

# SPRIT

## OF THE FOREST

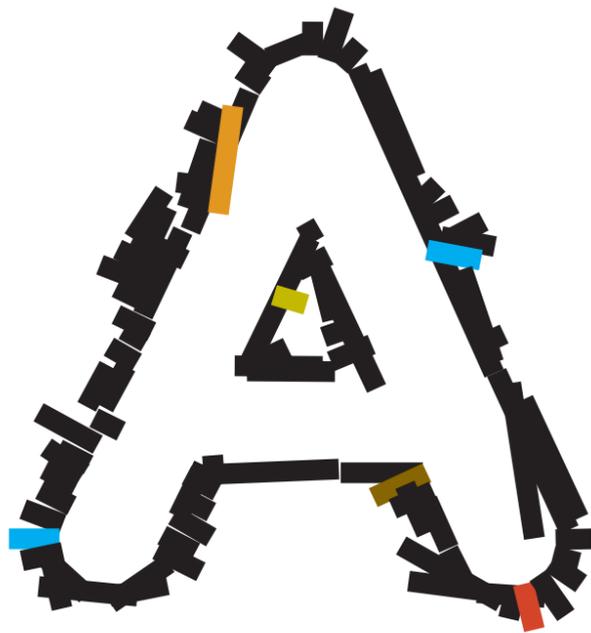
In a remote corner of Thailand, a near-extinct tribal people have secured a future for themselves, with the help of an unlikely benefactor

**By Christopher R. Cox**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
JEREMY SAMUELSON

OUT OF THE WOODS **Opposite: Mlabri woman Yalee, age 36, gathering wood for the family hearth.**





It that the young missionary needed was a sign.

Fresh from an American Bible college and new to Bangkok, Eugene Long searched the hushed archives of the Siam Society for details of remote hill tribes that might make his ministry. Inside an old-fashioned glass-doored bookcase donated by Jim Thompson, the legendary Thai silk king, he found his destiny: a 15-year-old report about a little-known ethnic group who called themselves Mlabri, or “the People of the Forest.”

The musty monograph recounted an obscure 1963 expedition to find this primitive jungle band, which other inhabitants of Thailand’s mountainous north called Phi Tong Luang—“Spirits of the Yellow Leaves”—for their practice of living in simple thatched lean-tos that were abandoned whenever the vegetation withered. Theirs was hardly a proud or romantic existence. The last hunter-gatherers in Thailand were an abject race of a few hundred people who roamed the forest in almost constant terror. They had no weapons besides pointed sticks and a few bartered spears, frequently died in the clutches of tigers, and were even hunted and shot by other hill tribes, who considered them vermin. The Mlabri did not make clothing, have any agricultural techniques, or possess a written language.

Did these people really exist? Long wondered. And did they still exist in these conditions? The newly minted evangelical had found his calling. Along with his wife, Mary, and two young sons, he set out to convert the Mlabri to Christianity.

Life, however, doesn’t always turn out as ordained. More than a quarter-century later, the Mlabri remain animist and the controversial ministry is gone—but the former missionary remains. Eugene Long has kept the faith with this tiny, defenseless band of Bamboo Age nomads and now seeks their salvation through an unlikely vehicle: the Internet.

“It’s really a miracle,” says Long, now 53, regarding the small, modest village in a far corner of Phrae province where he and the Mlabri have reforested a narrow mountain valley with teak, tamarind, and coffee trees. “But we worked real hard to get that miracle.”

To outsiders, the Mlabri seem an enigma. Detailed guidebooks of Thailand’s minority groups devote only a few paragraphs to one of the world’s most primeval people. My own interest had been whetted in a Boston bookshop, where I stumbled across an out-of-print edition of *The Spirits of the Yellow Leaves*, by Austrian anthropologist Hugo A. Bernatzik. The book, published posthumously in 1958, described an incredible expedition by Bernatzik to Nan province, just east of Phrae, in the 1930s. The narrative read like something out of the old “Terry and the Pirates” comic: murderous bandits; a bear hunt; encounters with wild elephants and tigers; and months wandering the mountains with bands of Mlabri.

