THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY, THAILAND (January 2009-May 2009)

I really encourage those who are considering participating in an exchange to apply right away. It was the most fulfilling and inspiring experience I've had. I am an English and Publishing student and applied because there is a lot of knowledge you can get outside of the classroom, and I thought this was a perfect way to become a more well rounded individual while completing school.

GETTING THERE

Getting your non-immigrant Thai visa is quick and easy, you can pick it up the next business day. The Thai embassy is located at 1040 Burrard Street. I advise applying for the multiple entry visa; if you want to spend a week in one of Thailand’s neighboring countries, it is a real pain to keep applying for entry and re-entry visas. I booked during high season so my plane ticket cost 1,900. Punctuality in Thailand is never important; time does not matter. This is true in restaurants, meetings, activities and school. I did not receive my acceptance letter from Thammasat until December 22 and I flew out of Vancouver on January 3.

ARRIVING IN BANGKOK

Thammasat advisors can arrange for airport pickup and accommodation at Charlie’s Guesthouse in Pinklao (about 20 minute drive to Thammasat). I'm not sure I would recommend this as no one showed up at the airport and while the Guesthouse is beautiful it is fairly removed from the social scene and school. The orientation is well done and gives a clearer perspective of Thammasat life and Thailand in general. I recommend buying a cell phone (about 900 B at MBK) and a SIM card (can purchase at 7-11) as it helps with boosting your social life as well as being helpful with emergencies. The teachers really appreciate when students wear the Thammasat uniform (which can be purchased at MBK 4th floor, Soi Rambuttri, and the uniform accessories can be purchased at the school bookstore). The uniform also commands respect among local Thais who treat you much nicer than usual when you are wearing it. Also if you shop in your uniform or mention you are a Thammasat student to the shop owner you can usually expect a significant price drop!

APPARTMENTS

An apartment hunting day is arranged by the school as well. 3J Court, Ruen Indra and Rattanakosin (privately owned fully furnished near Pata Pinklao) were very popular choices, located across the river. However, I wanted a place a little more central so I stayed in Pirom Mansion on Phra Sumen (20 minute walk to school; less than 10 minutes to KhaoSan). It cost 8,500/month including high speed wireless (excluding utilities) and came fully furnished with fridge and had hot water and western toilet. There is no kitchen but I didn’t mind because there are a lot of cheap food choices within walking distance. You can live like royalty for a fraction of what you would pay at home. For example some students rented out the enormous penthouse at Rattanakosin. However, I chose to live like I do back at home. I knew I would not be spending a lot of time in my apartment so I chose to splurge on frequent massages, weekend trips within Thailand and more extensive travel around southeast asia.
FOOD

The food is Thailand is both flavorful and plentiful. It seems as though Thai’s like extremes: sinus clearing spicy peppers are added to nearly everything (make sure to specify if you don’t want it) while overly sweet and sugary food is also very popular (ie: pineapple or mango heavily doused in sugar). I am also told by my Thai friends that Swensons ice cream is a popular treat among locals. Rice and noodle dishes dominate food choices. Be prepared to be adventurous! Being a vegetarian, I did not take as much caution eating from street vendors as I didn’t have to worry about how long the meat or seafood was left hanging in the sun. Once I learned how to say “I’m a vegetarian” in Thai I had no problem finding food. If you are adventurous you will happen across excellent dishes with ingredients you will have trouble identifying and pronouncing. However, none of the meat eaters I spoke with had experienced any problems eating vendor food. Expect an upset stomach in the beginning as your body adjusts to the new food. For days when you crave Western food Siam Paragon has a wide range of international food (expect to pay a lot!) there are also Subways and Pizza Huts around Khao San. But you are in Thailand for the experience- savour it!

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

There were around 80 international students in the following faculties: Economics, Thai Studies, and Business. It is not hard to make friends as nearly everyone is in the same boat as you (excited, anxious, and alone). Learning about the countries the other exchange kids were from made me realize there are so many places I want to see. This is just the beginning! Tuition varies depending on which faculty you are in. The kids from BBA pay the most but they also have their own lounge and had the opportunity for cultural field trips. There were mini getaways nearly every weekend, so it was easy to see Thailand (and beyond) with some new friends.

