

Swiss Ambassador to Thailand Ambassador H.E. Helene Budliger Artieda

Expatriate Life had the pleasure of interviewing the Swiss Ambassador to Thailand Ambassador H.E. Helene Budliger Artieda.

How long have you been the Ambassador to Thailand?

I arrived in Thailand at the beginning of October 2019 and experienced thankfully a bit more than five months of normal diplomatic activity before my Embassy like many others had to enter into crisis modus operation to tackle the situation created by the spread of COVID-19.

Did you arrive to Thailand from home, or were you posted somewhere else before?

Previously, I was posted for four years to beautiful South Africa where I also represented Switzerland in Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mauritius and Namibia and served as the Swiss Special Representative to the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC).

Where are you born and brought up?

I was born in Zurich and grew up in the suburbs of my



hometown. In Switzerland, it is equally important to know where your family originates from. My canton of origin is Lucerne.

At which age did you decide you wanted to become a diplomat?

Already in my late teens, I had hopes for an international career because I enjoyed travelling and discovering new cultures from a young age onwards. First, my eyes were set on one of the many Swiss hotel schools. It was more of a coincidence that I ended up with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs instead.

Do you have other diplomats in your family?

No. My father worked in banking, and so did two of my uncles. My mother stayed at home to educate and take care of us.

As for my sister, she has a great position at the Swiss National TV station. All my extended family members love to travel internationally. However, I am the only one that pursued an international career.

How do you look at Thailand today? Have you had any obstacles since you arrived?

Thailand, the Thai authorities and people have been wonderfully welcoming. Bangkok is a safe, during normal times, lively city with lots of opportunities. Today, Thailand, like every country in the world, is facing great difficulties with regards to the current global health and economic crisis. It worries me that millions of Thai people have lost their jobs in recent weeks. This global recession will mean that we will have to lock hands in solidarity among friendly nations and work together to find a way back to what is perceived as a good life worth living. As

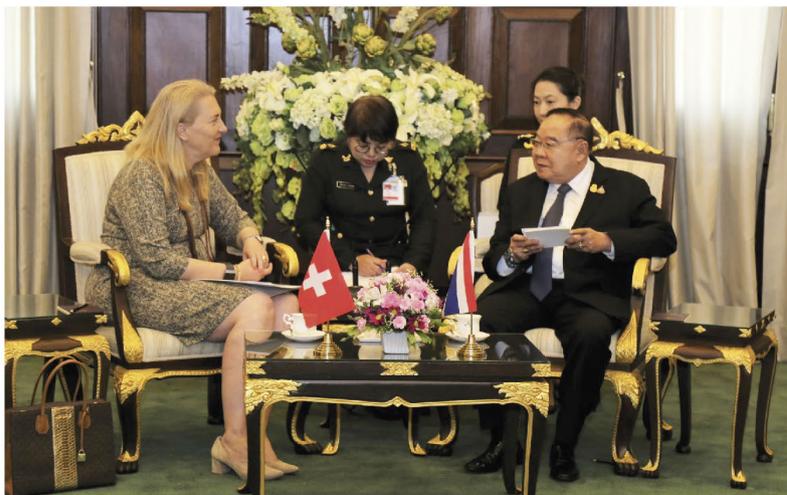




an obstacle, or rather a regret on my side, I would consider the lack of understanding and speaking of the Thai language. Without any prior knowledge or affinity, I find it difficult to learn the language during my mission in Thailand.

Do you see any similarities between your country and Thailand?

Between Thailand and Switzerland, I would think it is more that opposites attract. Swiss tourists flock to Thailand because of the beautiful beaches, the distinctively different food, to visit the colourful markets, chill on the famous rooftop terraces in Bangkok and for many other experiences which Thailand offers plentiful.



Thai people tell me that they enjoy Switzerland for its nature, good air, historic cities and villages, cheese and chocolate, snow, mountains and so forth. There are also aspects, which make for a strong bond between the two countries. Swiss people most often stem from farming ancestry. Although quite urban nowadays, this love for the land unites us. There are many intercultural marriages, which to me build the strongest bond possible. Diplomacy is a people-to-people business. It immediately

creates a closeness when I meet a representative of Thailand who tells me that he or she has Swiss relatives in the family. Last but certainly not least, there are many historic ties between the Thai Royal Family and Switzerland. Most Thai people are aware, that their beloved late King Rama IX spent crucial years in Lausanne before returning home.

