

The In's and Out's of Baan Unrak

What is Baan Unrak?

Baan Unrak, "House of Joy" in Thai, is a project of the Neo-Humanist Foundation. The project in Sangklaburi has several components.

- The largest part of the project is the Children's home which provides a safe and loving home to over 100 children.
- The Baan Unrak Primary School teaches over 200 students, is fully accredited and functions under its own budget.
- The women's project includes several enterprises including a weaving center, sewing center, a bakery, a shop and an internet café which provide employment as well as a small income to the home.
- Outreach program provides assistance to those who have dire medical conditions and have to resources to get the care that they need.

What is Neo-Humanism?

Neo-Humanism is a philosophy (not a religion) developed by the Indian philosopher Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar. The practice of Neo-Humanism follows a set of principles based on the ethic of universal love. This includes respect for all beings including plants and animals. The children at our home follow the philosophy by not eating meat and meditating twice daily. The children continue to follow their own religion (mostly Buddhism).

The women who founded and run Baan Unrak are called Didi's. They are similar to nuns in that they are full-time volunteers who have devoted their lives to service.

Volunteers need not be followers of Neo-Humanist philosophy, but are asked to respect the principles by maintaining a vegetarian diet, not smoking or drinking alcohol while volunteering at the home. You are welcome to participate in meditation and yoga activities as much or as little as you like.

Our History

The children's home is run by Didi Devamala, who came to Sangklaburi as a volunteer for the Neo-Humanist foundation to begin an agricultural project. Didi founded the Baan Unrak Children's Home in 1990 to provide for three young girls. It soon became apparent that many other children in this area were also in need of care. The home grew and now, in 2006, **Baan Unrak provides for more than 100 children.** Baan Unrak is home to boys and girls, of ages ranging from infancy to teens.

In June 2006 we moved into a new home. The home is situated on a beautiful plot of land overlooking the lake. The home is beautiful and spacious. We have plans for future expansion, but we are thrilled with our new home.

The mission has expanded to accommodate abandoned and destitute women as well. A weaving and sewing center was established in 1996 to provide jobs to women in need as well as regular income for the women and children. We currently have 9 women working for us and we have a training program to give other women the skills they need to provide for their families.

Other business ventures include a **bakery**, established in 2003, which produces fresh baked goods, a **shop** to sell the woven goods we make, and an **internet cafe**.

In 2005 we established the **outreach program** in response to the need for medical care for those who could not get medical care in the area. Our full-time outreach coordinator provides:

- natural medicine (with the assistance of a volunteer physician)
- transportation to get medical care
- we assist with getting documentation for those who need to travel for medical care
- we pay for life saving operations
- food and housing for convalescing women
- translation services for women who do not speak Thai
- checks on the condition of our patients on a weekly basis

Why are there so many children in need?

The number of destitute children in this area is astonishing - particularly when you realize that Baan Unrak is not the only children's home working to meet the need. **Why are there so many?**

Some children are truly orphaned, both parents have died and there is nobody to care for them. **Other children have had one parent pass away and the other is not able to support the children.** In some instances, **the children are abused or neglected.** This is a particularly big problem for children whose parents have been divorced and remarried. In other instances, drug or alcohol abuse contributes to the abuse.

This area is home to many refugees fleeing war and forced labor in Burma. Leaving family and community behind has destroyed the support network for families and exacerbated the immense challenges they face when relocating to a foreign country and culture. In addition, many are weakened or injured when they arrive in Thailand. These problems, along with the lack of employment opportunities, put tremendous stress on families.

HIV/AIDS is also a significant problem as many men travel to find work in urban areas where they visit prostitutes. When they return to this area, they carry the disease with them and transmit it to their wives and unborn children. Women are often forced into prostitution due to lack of employment prospects making them more likely to contract the disease.

Poverty is also a factor among both the Thai population and refugees. Some parents are simply not able to feed their children, let alone pay the school fees that would allow their kids to gain an education and break the cycle of poverty. Many parents are also forced to move frequently to find seasonal work and are unable to provide a stable home for their children.

Not all children living at Baan Unrak are orphans. **Some children have mothers living with them at the home.** Some children are sick and their parents bring them to Baan Unrak because they don't have the resources or capability to provide care. Baan Unrak tries to work with parents and children to meet the needs of their individual situations. Priority is placed on the safety of the children. If the safety of the children is not at risk, Baan Unrak attempts to provide the support necessary to keep families together.

Who is Who?

