

You're never too old to take a GAP year!

Neville Timmins is the father of a close friend and he loves travelling and photography. He is 76 and retired. Neville travels a great deal and combines both his loves by documenting his journeys with amazing photography. This year he decided to leave his English home and head to Thailand for a GAP year.

The following are some of the emails he sent to family describing his time in Thailand.

Email - 9 January 2014

Hi All.

Well, here I am at Sole Survivor in Phonphisai, Nong Khai, which is in the non-tourist area. It is in the Isaan area.

The Project is run by Jack (32), who is Thai, & his wife, Patricia (28), who is Dutch. They have a 9 month old daughter, Lunar.

At present, there are 4 of us on this Project - 2 more are expected on [Sunday](#).

Our home is a separate building to the family home & can take a maximum of 8 Volunteers.

The area around us is very flat & we are set among rice fields, where 10 varieties of rice are grown.

The weather is warming up now & can reach 30C or so during the day, although the mornings can start off very cool.

A few weeks ago, the temperature dropped to 10C which is very low for this part of Thailand.

This week I have been in a Primary School helping an English teacher, who is Thai.

The School is wooden & has seen better days & the classrooms are all upstairs.

When I arrived on my first morning, the children & teachers were outside on the grass having their assembly, &

I waited upstairs for them.

As they walked to their class rooms & saw me, they waved up at me & smiled.

It made me feel like Royalty!

When they came close to me, they said 'hello', shook my hand or took both hands!

They also did High Fives & give the odd cuddle!

Now they invariably give me a big smile & shake my hand, etc. every time they see me!

They are lovely children.

Normally, these children would never see a tourist unless it was whilst they were at a market.

Generally, Thai people do not travel in Thailand or anywhere.

Mostly they work long hours, 7 days a week for very little money, so they have neither the money nor time to travel.

A lot of them live in a ram shackled wooden building with very few possessions, except a TV, but despite this, they seem very

happy - always smiling, laughing & smiling.

I feel very humble among them.

Love, Neville xxxx

Email - 13 January 2014

The Mekong River is one of the longest rivers in the world & it borders the north east of Thailand for a few 100 km.

On the other side to the river from us is Laos & it is possible to cross the Mekong to it via The Friendship Bridge & purchasing a Visa, which costs about \$35 US.

All along the Mekong, between the River & the main road which varies from about 200 metres to 1,000 metres wide, there are fishing villages.

They all join together in a long narrow line.

Usually on the other side of the road are the rice fields, which just now are looking very green, where they can harvest two crops a year.

The rice grows to about a metre high, & when it is cut, about 300mm is left standing.

Where I am is a very rural area which tourists pass by as there are no tourist attractions in this area.

As a consequence, I am experiencing the authentic Thai culture & Thai food.

I am using chop sticks to eat with at times & can usually pick up peanuts with them to eat.

Today we went to a family wedding - Jack's cousin got married & we watched the ceremony at close quarters.

Last week I 'taught' English in a primary school but next week I start in a secondary school!

Love

Neville xxxx

22 January 2014

Before entering a home, everyone, including all the members of the family, have to remove their shoes before entering.

Similarly, at school, all the children have to remove their shoes before entering a classroom & leave them outside in the corridor.

They also have to remove them before going upstairs to where their classrooms usually are.

As a consequence, the socks are reinforced on the soles so they are like Slipperettes.

So in the Primary schools, the children often walk & run around barefooted!

Usually, the children are not allowed to enter a classroom before a teacher has entered, & sit at their desks & wait until the whole class has arrived.

Then, at a signal from the head boy/girl, all the children stand up & with big smiles, they loudly chant - "GOOD MORNING TEACHER - HOW ARE YOU?"

To which the teacher, or volunteer teacher, replies - "I AM FINE, THANK YOU. HOW ARE YOU?" The children reply "I AM FINE, THAN YOU".

Whereupon the teacher asks the children to sit down.

At the end of each lesson, the children all stand up & in unison "THANK YOU, TEACHER" for the lesson.

We then say "THANK YOU STUDENTS. I HOPE YOU HAVE A NICE DAY/I HOPE TO SEE YOU AGAIN SOON"

We then teach. The teacher may give us some work to do with the class, particularly with pronunciation.

The students are very shy, especially at trying to communicate in English. I encourage them to talk in English by telling them that I DON'T speak any Thai, although I do know a few words.

In this part of Thailand, they do not get tourists, so there is no incentive to learn English.

A lot of the Thai people around here have not seen a white European before, except on TV, so at functions in particular, some people are keen to practice the little English they do know, like 'Where are you from?' 'Where do you live?' 'What is your name?' 'How old are you?'

They then usually want to photograph me/be photographed with me/me photographed with their group/girlfriend!

I am getting the taste of being a celebrity!

Our nearest 'city' of any size - possibly some 30,000 population, has all their shop signs in Thai script, so you have to peer into the shop, if their wares aren't displayed out on the pavement, to try & discover what they sell or what their business is.

Sometimes the teacher of the English class hands the class over to you completely or interjects to clarify what you have said.

At other times, the teacher 'disappears' for some or the entire lesson, or take photographs of you whilst you teach.

They invariably ask us if we would like them to take photographs on our cameras.

The schools tend to encourage you to take photographs of the children, which isn't particularly easy, as when you are about to photograph just two or three children, any children nearby want to be in the picture! Then they usually pose giving the 'V' sign!

The Primary school children are very lovable! They smile & wave to you before they have met you. Then once they have met you they want to greet you with a Wai (hands together as in prayer & close to your nose) a "HELLO", a high five or cuddle & a big smile!

Teachers are very respected here, almost revered. As a volunteer teacher, I am even more so.

Children & teachers are keen to carry the few things that I do carry around with me each day, take me to my next classroom, even when I know exactly where it is.

The teachers organise or make coffee for me, give me bottled water, order & even deliver my lunch, usher me into their staff room & try to ply me with Thai food, even when I tell them that I have had my breakfast.

If I inadvertently drop something on the floor, I am not 'allowed' to pick it up!

When I try to pay for any food, I am told that the school will pay! I am not sure that that is true, although I was told that they have enough money to fund me for a whole year!!!

Sometimes I am invited into the vice principals office for coffee, & recently I was invited to have drinks with the principle & vice Principle!

It seems that staff go to school at 7-30 am & contribute food to share for their breakfasts.

Walking around a secondary school in particular, all the children Wai to you & lower their heads so that it is lower than yours, & we usually respond with a smile

or nod. As a consequence, walking around the secondary school where I teach, can be very tiring, especially in the warm weather, as children are about all the

time, as lessons often take place on the play area, beside a man-made lake, out on the sports field & whilst sitting in the stands

When we first meet somebody each day, we have to greet each other with a Wai & say 'Sawadee Krup', if we are a male, & the women say 'Sawadee Ka'.

Thai people tend to be quite petite, so at times, I feel a bit like a Gulliver!

Love Neville xxxxxx