

[Dealing with Thai Culture Shock](#)

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I am going to talk here about my experiences with Thai culture shock. This is something that does seem to hit people after a few years living here; some individuals may even experience it after just a few months. My intention here is not to judge what people are feeling. I just want to talk about what happened to me and how I coped with it. These feelings almost caused me to pack up my bags and leave; I'm so glad I didn't.

The Story of My Culture Shock in Thailand

When I first arrived in Thailand in 2001 I fell in love with the place immediately; it impressed me so much I decided to stay. It seemed to me at the time that making a life here would mean the end to all my problems. The Thais around me seemed to have all those personality traits that I admired; they seemed to have all the answers. I had been interested in Buddhism since my teens and my first impression of Thailand was that it was some type of Buddhist Utopia. It also seemed like a place where I could get drunk day or night and nobody would bat an eyelid. Maybe I could remain a drunk but still soak up the spirituality? It is embarrassing to think how naïve I was back then.

I was here about five years when culture shock really hit me. It was subtle at first. I had gone from thinking it was paradise to complaining all the time. The 'mai pen rai' attitude, that I so admired when first arriving, started to bug the shit out of me. The famous Thai smile began to look to me like a sneer. After a while almost everything about Thailand started to irritate me. Worst of all the fact that I was on the final death-run with a booze addiction meant that I felt completely trapped. The utopia had turned into by prison.

My period of Thailand culture shock lasted nearly a whole year. It wasn't bad all the time, but there was a lot of negativity and self-pity – I'm sure you can imagine. It is probably at this stage that most people would leave. I stuck with it though, and I'm really glad that I did. It took me a while to understand that this was culture shock that was causing the problem; once I identified this fact things got a lot easier. These feelings slowly turned into something a lot more manageable. Eventually it all turned to acceptance and a new appreciation of Thailand developed in its place – a more realistic appreciation.

Dealing with Culture Shock

I think the secret to dealing with culture shock is understanding what it is. The problem was never with Thailand but with me. I had allowed my thinking to trick me into believing that Thailand was something it wasn't. It should have been no surprise that Thailand didn't live up to my expectations; nowhere could have lived up to these expectations. The fact that I had put the place on such a pedestal meant that it was going to hit the ground with a bang.

I stayed in Thailand, and I'm really glad that I did. I have now built a great life here that suits me perfectly. The obsession with the place is gone but that does not mean that I can't enjoy the nice things about the country and the culture. I just now see this is a place where I live and not as a solution to my problems in life; only I can fix my life and no place can do that for me.

Culture shock is not something that only happens to foreigners living in Thailand; it can happen to ex-pats anywhere. I had experienced culture shock before arriving in Thailand, but it was even harder to deal with the second time it hit. When I hear ex-pats constantly complaining about Thailand I wonder if they are going through the same thing that I did – only they can know if this is the cause.

Have you experienced culture shock in Thailand or elsewhere?

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23 Responses to *Dealing with Thai Culture Shock*

1.  [Martyn](#) says:

[August 3, 2010 at 11:00 pm](#)

Paul I think one of the most important things people have to understand about Thailand is the Thai smile. So many if not all newcomers read the Thai smile as a sign of landing in utopia, a sign the people are so happy no matter what social status or problems they have. I've seen anger, hate and jealousy delivered through a flashing white Thai smile and it's reading what's truly behind it which is a major breakthrough in getting successfully past the culture shock stage. Understanding that Thais have problems, worries and emotional issues like the rest of us but try not to burden others with them is to me one of the stages in realising you are in a special kind of country.

Martyn recently posted..[Thailand Blogs – July 2010 Review](#)

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-  [Paul Garrigan](#) says:
[August 4, 2010 at 5:45 am](#)

I think you are spot on about the Thai smile Martyn. I believe that it is important to try and understand the culture and really work on learning the language; that way Thailand feels less alien to me.

[Reply](#)

2.  [Mike](#) says:
[August 4, 2010 at 7:21 am](#)

Paul, a good read, that people who come here thinking they have found paradise, ought to read too. Approaching the three year mark of life here I reckon my Thai fever has gone to be replaced with something like you describe.

I am a fairly open minded person, so I guess it will pass as I focus on the positives here and deal with the negatives as and when they occur(just like anywhere).

I can certainly recognise different Thai smiles now, which often say a lot more than words.

Mike recently posted..[Thailand Scams](#)

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-  [Paul Garrigan](#) says:
[August 4, 2010 at 7:31 am](#)

It does pass Mike and what comes after is a lot better – at least that is my experience anyway. I think the fact that you are aware will make it a lot easier to deal with. If it gets really bad a trip home can help. The worst thing I think that people can do is leave because of it.

[Reply](#)

3.  [Catherine](#) says:
[August 4, 2010 at 8:38 am](#)

Great post Paul. Whenever I move to another country I give myself time to adjust because I know that I'll go through a grieving process. I miss friends, the lifestyle I carved out for myself, knowing where things are and how everything works (or doesn't).