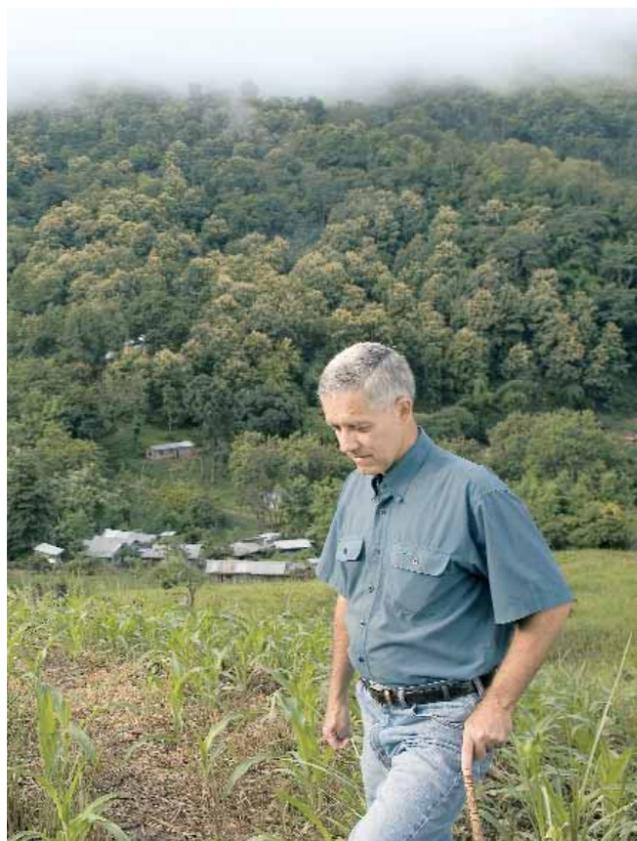
I’d had the identical reaction to these people as had Long: Could they really exist?

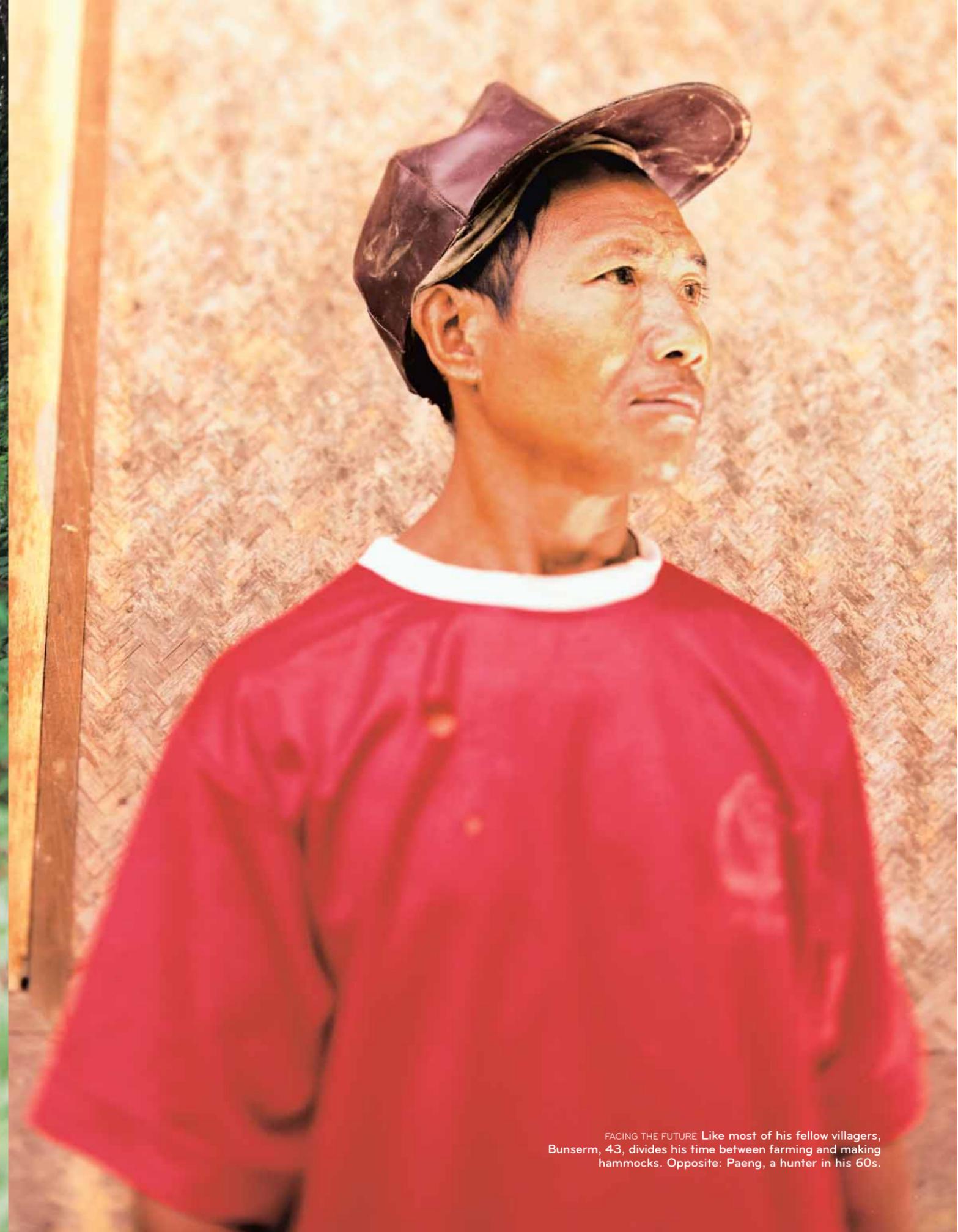
They did, as I discovered, along with directions to Phrae, Long’s contact details, and, eventually, an invitation to visit the Mlabri village.

