

Sneaking a look at the Long Neck Women

Are the tourists who come to gaze at a remote hill tribe in north Thailand helping to preserve a rare culture or perpetuating a dubious practice? Tim Forsyth wasn't sure

THE OUTBOARD motor splutters to a stop and the tourists disembark. The cameras click and whirr. Twenty minutes later the visitors get back on the boat and leave. You would not think this was a refugee camp.

But then it is hard to think of the Long Neck people as refugees. Dressed in lime green and pink, with brass rings around necks two or three times their normal length, these smiling women astound even the most seasoned traveller. It is an image that hides a struggle for cultural survival between war in Burma and exploitation in Thailand.

Ma-Nang, one of the Long Neck women at Nupa-ah village, explains: "Our long necks are our most important custom. Legend tells us our race began when a dragon with a long, beautiful neck was impregnated by the wind. We lengthen our necks to imitate our mother." Other stories claim the rings are to protect the women from tiger attacks, or were originally to prevent the Burmese court from recruiting them as concubines.

Girls start wearing neck coils at the age of six and move to larger coils as they get older. Only the oldest Long Neck women have the right to change the coils. A mature woman's neck may reach 12 inches.

Yet "Long Neck" is the wrong name. The *National Geographic* magazine once X-rayed a Long Neck woman and found that her neck was not stretched, but instead her ribs and collarbones were stretched — not surprising, as a full set of rings weighs 11 pounds.

The inconvenience is increased by the daily chores of washing and drying the rings, and the only way the women can drink is through straws. In the past, the coils also provided a means of purification — Long Neck women found guilty of adultery had their rings removed, causing the collapse of the head and suffocation.

Such odd-looking people have, predictably, become a tourist attraction. But tourism contrasts strongly with the recent traumatic history of the Long Neck people.

The ethnic group is known as the Padaung or Kayan, and originated in the Kayah state in Burma. Their neighbours there are the Red Karen, or Karen, who have claimed independence from Burma since 1875 and have been fighting for more than 40 years. In the past five years the Burmese have launched military offensives deep inside Karen territory. Long Neck and Karen refugees have been forced to cross into Mae Hong Son province in north-west

Thailand where they now have two refugee camps.

"Our homeland is littered with landmines. Even if we risk these by returning, we could still be recruited against our will by the Burmese army and made to carry munitions to the front line," explained Alphonso Zawthet, a Long Neck headman who lost a leg to a mine. "In Thailand we have no rights, but at least we are safe."

But in Thailand the potential for tourism has not been missed. Two years ago a Shan man from a nearby town was arrested trying to take seven Long Neck people from Burma and sell them to a resort near Chiang-Mai, the capital of north Thailand. They would have been displayed for tourists in some sort of human zoo. Instead, they now live in one of the camps.

Yet here the conditions are not that different from a zoo. The Long Neck people are housed in display areas near

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the gates, where women sit waiting for tourists and posing for photographs, but large numbers of Karen refugees are kept out of sight. Men from the Red Karen Army guard the gates and demand entrance fees of £7 from Western tourists, £120 from Thais.

"It is disgusting," said one Israeli tourist. "I hired a jeep to come here, and did not expect to pay more to see the people. This is a remote place, but I am being treated as though I am in the middle of Bangkok."

A Swedish tourist said: "I am embarrassed to be here. This village is obviously built for tourists. I wanted to find out about these people. Instead all I can do is sit and stare."

Tony Khooon, the Karen co-ordinator of refugees, defends his position: "You cannot stop the tourism. Why should we not benefit? We use the money to buy medicines and schoolbooks. But we know tourism can encourage children to beg. That is why we limit the tourists to just the Long Neck people."

The Long Neck people are thus used by their fellow refugees to generate income. It is not total abuse — the Long Neck people support the Karen in

their struggle, and also benefit from the tourists' cash. But they are the ones who have to organise their lives for tourists. Dr Ron Renard, of Payap University, Chiang-Mai, says: "The Long Neck people are relatively undeveloped and naïve compared with neighbouring communities. It is not surprising they can be exploited."

