

Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand
BBA International Program – WS 06/07

I hope this account of my exchange semester abroad will serve to future candidates as a helpful premise for what to expect, what to do, and how to enjoy the best five months of your life.

Before Arrival

The guidance from the BBA Office is quite good once I received the letter of acceptance from them. Their responses were quite timely and Mr. Tirawut (the main contact for exchange students) will guide you through the process of making it Southeast Asia without a problem. Information is probably the most valuable asset while living and traveling in Southeast Asia. It is rarely accurate and changes very quickly. Bus and train schedules, prices and other travel information should be considered always as 'adjustable' and therefore taken with a grain of salt. Even the information from the BBA Office is not always accurate and Thais will often say 'yes' or give you an answer to save face, rather than just simply stating that they do not know.

Visa

Thailand issues a student visa that is valid for up to one year, but once the student enters the country, he/she must leave within 90 days and reenter in order to continue the validity of the visa. You will need to wait for the letter of acceptance in original form on a University letterhead before they will issue your visa. The Kingdom of Thailand's Embassy is in Berlin and there is also a consulate in München. There are two types of visas, an ED Non-immigrant Single Entry and Multiple Entry visa. Whatever you do, GET A MULTIPLE ENTRY VISA! You will need this to travel around Southeast Asia, which is part of why the whole Thailand experience is so great. Pay the extra 40 Euros, because it will save you a lot of hassle later on with the immigration department.

Flight

After having flown over 300,000 miles in the past 4 years with many airlines, I have quite a bit of experience with airlines and travel agencies. I recommend booking your flight through www.statravel.de. They have a great selection of fares just for students with extended stay ticket validity options. I also recommend flying with a middle-eastern airline for a number of reasons. First, the flights are much cheaper than with a direct Lufthansa or Thai flight. Second, the service is impeccable on Etihad, Emirates and Qatar Airways and puts

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BBA International Program – WS 06/07

Lufthansa to shame. Third, the stopover breaks the otherwise 13 hour flight into two 6.5 hour manageable sessions in the sky.

Arrival

I stepped off the plane at Don Muang Airport not knowing what I had gotten myself into. The air was so thick and polluted and the area around the old airport looked very sketchy. I said how am I going to survive 5 months here? Don't worry, you will soon find that Bangkok and life in Thailand is so intoxicating it becomes intensely addictive. Suvarnabhumi Airport, opened in September 2006, replacing the old Don Muang International Airport, and now serves as Southeast Asia's biggest hub. The first impression one would get from flying in to Suvarnabhumi would be much more pleasant than the rundown area around Don Muang. Take a taxi from the airport to Evergreen Apartments (if you are already able to move in). It is located at the BTS station Rachatewi (pronounced raa cha te wee) next to Asia Hotel. The fare should cost you around 250 baht plus 50 baht extra Airport Surcharge. Don't negotiate with any taxi driver trying to rip you off, just get a metered taxi at all costs. If you arrive early and aren't able to move into Evergreen immediately, you may think about staying at Asia hotel or one of the neighboring hostels around Siam Square. Asia is okay if you get a student rate arranged from your coordinator, but in my personal opinion it is old, run down and not worth the normal rate charged.

Hotel

This is where the real fun starts. The whole experience in Thailand is made better by the fact that we are housed in a great hotel at Evergreen Serviced Apartments with all the other exchange students and plenty of amenities. You will be staying with three other foreign roommates and they try to switch it up, so you get the international experience. Make friends with the hotel staff, they can answer many of your questions when you first arrive. The Hotel has a swimming pool, sauna, gym, room service and internet service. You have to pay monthly for the internet service. They give you a login and password the first month, but you technically don't have to pay any more after that if you don't mention anything, because they do not stop service after the expiration. The rooms consist of two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a connected kitchen and living room with a balcony overlooking the pool. As a serviced apartment, there is daily cleaning service that changes your sheets, bring fresh towels, vacuum & mop and wash the dishes. The kitchen is rather limited, but there are two hotplates, a water cooker, microwave,

Buddy System

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Chulalongkorn (everyone refers to it as simply 'Chula') provides a buddy system where they pair you with a Thai student to help you survive the first week and get through the formalities. They are supposed to meet you at the airport, however this did not work with my experience, because they e-mailed me the day before I left and didn't set up a place or time to meet. Your buddies can be very helpful and will show you where to buy uniforms, the cheapest places to shop, where to eat, etc.

University

Chula is a big campus, much larger than the FH-Nürnberg and you can easily get lost. Go and familiarize yourself with the campus before school starts. The BBA Office is located on the 4th floor of Building 8 and you can find all pertinent information posted on billboards outside of the office. There are several ways to get to school depending on the amount of time and money you are willing to spend. We generally go to school together and share a cab. The ride is 1.6 km, takes 5-20 minutes depending on traffic, and costs about 35 baht (70 cents) each way. You can also take the Skytrain to Siam Square Station and then take the pink Chula bus. The Skytrain costs 15 baht + 2 baht for the bus. If you're up for adventure and need to get to class in a hurry, motorcycle taxis are your best option. It's a little scary at first dodging through traffic on the back of a motorcycle, but you'd be surprised how much time it cuts out of the trip.

Chulalongkorn requires that all students wear a uniform of a white shirt and dark pants for males, and a white shirt and dark skirt (NOT PANTS) for females. This can be purchased at the school's book store. Cheaper uniforms can be had at MBK and it is best to go with your Thai buddy to negotiate on prices. You will need to have a photo taken in your uniform for your student ID. The BBA Office will inform you on the details of that.

With regards to classes, the foreign professors tend to be of high quality and the Thai ones of lesser. Unlike Germany, but like most Universities in the world, there is generally quite a bit of required weekly reading and assignments throughout the semester. They like group projects, so you will get the opportunity to work in teams with Thai students as well. If you have any questions about courses or need some recommendations, feel free to e-mail me.

