

# CULTURE, ECOLOGY & COMMUNITY THAILAND

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AN EXPERIENTIAL  
SEMESTER ABROAD WITH



**ISDSI**



**FRONT COVER:**

Preparing for a coral reef zonation study  
Adang Archipelago, Southern Thailand

**ABOVE:**

Village elder and master weaver,  
Huay Hee Village, Mae Hong Son Province

**BACK COVER:**

One of the remote communities students  
learn from during the semester  
Mae Hong Son Province, Northern Thailand

# Our Unique Approach to Education

## COMMUNITY-BASED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EMPOWERING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

We believe that learning directly from local communities committed to sustainability is the best way to help students understand the complex challenges of creating a sustainable future and engender in them a commitment to be change agents in the future.

Research has repeatedly shown that students learn best and thrive in complex and rich environments. For this reason, our courses combine challenging academic study with experiential field-based learning in the social and natural sciences.

Structuring our programs around extended interdisciplinary field studies rooted in specific places and communities allows our students to study in an inherently integrated way. This helps our students to better understand the complexity of ecosystems, social systems, and the real-world solutions to the difficult problems of sustainability.

From the beginning, our strong partnerships with local communities have been a key part of what makes ISDSI courses successful. We work together with local leaders to help them tell their own stories, co-creating our courses

together. As a result our partner communities are passionate about connecting with and teaching our students — sharing their lives, knowledge, and struggles. Students then have the unique opportunity to help empower communities through listening to and learning the stories of often marginalized people.

Students on ISDSI courses don't come to "help" — they come to learn. Taking the posture of learners helps students recognize the strength and resilience of local communities. Living with and learning from local communities allows students to be a part of grassroots solutions to global problems.

Because ISDSI courses spend extended time in the field — in remote villages and elsewhere — we have also incorporated methods and theory from outdoor education and wilderness expeditions. We strive to combine best practices in study abroad, field research, and wilderness expeditions into a unique and powerful approach to cultural immersion, experiential learning, and leadership development.

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# SEMESTER

## SEMESTER PROGRAM

# Culture, Ecology and Community

Our semester program is hands-on and experiential. Designed in collaboration with local communities in Thailand, an ISDSI semester is academically challenging field-based learning.

**PROGRAM OFFERED IN FALL & SPRING**



The challenge of living sustainably on Earth lies in the interaction between ecosystems and cultures. Our semester program explores the ecosystems, cultures, and communities of Thailand as case studies for the important global environmental issues facing all of humanity.

*How can we feed a massive and growing human population without degrading our natural and human capital?*

*How do communities and individuals create stable, meaningful, and economically viable livelihoods in sustainable agriculture?*

*How can people live within and manage precious forest ecosystems in a way that preserves and protects both biodiversity and local cultures?*

*What's going on with our oceans? How are terrestrial and marine ecosystems linked? How do communities, cultures, governments, and businesses interact around marine resources?*

The *Culture, Ecology and Community: Thailand* program is an academically challenging semester that immerses you in Thailand in a way that few people ever experience. This is not a campus-based program with a few tourist excursions. This is a deep exploration of a country, its people, and the relationship between its cultures and ecosystems.

We go to real communities to live and learn with them. We're invited into their homes. We go with them to their fields, forests, and coral reefs. We learn from them how their community lives sustainably within their local ecosystems.

# PROGRAM

We don't just teach through classroom presentations and readings.

We help you learn about specific ecosystems and cultures through hands-on field studies and independent field research.

It's remarkable how much you can examine with a few well-chosen scientific tools carried in a backpack or lashed to a sea kayak and how much you can learn by speaking directly with local leaders.

Dive slates, tape measures, and keen observation and interview skills go a long way. We get dirty hiking, backpacking, kayaking, and snorkeling, using human-powered and wilderness travel skills to gain access to more remote places.

If you're up for a challenge, are open-minded, intellectually curious, and are fascinated by cultures, communities, and ecosystems, we encourage you to apply!

