

# HANDS ON IN THAILAND



PHOTOS: COURTESY PHIL ENGELBERTS

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*When Philip Engleberts saw with his own eyes how orphans in Thailand live, laugh and love despite their less-than-perfect circumstances, he couldn't help but be moved to action, he tells Kate Johnston.*

The children in Chiang Mai's Ban Kingkaew orphanage have either been abandoned or removed from their homes because of abuse, neglect or because their parents are in jail. "My role was just to bring two extra hands to the place," says Philip of his first visit there, "and I've never felt so useful."

He found he simply could not stand still when there were nappies to be changed – and his hands were also kept busy cuddling the children as they reached out for affection. But it would be a mistake to think of the orphanage as a sad place. In fact, when an emotional Philip had to leave, it struck everyone as funny that he would be upset.

"The women who look after the children thought it was all rather hilarious," he says. "Here was this western man blithering and howling about saying goodbye to what is essentially a happy place – it made them hoot and roar with laughter."

Ban Kingkaew orphanage is a beautiful, well-kept building which was a gift from local resident Miss Kingkaew Wiboolsanti, who willed her home and a sum of money for its development. Supervised by two Buddhist nuns, it's

run by 12 to 15 women – nannies, nurses and teachers – and local volunteers, who together manage the relentless workload of looking after 30 babies and children aged six months to six years. Few children are adopted. It's not a part of the Thai culture to adopt, as they tend to have large families to look after. "I've seen a few kids get adopted but not many," says Philip. "They're mostly international adoptions. But the amount of paperwork involved in international adoption is enormous."

Since his first visit to Ban Kingkaew in March last year, Philip has noticed changes in his approach to life. He hasn't vowed to quit his Sydney publicity business, he hasn't planned to move countries and give up everything and everyone he's ever known – it's just that something about the quality of everyday life has improved.

"I get less involved in trivial things," he says. "I still run my business and everything that goes with that but I have more perspective. If the business fails, if I go bankrupt, then I know it's not all there is. I know what's important to me. I am more assertive yet less easily stressed. Things just don't upset me as much anymore."

### Cultural shift

Philip has always loved Thai food, culture and people. His work promoting the travel industry had taken him to Thailand more than 20 times before his good friend Kristie suggested he visit the orphanage. Of course, participating in the lives of the children is a far cry from the five-star hotels and 'native' dance routines many tourists experience as Thai culture. The real source of any culture lies in the values and beliefs of its people. Through volunteering at Ban Kingkaew, Philip has developed a deep respect for the gentle nature of the Thai people. "I'm not a Buddhist," he says. "But I appreciate the way the Buddhist philosophy permeates all aspects of their lives."

During his most recent visit, Philip decided to do something to honour the incredible dedication of the women who care for the children day-in day-out. "I took 12 of the women out to dinner," he says. "They'd never been out to such a fancy restaurant – a main course only cost about eight dollars. They got all dressed up and drank Margaritas and Mai Thais and had a great time. I gave them a bag of cosmetics samples my friends in Sydney had given me, full of creams, potions and lotions."

On his next trip he hopes to take some of the children on a visit to the zoo or the swimming pool. "For them it's such a treat. They have a van for occasional outings, though it's not easy to get them out very much. And the kids don't have a lot of toys. An A4 sheet of paper may be their one thing for the day. They have such limited means but it's mind boggling how they can entertain themselves."

Living with less means the children don't know what it feels like to have their own clothes: whatever is donated gets randomly shared. "There's one huge pile of hand-me-down clothes in the corner from which all the kids are dressed," says Philip. "They just line up and get put into whatever's on top of the clothing pile. Some of the little boys end up in fuchsia floral shirts, or whatever.



It's just a matter of what fits. Doesn't matter if it's polyester or cotton, you get what you're given. Sometimes they can end up looking quite incongruous and funny."

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### Altruistic travel

It seems everyone is talking about the value of volunteering and apparently, Australians do it in droves. Altruistic travel is the latest industry buzz word. But not everyone's cut out for it.

"Foreigners fly in and out of the orphanage," says Philip. "But some aren't very helpful. One woman wouldn't

change a nappy and sat around smoking. But the Thai people would never say anything."

In a perfect world, the orphanage would run with only the help of government and private donors. But money is money, wherever it comes from. "American tour buses come into the orphanage daily," says Philip. "Tourists can hold a baby for two minutes and take a photo for a gold coin donation. I think it's a bit disruptive for the kids, but they need the money."

The businessman in Philip certainly understands commercial realities and he is putting his considerable talents and contacts into fundraising activities. To start the ball rolling, for his most recent birthday he asked friends to leave the gifts in the gift shop and give him cold hard cash. "I asked for nothing under \$50, which is not a problem for them," he says. "Then I matched the total. I've also done some fundraising through my clients. I had a charity dinner with *Delicious* magazine. I would like to do something bigger as I have access to travel prizes, but these would have to be tax deductible so it's a bit more complex. I may end up doing lots of smaller fundraisers."

Thankfully the children are still young enough to be oblivious to their lack of resources. As long as they are getting the basics, they accept their environment and random clothing options as normal. It's not sad, only uplifting, to see that within their resilience to circumstances, they remain open to receiving kindness and love from anyone willing to give it.

Philip has been back to Ban Kingkaew three times in a year and will soon return for another 10 days. It is there he finds a place where even the most basic action has clear value, where he and others are responding to a fundamental human instinct to do something when there's something to be done.

"I'm only there to do my bit," he says. "It's a privilege." **YL**