

# Footsteps of food, festivals and fun!

Muang Paem, Pang Ma Pa, Mae Hong Son



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THAILAND



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# Welcome to Muang Paem,

A tapestry of people, culture, arts and nature

Welcome to Muang Paem, where life is an inspiring tapestry of nature and culture. Agricultural livelihoods, arts, culture and traditions are woven seamlessly into day to day life. In Muang Paem, you will meet gentle, friendly people, living a simple life which nevertheless reveals a profound understanding and respect for the natural world.

## “Tabruk!” We are Paganyor!

The inhabitants of Muang Paem are White (Scor) Karen, or ‘Paganyor’, which means ‘humanity’ in their own language. The Karen peoples are believed to have settled in what today is Myanmar in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Their oral history suggests that they migrated from Mongolia via the Gobi desert to southern China, Yunnan Province then into Tibet and further south into Myanmar and Thailand.

According to interviews conducted with villagers, the ancestors of Muang Paem’s current inhabitants lived around the Salaween River valley area, and slowly migrated into Myanmar and Thailand. The Karen families of Muang Paem have lived peacefully in Thailand for several generations, and at least 200 years.

*Local Insight : Greet your hosts in local language! “Tabruk” is a traditional greeting which means ‘hello’ & ‘thank-you!’*



### Brief History of Muang Paem community

Karen people have lived in Muang Paem since 1961. Muang Paem predates present day Shan and Lahu communities in Tum Lod sub-district. Previous to Karen settlement, the area was inhabited by Lua people. During the second world war, Muang Paem fell across a trail used by Japanese soldiers on their way to fight in Burma. The Lua villagers moved away.

The founding families of Muang Paem migrated from Huay Puling district, in northern Mae Hong Son. It was an ideal location. Rice paddy fields had been developed by previous inhabitants, and there were abundant natural resources. Before 1957, the villagers lived around the area of the fish pond, the old Jedi and ‘Mor Dee’ spring. By 1961, there were 18 households. Nowadays, there are 115 households.



## Welcome home ...

Traditionally, Karen homes are made from bamboo and raised about 1 metre from the ground. Homes have a single room, with a raised earthen fire-place, located in the center of the house, which is used for cooking and heating. Roofs are thatched with wild grasses and large leaves, or simple wooden tiles.

Nowadays, local people are increasingly choosing to construct homes from stronger, more durable materials, such as hard woods, or corrugated iron. Younger couples have also begun to build private rooms. However, many elders still prefer to sleep in the common room, next to the warmth of the earthen fire.

The area around and under the house is usually used to raise pigs, chickens and buffalo. In the dry season, the buffalo are released to forage for food in the forest. Pigs are kept in their sties, and very well looked after. They are raised for important family events, such as weddings. Villagers also grow vegetables in their home gardens.

One of the most charming features of Karen homes are open balconies, where families welcome guests.

*Local Insight: spend an hour or two on the balcony with your hosts, asking about how life in the village has changed.*

## Bamboo Weaving and Products



Many pieces of equipment used in daily life, such as baskets and traps are made from bamboo. In the past, men were expected to be able to weave at least 2 kinds of equipment before they were allowed to get married. This tradition is nowadays very rare!

Two popular types of bamboo are used for weaving: white bamboo and blowpipe bamboo, which can be found in the community forest and close to streams.

When villagers want to produce household objects from bamboo, they trek into the forest to cut bamboo. The villagers try to find bamboo which is around 2 years old, because it is not too hard too soft to weave. The villagers cut the bamboo into strips of various widths, depending on the products which they are weaving.

If villagers do not have much time, the bamboo trunks can be soaked in water for up to 10 days, and will remain flexible. After this, the bamboo will begin to develop an unpleasant odour and become discoloured. Bamboo which has been cut into strips can be kept for 1-2 years before weaving. In this case, the villagers soak the strips in water before they weave.

*Local Insight: how many different bamboo objects can you see used in a Karen house? What are they used for? Who made them? How long do they take to make?*



## Paganyor Textiles

Karen textiles are an iconic symbol of local art and culture. Most women are skilled weavers, crafting simple, beautiful textiles during their free time, after returning from the fields. Karen women weave using a backstrap loom, which limits the width of cloth to the breadth of the weaver's back. Several pieces of cloth must be sewn together to make larger pieces of cloth.

