

Traditions Worth Keeping



Southeast Asia is home to many minority groups and tribes, but visiting them can make westerners feel uncomfortable. The difference between the material wealth of the traveller and the poverty of the villagers is on stark display, and it can be difficult to come to terms with the disparity of living standards. The last thing you want is to feel like a voyeur, so we have found some ways for you to get involved with the local people, allowing you to feel more like a guest. Here some of our Southeast Asia specialists talk about their own experiences and how you can ensure that your visit gives something back to the areas that you spend time in.



Nam Tha lunch, Laos

Elderly Palong woman, Thailand



Mark Hotham meets White Hmong



Vietnam

Ha Giang Province, for so long isolated and cut off by the Vietnamese Government, has remained almost totally unaffected by modern influences and is home to a number of indigenous minority groups. It is thought that there are eleven minority groups inhabiting this remote and beautiful province and a twelfth that has not yet been documented. In early 2007 I discovered a land free from the incessant march of commerce and industry, and people who had had almost no contact with the West. They were warm and hospitable, curious and inquisitive. Their villages were quintessential images of a Vietnam of yesteryear: if it hadn't been for the occasional telephone line and scooter the scene could have come from a century ago. The best place to meet minority tribes such as the Black La Chi, the Giay, the Flower Hmong and the Lo Lo is at the weekly local markets, when they descend from their remote mountain homes. Here you're not invading their space: they come to trade, drink, eat and gossip, mixing freely with each other before returning back into the hills, often a day's walk away.

At a time when the central government of Vietnam is encouraging uniformity across the country, it is crucial to support the traditional ways and beliefs of the many minorities in the province. We have set up a number of home-stays in the region and ensure that any interaction has a positive impact on their lives and that money spent in the area goes to help local people and support their economy.

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Thailand

In the old Lanna kingdom, where the northern reaches of Thailand roll in forested hills towards the border with Burma, I only expected to find fauna and flora. I hadn't counted on the many hill tribes I'd come across, their villages scattered on slopes and mounts throughout this untouched part of the country. Stopping mid-trek along the lush mountain track, the generosity of the local Nor Lae village shone through as I was invited onto a wooden veranda for tea, freshly picked. In these self-sufficient communities cocooned in their surrounding hills kindness to strangers seems to come naturally – something that has long disappeared in the West – and was repeated again and again.

The villagers of Nor Lae are of the Palong tribe where the men spend their days hunting in the forest and the women are either in the fields or sitting on their verandas weaving silks for market, and always seemed to enjoy the diversion of an exchange of smiles. Alongside the Palong tribe, the Lahu Khob Dong, Ban Pang Ma and Akha hill tribes are blessed with fertile soils, and in the past the main crop was opium. With help from the Thai government the whole ethos has been changed, and now the crops are strawberries, lychees, tea and orchids that can be sold to visiting trekkers and to the markets in the large towns. I found these villages gave me a fascinating insight to a culture that is steeped in tradition but completely aware that a modern day business sense is essential to preserving their heritage.

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Laos

On my last trip to Laos I stayed in the northern village of Luang Nam Tha at the delightful Boat Landing Guesthouse, perched on the banks of the Nam Tha river. This eco-friendly guesthouse provides its own energy using solar panels and sources all food locally. They believe in small-scale, low impact tourism and actively support many local wildlife and community improvement projects in the nearby Nam Ha National Park.

The mountainous area around Luang Nam Tha is surrounded by rolling primary forest, rich river plains and many colourful minority groups. There are no less than 25 different ethnic groups living in the Nam Ha province, and it is well worth spending a few days in the area to really get to know the people. I was lucky enough to visit an Akha village and found them incredibly welcoming. Friendly and smiling, they were happy to have their photo taken with me.

There is a wealth of activities such as trekking, mountain biking and kayaking on offer, all of which can be tailored to fit your individual requirements. By visiting this region you work in partnership with an established ecotourism project both owned and operated by the local community which ensures they benefit directly from tourism in the area. Such empowerment projects encourage villagers to appreciate and preserve both their heritage and natural environment.