It is becoming common for tourists trekking in northern Thailand to relax by visiting hill tribes. The distinctive costumes and pre-industrial lifestyles found in mountain villages are irresistible attractions. But the people face both poverty and prejudice.

Hill tribes are on the outside of Thai society. During the Vietnam War, the government feared communist insurrection and fought against insurgents across north Thailand. There is still little trust. Hill tribes are considered illegal squatters on government land and are blamed for deforestation, soil erosion and water shortages.

Prejudice and lack of education lead to exploitation and problems coping with modern culture. A 1990 survey of 67 hill-tribe prostitutes found every one of them was HIV-positive. Less than 10 years ago a man from the least developed hill people, the Malabri, was displayed in a cage in a Bangkok department store.

Professor Anan Kanchanaphan, of Chiang-Mai University, says: "The so-called hill tribe problem is a problem of our own warped vision, or wrong perceptions, which can lead to extreme, sometimes absurd, visions of highland people."

Chiang-Mai is virtually dependent on hill-tribe tourism. But for all the attention they receive, there is little benefit for the hill people. Mass-produced fabrics based on hill-tribe designs encourage villagers to alter historic cultural forms for the sake of Western fashion. Cultural damage is inflicted by encouraging festivals to be held out of season.

Trekking companies advertise hill tribes as primitive and remote, but increasingly the tourists will only pay for treks if they include a wide mix of tribes to be visited, elephant rides and raft trips, and the opportunity to smoke opium. This is high adventure for the tourists, but not for the hill people. Although opium has been grown and smoked for generations, anthropologists fear that nightly smoking with tourists may increase addiction.

Such tourism presents ethnic minorities with serious development problems. But it is not only Thai operators who are at fault. England's STA Travel



Nam Pin Don, aged 22, one of the Long Neck women who have fled from Burma to Nupa-ah village in northern Thailand. Girls start wearing neck coils at the age of six

wrote in its 1989-90 brochure: "The Akhas... wash only once a year, and can neither read nor write because, legend has it, their alphabet was eaten by a dog." Sometimes the Akha can indeed appear dirty. But this is because they live in poverty on mountains where water is scarce. And instead of washing only once a year, the Akhas are actually forbidden from washing once a year, at their new year. Does poverty really need to be the tourist attraction?

Proper management of tourism can reduce harmful effects, and many hill people are adept enough to profit from tourism without losing their identity. But this cannot survive if their land is bought by resort developers or large agricultural companies. Projects supposedly aimed at sustainable agricultural development actually support the old strategic aim of removing hill tribes and increasing access for the Thai military and investors.

Tourism supports such aims because it provides an incentive for Thai investors to buy mountain land, and can also be a source of waged labour for reser-

ved hill tribes. And, as shown by the Karen's domination of the Long Neck people, not all groups can master tourism equally.

Ma-Nang puts on a brave face: "I do not mind tourism. Our visitors come to see our long necks, but we enjoy seeing their different coloured hair and eyes."

Tourism is just one source of pressure for the Long Neck people. Most have been converted to Christianity, and education and war are persuading families to abandon old customs. Only about half of the Long Neck women now lengthen their necks — in Thailand there are only 22 of them. It seems unlikely that the custom will continue much into the next century. One factor is a shortage of neck coils, which can only be obtained in Burma.

The influence of tourism may keep the custom alive — but tourism considers only the length of the necks and ignores the crisis of cultural survival. Ma-Nang says: "Life is not better in Thailand. Here we have no land or rights. We want to return to Burma. But we can't, because of the fighting."



FACT FILE

Flights: Trailfinders (071-938 3366) offers a return fare from London to Bangkok with the Emirates, travelling via Dubai, from £469; a return fare with Royal Brunei Airlines, travelling via Frankfurt, costs £475. Packages: Sensibility Travel (071-704 0919) is an "environmentally concerned" tour operator for people "who want to enjoy the natural environment of the Tropics". The company offers holidays to the village of Chiang Khan in Loei province, north-east Thailand, overlooking the Mekong river. Seven days at the village base costs from £275 per person — a two-week package including return air fares and a week on a Thai island costs from £1,300. Further information: Tourism Authority of Thailand, 49 Albermarle Street, London W1X 3FE (071-499-7679).

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