society, as the substitute crops, in place of the traditional opium, do not provide enough for the daily necessities. Many wait for the arrival of a 'Messiah' to lead them into plenty and happiness.

●●● The Lisu



The Lisu migrated into Thailand from the area of the upper Salween River in Yunnan, they belong to the Lolo speaking linguistic group, together with the Lahu and the Akha, but unlike these tribes they do not have distinct sub groups. Physically they have the most beautiful women and the most handsome men and dancing at their New Year ceremony in their ceremonial costumes adorned with silver, they are a unique and moving spectacle. Marrying outside the tribe is fairly common because the man must pay a high bride price for a wife. They take life very seriously and the frustrations of dealing with bureaucracy, or in settling disputes, can easily lead to suicide or escape into the world of drugs.

The long necked Karen

The Padaung or long necked Karen are very recent immigrants into Thailand. There are three villagers near Mae Hong Son, in the far north west of Chiang Mai province, with were brought into Thailand by Thai entrepreneurs for the tourism market. These Padaung have no legal status in Thailand and are exploited as curiosities by camera toting tourists.

Ethnically they are Karen, they have taken ornamentation to an extreme where the women wear brass rings around their necks, which depress the collar bones, and the neck appears to be stretched. This is done from early childhood, adding a few rings at a time, until at adulthood their necks are remarkably long. The rings are not removed for bathing or sleeping and it is supported without the rings.



Do not visit them as they are kept in a human zoo with no freedom. They are not allowed to leave camp because their 'owners' cannot exploit them if they do. Monies made from entrance fees and souvenirs go to the pockets of nasty people.

●●● The Lawa or Lua

The original inhabitants of northern Thailand.

Probably the least known of the northern Thailand mountain minorities **the Lawa** are probably the most interesting. Books on the hilltribes tend to overlook them, and most anthropologists choose the more colourful groups for their PhD dissertations. The Lawa were the first people to inhabit the Chiang Mai valley in historic times and referred to in myth and legend. The Phu Sae Ya Sae or grandfather, grandmother spirits ceremony in which the good represented by Buddha, overcomes evil represented by a medium in a cannibalistic trance, is still performed annually every June near Chiang Mai city and has its origins in ancient Lawa ritual. Ancient grave sites and remnants of old settlements indicate a sophisticated people inhabited the area before the Thai arrived seven hundred years ago.



Today the Lawa have either fully assimilated into Thai society as in some villages in the Chiang Mai city area and only retain some of their language, or they have been marginalised into hilltribe villages in the Mae La Noi and mae Chaem areas. They might sometimes be seen in the market at Mae Sariang. These hilltribe Lawa are mixing and intermarrying with the neighbouring Karen. They are not migratory, like many of the hilltribes, but live in settled villages that have been there for sometimes hundreds of years. They cultivate wet padi rice and sell vegetables and forest products to the local markets. In dress they sre similar to the Karen except the women wear a short sarong with a lightening pattern, wear a lot of brightly coloured beads around their necks, and can occasionally be seen with black lacquered leg bands made of cane. Their language is of the Mon-Khner group and they have many rituals and spirits of which the Karen are very afraid. According to some they may have been affiliated to the Wa at some time in the past, and although the Lawa and the Lua are usually assumed to be the same, there is evidence that they were quite separate ethnic groups.

●●● The Yao or Mien



The Mien, or Yao as they are commonly know, probably migrated from southern coastal China in South East Asia about six hundred years ago. Legend says they arrived by sea first to Hainan, then to Vietnam and Laos and more recently into Thailand. Many fled the communists in Laos in the 1970's and, together with the Hmong, they were interred in refugee camps and a large number were accepted as immigrants into U.S.A.

The Mien are a homogenous minority living mostly in the Mae Chan area of Chiangrai province in northern Thailand. They are the only minority that has a tradition of writing, using Chinese script to record rituals, family records and contracts. Nowadays it is only the old men who can still read Chinese but the new generation are literate in Thai. They are good farmers and traders growing tea, coffee, fruit and vegetables for market. They have never been opium poppy growers. The Mien or Yao can be instantly identified by their costume. The women wear loose fitting, ankle length, pants heavily embroidered with cross stitch; their tunic is bordered with a red ruff and fastened with rectangular silver buckles.

They also wear a large turban the ends of which are also embroidered. Like the Lisu and the Hmong they celebrate Chinese new year with three days of feasting and merriment. Their religion is ancient Chinese Taoism and the ceremonies are performed by a priest assisted by a shaman, the gods are displayed in a pantheon of paintings, which are displayed during the most important rituals.

A desire for order guides the Miens life. Politeness to ones fellows, adjust to local customs and laws, conduct all rituals and ceremonies properly and in accordance with the traditions, and balance the spiritual and the real worlds. Harmony, within whichever society they are living, will ensure a good life.

Other minorities

Minorities groups who can be found in the north of Thailand but not necessarily in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces.

The Kaya. Recent immigrants into the Mae Hong Son area. They are from the Karen group of minorities fleeing persecution in Burma.

The Kareni. Another Karen group with the same problem as the Kaya.

The Mabri. A remnant population of a hunter/gather group found in Nan province and being moved into permanent mission settlements.

The Htin. A settled minority living in the lowlands of Nan province.

The Khmu or Kamu are a Mon-Khmer speaking minority who live mostly in Laos but also in the Laos border provinces of Thailand.