A four-hour drive from the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, Phrae is well off most travelers’ radar: just over 20,000 foreign visitors came through in 2006. But the province has a certain subtle charm, especially in Phrae town, its moat-girdled capital, which was once a major hub of Thailand’s logging industry. Even today, the surrounding mountains hold some of the largest teak reserves in the kingdom. The handiwork of local craftsmen can be seen across the old town, in the neighborhoods of raised wooden houses with horn-like *kalae* carvings on the gables, and in the scattering of temples, such as the Burmese-style Wat Chom Sawan, constructed almost entirely of teak.

The artisans’ greatest triumph is Vongburi House, a Victorian-style confection built in 1897 during the reign of Thailand’s great modernizer, King Chulalongkorn. Originally the private residence

MAN WITH A MISSION **Below:** Former missionary Eugene Long in the hills above the Mlabri village of Ban Boonyuen. **Opposite:** Showing off a family portrait.





FACING THE FUTURE Like most of his fellow villagers, Bunserm, 43, divides his time between farming and making hammocks. Opposite: Paeng, a hunter in his 60s.



BE IT EVER SO HUMBLE Some of Ban Boonyuen's cinderblock houses, above. Opposite: A young Mlabri lady called Yin on the steps of a hammock-making shed.

of a young Thai couple with a share in Phrae's lucrative forest concession, the building is notable for the elaborately carved fretwork decorating its gables, eaves, and transoms. The lovingly preserved interior, which houses a small museum, is every bit as evocative of that faded era with its display of ancient gramophones, elephant saddles and bells, heirloom porcelain, and slave-buying contracts.

The relative bustle of Phrae quickly vanishes once Long points his Toyota 4x4 Hi-Lux north on Highway 101. Beyond Ban Thung Hong, a village famed for its indigo *mor hom* work shirts, we drive east past Phae Muang Phi, or "Ghost Land," an eerie landscape of eroded pillars not unlike the hoodoos of Utah's Bryce Canyon. We then begin a roller-coaster ride through maize-covered hills, at one point encountering an elephant and his mahout trudging along the road. The pavement ends in Huay Hoi, more than 40 kilometers from Phrae town, but Long coaxes his truck along a rugged track for six more kilometers, passing a Hmong settlement and then fording a small stream to arrive in Ban Boonyuen, the village he founded 20 years ago. As the crow flies, it's no more than 15 kilometers to the site surveyed by the Siam Society expedition in 1963.

Long's initial journey was far more circuitous. His father, a U.S. Army sergeant, died when Long was 12, and the young Florida boy was soon racking up numerous juvenile offenses, including grand larceny. But after nearly dying at age 14 from an alcohol-induced coma, he became a born-again Christian, and later attended the Bible Institute of the controversial New Tribes Mission. One of the world's largest evangelical missionary organizations, NTM believes in "church planting" and spreading The Word "until the last tribe is reached." Backed by millions of dollars, Florida-

based NTM has undertaken an aggressive global outreach: an army of 3,000 highly trained missionaries who work with remote, ethnic-minority peoples in nearly 20 countries. Human rights organization Survival International has accused NTM of using criminal tactics—including armed manhunts and kidnapping—in its efforts to convert indigenous groups in South America.