Didi Devamala - founder/director

Didi Mongala - Business administrator/care taker for children with special medical needs

Steve-Manager

Faa - Coordinator of medical records and patient care

Abijeet - Agricultural Supervisor

Mae Lek - Housemother Supervisor (and all around nice woman)

What does a volunteer do?

Every volunteer brings a unique set of skills, experiences and expectations to Baan Unrak. We will try to utilize these skills to meet the needs of the home. **It is helpful for volunteers to remain flexible**, as some roles will need to be filled more urgently than others and assignments will depend on a variety of factors including the presence of other volunteers and the best distribution of available skill sets. **At some points you will feel overloaded and others underutilized. You will be expected to ask for help when overloaded and find more duties for yourself when underutilized. You are expected to be independent, no one will hold your hand.**

Some examples of what volunteers do are:

- Teach English to housemothers
- Help children with homework
- Assist with cooking
- Supervise Yoga
- Lead weekend activities
- Work on the gardens
- Maintenance
- Painting
- Do a variety of office work including
 - fund raising
 - correspondence with donors
 - filing
 - computer maintenance

Long-term volunteers are expected to take on a full-time workload while at Baan Unrak. Food and accommodation are provided free of charge to full-time volunteers who stay for 6 months or longer. In some instances we can provide accommodation for short term volunteers. Volunteers who stay for shorter periods are asked to make a donation to help the expenses of the project.

Health Concerns

There are several serious sicknesses which are common in our area:

DENGUE FEVER

Dengue fever is common in the area. It is transmitted by mosquito bites. It is like a severe case of the flu. Nasty stuff but rarely deadly. The best defense is consistent use of mosquito repellents with DEET and to sleep with mosquito nets.

MALARIA

Malaria is common in the surrounding forests but not in town. Some volunteers choose to take anti-malarial medication, but many do not because of the possible side effects. Again, the best defense is consistent use of mosquito repellents with DEET and to sleep with mosquito nets.

Stomach Disorders

Most of the shops in town are quite safe to eat at. In the middle of the market, there are restaurants that primarily serve breakfast...quite safe until later in the day. The restaurants and stands on the perimeter of the market are very good and safe. Everyone uses clean water (it is incredibly cheap) so do not worry about the water in the restaurants.

If you need medical attention during your stay in Sangklaburi, there is a Thai government hospital in town, as well as a Christian hospital in Hweymalay, a village thirty minutes away from Sangklaburi by car. Many westerners prefer the Christian hospital because nearly the entire staff speaks English and the quality of care is considered to be superior to the hospital in town. Some doctors at the Thai hospital will also be able to speak English. For minor ailments and medical concerns, the pharmacist next to the bank speaks some English and can usually be of assistance.

VISAS

Short term volunteers

If you are coming for a month, most nationalities can get a visa upon arrival for a month (check your local Thai Consulate for details). If you are coming for 3 months or less, get a non-immigrant visa good for 3 months. You can opt for a multiple entry visa if you are planning on making trips outside the country during your stay. If you come on a tourist visa, you can either extend it in Kanchanaburi or leave the country which will then allow you to get another one month tourist visa.

Long term volunteers

If you are coming for 6 months or longer, get a non-immigrant visa and we can get it changed here for a one year visa. Do not come on a tourist visa, it is difficult to get changed to a one year visa.

Sangklaburi

Sangklaburi is currently located on the edge of Kheuan Khao Laem - an artificial lake created in 1983 when the Khao Laem Dam was constructed across the River Kwae Noi. The old town of Sangklaburi was submerged in the reservoir and the residents were relocated to the current site. The town is divided into two parts - what are commonly called "Thai Side" and "Mon Side."

Officially known as Wang Kha, the Mon settlement is located across the lake from Sangklaburi proper and is connected to the Thai Side by the longest wooden bridge in Thailand. The Mon Side is populated by ethnic Mon people, who have resettled in this area from Mon State in neighboring Burma. Homes on the Mon Side are built in the traditional Mon style and Mon language is most commonly spoken. There is a market which sells carved wood and various fabrics on the Mon Side and also a small collection of food vendors who set up near the market each evening. The food sold here is "ahaan Mon" or Mon food. It is distinct from Thai food and definitely worth a try.

Market

Baan Unrak is located on the Thai side of town, about a 30 minute walk from the town center. The main market area has shops, restaurants and fruit stands where you can buy almost anything you need. If you have an ATM card with either a MasterCard or Cirrus (and other) logo, you can withdraw money from your bank at home in the ATM in town.