Karen culture strictly distinguishes between the roles of men and women. Unmarried Karen women wear a long, hand-woven, white dress which hangs down loosely to their ankles, called 'Chewa,' symbolising purity. Married ladies wear dark-coloured, waist length blouses, decorated with seeds or eye-catching, woven designs. They also wear sarongs woven with bold and colourful designs. Traditionally, Karen men wear woven, red shirts, and simple dark trousers.

When a child is 1 year old, their mother will weave a Karen dress for them: a white 'Chewa' for girls and a red 'Chekwa' for boys. Karen women believe that these shirts will bring good health to children and their mother. The mother must weave the shirt within 1 day. If she cannot do this, she can request the help of up to 3 women, from happily married families, to assist her. Mothers also weave hammocks for babies and table cloths in preparation for their daughters' wedding.

Karen cloth is often beautifully decorated, using Job's Tear seeds, woven into patterns. These blouses have a special name, 'Che-bur', which refers to the seeds. The seeds are grown in the fields, alongside the families' rice. Blouses which are decorated without seeds, but with colourful designs are called 'Cheki'.

## Natural dyeing

The women use different parts of trees to dye textiles. These include jackfruit bark for yellow, lac for red, Indian gooseberries for green and *Pratu* (*Pterocarpus macrocarpus*) bark for brown. The women also use alum, ash water, limewater and water with suspended rust particles as agents to fix colours, strengthen and soften the threads. Finally, the cotton is soaked in starch to make the threads strong enough to weave. The process is:

- i) Soak the materials in water for 3 days;
- ii) Boil the dye for 1 hour and filter through cloth to removed un-dissolved particles;
- iii) Wait for the dye to cool down;
- iv) Soak and wash the cotton to soften it;
- v) Rinse the cotton to wash out any starch;
- vi) Warm the dye and soak the cotton in the dye for around 30 minutes. Then, soak the cotton in water with limestone;
- vii) Dry the cotton. Make sure that it is completely dry before weaving.



*Local Insight: Buying local textiles is one of the best ways to prevent poverty and support local arts to stay alive. Try on a local shirt or blouse. Ask to see how it was made. How many days did it take to dye and weave?*



## Traditional, mixed, rotation farming

Agriculture is still based around self-sufficiency. The Karen are well known for sustainable land management practices, which include crop rotation, and mixing crops in their fields, which are harvested at different times of year. Most crops are planted for consumption in the family and to feed animals. The most important crop is rice. Rice is planted on mountain rice terraces and in paddy fields. Villagers also plant vegetables in home gardens and spare spaces around their homes. They also forage for wild forest foods, and go fishing.

### Mountain rice

The original inhabitants of Muang Paem built their homes on the hillside, close to their mountain rice terraces. Muang Paem village has clear boundaries, based around traditional agricultural zoning, which pre-dates the establishment of Thai protected areas. Mountainside allotments are rotated on a 5 year cycle, which allows enough time for nutrients to return to the earth. Allotments are divided between local families, based on discussion and consensus. Each family is allowed to farm 4 to 5 allotments, where they plant rice, and other crops which ripen at different times of year. Common crops include rice, chilli, eggplant, pumpkin, garlic, cucumber, onions, coriander, and various types of beans. Crops ripen throughout the seasons, providing an ongoing source of food security. Mountain rice is planted from April.



### Paddy fields

Paddy fields are located in the valley, around 1-2 kms from Muang Paem. They are irrigated by river water and rain, using 'muang fai', a local irrigation system, built by hand from bamboo, tree branches and earth. Villagers begin planting rice in June. Three rice species are planted: *Burbolaw*, *Burmhaechathi* & *Burjeulae*. (note: local, Karen language)

### Home gardens

Local families also have home gardens and orchards, where they plant sweet corn, bananas, passion fruit, pineapples, lemongrass, ginger, kalanga and other types of fruits, vegetables, herbs and edible plants.