Long and his young family arrived in Bangkok in 1978, where he spent more than a year learning Thai. After reading the Siam Society report on the Mlabri, he set his sights on Nan province, the tribe's last known whereabouts. Once he moved to Nan, however, communist insurgents and illegal loggers made contact difficult. He relocated to Phrae, where he learned of Mlabri working as unpaid labor for more sophisticated hill tribes. Long would drive to Huay Hoi, and then hike into the hills with a first-aid kit.

The dismal conditions of the Mlabri he met hadn't changed since the Siam Society expedition. They lived beneath drafty windbreaks, wore discarded rags, and subsisted on roots, wild fruits, and small game. Literacy was non-existent. Half of all the tribe's children died before their first birthday. Fifty percent of the adults suffered from falciparum malaria; life expectancy was less than 40 years. Squeezed from their shrinking forest home, the Mlabri were on the verge of extinction.

"They've been taken advantage of by almost everyone they've ever met," Long says, showing me old snapshots of his earliest encounters. Many of the men and women in the photos are now dead.

Long built a simple hut in a small, stream-fed valley denuded by slash-and-burn farming. He hired tribesmen to replant the hills with trees, offered them rice, and treated their illnesses. Soon, several dozen Mlabri had become frequent visitors, giving Long more time to see to their basic needs and to study their obscure Mon-Khmer tongue. Preaching would have to wait.

"The first step is to learn their language," Long explains. "You demonstrate God's love with your life before you start talking about it. When we first came here, there were hungry people, sick people, abused people. And we're going to sit down and have a Sunday school lesson with them?"

It would take a decade before Long became conversant in Mlabri, an atonal language in which every final word seems to melt into a sigh.

"They talk music," Long says. "They're not illiterate. They're pre-literate."

The Mlabri have specific words for every forest creature, but no terms for "gun" or "steam pot" or any numbers above 10. Time is told by the position of the sun. There is no talk of specific months or years; there is only the moon phase and the seasons.

Says Long: "It reflects where they came from, what's important to them."

The Mlabri inhabited a transient, uncertain world. When sick, they changed their names to fool bad spirits. After a bad dream, they even abandoned their dwellings. They often married for only a few years, and then took another spouse. The results were confusing family relationships straight from a country-and-western song: someone with a sister that was also his grandmother; another whose grandfather was also his brother-in-law.

Periodically the tribesmen, who have an encyclopedic knowledge of the jungle, would disappear to hunt (*Continued on page 128*)



(Continued from page 112) game and forage for fruits and wild honey. Once, after threats by illegal lumbermen, the entire settlement vanished for seven months. By then, Long had learned not to ask why or where they went, but to simply celebrate their return. He had found his own Middle Path.

"I'm the Buddhist Baptist," he grins. "I try to approach them in a Yellow Leaf way. That was always my theory."

**THE LONGS, WHO HOME-SCHOOLED** their three children, opened a grade school in the village, which eventually grew to 130 people and even acquired a name—Boonyuen, which is Thai for "longevity." Hygiene and nutrition also improved, as the one-time wanderers built permanent cinderblock houses and planted their own crops. It's been four years since the last case of malaria. Since 2004, no infants have died.

Conversion to Christianity might seem inevitable. On the one hand were the nearly extinct Mlabri, a loin-cloth-clad tribe on the furthest margins of Thai society. On the other was NTM, in the person of Long, offering food, clothes, medicine, and, for the first time, a tribal school. Such scenarios infuriate indigenous-rights groups. Was Long, who had become employer, teacher, and doctor, the tribe's salvation—or would he be its ultimate undoing? Just how much of the culture of this nomadic, animist tribe would endure if it settled down and practiced Christianity? How would a tribe without any concept of guilt accept Original Sin? In a scathing *Lonely Planet* guidebook description, Long's ministry was likened to Peter Matthiessen's grim novel about missionaries gone awry, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*.

Long, who says the guidebook writer never visited Ban Boonyuen, is well aware of the accusation that he's detribalizing the Mlabri.

"These people aren't living in a vacuum," he responds. "We didn't pluck them out of nowhere and start Americanizing,

Christianizing, Westernizing, or even Thai-izing them. These were people who had already had contact with outsiders—and that contact had not always been pleasant. What's the alternative? Just to let other people take advantage of them? Is that somehow better?"