To maximize the amount of time we spend in the field, we created our unique Expedition Field Courses

## SEMESTER PROGRAM TIMELINE

We teach on a block schedule studying one subject at a time for a month.

### BLOCK 1

THAI FOUNDATIONS

LANGUAGE + SOCIETY

**Block 1: Foundations** is an intensive course in Thai language and society. During this block you live in the vibrant city of Chiang Mai, study intensive Thai language, and participate in seminars and experiential field studies on the history, society, geography, and politics of Thailand.

### BLOCK 2

EXPEDITION FIELD COURSE

AGRICULTURE

**Blocks 2-3-4:** The program then moves on to a series of three 1 month long **Expedition Field Courses (EFCs)**. Each EFC is made up of **1 week of seminars in the classroom** followed by **3 weeks immersed** in field studies in different communities and ecosystems throughout Thailand.

### BLOCK 3

EXPEDITION FIELD COURSE

FORESTS

In addition to the field studies, during each EFC students also conduct an **Independent Field Research Project (IFRP)** focused on a subject of their own choosing related to the course topic. The IFRP is a key component of the experiential learning at ISDSI, training students in field research methods as well as analysis. Each course includes a final IFRP presentation.

### BLOCK 4

EXPEDITION FIELD COURSE

OCEANS

BLOCK 1 — THAI FOUNDATIONS

# Thai Language and Society

This course focuses on rapidly acquiring Thai language skills and the study of Thai history, culture, and society.

6 CREDITS: THAI LANGUAGE / SOCIETY



Experiential learning at Wararot Market, Chiang Mai

## CULTURES

Central Thai  
Northern Thai / Khon Muang

## ECOSYSTEMS

Urban and near urban

## EXAMPLE FIELD STUDY

Explore the “old city” of Chiang Mai, learning the history of the markets, temples, and communities the city.

# COURSE OVERVIEW

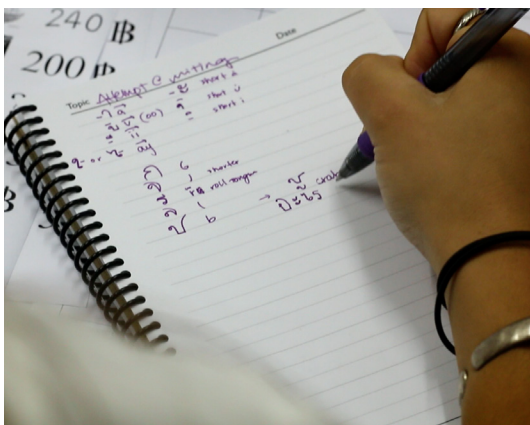
## LANGUAGE CLASSES

In this course you spend each day in small language classes of 3-5 students. To facilitate rapid learning, no English is used in the classroom. You learn to speak, read, and write Thai, and language learning continues throughout the semester with ongoing classes whenever you are in Chiang Mai. Due to the immersive nature of the Expedition Field Courses, you will have ample opportunities to practice when you are in the field and every bit of Thai you are able to pick up enhances your experience in the field. There is an oral language review at the end of the semester and students are typically surprised at how much they've learned. This course often meets foreign language requirements, depending on students' home institutions.

## SEMINARS + LOCAL FIELD STUDIES

During this course you will also meet for seminars on topics including Thai history and social issues. Combined with your language learning, these seminars give you sufficient cultural and language skills to better understand and immerse yourself in Thailand and the rest of your courses and field studies.

Seminars are complimented by field studies that give depth and context to your classroom learning. Q&A sessions with monks, exploring local markets, and studies of the 700 year old city of Chiang Mai are examples of typical field studies that help you see further into the fabric of Chiang Mai and Thailand.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- ✓ Read, write, and speak Thai
- ✓ Be able to live independently in Chiang Mai
- ✓ Understand and apply experiential learning principles
- ✓ Know major themes and events in Thai history
- ✓ Understand key cultural & sociological characteristics of Thai society

BLOCK 2 — AGRICULTURE

# Sustainable Food Systems

This course examines food systems in Thailand with a specific focus on small holder sustainable agriculture