Guest Houses

There are a variety of guest houses on the lake close to Baan Unrak. They all have nice views of the lake and offer rooms that range from spartan (for about 100 baht) to pretty nice (for about 1700 baht). **We generally recommend P Guest House** because all the rooms are clean and safe, the food is decent, the staff can speak passable English, and the rooms are reasonably priced (from 200 to 700 Baht).

Getting around

Sangklaburi is a small town and most places can be walked to. There are motorbike taxis which will generally cost 10B. A ride between the Thai Side and Mon Side is usually around 40B. There are also sawngthaeos (pick-up trucks with two seats in the bed and a roof covering the back) which run set routes to nearby villages or they can be hired if you want to travel somewhere with a group. Motorbikes can also be rented by the hour or by the day (for about 100 baht a day) from local guest houses.

Things to do and see

The wooden bridge is a key sight in Sangklaburi. A walk to the Mon Side makes a nice evening activity, as sunset is very scenic on the lake. The Golden Temple (officially called Wat Wang Wiwekaram) on the Mon Side is an impressive sight to visit and there is a handicraft market beside the temple. For many the one hour walk to the temple is a bit too far, but you can walk to the Mon Side of the bridge and get a motorbike taxi from there. The Monastery on the Mon Side is also worth a visit.

Boat rides on the lake are very nice. You can visit the old temple, which is now submerged in the lake. The top of the bell tower can still be seen emerging from the water nearly year round. In the hot season, as the water level in the reservoirs recedes, the upper floors of several buildings in the old temple complex also rise up out of the water. Several guest houses rent canoes and kayaks for recreation on the lake or you can hire a long-tail boat. Local guest houses organize treks, which include boat rides on the lake, elephant riding and bamboo rafting.

Three Pagodas Pass is a 30 minute drive from Sangklaburi. It is possible to cross into Burma on a day pass here, but you can not go far once over the border and you have to pay US 10\$ for the day pass. The scenery around Three Pagodas is stunning and worthy of the trip whether or not you plan to cross into Burma. There is also a handicraft market on the Thai side of the border here.

On the way to Three Pagodas there a couple of nice stops:

There are **waterfalls** in the area, which can make a nice stop. They are about 10 minutes off the main road and accessible by motorbike. In the same area there is a **cave** that is home to a simple temple.

There is a great **lunch spot along the Songkalia River**. Here small bamboo huts are set out over the water and food is brought to you in your river hut. You can swim or wade in the shallow water or just dip your feet in and watch the lazy river flow by. . .

EATING AND DRINKING IN SANGKLABURI

For some of us food is an essential part of our experience in Sangklaburi, here are some recommendations of food and drinks to try while here, and where to find them:

Sam Tom

Sam Tom is a salad made from green papaya and a mix of other tasty ingredients. There is a small bamboo structure on the left-hand side of the road on the way to town. The friendly family who lives in the house next door makes Sam Tom, along with a few other dishes. If you're vegetarian ask for Sam Tom 'Jeh' - they are very familiar with this request. . . Sam Tom is great with sticky rice (khao niaw).

Quality Beverages - Café Bezo

If you're a lover of coffee and/or chocolate, you'll soon find that good quality versions can be hard to come by. Café Bezo, directly in front of the volunteer house, is the exception. Their coffee is very good, their hot chocolate is rich and chocolaty and so is their chocolate shake. Fruit shakes here are also better than those found elsewhere in town.

Thai Sweets (Ka-nohm)

In addition to dinner food, night market vendors in town sell a variety of sweet desserts. The formula commonly involves sticky rice mixed with sugar and coconut milk. This mixture is available with a variety of accompaniments, such as fresh mango, sweet beans. Khao-Tom-Mat is made of sticky rice wrapped around a banana and stemmed inside a banana leaf. There are also a variety of brightly colored gelatinous treats to experiment with.

Roti

Mobile vendors can be seen around town making roti - a thin dough fried with lots of oil and butter, then topped with sweetened condensed milk and sugar.

Cha Yen

Cha means tea, yen means cool. Cha Yen is what many of us know in the west as Thai Iced Tea. This reddish tea includes ground tamarind, is sweetened with tons of sugar and condensed milk and is served over ice. You can get Cha Yen in the market on the Thai side, at shops on the Mon side of the wooden bridge or from the motorbike vendor who cruises the streets of Sangklaburi.

