

## 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 140 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.
- The outreach program provides food and assistance to those (usually refugees) without income who have dire medical conditions and do not have the resources to get the care that they need.

### What is Neo-Humanism?

**Neo-Humanism is a philosophy** 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 Christian or Buddhist ).

**The women who founded and run Baan Unrak are called Didis.** 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. The Neo-Humanist philosophy will have little effect on the lives of volunteers who are not interested in it, except that a more gentle approach is asked for when disciplining children. There are daily meditation sessions, which you are

welcome to attend but do not have to if you are not interested. The food at the home follows a strict diet (including no eggs, mushrooms, onion or garlic) but you are free to eat as you like outside of the home.

## 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 2011, **Baan Unrak provides for about 140 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.

**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
- Clothes, rice, cooking oil, beans

## 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 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

Sarah Lassally -Volunteer Co-ordinator

Saw Dwigh Chi - Coordinator of medical records and patient care

Lamae - Agricultural Supervisor

Mae Lek - Housemother Supervisor (and all round 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, and to work unsupervised, no one will hold your hand.**

Some examples of what volunteers do are:

- Teach English to housemothers
- Assist with cooking (professional experience required)
- Marketing for our weaving centre
- Teaching home school teenagers
- Lead weekend activities
- Assist with ISV volunteer groups
- Maintenance
- Painting
- Do a variety of office work including
  - fund raising
  - correspondence with donors
  - filing
  - computer maintenance
  - website 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. Volunteers who stay for shorter periods are asked US\$150 per week, with a maximum of US\$900 to help the expenses of the project.

We do quite a lot of teaching here at Baan Unrak, but if that is your main interest then we suggest that you apply to Baan Unrak School. Volunteers at Baan Unrak have great freedom to start whatever projects they are interested in, provided that they are willing to put the initiative and work in. Our volunteers have got involved with daily yoga classes, a jazz choir, circus performing, video editing, and relief work, to name but a few. However, bear in mind that some of the work that is most vital to us is 'office work' and that you will be asked to share some of the responsibility.

## 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 and to sleep under a mosquito net.

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 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 and ice cubes 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 Huai Malay, 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 valid for 90 days. 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 extend it by three months at a Thai embassy outside of Thailand, such as in Phnom Penh. Alternatively, you could simply leave the country and return 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 type O visa. Do not come on a tourist visa, it is difficult to get changed to a one year visa.**

Accommodation

Volunteers will be provided with their own room whenever available. But it may be necessary to share a room for short periods when full. Accommodation is basic but adequate. Volunteers at Baan Unrak stay at one of two places inside the town, about a fifteen minute walk from the home.

Accommodation for men is in a block of rooms behind the Baan Unrak Bakery and Café.

Each room has its own bed, mosquito net, electric fan and some basic furniture.

Toilets and (cold) showers are shared with the Bakery. There are two Western style toilets and one Asian style. Volunteers can use the wireless internet at the bakery or, for a small fee, the computers there. There are no cooking facilities.

Accommodation for women is located in a four-roomed traditional Thai wooden house on the street parallel to the Bakery, about five minutes walk from there. Each room has its own bed, fan, mosquito net and some basic furniture. There are basic cooking facilities. There is a large communal living space, a porch and a small garden. There is only a cold shower and an Asian style toilet .

Volunteers are welcome to stay outside of the Baan Unrak accommodation if they so choose, either renting an apartment or staying at one of the many guest houses in town. **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, Visa 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 offer rooms that range from spartan (for about 150 baht) to pretty nice (for about 1700 baht).

Graph - 650 with hot shower

T-House - 450 with cold shower

Burmese Inn - 400 with hot shower.

**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 200 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. The scenery around Three Pagodas is stunning and worthy of the trip. 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:

Som Tam 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 - T-House (Baan Cheun Jai) - You are very likely to spend quite a lot of time here as a volunteer, if you have money to spare on small luxuries. It is located outside the center of the town and a ten minute walk from the house or volunteer accommodation. Run by the unique P Ton and her family, it sells Thai food and snacks and has a very relaxed atmosphere, a home away from home. It is also possible to watch movies there on evenings and lazy afternoons.

Graph Café - This trendy café opened up in 2010 directly opposite P Guest House and a five minute walk away from the volunteer accommodation. It sells coffee so nicely made that most people take photos of it before drinking it. Like T-House, you can feel comfortable sitting there for hours. They have perhaps the most consistent wireless internet access 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 Home to over 100 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 mothers. 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.

**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](http://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](http://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.

Patanarack Patanarack 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.

●Cambodia 196 MV Preah Nordon Blvd, Phnom Penh 023-363 869-71	●Malaysia 206 Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur 603-248 8222
Laos Th Phonkheng, Vientiane 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

Some embassy addresses in bordering countries above.

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](http://www.airasia.com) Bangkok Airways - [www.bangkokair.com](http://www.bangkokair.com) Lao Airlines - [www.laoairlines.com](http://www.laoairlines.com) Malaysia Airlines - [www.mas.com.my](http://www.mas.com.my)

The website -[www.bangkoktickets.com](http://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 90 days. You still have to leave the country after 90 days, but you need only cross the border, after which 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 (in Phnom Penh, Vientienne, Kuala Lumpur etc.) or consulate to obtain a new visa along with the necessary paperwork which we will provide.