

A Hill Tribe Trek in Eastern Myanmar

A trek to the hill tribe villages is a major reason visitors come to Keng Tung, in the Shan state of eastern Myanmar, or Burma. The villages sit high on the hilltops, mountain ridges and slopes of this lush, rugged area, and have only just started to receive visitors since 2013. The Shan State is Myanmar's easternmost state, and shares borders with Thailand, Laos and China. To visit, we've arranged ahead of time for visas at one of these newer land border crossings—this one in Tachileik. Our three-day visas allow us to travel only from Tachileik to Keng Tung, and we're required to hire a guide. This morning, we'll bump along in our air-conditioned van for two hours on a dirt road to travel to Pin Tau, and from there, we visit two different hill tribe villages.

The first tourist visas since the 1962 military takeover were issued in 1992, but as late as 2006, fewer than 270,000 tourist visas were issued, and almost everyone entered the country by air to the capitol city of Rangoon with travel restricted to certain areas. In 2013, the country saw 2.4 million visitors, and while most still visited only the major areas of Rangoon, Bagan and Mandalay, the opening of several land borders are allowing other areas to see tourists. At the time of this writing, Aung San Suu Kyi is poised to return to a position of power and the country is in a state of incredible change.

Our guide, Sai (Mr.) Leng has been with us since he and his driver, Tip Com, met us at the Tachileik border customs and immigration center and transported us to Keng Tung, ninety-five miles to the north, the day before. Sai Leng graduated from college in Mandalay, and teaches English and martial arts, as well as being a freelance government-certified guide. He's married, with two young children. His English is great, and he also speaks Mandarin. Ethnically, he tells us he's a "mix" of several of the tribes, and we appreciate his thoughtful insight into the changes his country is seeing and his respect for these tribes.

Most Shan State citizens belong to one or more Tai ethnic groups or to one or more of the many hill tribes in this region of lush, rugged mountains and hills. Just a few of the hill tribes in region include Shan, Akhu, Akar, Eng (or En), Loi, Wa, Palaung, and Lahu (or Lisu).

At the trail head, several Akhu women show us their wares, displaying on some chain link fencing at the trail head.

We begin our trek. (As a disclaimer, I'll call this a trek because this is what everyone keeps calling it. But to me, this is a "hike." Granted, there were some pretty deep grades, but we were not backpacking, this was not an arduous multi-day journey; this was a day hike for which we were well-prepared with light layers of clothing, decent walking shoes, bottled water and a picnic lunch.)

There's no arguing this is beautiful land. As we walk, Sai Leng points out plants and trees and

talks about how many are used in medicines. We pass quite a few people on this road.



We arrive at the first village.

We're of great interest to the many village children. When one of my friends digs out some candies to share, Sai Leng asks her not to. "We've learned from other cultures that guests giving things to our children can make them beg from visitors in the future, and we don't want that."

We ask about school and are told, "The government wants the children to go to school. But there are not enough jobs for people, with educations or not. The government stipulates a percentage of children in the villages that must attend school. A certain number of children from each of these villages must attend school. But getting to the school is not easy and they don't all want to go. So, sometimes, if a village is supposed to send 5 kids, say, the kids will rotate. But no one learns that way. It's difficult."

Sai Leng says, "People want to talk with you, they like to laugh, and they want to try English, but they also like to hear you try to speak their language. And they want tourism. It can bring money to the villages. Right now, about three groups a week come. But we have concerns as well. What changes will happen when more groups come, if groups come every day? There is good and bad to that."

We remove our shoes before we enter both homes. Both our hostesses serve refreshments. What we lack in language skills we make up in shy smiles and admiration of their beautiful children.

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The homes we pass and the two we visit are single family homes, although many of the families are multi-generational. (The Loi hill tribe is one that lives in long houses designed for multiple families.) The homes are on stilts, constructed of wood, with the living quarters upstairs and space for livestock, farm equipment and storage below.



Upstairs, the homes have covered, open-aired living space.

Inside, there's a kitchen, living and sleeping space.

Both of our home visits end with our hostesses displaying a selection of jewelry and weavings. These were not goods we saw at the markets, and the prices were very low. The scarves, purses and jewelry and items we buy bought are completely hand stitched, and the beaded necklace and ear ornaments are the same the women were wearing. We say our goodbyes.



As we leave, we're introduced to a village elder. Many Eng women blacken their teeth by chewing a tree bark and beetle nut.

As we leave, we get a more great views of the land below.



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More than anything, I wonder what changes these children will see in their lifetime. Myanmar is beginning the next stage of hopefully positive political change. This includes the need to heal from years of war and a closed society, and providing opportunities for its population. Change is coming to Myanmar's citizens, but to what extent is unknown.



FOR MORE:

Myanmar Tourism Federation, <http://www.tourismmyanmar.org>

-All photos by Nancy Zaffaro.