### Herbal medicines

A large variety of herbal medicines can be found in Muang Paem village and the surrounding area. Karen people are very proud of their knowledge about these remedies. Many households plant herbal medicines in their home gardens. Nowadays, Karen people have better access to modern medicines. Nevertheless, the fact that herbal medicines can be grown at home, and found in the forest for free ensures that they are still valued and used, especially by the elder generation. There are 5 recognised herbal doctors in Muang Paem. Most experts learned from elders in their families. Some villagers requested to become a student of expert elders outside their families. The importance of the forest as a source of natural remedies has motivated forest conservation.

## Traditional, mixed, rotation farming

**January:** After the newly harvested rice has been pounded and de-husked, the ‘*Kee Lor Jur*’ ceremony takes place. The villagers pound some rice, and boil whisky. They ask the village elders to bless the spirits of the fields for their good harvest. Later in the month, the villagers survey potential areas for mountain cultivation. Plenty of bamboo is an indicator of good quality soil.

**February:** villagers select their mountain allotments. An important ceremony, ‘*Kee Jer*’ takes place, on the 13th and 14th of the lunar calendar, which is a blessing with sacred thread, lead by a village elder called ‘*Yee Kor*.’

**March:** Areas selected for mountain allotments are cleared. Villagers cut big trees at waist level. These trees stay alive and produce shoots during the rainy season.

**April:** a fire break is built around the mountain rice fields, to protect crops from forest fires. After this, the fields are burned and fences are constructed to prevent cattle from trampling the crops. House warming ceremonies cannot be conducted in April.

**May:** villagers begin releasing water into the nursery fields, where rice shoots are grown. They also plant vegetables and plants in their mountain allotments. The villagers also construct traps for rats, squirrels and other animals to prevent them from eating their crops.

**June:** the villagers begin to plow the paddy fields, and to plant paddy rice. They make an offering to the spirits of river and earth, at the source of the paddy irrigation system. The villagers ask the spirits to protect their water and rice, and request a bountiful harvest. People who share the same water source will join this ceremony. After this, villagers weed their mountain allotments.

**July:** the villagers continue to weed their fields and ward off pests. They wait for their crops to grow. They make offerings to the spirits of river and earth.



**August:** a major offering is made to the spirits of the fields, forest and mountains (‘*Sae Kur / Sae Chi*’), asking for a bountiful harvest, and protection from insects and other pests which eat crops. First, the *Yee Kor* (shamen) makes an offering, followed by the other villagers.

**September:** rice and many types of vegetables are beginning to ripen. Men go into the forest to search for forest products. Women usually weave Karen textiles.

**October:** The ‘*Or Bur Koh*’ (eating young rice) ceremonies begin in family homes, and will last until December. Local families eat newly harvested rice.

**November:** The villagers go to the fields to harvest rice;

**December:** the villagers carry the paddy rice back to the village, where it is stored in rice huts. In the mountain allotments, the “releasing birds to the sky” ceremony is performed. The villagers thank the spirits of sky, forest, mountains and wild animals for the rice which will sustain their lives during the coming year. The villagers also go into the fields to collect seeds for planting next year.