There is a good cafeteria on campus which everyone goes to daily. Meals cost between 15-25 baht (45-60 cent). If you don't want what has been prepared, ask your buddy to order something for you and they'll make up custom stir fries, sweet & sour pork, etc.

Eating out

Rather than giving you specifics on what to eat, I'm going to let you know where you should eat. All students living at Evergreen often ate at a little place down the street

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BBA International Program – WS 06/07

from Asia hotel on the corner we endearingly called Pineapple Fried Rice, after their great dish. You can eat street vender meals for 20-40 baht. The Thai & Steak Place next to 7-11 is quite good. If you don't know what 7-11 is, it's a convenience store chain from the US, open 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week. There are several thousand in Bangkok alone and over 3,000 in Thailand. Keep in mind, Thailand only allows the sale of beer and liquor from 11-2pm and from 5pm-12pm. Siam Paragon has a great selection of more expensive Western Food, including Subway, McDonalds, Burger King, plus many good Japanese and Italian Restaurants. Pizza Hut has an all you can eat lunch special for 129 baht. The 4th and 5th floor of MBK have a large food court, serving a variety of foods. There are four or five German restaurants in Bangkok if you get homesick. Bei Otto is probably the most popular. Sukhumvit Rd. even has some German beer halls with Paulaner on tap. Little Arabia on Sukhumvit has excellent Egyptian food and is the place for Kebab late at night.

Groceries

If you want to buy bulk groceries for a cheap price, go to Lotus – Tesco. To get there, go to the intersection of Phayathai Rd and Siam Sq and take a right at MBK. It's all the way down at the end of the road. Behind Asia hotel there is a local vegetable market where you can buy fresh veggies, fruit and seafood at Thai prices. For finer tastes, The Gourmet Market in Siam Paragon has almost everything you can imagine and is one of the nicest Grocery stores I've ever been to. For a taste of home, Foodland on Sukhumvit Soi 3 has everything German you can think of, including a German Butcher with Nürnberger Bratwurst and a fresh bakery.

Travel

Living in Bangkok gives you access to Southeast Asia's biggest hub for low cost airfares. You can fly very cheaply to most places in Asia if you book far enough ahead. AirAsia www.airasia.com flies to many places domestically. The Bus system in Thailand is efficient, safe and cheap. You can travel 800 km overnight for about 12 euros. Get a Lonely Planet travel guide and stake out your travel destinations, but here are some that should be at the top of everyone's list.

Ayuthaya – former ancient Thai capital 2 ½ hours north of Bangkok, stunning temples

Chang Mai – capital of the north, jungle trekking, elephants, tribal villagers, flower festival

Khao Yai - national park with amazing scenery, home to the waterfall from the movie "The Beach"

Songklaburi – scenic tranquility along the border of Burma

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Kanchanaburi – famous Erawan waterfalls, Death Railway, Bridge over the River Kwai, Tiger Temples

Angkor Wat, Cambodia – a must visit, the world's largest religious structure

Phnom Penh, Cambodia – Paris of the West, Cambodia's capital is unique in itself

Vientienne, Laos – Stop in the Capital of Laos on your way to Vang Vien or Luang Prabang

Vang Vien, Laos – spend several days tubing down the river, jumping from rope swings, drinking cheap Lao beer and whiskey

Luang Prabang, Laos – great market, former northern Capital, beautiful temples

Krabi – best beaches in the south of Thailand

Kho Tao – best place to learn to dive

Kho Samui – famous for its full moon parties

Kho Samet – paradise beaches, the perfect for the weekend getaway from Bangkok (only 3 hr bus ride)

Kho Chang – larger than Kho Samet and further away, but offers more adventure

Concluding Remarks

My exchange semester in Thailand was honestly the best 5 months of my life until now. I have traveled throughout the world, but Southeast Asia is a jewel and holds more adventure for the money than any other place I've been yet. Living together with the other exchange students really made the trip all the more better. I made some lifelong friends while on my exchange and continue to visit them in their own countries even after the exchange. When you first arrive, you may think what did I get myself into. Bangkok is a bit overwhelming at first with the traffic, 10 million people and chaos that ensues. You will quickly become addicted to the plethora of activities that it offers and should never become bored. My advice is to not stay more than two weekends in a row in Bangkok or you may go crazy. Get out and travel, it is extremely cheap and the best way to experience the true culture of the 'Land of Elephants'. Carry your wallet in your front pocket, especially at markets. I had my stolen twice, but it was a rarity

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BBA International Program – WS 06/07

among the others. Keep at least one extra credit card or ATM card in your safe for a backup and do not carry much cash around unless you're traveling to remote places, as ATMs are widely available. Mosquito repellent will become your best friend, and so will sunscreen for the fairer skinned Germans. Many people chose to go on an exchange to leave their comfort zone, experience adventure, and make new friends. Thailand is quite opposite to the life and customs people are used to in Germany and from the West. The extreme change of environment and new challenges it poses will help build your coping skills in the world and will change your way of thinking. Even after all the partying and vacationing, it makes you a more mature person with unique insight into the lives of the other cultures you are exposed to. Adventure is to be had most everywhere, whether it be jungle trekking in Burma, white water rafting near Chang Mai or riding elephants on the islands. Be daring. Take the jump from the tall rope swing and don't look back. Play it safe as well, because almost everyone got injured on our trip, but we all made it back alive. You will step so far outside your comfort zone you won't even know where its boundaries once were. In conclusion, after comparing my experience with the other's from my semester, I couldn't think of a more perfect place to learn something about business, a lot about culture, even more about your self and in one of the most beautiful settings on earth.