Yam

Yam means salad. Salads come in many varieties and can be a great alternative to fried dishes on really hot days.

Ahaan Mon

Two dishes stand out at the night market on the Mon Side. Mon Noodle Soup includes a unique soup made from the trunk of banana trees. A variety of add-in are provided, such as tamarind, chilli and crumbled pieces of fried corn patty. The other recommended dish is Yam Mon or Mon Salad. This is made with noodles, shredded cabbage, cucumber, ground bean powder and a tasty sauce. It generally includes bits of pork, but can be made with pieces of fried tofu as an alternative.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

There are many groups working toward improving the living conditions of people in this region. These organizations represent great opportunities for collaboration and resource sharing. Many organizations have websites and are very approachable if you're interested in meeting with them to learn more.

HOMES FOR CHILDREN AND WOMEN

Children of the Forest

Home to 45 children, Children of the Forest also has a free school that provides education to over 150 students. Children of the Forest is also a home to single mother. The home focuses its efforts on migrant worker communities and provides transportation to the children of plantation workers so they can attend school. Children of the Forest sends their children who have sponsors to attend Baan Unrak Primary School.

Whispering Seed

Whispering Seed is a children's home and community learning center. The project is currently under development on an organic farm in a village near Sangklaburi. Whispering Seed hosts workshops in earthen building and other sustainable living practices. Currently Whispering Seed is home to three children. Community education initiatives focus on preservation of the Karen language.

MON NEWS AND HUMAN RIGHTS AGENCIES

Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM)

A variety of activities and publications are organized under the umbrella of HURFOM. The Mon Forum is a monthly journal focused on the human rights abuses in Southern Burma. The Plight is a quarterly journal focused on the rights and conditions of women and children in Burma, produced by the Women and Child Rights Project, a subset of HURFOM. The Women and Child Rights Project also organizes human rights trainings and facilitates an internship program that brings women from Mon State to study in Sangklaburi. HURFOM contributes to the development of a database documenting human rights violations by the Burmese military government. Education is also provided to Mon people through HURFOM. Subjects include English language, Thai language, Mon language and computer skills.

Independent Mon News Agency (IMNA) - www.monnews-IMNA.com

The Independent Mon News Agency is administered in conjunction with HURFOM. IMNA publishes Guiding Star - a monthly, Mon Language newspaper. IMNA also produces daily news in English on their website and a weekly radio program, broadcast through the Democratic Voice of Burma.

Kao Wao - www.kaowao.org

Kao Wao is a web-based project providing news and analysis concerning the situation in

Burma.

Mon Women's Organization

The Mon Women's Organization provides education and vocational training to the Mon community inside Burma and in the border region.

Progressive Mon Youth Organization

Patanerack

Patanerack is a Non-Government Organization that provides a variety of services throughout Thailand. Some projects in this region include Malaria education and prevention, HIV/AIDS education and prevention, and permaculture training.

Travel

Travel to Cambodia, Laos or Malaysia is reasonably priced and good for a visa run. There are overland routes to all of the countries mentioned above. Many small air carriers offer reasonable rates for flights within Asia. Some budget airlines include:

Air Asia - www.airasia.com

Bangkok Airways - www.bangkokair.com

Lao Airlines - www.laoairlines.com

Malaysia Airlines - www.mas.com.my

The website - www.bangkoktickets.com - is recommended by Lonely Planet as a good source for discounted fares leaving from BKK. (Be aware that a 500B departure tax must be paid by all passengers leaving Thailand on international flights.)

Some volunteers have been able to purchase multiple entry visas in their home countries. This means the same visa is good for multiple visits to Thailand, each consisting of 2 months and each eligible for a 30-day extension. In this case you still have to leave the country after 3 months, but you need only cross the border and stay out of Thailand for at least 24 hours, after which time you can re-enter on the same visa. If you do not have a multiple entry visa, you will have to go to a Thai embassy or consulate to obtain a new visa. Here's a list of embassies and consulates in neighboring countries:

● <u>Cambodia</u> 196 MV Preah Nordon Blvd, Phnom Penh 023-363 869-71	● <u>Malaysia</u> 206 Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur 603-248 8222
Laos Th Phonkheng, Vientaine 21-214581-3	4426 Jalan Pengkalan Chepa, 15400 Kota Bharu, Kelantan 609-744 5266
No 26, Ban Xayamongkhon, Th Kouvoravong, Savannakhet 41-212445	No 1 Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, 10350 Penang 094-2268029