## On the footsteps of food with a compass for culture and crafts!

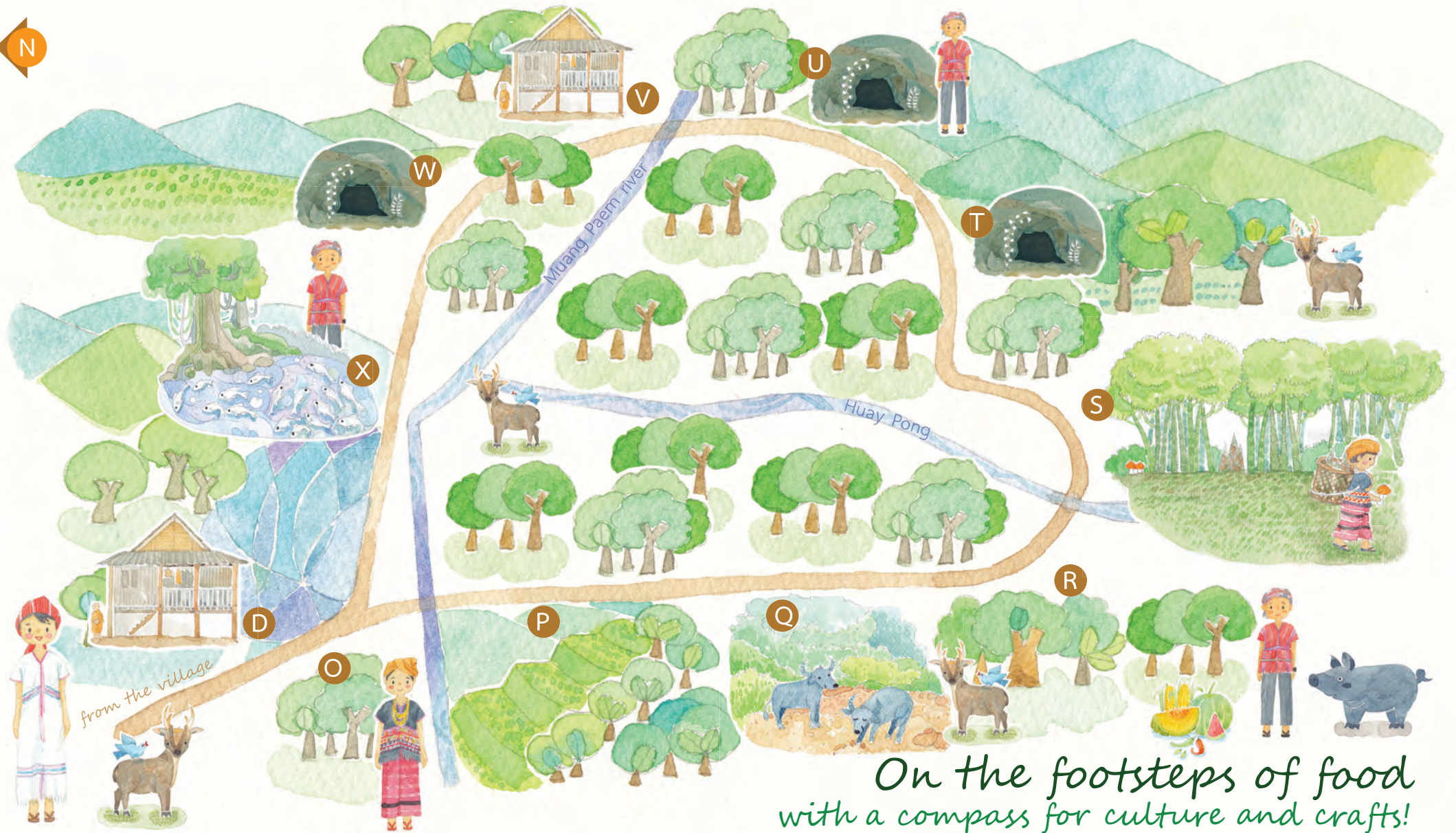
**Advice for guests:** Muang Paem is still a traditional community.

- Guests should dress modestly. Men should wear shirts in the village, and women should wear shirts their which cover shoulders and shorts or skirts which are not too short.
- You may be offered rice whisky during your stay, but should drink in moderation.
- Please be friendly and patient If services are slower or different to your expectations the people are not tourism professionals. Avoid displays of public affection (kissing and cuddling in public)

- A = headman
- B = village shamen
- C = Muang Paem school
- D = Muang Paem temple
- E = church
- F = village rice bank
- G = traditional home

- H = Home Stay
- I = women's weaving group
- J = natural dying
- K = bamboo crafts
- L = shamen, herbal medicine doctor
- M = village gate
- N = Community Based Tourism Group Center





## On the footsteps of food with a compass for culture and crafts!

**Local Insight:** go into the forest and search for edible plants with your host, then take them back and prepare a meal. Or, pick some vegetables in the home garden.