4 CREDITS: SOCIOLOGY / BIOLOGY



Organic gardening lesson on a host family's farm, Mae Taa, Chiang Mai province

## CULTURES

Northern Thai/ Khon Muang

## ECOSYSTEMS

Upland and lowland agroecosystems of Southeast Asia

## EXAMPLE FIELD STUDY

Learn about social networks and indigenous knowledge in the seed saving and food sovereignty movement



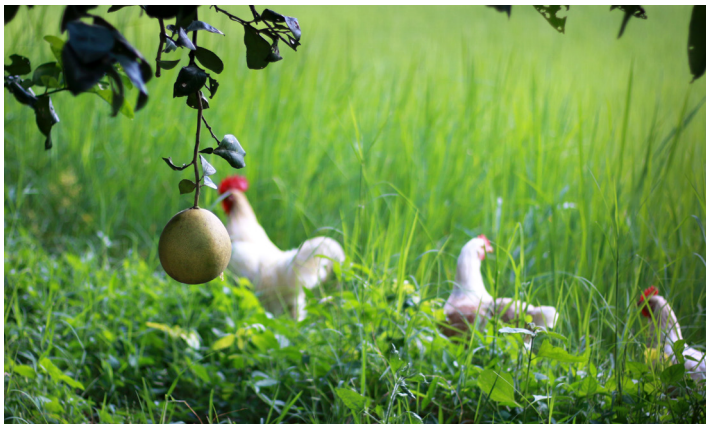
# COURSE OVERVIEW

Perhaps one of the most challenging topics in sustainability studies, food systems are critical to creating a sustainable future.

This course examines both large scale agroindustry and smallholder agriculture, with special emphasis on organic farming and agroecology. You will study both lowland and upland agriculture as practiced in Thailand, spending extended time in the fields and gardens of farmers and villagers. After the seminar week on campus, students go live with and learn from our partner communities.

You'll learn about their own experiences of transitioning to organic agriculture and diversified farming, get dirty learning in their gardens, and study the agroecosystems in their fields.

You will learn directly about both the ecology of sustainable agriculture as well as the social and political issues surrounding different food systems. In addition to food cropping systems, this course also examines globally important crops including coffee, chocolate/cacao and medicinal cannabis.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- ✓ Understand key issues in sustainable agriculture and agroecology
- ✓ Learn the fundamental biological processes within agroecosystems
- ✓ Understand the sociological dynamics related to agriculture for both upland and lowland peoples of Northern Thailand
- ✓ Study the challenges for smallholder production of coffee, chocolate/cacao, and medicinal cannabis
- ✓ Develop independent field research skills while conducting an Independent Field Research Project (IFRP)

BLOCK 3 — FORESTS

# Political Ecology of Forests

This course explores the ethno-ecological relationship between humans and forests.

4 CREDITS: ANTHROPOLOGY / ECOLOGY



Backpacking between villages and river crossings along traditional footpaths through the forest, Mae Hong Son Province

## CULTURES

Bak'en'yaw (Karen)

## ECOSYSTEMS

Upland tropical forests  
Rotational swidden agroecosystems

## EXAMPLE FIELD STUDY

Identify forest plant species used in traditional fiber dyeing, learn the cultural importance of textiles, and learn to weave from local artisans

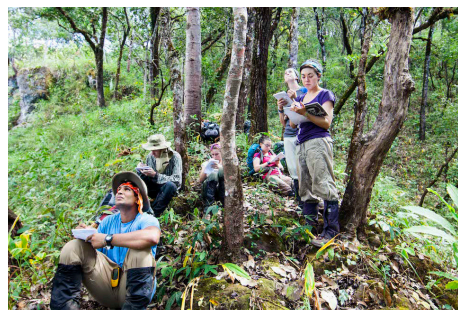
# COURSE OVERVIEW

Most of this course takes place in and between remote villages nestled among the forested mountains of the extreme northwest corner of Thailand that have long been the domain of Bak'en'yaw (Karen) ethnic communities. Karen culture and communities are inextricably connected to the forests on which they depend. On this course you will study tropical forest ecology, the Karen adaptation to this environment, and the conflicts over forest resource management, both in Thailand and globally.



