



The Together Project: Huay Pu Keng, Thailand

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Long-Neck Women and Ethical Travel



The Karen people live an exceptionally unique life. The Karen, who originally come from the country of Myanmar (previously called Burma) were immediately affected by the declaration of independence from the UK in 1948. This declaration was the mark of a sixty year-long surge of fighting across the nation sparking havoc in different ways across the country. In result, human rights violations have been committed against minority tribes, including the Karen. It has left them no other option but to flee their countries as refugees and to relocate in Thailand.

There are few to no rights given to refugees who flee to Thailand. Some of the Karen now live in villages “given” to them from the Thai government as a form of

economic help in tourism. It’s worth noting that the longneck women are known to be a successful tourist attraction for the country, but continue to be denied the right to work and do not have the legal permission from the government to leave these remote villages.



For years tourists have come to visit the women to snap photos and purchase a few of their handmade goods. This so-called “human-zoo” tourism has been deeply criticized by a plethora of sources, but it still remains one of the only ways villagers can receive an income due to their restrictions from the government.

All around Thailand and surely in several countries around the world, there are villages where individuals who are “different” and “exotic” are visited. The traditional gold rings the Karen women wear around their necks that bring in tourists around the world. These golden rings were previously worn to protect themselves from tiger attacks. Today, they wear them both as a way to carry on their tradition and others wear them for the tourists who come and visit.

When visitors come excitedly from around the world to visit, however, they often have little understanding of what goes on behind-the-scenes. Before I even knew about the Kayan village of Huay Pu Keng (one of the many homes of the long-neck women), I was brought to a different village created *specifically* for tourists just outside of Chiang Mai. Essentially, these women sit outside of worn-down huts waiting for tourists to go take photos of them. At the entrance of this village there is someone who charges you a fee to walk inside. I couldn’t understand how a human being could be seen as just an object to pay an entrance to see, take photos of, and leave. To my surprise, it was even a place recommended by cab drivers and locals to go to. Instead of going in, I walked away in hopes of finding a place that didn’t seem to take advantage of their culture and traditions for tourist purposes. After arriving to this “artificial village” I realized the tourism created around these women is nothing less than a human-rights issue.

It is difficult to understand a system like this even exists when you have never seen one like it before. In a world where we put in extensive time researching which car, water bottle, mattress, computer, plane ticket, or headphones to buy- we should remember to also research ethical tourism practices, too.



The journey to get to Huay Pu Keng is an adventure itself. After the boat-ride across a river to get to the village, teak stilt huts display colorful woven goods, wooden trinkets, brass jewelry and handmade pieces of art are sure to catch your eye. The Karen women will likely be weaving on their front patios next to their displays creating vibrantly colored scarves, shaping carving bronze jewelry, or working on other projects. Sometimes the village is filled with the happy hymns of the Karen playing guitar and singing their traditional songs on their front porches. These sights are what bring people all over the world to come visit and photograph the world-known longneck women.







To find out the truth about what the villagers themselves thought about the tourists, Mu Tae (pictured above), a long-neck woman of the village shared her own insight. She explained how important the tourists were for the village. However, rather than the “human-zoo” styled tourist groups that come, they offer The Cross Cultural Co Creation workshop to give tourists the opportunity to learn about Karen traditions.



The Karen teach tourists to make jewelry, carve wooden sculptures, and are told stories about their tradition. It's a time to ask questions to learn deeper about their history and everyday life.

Mu Tae also expressed how tourists were an important part of their village by explaining that when they come and tourists learn from the villagers, it was a way for them to preserve their culture. Workshops like these guarantee that the villagers are also supported through their teachings.





Finally, I can't tell you how much of a joy it was to spend a week in the Huay Pu Keng village myself and to see how they have created an opportunity for themselves to be more than just objects. Living in Thailand as a refugee is without a doubt an incredibly difficult situation considering the lack of rights refugees are given. Although my time was short, the experience was enriching and I'm thankful to have learned what I did through the kindness, knowledge, and hospitality of the Karen. We danced, we laughed, ate, created, and I am so thankful to learn that even in the most difficult situations, they have changed the world of tourism in Huay Pu Keng.









About the Author:



I'm Johanna, a Mexican-American portrait photographer, sometimes-writer, ethnology student, and the heart behind of The Together Project currently calling Freiburg, Germany home!

I'm passionate about sharing the kindness, light, and connection that humans have shown me across the globe- which is ultimately the inspiration behind The Together Project.

The Together Project is a series of photo essays inspiring us to see humankind with a sense of curiosity and compassion. The Together Project is here to inspire you to learn something new and meaningful about a culture you may have never known about, creating a sense of understanding and connection towards a people you may have not yet come into contact with.

If you'd like to see more of my work, feel welcome to visit my website at <http://www.johannapatton.com>