Everyone is different settling into a new country, but for me there was the honeymoon stage, the irritation stage, the anger and resentment stage, and finally, reality.

Thailand is Thailand, and each of us comes to terms with the reality in our own way. Many leave, heaving with resentment. I'm glad you stayed.

Catherine recently posted.. [Successful Thai Language Learner- Hamish Chalmers](#)

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4.  [Paul Garrigan](#) says:
[August 4, 2010 at 8:53 am](#)

Hi Catherine, I think that it may be even harder for people who come to Thailand because they have grown to dislike their own country and don't have many friends to miss. For them the disappointment of culture shock is probably a lot more severe.

[Reply](#)

5.  [Whatever](#) says:
[August 4, 2010 at 7:54 pm](#)

Yes, but what was the problem? You? or the Thais around you? It's not clear to me what you mean by "culture shock". The Thai way of thinking, doing business, attitudes, Could you give examples?, please?
Thanks.

[Reply](#)

- o  [Paul Garrigan](#) says:
[August 4, 2010 at 8:05 pm](#)

I would say that the problem was me. I moved to Thailand with expectations that were just too high. When things didn't live up to my expectations I became disappointed. I suddenly realised that the things in Thai culture that once really attracted me now felt too alien to me – I would describe this as culture shock. The reason I say that the problem was me is because when I changed my way of looking things I found that Thailand became somewhere that I enjoyed being again. These days I live in Thailand because I want to be here and not because I feel I need to be here. I'm sorry but I can't explain it any better than this.

[Reply](#)

6.  [Tom Yam](#) says:
[August 6, 2010 at 8:24 am](#)

Hi Paul,

I've lived in Thailand for 7 years. I recently went to England for just a week. On the return journey i felt as if i was returning home. So it's taken me all this time to see it this way round!

I used to get frustrated and complain a lot about things like "Thai time" and "mai bpen rai" and i was always told that if i didn't like it then why didn't i go home? I've come to accept the way things are here and be part of them. I spent a good deal of the week in England complaining about different things like the weather,expenche,the attitude of youth etc,etc. I was told by some of my friends,"if it's that bad here then why don't you go home"? And for the first time in 7 years living in Thailand i feel as though i have come home!
Regards.....Tom.

Tom Yam recently posted..[Can i have an ugly caddie](#)

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- o  [Paul Garrigan](#) says:
[August 6, 2010 at 9:11 am](#)

I know what you mean. I don't get excited when I return to Thailand like I once did, but it does feel like coming home. I actually get more excited about going away. You are right that acceptance is the key to life in Thailand. When I focus on the positive side of life i it makes things a lot easier generally.

[Reply](#)

7.  [Ben Shingleton](#) says:
[August 8, 2010 at 2:23 am](#)

Good post Paul, I've experienced the same type of culture shock emotions you've described (although under slightly different circumstances and I've only been in Thailand 2 years). It's good to know that this is a fairly common mixture of emotions amongst fellow expats so I'm glad you wrote about it.

Ben Shingleton recently posted..[Thai housing project](#)

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- o  [Paul Garrigan](#) says:
[August 8, 2010 at 6:36 am](#)

It does seem to be quite common Ben, but I would imagine it is easy to mistake the symptoms for something else.

[Reply](#)

8.  [Jungle Girl](#) says:
[August 8, 2010 at 8:43 am](#)

Hi Paul, nice post, thank you.

I've struggled on and off with culture shock for a long time, mainly for me it's a feeling of extreme disappointment when Thailand or people here don't live up to my expectations, or my own most basic moral code. Just the fact that I get disappointed is an indicator I have put things on a pedestal. Getting to a point of acceptance is really hard, but as you say reality is the best place to be, and I'm working on living in the moment and not projecting (even sub-consciously) "my stuff" such as expectations, social conditioning, opinions, ethics onto other people and another culture. Also, like all things in life I find you get back what you put in, as soon as you're putting negativity and harsh feelings out there you'll get them back and life will feel harder. Always a work in progress though 😊

Jungle Girl recently posted.. [Swimming From Burma](#)

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- o  [Paul Garrigan](#) says:
[August 8, 2010 at 9:31 am](#)

Hi Jungle Girl, I think the fact that you can see what's going on is half battle; that's my experience anyway. I know for a long time that I tried to fix external conditions by moving from place to place; it took me a long time to realise that the problem was coming from inside me. You seem quite aware of what's going on and this puts you in a better position than a lot of people. Living in the moment really is the the best place in the world to live – even better than Thailand 😊

[Reply](#)

9.  [Steve](#) says:
[August 12, 2010 at 11:27 pm](#)

Culture shock is a strange beast for me as I've never really experienced it when traveling to other countries, even for extended periods of time. What I have experienced is reverse culture shock, or a feeling of dislocation when returning to the U.S. It's very disconcerting when returning to the place you consider "home" brings up feelings of depression, disappointment and dejection.