WEATHER

Being from rainy Vancouver, the weather from January – June was a gift and a curse. In January it was in the early 30’s. Once April hit, the weather was unbearably hot (mid 40 degrees). The smog and amount of people in the city seemed to intensify the heat. Also you are not allowed to wear “inpolite” outfits to school. These inappropriate outfits include: sleeveless tank tops and shorts. In fact, the more conservative profs would not allow you into their class if you wore those clothes! You are not allowed to wear those clothes into temples either. However, Thai people have become accustomed to pharangs wearing those sorts of clothes and do not say anything. That is another point about Thai people, they are extremely polite and go out of their way so that no one “loses face” or is humiliated. That being said, they do appreciate when you dress on the conservative side when it comes to your public image.

THE SCHOOL

At the orientation you are told that Thammasat is the Berkley of Thailand- that is it is very liberal and home to free thinkers, whereas Chulalongkorn is considered the Harvard of Thailand. There is a friendly rivalry among the schools (think SFU and UBC) and the soccer game between them is well attended and a lot of fun. The campus is fairly large, open and airy, and located right on the river. As mentioned, Thai
time applies to class schedules and in most aspects the classes are run very casually. My class sizes ranged from 20-50 students. Showing up 20 minutes late, talking during class as well as texting and even answering your phone are common. It is a common belief that international schools are much easier; however, BE students found the classes much more in depth than what they were used to at home. In fact, a few students including myself had to drop a course because we realized by the second week that we were in over our heads. A few teachers at Thammasat had said that after teaching in North America they realized that course curriculum in Thailand was difficult for some exchange students to adapt to. The semester runs from first week of January till mid May and there is a lot to go over. Most classes are 1.5 hours/ 2 times a week. Most course grade weightings were based very heavily on the final (worth 60-80%) Books are very cheap to buy at the bookstore, but a better option is to photocopy them as there are no copyright laws! A Macroeconomics textbook at the bookstore sold for 600 B but I had it photocopied for 350 B just around the corner (also available to photocopy at the Library).

CULTURE SHOCK

Having backpacked Southeast Asia (including Thailand) 4 years ago I had an idea about what to expect. Thailand is really liberal and more developed than its neighbouring countries. There is a reason why Thailand is often warmly referred to as “The Land of Smiles”. Thai people are incredibly kind, soft spoken and tolerant. That being said, your effort at both trying and embracing Thai cultured is noticed and greatly appreciated. Expect to have to adjust to a slower paced lifestyle (which has its appeal) the stink of rotting garbage, the insane traffic, and the sometimes shockingly inhumane way they treat animals. It’s important to remain open-minded as a few kids had longer adjustment periods as they found it difficult to accept this new way of life and the differences it has to offer. But really Bangkok is the metropolitan centre of the country where you can find a mixture of just about everything: massive shopping malls, small markets, Western breakfasts and Thai specialties, Patpong shows and crazy clubs and quiet temples for meditation.

SOME PLACES TO SEE (I spent over 7 months in southeast asia -5 months school+2.5 travelling- and checked out places like Indonesia, Laos, Philippines, Cambod and Vietnam)

1) Erwan Falls, Kachanburi, & Ayutthaya, Thailand- about 3 hours away. Waterfalls, monkeys, River Kwai. Ayutthaya is the former capital and has some awesome temples.

2) Pearls of the Andaman- Krabi province has the most beautiful islands I’ve seen. Check out airasia for cheap flights. Ko Samet and Ko Chang are closer to BKK and also nice.

3) Elephant Nature Sanctuary, Chiang Mai, Thailand- if you want to see, touch, and learn about elephants go here instead of supporting industries (such as trekking) which exploit these amazing animals.

4) Vang Vien & Vientene, Laos- very outdoor-sy, chilled out lifestyle and breathtaking scenery.
5) Tanjung Putting National Park, Borneo, Indonesia- the coolest thing I've ever seen and the hardest to get to. Rented a wooden boat to float down the river and see rehabilitated orangutans up close in the jungle. $$$ but well worth it.

6) Dalat & Hoi An, Vietnam- Vietnam was one of my favorite countries. So rich with culture and history.

7) Siem Reap, Cambodia- Angkor Wat. Enough said.

Please feel free to email me if you have any questions: k_okabe20@hotmail.com or kjo1@sfu.ca

Good luck!
Ko Phi Phi, Thailand

Elephant Nature Park, Chiang Mai

Market, BKK