D = Muang Paem temple  
O = community forest  
P = rice terrace  
Q = protected swamp  
R = community forest  
S = community forest

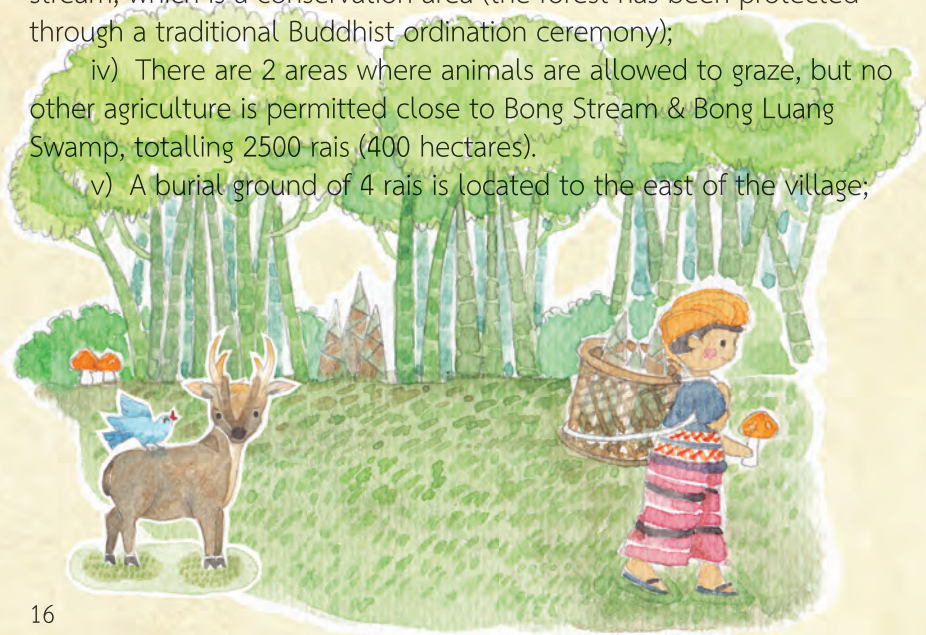
T = Tum Yao cave  
U = Huay Rai cave  
V = old temple  
W = Jedi cave  
X = fish conservation area

## Community Forest

The Karen are well known for practicing effective forest zoning, which has enabled them to manage and use natural resources sustainably for generations.

Traditionally, the Karen have a 'Dayborku' or navel forest. Women bury their placentas here after giving birth, to join the spirit of their child with a tree, which cannot be cut down. This is no longer practiced in Muang Paem, because babies are now born in the hospital, rather than in the village. However, effective natural resource management is still practiced:

- i) There are about 4000 rais (640 hectares) of watershed forest in the area of Hia stream, which cannot be cut or farmed;
- ii) There is an area of 1000 rais (160 hectares) of forest, to the north of Muang Paem which can be utilized by the community members;
- iii) There is an area of 1500 rais (240 hectares), close to Bong stream, which is a conservation area (the forest has been protected through a traditional Buddhist ordination ceremony);
- iv) There are 2 areas where animals are allowed to graze, but no other agriculture is permitted close to Bong Stream & Bong Luang Swamp, totalling 2500 rais (400 hectares).
- v) A burial ground of 4 rais is located to the east of the village;



## Protected swamp

The 'Bong Luang' is a swamp area of 1500 rais (240 hectares), which provides food for many wild animals and birds in the forest. The area is a salt lick, rich in salts and minerals which birds and animals need to survive.

In the rainy season, birds and animals will drink water in the swamp, and digest dissolved salts. In the dry season, they will lick and eat the earth in the swamp. The community does not allow hunting in this area. This is a great place to view wildlife...if you are quiet!



## Fish Conservation Area

Only 15 minutes walk from Muang Paem, is a fish conservation area, where hundreds of fish enjoy protection from fishing. In the rainy season, when fully grown, they will travel naturally downstream, where villagers can catch them for food.

*Local Insight: accompany a local forest guide to the protected swamp and fish conservation areas, to learn how Karen people are conserving the forest and wildlife.*

## Foods and the seasons

Karen people live a simple life, closely connected to nature and the seasons. There are 3 seasons: rainy season, winter and dry season. Villagers' food comes from 3 sources: i) food from inside the community forest, ii) food from outside the community forest and iii) food which villagers have planted themselves. Some food is stored in case of poor harvests or food shortages.