As to the Thai smiles, I'm not surprised if you sometimes see them as sneers, because sometimes they very likely are. I wrote a detailed piece on the different types of Thai smiles that you can see here <http://www.thailandmusings.com/the-land-of-smiles/> if you like. :-)

Steve recently posted.. [10 Clues That She is a Ladyboy or Katoey](#)

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- o  [Paul Garrigan](#) says:

[August 13, 2010 at 6:12 am](#)

Hi Steve, I think people do experience culture shock differently. I suppose that at one point in my life I did experience a type of reverse culture shock. I've lived outside my home country longer than I lived there, but in recent years I've grown to appreciate it a lot more. Since my son was born my culture has become more important to me because I want him to have two cultures.

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10. [Expats and Tourists Thai Culture and Reality Shocks | Beyond The Mango Juice](#) says:
[August 18, 2010 at 5:50 am](#)

[...] Garrigan's post Dealing with Thai Culture Shock is about Paul's former booze addiction which turned his Thailand dream of alcohol utopia into [...]

[Reply](#)

11.  [Camille](#) says:
[August 18, 2010 at 11:10 am](#)

Hi Paul,

Been there a few times with the culture shock and this being my 11th year here, in a way it's a never ending story, you think you understand what's going on and from the leftfield a complete new insight, experience or local way of thinking totally takes you by surprise.

Sometimes it's difficult to deal with but most of the time it's fascinating and interesting and I can't imagine how life would be back in Europe again, not that I have an urge to try it out.....

Camille recently posted.. [Koh Samui- Thailand daily weather update 18th August- 2010](#)

[Reply](#)

- o  [Paul Garrigan](#) says:
[August 18, 2010 at 11:14 am](#)

Thanks Camille. I think in life generally it is usually when we feel that we know what is going on that life sends a few surprises our way. I suppose this keeps things interesting.

[Reply](#)

12. [If Your Are Not Happy With Thailand Just Go Home | paulgarrigan.com](#) says:
[August 18, 2010 at 4:08 pm](#)

[...] is keeping them here. I've talked about my own experiences of culture shock in a previous post (see here), but some of us really do seem to have turned it into a calling. This was one of the reasons I [...]

[Reply](#)

13.  *Supalux J.* says:
[August 10, 2011 at 9:52 am](#)

Good morning from Thailand, Paul,

I'm doing a project about the cross cultural of the foreigners in Thailand. I searched on google about the cultural shock and I just found your blog today and it feels great to see anyone admire my country like this. I wonder if you have some time to help me fill in the form of an interview. If you do I would be greatly appreciated but if you don't, it's alright anyway. I hope you'll have a wonderful day. :)

Thank you,
Supalux J.

[Reply](#)

-  *Paul Garrigan* says:
[August 10, 2011 at 10:04 am](#)

Hi Supalux, you can contact me on info@paulgarrigan.com

[Reply](#)

14.  *Viktor* says:
[August 16, 2011 at 1:30 am](#)

Hi Paul, many thanks

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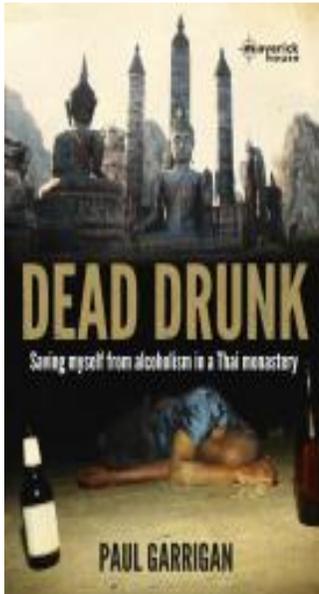
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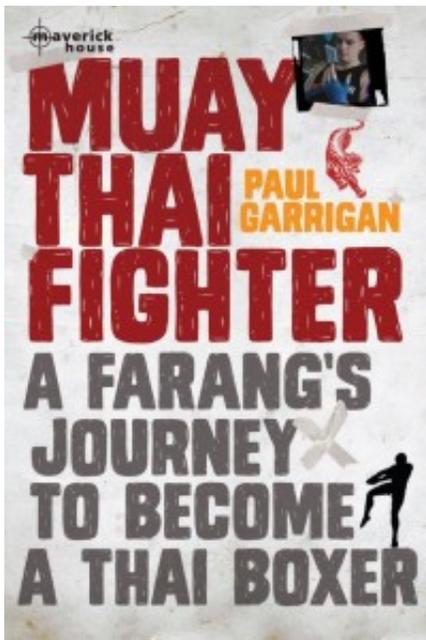
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I am an ex-drunk who found that living sober is better than anything I could ever have imagined. I'm originally from Ireland but now live in Thailand; a wonderful place to be free of addiction. I like to talk about recovery in the hope that it will inspire other people, but mostly because I just like to talk. Join me on this wonderful journey and see where it takes us.



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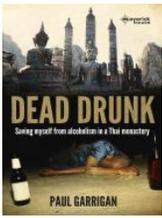
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