Students hike and backpack on traditional footpaths through the thick forests and steep hills between villages to understand life in the forested mountains. You will stay with Karen host families, eat meals prepared over open hearths, go with them to their mountain fields and traditional agroforestry plots, and experience their culture first-hand.

Students also meet with forestry officials and village elders, conduct ecology studies in deep old growth tropical forests, and learn how Karen culture is adapting to a variety of changing circumstances.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- ✓ Understand key issues in political ecology surrounding forests and the social dynamics related to rotational upland agriculture
- ✓ Study Karen ethnic people's cultural adaptation to the rapid changes in Thai society and their struggle for the recognition of local rights to manage community forests
- ✓ Learn the tools and methods of forest field research and socioeconomic surveys
- ✓ Conduct an independent field research project (IFRP) related to upland issues
- ✓ Demonstrate proficiency in backcountry travel in mountain and tropical forest environments





Students conduct a sea grass biodiversity survey in Trang province, Southern Thailand before talking with community conservation leaders about the importance of the inter-linked ecosystems of mangroves, sea grass beds, and coral reefs for the local marine environment and the communities.

BLOCK 4 — OCEANS

# Culture + Ecology of the Andaman Sea

This course focuses on the coral reefs, mangroves, islands and coastal communities of the Andaman Sea in Southern Thailand

4 CREDITS: ECOLOGY / GEOGRAPHY



Sea kayaking along traditional Urak La'woi travel routes in the Adang Archipelago

## CULTURES

Khon Dai (Southern Thai)  
Urak Lawoi

## ECOSYSTEMS

Mangrove Forests  
Sea Grass beds  
Coral Reefs

## EXAMPLE FIELD STUDY

Reef biodiversity study and cultural practices related to fish conservation

# COURSE OVERVIEW

The Earth's ocean systems are complex, interwoven, and face an alarming number of difficult pressures. To study this first-hand, this course takes you to the warm waters of the Andaman Sea in the southwest corner of Thailand, part of the eastern edge of the Indian Ocean.

This course focuses on reef ecosystems, mangrove forests, seagrass beds, and the human communities that depend on these ecosystems for their survival. Both the physical and cultural environments are challenging—traveling by sea kayak and longtail boat, living in small Southern Thai villages, and moving between terrestrial, coastal,

and marine environments. Students stay with families in a coastal fishing village, camp on the beach in the Adang Archipelago, and learn about the rich cultures of Southern Thailand.

Experiential learning is key to understanding the complexity of the marine and coastal environment. Students snorkel in both reefs and mangroves and learn about the unique challenges and struggles of the human communities that live in the coastal zone. These cases represent a complex situation of multiple and often conflicting resource uses in coastal ecosystems and rapidly changing ways of life for the people that depend on them.



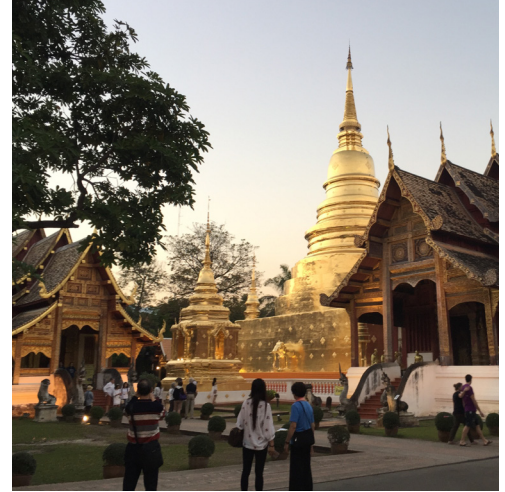
## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- ✓ Understand key issues concerning the sustainability of coastal environments and cultures in Thailand
- ✓ Study local knowledge related to fish, fishing, and marine resource utilization
- ✓ Learn the social dynamics related to marine ecology and island resource conservation and development (e.g. ethnic culture, tourism, commercial fishing, national park conservation)
- ✓ Become proficient with field research methods, including interviewing key stakeholders and biodiversity surveys
- ✓ Conduct independent field research project (IFRP) related to the ecology and cultures of the islands and coasts
- ✓ Gain proficiency with essential technical and expedition skills such as GPS navigation, warm water sea kayaking, and skin diving



# THAILAND + CHIANG MAI





## THIS COULD BE YOUR CLASSROOM

From the warm tropical waters of the Andaman Sea in the far southwest to the first foothills of the Himalayas in the north, Thailand is a mosaic of complex and unique ecosystems and microclimates.