### The Rainy Season

In the community forest, vegetables include various species of mushrooms, water mimosa, baby egg plant, banana hearts, bamboo shoots, Acacia, galingale, *Pak Nam Nong* (*Polyalthia suberosa*), and local vegetables with no translation available! Frogs, field rats, edible lizards and eels are also hunted.

Outside the community forest, vegetables include various species of mushrooms, such as termite and puffball mushrooms, auricularia, panus polychrous and Rosy Russula. Animals which are hunted for food include squirrels, wild chickens, birds and fish (these include cause fish, red cheek barb, freshwater red snappers, cat fish and spot-finned spiny eels).

Vegetables and fruits planted by community members include rice, sweet corn, rosella, custard apples, onions, pumpkins, cucumbers, tomatoes, sour gourd, morning glory, lemon basil. Animals which are raised include chickens, cows, buffalo and catfish.



### The winter season

In the community forest, vegetables include water mimosa, baby eggplants, acacia, banana hearts and local vegetables *kwaepo* and *pokudaow* (no translation). Animals which are hunted for food include cold-season frogs, mountain frogs, freshwater prawns and fish.

Outside the community forest, vegetables include cluster figs and Miding ferns. Animals which are hunted for food include grasshoppers, birds, squirrels, moles, wild chickens, and various types of fish (e.g. cause fish, red cheek barb, freshwater red snapper and cat fish.)

Vegetables and fruits planted by community members include taro, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, cucumbers, garlic, red and black beans, red lady finger beans, paubasa beans, lettuce, sweet basil, coriander, tomatoes, and balsam apple. Animals raised include chickens, cows, buffalo and catfish.





## The hot season

In the community forest, vegetables, fruits and herbs which are foraged include young tamarind leaves, cucumbers, bamboo shoots, banana flowers, Miding ferns, Asiatic Pennywort, Lasia spinosa, Lyonia Foliata and Purple Bauhinia. Animals which are hunted for food include red ant eggs, crickets, and dung beetles.

Outside the community forest, birds, squirrels, fresh water prawns, cause fish, red cheek barb fish, freshwater red snappers, cat fish, spot-finned spiny eels, and pollywogs are hunted by the villagers.

Vegetables and fruits planted by community members include garlic, eggplant, sweet potatoes and bananas, papaya and lettuce. Animals which are raised include pigs, chickens, buffalo and catfish.

**Local Insight:** try 3 vegetables that you have never eaten!



## Food Missions

Are you brave enough to taste these delicious local favourites?



### In the rainy season:

Curries, fried and boiled bamboo dishes, mushrooms and fish!



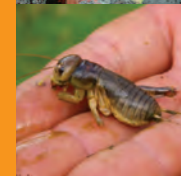
### In the dry season:

Cold fish curry, cold curry with dried lettuce, baby frog roasted in banana leaves, red ant egg salad, fried dung beetles, chilli sauce!



### In the winter:

Try rice steamed in Bamboo, field rat roasted in banana leaves, dried fish curry, grasshopper chilli paste, dry lettuce with boiled rice!



## Local Language

Scor Karen people have a written language with 20 consonants and 5 vowels. According to community members in Muang Paem, in the past, this script was passed down between generations. People who can read and write Karen are admired in the village.

The majority of community members who can read and write Karen are over 50 years old. The Thai education system has given priority to central Thai and other foreign languages, rather than promoting local ethnic languages. Therefore, most younger Karen are only able to speak their own languages (rather than being able to speak, read and write them). The older generation are concerned that the next generation may not remember traditional legends and stories, if they are not recorded and passed on in written Karen.

It is traditional for Karen men to write love letters in Karen when courting. Missionaries further assisted the longevity of the Karen language by teaching villagers to read Karen for Bible studies, which was almost identical to traditional Karen. This has helped some youth to become literate in Karen. However there are still very few opportunities to practice written Karen.