"What we're dealing with here is the reality that we found, not the idealities that we'd prefer."

Long was also pilloried by some of his fellow missionaries. His conversion efforts took an unusually long time, and he concerned himself with the Mlabri's health and welfare—even advocating successfully for their Thai citizenship papers—instead of focusing on spiritual matters.

"What do you tell them?" he asks

It's a startling juxtaposition: a HUNTER-GATHERER tribe without a written language has become part of the global economy, and is selling its wares via eBay

rhetorically. "They come to you at night and they're sick, they're hungry, they're mistreated. And you want to bring out your Bible and tell them about Jesus? When people can be helped and you're not helping them, you're not setting a real good example of what a believer is all about.

"You can't do everything that needs to be done—but that doesn't mean you don't do anything," he adds, citing the Parable of the Good Samaritan. "It's a matter of conscience."

Long acknowledges his uncommon approach was "way out of the ordinary" for missionary work. Eventually he came to loggerheads with the NTM administration over his activities; the organization worried about repercussions for its other Thai ministries, the mounting cost of trying to convert the tiny group, and the humanitarian work of their strong-willed missionary, who had become de facto headman of the Mlabri. In 2003, NTM and Long finally parted ways.

"Probably 'amicable' wouldn't be the right word," says Long, who felt hamstrung by the NTM bureaucracy. "They were probably as happy to be rid of me as I was to be out of there. There were just real philosophical differences about how to go

about things."

Economic development, for example: it's not an NTM priority, but in Ban Boonyuen spreading the Gospel became secondary to improving the Mlabri's impoverished circumstances. To generate income, Long built several metal-framed shelters, taught the Mlabri weaving patterns, and began producing handmade "jungle hammocks" that are sold through a Swiss middleman or over the Internet.

It's a startling cultural juxtaposition: a hunter-gatherer tribe without a written language has become part of the global economy, and is selling its wares via eBay.

"The nice thing about making hammocks is they can pace themselves," Long says as he shows me around the simple open-air "factory" and a storeroom filled with spools of colorful cotton, silk, and acrylic threads. "We hire them by the piece, not by the day. We don't want to become overseers."

Last year, the Mlabri sold more than 3,000 hammocks; it's getting hard, admits Long, to keep up with demand. Weavers earn from 150 baht to 1,000 baht (about US\$22) per hammock, depending on complexity—more money than they'd make as unskilled laborers in the city.

**A HANDFUL OF CURIOUS TRAVELERS** have rented four-wheel-drive trucks and arrived unannounced in Ban Boonyuen. The village, however, is too remote and its poverty too unromantic to ever lure tour groups. Not that Thai travel agencies haven't approached Long and asked him to convince the Mlabri to reenact their former lifestyle for the entertainment of strangers.

"If anybody wants to come and see what they're really like, if they want to visit fellow human beings, we'll welcome them," Long says. "But we're not going to lie to the tourists and put the Mlabri on show. If you want to see people without clothes, there are places in Bangkok where they do that all the time."

Long leads the way up a narrow path to a cluster of cinderblock houses built by an extended Mlabri family. I recognize an elderly woman, Sansanee, from an old photo Long had shown me of a woman nearly bent double beneath the weight of an enormous load of thatch. Now widowed, she lives with her daughter and son-in-law in a simple house with electricity, a bathroom, and—wonder of

wonders—an automatic rice cooker. Her pretty daughter, Wong, a head taller than Sansanee thanks to a better diet, is inside weaving a hammock.

"If they get too far ahead, other Mlabri complain," says Long. "They work at home so other people can't see how many hammocks they're making. They want a nice TV."

Other Mlabri already own furniture, motorcycles, or propane-fired stoves—all purchased with earnings from hammock sales. A few tribesmen have ventured into Phrae to work at a noodle factory, but most seem content to live, farm, and weave in the valley with their brethren. Back at the factory, a woman with a baby tied to her back works on an elaborate hammock that will bring her 1,000 baht for five days' work. She has no desire to work or live elsewhere.

"It's nice," she says, threading a shuttle. "The people here, we're not going to go anywhere. We're going to stay in one place. In the old days we used to move a lot."

Community will be crucial to preserving Yellow Leaf culture, to prevent Mlabri from becoming a "hearth language" spoken

only at home by a few old people. The tribal population, which Long estimates at no more than 400, lives in just three remote mountain villages in Phrae and Nan; a smaller number also inhabit the recesses of adjacent Sainyabuli province, Laos.