- Mangrove forests and coral reefs teeming with life.
- Old growth tropical forests with massive trees and buttress roots taller than you.
- Agroecosystems ranging from paddy rice fields in the valleys to permaculture forests
- Shade grown coffee on the slopes of mountains.

Like its ecosystems, Thailand is a country of many distinct regional cultures, dialects, and peoples.

- The central Thai language and culture may predominate, but each region has its own dialect and history, and there are numerous non-Thai minority ethnic groups, particularly in the mountainous north.
- While Theravada Buddhism is the primary religion and ornately decorated Buddhist temples and saffron robed monks are nearly ubiquitous in much of the country, Islam is practiced extensively throughout the south and there are significant Christian and animist communities as well.

Proudly independent, Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia to never have been colonized by a European power.

- Before Thailand was a nation, it was the Kingdom of Siam with a network of smaller vassal states.
- A constitutional monarchy since 1932, the royal family remain influential and extremely important in modern society and politics.

As a rapidly industrializing country in Southeast Asia, but still possessing substantial natural capital, Thailand is the perfect place to explore how human cultures and the natural world interact. There are few countries on Earth so full of the contrasts between ancient tradition and modern influences, between a lush natural world and human-centered development.

Within Thailand, Chiang Mai is a vibrant cultural hub in the north. Previously an independent kingdom and an important crossroads in Southeast Asia, it retains its own unique culture. A cosmopolitan university city nestled in a lush valley next to the mountains, Chiang Mai is an ideal location for our campus and as a home-base for further explorations of the country.



# ABOUT US

## **International Sustainable Development Studies Institute**

**Connecting communities to make a sustainable future.**

**The International Sustainable Development Studies Institute (ISDSI) is a recognized leader in innovative study-abroad programs.**

The program that developed into ISDSI started in 1998. Since then ISDSI has grown and now runs several semester and summer programs, facilitates short term faculty-led programs, and hosts faculty and graduate students from the US and elsewhere for both teaching and research. We've now had over 600 students attend our programs from more than 50 colleges and universities.

# OUR TEAM

## ISDSI STAFF

ISDSI is staffed by a mix of Thai, Karen (Bak'en-yaw), and American instructors and support staff, with a unique team-based approach to teaching — a lead instructor oversees the course and teaches foundational seminars (in Chiang Mai and the field), and a team of field instructors leads the experiential learning activities in partnership with local community members.

We draw on faculty from various universities in Thailand, as well as guest speakers from a wide variety of international and local NGOs. We also host faculty and graduate students from institutions in the United States and elsewhere for both teaching and research.

ISDSI staff have experience in community and sustainable development, research, program evaluation, and other issues. Our team is both drawn from and engaged with the communities and issues we teach about.



