

# The Spirit Houses of Thailand

## More than a Fairy Garden

The spirit houses of Thailand have several monikers, ranging from phi (spirit) houses, san phra phum (the house of the guardian spirit), the san jao thi or san chao thi (abode of the land lord), even the da yai (grandfather and grandmother). Whatever the name or their specific spirit inhabitants, these spirit houses are present everywhere you wander, from city to suburb to remote corners of the countryside. They are a wonder to the stranger among them, objects of beauty, mystery, curiosity, and mysticism. The first time I caught a glimpse of one, I was unsure if I'd just seen an incredibly elaborate bird house, an outdoor dollhouse, or something else entirely.

After passing several of these gorgeous, tiny houses on my first day in Chiang Mai, I inquired as to what these remarkable structures were. I soon discovered that the Thai people are a very superstitious people, who are strongly tied to their ancestors, spirits, and ghosts. These spirit houses are actually meant to provide shelter to spirits in order to protect the land and its living inhabitants, honor ancestors, keep negative energy away, and bring good fortune.

A common practice across countries throughout Southeast Asia, like Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, property holders across Thailand place them near their homes, farmlands, roadways, or businesses to ensure good fortune by appeasing the spirits who occupy these spaces. By seeking their blessings and good will, Thais hope to secure protection and avoid malevolent acts from those who came before.

Not all Thai spirit houses are the same, often driven by the financial circumstances of their owners, you may find a simple wooden structure on a wooden post alongside a village road or adjacent to a rice paddy. In suburban communities, you may find larger, more elaborate structures, possibly made of concrete, placed in an appropriate place next to a resident's home or in the family garden. In cities like Chiang Mai and Bangkok, businesses and hotels may have life sized shrines near the front entrance to a building.

As seen in the photos here, most shrines to the spirits are small structures with roofs that are typically mounted to a platform and then secured to a wooden or concrete pillar, above the ground. While some are as small as a tiny birdhouse, others are actually large enough for people to walk inside of them, as shown here.

These ornate spirit shrines often include various objects placed inside them or on the platform to which they are attached. Notice the various offerings in the spirit houses

featured here. You see everything from tiny statues of people, animals, vases of flowers, cups of water, bottles of beverages, eggs, fruits, sweet treats, as well as burning incense, votive candles, garlands, and fresh flowers.

In Thailand, the careful observer will also note something red on the altar (or front) of the spirit house's platform. This is meant to symbolize blood, or life. If you look closely, you will see red incense sticks in small bowls filled with sand or red-colored liquid in a glass, bottle or other container (possibly strawberry flavored Fanta soda, which is a common Thai practice). All is placed on the spirit house altar to please the spirits and to keep negative energy away.

While the majority of Thai people today are Buddhist, the tradition of spirit houses is a blend of key spiritual traditions that have been around in Southeast Asia for centuries. The first is animism, the belief that all things, not just human beings, have a soul or spirit - trees, rocks, mountains, rivers, plants, animals, and more. The other two are Buddhism and Hinduism. This is why, as I wondered some of Thailand's national forests, I not only saw orange cloth bands around ancient trees to protect them, but a spirit house alongside each one to protect the trees' spirits and to ensure they would never be chopped down.

The every present nature of the spirit house all across Thailand came to represent something beautiful and serene for me. I passed each one with an increased sensitivity to the spiritual world, those who came before us, the soul of the natural world around us, and the power of our intentions while we occupy this planet.

My journey to Thailand offered me a glimpse into the cultural significance of the spirit houses of Thailand, and at the same time awoke my mind, body and soul with each passing day, as if I'd been asleep for some time.