



Field Studies of Sustainable Waste Management in Thailand

Before arrival

We decided to apply for KTH Field Studies since it is an amazing opportunity to get to see the world while also studying! The subject of the project was inspired by an earlier MFS in Sri Lanka. We chose Thailand as a country since it has been facing increased tourism, which causes lots of problems due to its excessive generation of waste. Therefore, Thailand suited our project idea. We expected to see how the community in Thailand in general worked differently compared to what we know in Sweden. We prepared for the trip with vaccinations, but no visa was needed since our visit was shorter than 60 days.

Upon arrival

We arrived about one week before starting the project, which gave us time to settle down. Then, we met with our contact person, who worked for the beach clean-up organization Trash Hero, who helped us a lot during our entire stay. We also did interviews with hotels every now and then throughout our visit, which lasted for about two months.



Financials

The currency in Thailand is roughly one-third the value of the Swedish krona, while prices are about the same, just in Thai baht. This meant we got three times more for our money, which made the cost of living very low. As a result, we often ate out at restaurants. A dinner could cost between 30 and 100 SEK.

During different periods, we had friends visiting, which helped reduce accommodation costs and allowed us to stay more comfortably. To get around, we mostly walked or took a cab. The cheapest option was to rent scooters, which is the most common mode of transportation in Thailand. However, due to the high risk of injury, we chose to take a cab instead. Even a cab was significantly cheaper compared to Sweden.

Most of our expenses occurred before departure. Most of the costs went to accommodation, flights, and vaccinations. We recommend booking well in advance, especially accommodation, to ensure the affordable yet decent-quality options are still available.

Accommodation

We booked our accommodations via Airbnb and were given advice on areas to stay in by our contact person. We decided to stay in three different areas, so we had three accommodations during the trip, which altogether cost about 22,000 SEK. The housing conditions were great, with AC in all accommodations.



Project

Our project aimed to examine methods used by hotels to improve sustainable waste management. Some of our days started with going to multiple hotels in person to explain our project idea and ask if they were interested in being interviewed. Initially, we emailed 30 hotels, but only one answered, referring us to their website, so the best method was to go to the hotels in person. We usually interviewed 1-2 hotels and then got home to work on the project. Some hotels were recommended by our contact person, so they were scheduled. If we did not interview any hotels, we just worked on the writing part of our project.



Country

Thailand was a great destination for experiencing beautiful nature, good food, and rich culture. We participated in the holiday Songkran, which is the new year celebration in Thailand, when people get out on the street and drench each other with water buckets and water guns. It was really fun! The main culture shock was the limited use of e-mail for communication.



Leisure and social activities

We spent much of our free time enjoying the sun and swimming. We also explored large parts of the island through various trips. Since the island is a major tourist destination, there were plenty of activities readily available. For example, we went ziplining in the jungle, saw elephants, took a day trip by boat, and visited the neighboring island, Koh Phangan.

The Thai people are very hospitable and provide excellent service. In every shop, we met locals who were incredibly friendly. Since Koh Samui is a popular tourist destination, most of the young people we socialized with were not Thai.



Sustainability

We quickly realized that living in Thailand is not as sustainable as in Sweden. Enormous amounts of single-use products are consumed, and opportunities for sustainable behavior are limited. One major difference, especially relevant to our work, is waste management. Even though we, as tourists, tried to avoid unnecessary consumption, the system made it almost impossible to be as sustainable as at home. For instance, we did our best to buy drinking water in large containers to avoid using multiple small bottles each day.

Our local contact in Thailand runs the organization Trash Hero on Koh Samui, which organizes beach cleanups every Sunday. We participated several times and helped pick up litter.

Another way we may have had a local impact was by raising awareness among hotels that there are people who care about sustainability. One of the hotels we interviewed put up a sign about a meeting on the exact topic we had discussed, shortly after our visit. Our work, on a small scale, may have encouraged some hotels to start thinking more actively about how they can become more sustainable.



Other recommendations and observations

We highly recommend going on a field study. We had an amazing trip while also being able to combine it with our studies. We got to see and experience many exciting things that a regular tourist might not have the chance to. It was also a very valuable learning experience to try living abroad for two months and getting a sense of everyday life there.