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**Tabruk** – Hello

**Ner mee dee lur** – what is your name?

**Jer mee lur XXX** – My name is XXX

**Ocho-Oh-Cle-Ah** – How are you?

**Ocho-Oh-Cle** – I'm fine

**Mur ra** – very fun!

**Oh-mae** – eat

**Oh-tee** – drink

**Agwee** – delicious

**Mee** – sleep

**Mee Mer** – sleep well

**Ha-Lor-Gwe** – go for a walk



## Urtha . . . Paganyaw Poetry

“*Tha*” means poetry in Karen language and “*Urtha*” refers to delivering rhyming poetry in a charming cadence. It is famously used during Karen courting, when Karen boys sing to their sweethearts from outside her homes to communicate their love. “*Tona*” refers to poetry without rhyme. During funerals, *urtha* is still recited all night. During blessings, *urtha* is recited while a sacred thread is wrapped around the recipient’s wrist. Traditionally, *urtha* were recited at many points during a wedding. However, now there is less recital of *urtha* during weddings, and only a handful of village elders are able to recite the traditional wedding *urtha*.

*Urtha* are not recorded, but passed on orally between generations and memorized. There are many interesting traditions associated with teaching *urtha*. For example, elders won’t teach funeral *urtha* in the village, only in the forest, although youth can attend funerals to learn. Other *urtha* can be taught at any time and place. According to elders, in the past it was easy for youth to remember *urtha*. Nowadays, youth have opportunities to listen to many Thai and foreign songs, so they have less time and attention for *urtha*.



## Caves

There are 4 caves close to the village:

i) **Tum Yao Cave** is around 500 metres long. It is a living cave, where visitors can admire stunning stalagmite and stalactite formations. There is a small waterfall. There are also freshwater prawns, bats and grasshoppers in the cave;

ii) **Huay Rai cave:** A stream runs into this cave from the mountains. It is about 300 metres deep. It's possible to travel through the cave, to the Paem river. During the rainy season, this cave is wet;

iii) **Paem Cave** is about 800 metres long. It is possible to travel through the cave to the Paem river, including by bamboo raft;

iv) **Jedi Cave:** there is a Buddhist Jedi in this cave, 2 metres tall and 2.5 metres wide. The Jedi has been restored by Phra Sawang, a Monk.

### Do's and don'ts for cave exploration

- The cave is still living, and a fragile place.
- Please listen to your guide carefully and follow their advice.
- Please do not touch any objects inside the cave. Oil in your fingers will stop the cave from growing.
- Please do not remove objects from the cave.
- The path is slippery. Please walk slowly.
- Please walk in the middle of the path.
- Please do not kick dust on the path.
- Be careful of spiders and snakes



## The United Nations Joint Project

This publication is an output of the ‘**Community Based Ecotourism Development in Mae Hong Son Project,**’ funded by the *United Nations Joint Program on Integrated Highland Livelihood Development in Mae Hong Son (UNJP)*. The overall goal of this program was to improve the quality of life and to reduce poverty among vulnerable groups in underserved areas of Mae Hong Son province, northern Thailand, through protection and empowerment measures. Ecotourism and *community-based tourism* were developed as tools to foster socio-economic development and contribute to sustainable cultural and natural resource management. The project was lead by Mae Hong Son provincial office for tourism and sports; funded by *FAO, UNDP and UNESCO*; and implemented by *Thailand Community Based Tourism Institute (CBT-I)*.

### Thailand Community Based Tourism Institute

CBT-I was established in 2006 to “Provide support and facilitate cooperation among stakeholders from grassroots to international levels, in order to strengthen the capacity of Thai communities to manage tourism sustainably.” Since 2006, CBT-I have assisted over 40 communities to conduct simple research projects to explore their potentials for tourism. CBT-I have trained over 1000 people from over 100 communities in areas like CBT product development, marketing, operation, and monitoring. CBT-I have facilitated peer-learning networks across Thailand, allowing communities to meet, discuss, share experience and resources and advocate for government support. Recognizing that success relies on partnerships with business, CBT-I provide regular training for tour operators, guides, responsible government and NGO staff. CBT-I were a finalist in the WTTC 2012 Tourism for Tomorrow Awards for Community Benefit.

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*Community members in Muang Paem helped to collect the information in this book, and to check its accuracy during cultural mapping activities.*