"If these people went to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phrae—if you spread them out—how long would the language last?" Long muses. "One generation; that would be it." He adds, "I want to make it possible for them to remain here as a group if that's what they want. Right now, hammocks are a great answer to that."

Long acknowledges the Mlabri could someday be engulfed by Thai culture. "It really depends on them. Right now, they're proud to be Mlabri, of being able to do Mlabri things. They're proud of their language. Their history is sad. They don't have an illustrious past, but I think they're even proud of that—of who they are and where they came from."

In Ban Boonyuen, the immediate future seems promising. There is weaving for all who want to work. The valley is flanked by groves of mature teak; in their

shade flourish thousands of Arabica trees that could yield prime organic coffee. Although school lessons are taught in Thai, village children still learn Mlabri as their mother tongue. Long's son, Allen, is developing a Mlabri alphabet.

But the completion of a Mlabri-language Bible will take Long a lifetime. He and Mary are trying to translate portions of some Old and New Testament stories, including Genesis and the Book of Luke. The Mlabri, says Long, already have a creation myth about an omnipotent being, Tirlaguk, who lives in the sky with his two wives and his son, the thunder. And the tribe still believes in Tirlaguk. Despite the missionary's decades-old presence, the Mlabri remain animist.

"Maybe two or three might consider themselves Christians," Long allows. "We don't tell them they are; we don't tell them they aren't. It's not really our job."

He also hasn't built a place of worship or conducted a public church meeting, let alone held a private Bible study. They're all too foreign to the Mlabri perspective, Long believes. Theirs is a world view like few others. In the weaving room I meet Yot, a diminutive man who seems to sing, not speak, in answer to my questions. He's in his 50s, a rarity for his people, and grew up with the old ways—digging up wild sweet potatoes, climbing trees to gather honey, hunting everything from bears to bamboo rats, sleeping in the open—in the mountains surveyed by the Siam Society.

"We saw tigers," Yot tells me. "My older brother and I were in the jungle and we disturbed three tigers that had killed a pig. They attacked and bit my brother. I ran away. I was five. They ate my brother completely." He adds, "There used to be more Mlabri. But some of them died from headaches, stomach aches, tigers, snakes."

Are the Mlabri now better off? I ask Yot. Will there always be Mlabri in Thailand?

He pauses before replying. The tribesman's old wariness has returned. It would be presumptuous and could anger the spirits if Yot were to speak of any improvement.

"Some live," he replies softly, "some die. That's the way it is." ©

## FACT FILE: PHRAE AND VICINITY



The mountains are modest and the beaches non-existent, yet a small but growing number of travelers have found their way to Phrae. The provincial capital is compact enough to tour on foot. **Den Chai Tour** (66-54/613-474) can arrange excursions to outlying sites. Chiang Mai-based **Siam Sun Tours** (66-53/357-221) offers multi-day packages in neighboring Nan province.

**GETTING THERE**  
The **State Railway of**

**Thailand** ([www.railway.co.th](http://www.railway.co.th)) operates multiple daily Northern Line trains departing Bangkok with stops in Den Chai, a district seat seven hours away. From Den Chai, taxis and *song thaew* are available for the remaining 24 kilometers to Phrae.

Alternatively, Phrae is a four-hour drive from Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai. The only air link is on domestic carrier **PB Air** ([www.pbair.com](http://www.pbair.com)), which flies five days a week from Bangkok to Nan, itself another two hours by road to Phrae.

**WHEN TO GO**  
The dry, cool season, which typically runs from November through March, offers the best weather. The summer monsoon can wreak havoc on mountain

roads and flood the railway line.

### WHERE TO STAY

Phrae town has several adequate hotels. Just outside the old city, the **Mae Yom Palace Hotel** (*Yantarakijkosol Rd.*; 66-54/521-028; doubles from US\$22), has friendly staff and reasonable amenities, including a swimming pool.

### WHERE TO EAT

**Mae Yom** at the Mae Yom Palace Hotel (above) has an à la carte menu of northern Thai specialties. **Khunya Restaurant** (*Ratsadamnoen Ave.*), a five-minute walk east of the old city, serves good-value Thai fare in an informal setting.

### RESOURCES

Information on the Mlabri and Ban Boonyuen can be found at [www.mlabri.org](http://www.mlabri.org).