



Kao Jai Mai? Understand?

Description



A little Thai goes a long way. You don't need to speak any Thai to find "Old Siam", but a few well-placed words or phrases can dissolve cultural barriers instantly.

First, for the bad news. Thai is a tonal language. What that means is how a word is pronounced (it's tone) will determine it's meaning. For example, the sound "kow" has many meanings depending on the tone you use. "Kow" can mean rice, white, knee/elbow, entrance, or news. This use rising, descending, low, high and flat tones to create meaning. English is not a tonal language. For example, regardless of the tone you use to pronounce the word "rice" its meaning will never change.

So what does all this "tone stuff" really mean? It means, as an English speaker, you are tone deaf to the Thai language. And this specifically means when you use a wrong tone,

you've either changed the meaning of the word to something entirely different, or you're making an unrecognizable sound to a Thai person. Gibberish and nonsense is the result. But wait, there's hope.

Everyone who visits Thailand will benefit from speaking at least "survival" Thai. With very little effort, you can learn to say "hello", "goodbye", "How are you?", "Where's the bathroom?", "What's your name?", etc. Just a couple hours of study will give you a starting vocabulary that will hold you in good stead during your stay. I've provided a few links at the end of this chapter that will teach some basic survival Thai.

The first time you speak Thai, you probably won't be understood. Keep trying. Listen closely to how Thais pronounce the word you're trying to, and then mimic them. Monkey see, monkey do is the best language course. And don't be shy about gesturing and acting out what it is you're trying to say. Not only will you be good entertainment, but Thais will love your effort.

With English, we believe everyone should speak our language. With Thai, Thais are delighted beyond belief if you can even stammer out a few mispronounced words.

I can read and write rudimentary Thai. When I'm in the pillowmaking village, I'm often handed invoices in handwritten Thai that I must decipher. We generally eat in restaurants that only have menus in Thai. In rural areas, signage is only in Thai. In written Thai, words can be spelled backwards, and vowels can appear under, over, before or after the consonant to which it's attached! Consonants can change to a different sound depending on their position in a word. (I call them "transvestite letters") And to make matters worse, written Thai uses no space between words in a sentence. A sentence is just one long string of letters! And Thai has its own unique writing for numbers. (Thankfully it's not used much today.)

But I truly love reading and writing Thai. You can memorize the Thai alphabet in just a couple hours. (There's 32 consonants and 11 vowels) While you'll probably never be able to read much Thai, just knowing the sounds that those strange Thai runes represent will begin to bring understanding in a strange land. In fact, by just reading this blog entry, you'll have more understanding of Thai than 99% of tourist to the Kingdom.

Often, our fabric safaris take Jenny and I to rural areas of Siam. Some of the world's finest silks come from these country villages. When I speak Thai to these villagers about their silk, they often giggle. Odds are they've never heard a white person speak their language.

Yes, a little Thai will go a long way. Even if no one understands what in the hell you're trying to say, Thais will know you're trying to speak their language and therefore respect you. Try speaking a little Thai-just a "Hi, how are you?" and preface it with a friendly wai (see Chapter 1), and you'll see the closed gates of Siamese culture begin to open to you.

Here's a few links to Thai language websites that I enjoy:

www.learn2speakthai.net

A very good resource for beginners. Mia is a wonderful teacher and the Mannii series of lessons are great for learning to read and write Thai.

www.learningthai.com

I used this website a lot when I was a beginner, especially for reading and writing. Very good beginner lessons with audio so you can begin to hear how Thai words are correctly pronounced.

www.learnthaiwithmod.com

An excellent site with short video tutorials (all free!) for the beginner. Mod is a great teacher and her videos are quite entertaining. Watch just one of her videos and start speaking Thai. She also has a great channel with all her videos on youtube.

www.thai-language.com

A very extensive site for beginner students of Thai. Another good place to learn the Thai alphabet, and pick up basic conversational Thai. Lots of places to explore on this site.

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An old temple mural in Lamphun Province. Buddhist society has never been puritanical.

Category

1. The Siamese Puzzle Box

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Author

jeffcgallagher

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