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Community Based Tourism is a great way to get close to Thai culture, learn from the people and support a community at the same time. The locals are aware of the natural and cultural heritage of their community and are happy to share this with visitors. They demonstrate their daily tasks and customs, and in turn conserve their heritage.

Ban Na Thon Chan Community is a place to start. Located in Sukhothai province, it is more than 200 years old, and most residents are descendants of the ancient Lanna kingdom. The Pacific Asia Travel Association, PATA, awarded the community a Gold Award in 2012 for Heritage and Culture, saying â€œ [The] Ban Na Ton Chan Community program is very noteworthy from the standpoint of heritage.â€•

The PATA Gold Awards set an industry standard for excellence and innovation as this non-profit association serves as a catalyst for responsible travel and tourism development.

The villagers strive to maintain a balance between man and nature, as they welcome visitors with 20 families opening their doors to tourists as part of the Ban Na Ton Chan Homestay Project. They can accommodate up to 70 people.

The host family leads tours of the village as well as the nearby â€œElephant Sanctuaryâ€• that provides rehabilitation for tortured, neglected and abandoned elephants.

Villagers also teach tourists how to prepare and cook Thai dishes using locally grown herbs and vegetables.

There is a wealth of knowledge waiting at the homestays, but visitors can also feel good in the knowledge they are helping maintain a self-sufficient community in its efforts to preserve ageless Thai traditions.

A homestay at Na Ton Chang lacks the luxury of a five-star hotel but more than makes up for that with warm village hospitality and the joy gained when learning a new culture and its customs.

Another good example is the Kah Yao Noi Eco-tourism Club, which has won several awards with its partner, the Bangkok-based NGO Responsible Ecological Tours Project (REST). These accolades include the World Legacy Awards Destination Stewardship Award sponsored by Conservation International and National Geographic Traveler magazine.

The homestays are proving very popular with visitors from Europe and the US looking for a few days of living a simple lifestyle with locals and all they learn doing so.

The combination of nature and a rural life while living with fishing families and enjoying all the fresh seafood that comes with it, results in repeat visitors.

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