**Pati Saju, Huai Hee Village, Karen  
Coffee Farmer, Forest Management  
and Orchid Conservation Expert**



**Mae Deh, Jaomai Village  
Village Leader, Mangrove Expert,  
Herbalist and Traditional Fisher**



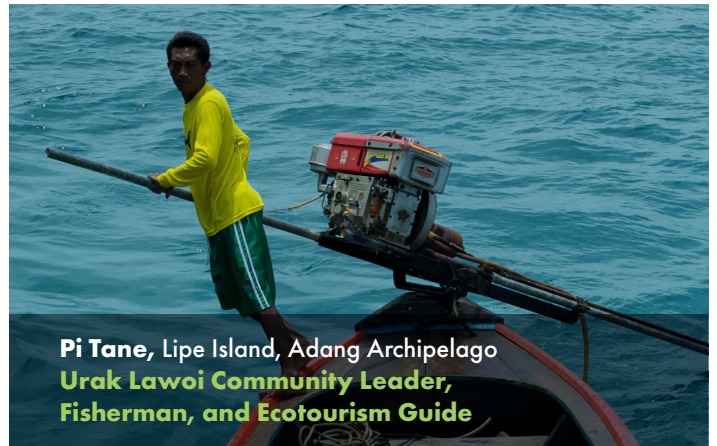
## OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Our courses are community-based, drawing on the issues and concerns of our partner communities, empowering them by helping them tell their stories about their unique culture and ecologies.

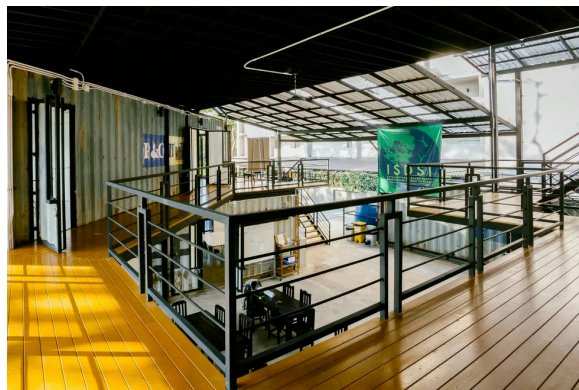
These are just a few of the very important people that our students learn from.



**Mathana Aiphamool, Mae Taa Village  
Sustainable Agriculture Activist  
and Heirloom Seed Saving Expert**



**Pi Tane, Lipe Island, Adang Archipelago  
Urak Lawoi Community Leader,  
Fisherman, and Ecotourism Guide**



# OUR CAMPUS

## Sustainable Architecture And Design At ISDSI

There are a lot of options for sustainable architecture. We elected to use shipping containers (sourced out of the ports in Bangkok) to build our center. By up-cycling the steel, they are kept out of the waste stream, and allow us to learn (and teach) about how to use the hundreds of thousands of containers sitting in the ports of the Global South.

The main ISDSI building is built out of 17 shipping containers. We use LED lighting throughout, good airflow and insulation

to minimize the use of air conditioning, and high efficiency air conditioning when necessary. We were careful to save the trees on site that provide shade, restored the degraded soil, and have a small organic garden and agroforest on site.

Our goal with the design was to create a space that we could use for our students, but would also lend itself to becoming a community center and hub. Sustainability was a major goal, and this was complimented by creating a space that has natural connections to the outside. Our commons areas flows into the outside space under the trees, and we have rooms of different sizes to use both as classrooms and as gathering spaces.



## RX CAFE

### Local Fair Trade Coffee

Rx Cafe is committed to excellence in all aspects of coffee. We source our beans locally and ethically, roast them ourselves, and often know the farmers personally. In addition to an active cafe, we also teach coffee skills classes to both coffee enthusiasts and coffee professionals.

The cafe is built from a single 20-foot shipping container, with interior LED lighting and composite panels for walls, counters, and floors. The cafe is open air and shaded by huge acacia trees (“rain trees”) on site.

Set between our gym and the main ISDSI building, the cafe is a community gathering point for people on and off campus.



## CROSSFIT CHIANG MAI

### Our On-Campus Gym

CrossFit Chiang Mai was the first CrossFit affiliate to open in Thailand. In addition to CrossFit classes, the gym also has yoga and bootcamp classes. Taking advantage of Thailand’s climate, our gym is designed to be open air, with fans for cooling, and a translucent canopy to keep off the rain and let in light. We hang a flag for every member or visitor’s country, and are losing count of the number of countries represented in our gym! The community of CrossFit Chiang Mai is international and diverse, with people from all walks of life and backgrounds.

# JOIN US

ISDSI's community-based and experiential approach to education is unique. One of the best ways to learn if our program is right for you is to hear our former students explain why their experience with us was life-changing.