Lyn Richards: 01993 838 129



Huli tribesman, Papua New Guinea



Lao Village



Ou river scenery, Nong Khiaw, Laos



Iban tribesman, Borneo



Victoria Greygoose in Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea

Of more than a hundred different tribes in Papua New Guinea's highlands, the Asaro people are renowned for their intimidating war costume, the centrepiece of which is a huge, individually crafted mud mask, complete with grotesque facial features. Legend has it that when losing a fight with a neighbouring tribe the Asaro retreated to a muddy river. They emerged to be confused with 'evil water spirits' and their enemies ran away.

Despite this threatening costume, I found the Asaro people to be extremely welcoming. At the little village of Gerumeyaka in the highlands near Goroka I was presented with a captivating display of their rather menacing warrior dance. My hosts then prepared a traditional 'mumu' lunch of meat and vegetables, slow-cooked underground below an open fire, and we all ate with the villagers. Papua New Guinea is a relative newcomer to tourism and many of the tribal traditions have never been exposed to the outside world. This makes for a truly refreshing experience for the responsible visitor, who can play a crucial role in ensuring these fascinating rituals are celebrated and preserved for future generations.

Victoria Greygoose: 01993 838 122

Borneo

Borneo is a truly multi-cultural country where a large number of tribal groups can be found. The most famous are the Iban and Rungus tribes who inhabit the Malay states of Sarawak and Sabah. I visited an Iban community and stayed with them in their longhouse: it gave me a fascinating insight into how they combine their traditional way of life with the few elements of modern life that suit their needs. One thing that has certainly not faded is their warmth, hospitality and humour. Travellers aren't new: naturally sociable, many of these tribes have welcomed visitors into their homes for decades. They relish the opportunity to share their cultural heritage and delicious food with people who are interested in learning about their culture.

Just visiting one of Borneo's tribes positively contributes to their economy and enables these diverse and vibrant tribes to continue their traditional way of life. Each family lined up to show me the handicrafts that they had made, and I was more than happy to make a couple of purchases: encouraging this will allow these expressions of tribal identity to survive indefinitely. My night was spent on the banks of the Batang Ai Reservoir and I was welcomed into their longhouse with traditional music and dance and plied with the ever-present tuak, home-brewed rice wine that seems to flow generously on every social occasion. I don't think I've ever met such friendly people and it remains one of my favourite memories of Sarawak.

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Top tips when meeting tribal people

- 1: Always ask before taking photographs of people.
- 2: Ask your guide to teach you how to say hello in the local dialect.
- 3: Ensure you are dressed appropriately. For example, if the tribe doesn't bare their shoulders, then ensure yours are covered too.
- 4: Ask what happens to rubbish left behind while staying in a local home. Some things they may be able to reuse, but others might be better disposed of in a town later on your trip.
- 5: Take pictures of your home, town and family to show them. They are likely to be as interested in you and how you live as you are in them.
- 6: Ask your guide if it would be appropriate to take a gift, and if so what.
- 7: Do not give sweets or money to children. It is normally best to give any gifts to the head of the village so he can ensure they are evenly distributed.
- 8: If staying in a remote village, do be mindful of the amount of water that you use for washing as water can be a rare commodity.
- 9: Be careful to observe any customs such as removing your shoes before entering a building. Your guide will be able to advise you of anything specific for the tribe you are visiting.

WEB PLUS

www.audley.co.uk/traveller/summer08

View an interactive map of the tribes of Southeast Asia



Muang Sing market, Laos



Iban woman, Borneo



Flower Hmong women, Ha Giang, Vietnam



Boatlanding Guesthouse, Luang Nam Tha, Laos



Huli tribesman, Papua New Guinea

FACT FILE

Guide prices are found below but for further details please contact our specialists.

THAILAND

Two weeks, incorporating a two-night stay at Doi Angkhang costs from £1,900 per person. For details please contact our Thailand specialists on 01993 838 115.

VIETNAM

Two weeks, including time in Ha Giang, costs from £2,565 per person. For details please contact our Vietnam specialists on 01993 838 140.

LAOS

Two weeks including seven days exploring the far north costs from £2,250 per person. For details please contact our Laos specialists on 01993 838 125.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Two weeks including two nights in Goroka and a day excursion to visit the Asaro mud-men and time spent with other tribal groups around Tari and the Sepik River costs from £4,150 per person. For details please contact our Papua New Guinea specialists on 01993 838 145.

BORNEO

Two weeks including a night in an Iban longhouse and time in several national parks exploring wildlife starts from £2,250 per person. For details please contact our Borneo specialists on 01993 838 120.



Iban tribesman, Borneo