## Heather Kalamazoo College

"Since leaving the program, I've gone on to be a Peace Corps volunteer, a community organizer, a policy analyst, and now an attorney. Not a week goes by that I don't discuss Thailand with someone. **To study abroad through ISDSI was the best choice I made in college.** Consider it."

## Maddie Oberlin College

"I don't think I could have made a better decision, it was the **perfect combination of science and culture!**"

## Aaron Wheaton College

"Studying with ISDSI was the highlight of my college academics. The broad scope of the program allowed me to further my understanding of environmental science, making it more concrete, and **it also stretched me as I had to match my science background with cultural studies.**"

## Peter Colorado College

"This experience prepared me not only for a wonderful and powerful experience in Peace Corps [...] but also **helped me to become a better global citizen in general.** I would highly recommend this program to anyone looking to push their comfort zone and explore the world in a deeper way."

## Maya College of Wooster

"ISDSI classes are challenging in a way I've never experienced before. Experiential learning sometimes feels more like play than work (I mean, you get to backpack through Thailand!), but **you learn so much and it is constantly forcing you outside your comfort zone.**"

## Hayley SUNY-ESF

"They have a phenomenal staff and **their pedagogy on experiential education is wonderfully executed** using local leaders in villages throughout Thailand..."

# APPLY

## HOW TO APPLY

### STEP 1

Contact us at [admissions@isdsi.org](mailto:admissions@isdsi.org) to let us know you are considering applying.

We can help you with the approval process at your school, as well as advise you on scholarship opportunities and space available for the program you are interested in.

### STEP 2

Fill out our ONLINE APPLICATION completely and submit it by the deadline for the semester to which you are applying.

### STEP 3

Request your transcript be sent to ISDSI.

### STEP 4

Request two letters of recommendation and study abroad approval form and have them sent to ISDSI. We need your letters of recommendation, approval form, and transcript by the deadline for your application to be considered complete. Please email us and let us know who will be sending the letters of recommendation.

### STEP 5

After receiving your application, letters of recommendation, approval form, and your transcript we will review your application. If you are accepted, additional information will be required to complete your enrollment into the program.

Email us if you have any questions about the application process at [admissions@isdsi.org](mailto:admissions@isdsi.org).

## DEADLINES

### SEMESTER PROGRAM

**MARCH 15**  
FALL SEMESTER

**OCTOBER 15**  
SPRING SEMESTER

\* Early decision is available to students who apply before the deadline.  
If there is space, we will accept applications on a rolling basis after the deadline.  
When a semester fills, we will establish a waiting list and admit students on a space available basis.

## CONTACT

### ISDSI

47 Chotana Road, Chang Puak  
Muang, Chiang Mai, 50300  
THAILAND

### OFFICE HOURS

M-F: 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM (UTC+7)

### GENERAL INFO

[info@isdsi.org](mailto:info@isdsi.org)

### APPLICATION + ADMISSIONS

[admissions@isdsi.org](mailto:admissions@isdsi.org)

### PHONE (Thailand)

+66-53-218-931

## SOME OF THE SCHOOLS OUR STUDENTS HAVE COME FROM

Amherst College  
Barnard College  
Brevard College  
Calvin College  
Carleton College  
Colby College  
College of St. Benedict  
College of Wooster  
Colorado College  
Cornell University  
Davidson College  
DePauw University  
George Washington University  
Guilford College  
Hamilton College  
Hampshire College  
Hendrix College  
Hollins University  
Houghton College  
Kalamazoo College  
Kenyon College  
Knox College  
Miami University of Ohio  
Montana State University  
Northeastern University  
Oberlin College  
Pitzer College  
San Francisco State University  
Scripps College  
Seattle University  
Skidmore College  
St. Olaf College  
Swarthmore College  
Tufts University  
University of California – Berkeley  
University of Denver  
University of Illinois  
University of Maryland Baltimore County  
University of Massachusetts  
University of Minnesota  
University of Michigan  
University of Redlands  
University of Wisconsin  
Vassar College  
Washington University St. Louis  
Wheaton College (IL)  
Whitman College  
Yale University



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