Do you have children? What age and where do they go to school?

We do not have children, but I am married, and my husband and I enjoy the company of three dogs who travel everywhere with us. No substitute for children, but we nevertheless consider them as part of the pack.

How do you look upon your work here? What does an average day look like?

As many of my colleagues must have told you, Bangkok is a remarkably busy post. For Switzerland, the Embassy also plays a regional role with side accreditations to Cambodia and Laos and with a regional consular centre for some of the Mekong region. It is an immensely popular post, which regularly attracts great interest when openings are advertised within the Ministry. So, I feel very privileged to serve in Bangkok. There is not much routine, and my days never look the same and the topics I deal with vary greatly.

I looked randomly at one of my weeks back in December, and this is what I found: I hosted a dinner in honour of a visiting business executive at the Swiss Residence; paid a Thai official at MoFA a courtesy call; attended a National Day of a European friend; travelled to Hua Hin to meet with the Swiss community; hosted the Swiss Thai Chamber of Commerce for a joint networking event at the Residence; lunched with a former Swiss Ambassador; held bilateral meetings with a Thai entrepreneur, with a representative of a social impact fund and with an international NGO; attended several Embassy internal meetings. To round things up, that week the Embassy hosted a Swiss delegation from its headquarters and the region. I could have picked any other week and it would have been equally busy, diverse and interesting.



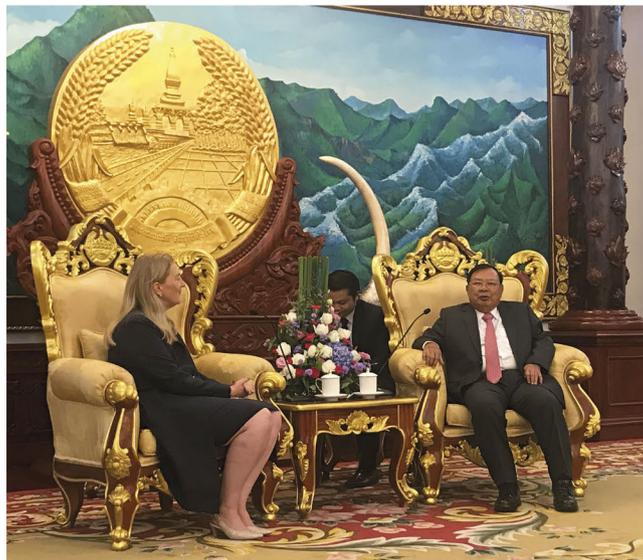


As every Ambassador, I assume you have some goals you really would like to reach/fulfil before you leave Thailand. What are they?

There are three main interests: (1) To further foster economic relations between Thailand and Switzerland. Switzerland is a member of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and EFTA has signalled to Thailand that there is interest to resume talks about a free trade agreement. I am eager to support Swiss companies here in Thailand and win Thai investors for Switzerland. (2) Bangkok is an important consular post. Offering the best possible service to Swiss citizens, living or visiting Thailand has high priority for me. Thailand is also our biggest source market for tourism to Switzerland and the number of visitors were very elevated before the COVID-crisis. Our visa team is dedicated to offer a smooth and where possible client centred process. (3) I am the face of official Switzerland in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos and as such, I aim to attend as many functions as possible.

Have you been travelling around in Thailand?

Yes, I had the opportunity to travel both for business and for pleasure. The Swiss clubs in Hua Hin, Chiang Mai and Phuket invited me to their Christmas festivities. Her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn very kindly invited the diplomatic corps for a study tour to Chiang Rai where we learned about the Royal projects. For us, visiting the Doi Tung Royal Villa, which was inspired by the Swiss mountains, was one of the highlights. Privately, we managed to squeeze in an extended weekend in Phuket. When my family visited, we took a tour of historic Ayutthaya and returned by boat to Bangkok.



As of early March, all our travel plans have been grounded.

Until now may I ask what is your favourite destination in Thailand?

It is honestly too early to speak of a favourite destination. So far, we enjoyed everything we have seen and experienced.

When you have a day off, what do you do? Do you have any special hobbies?

There is not much free time as Ambassador since my husband and I often attend events at the weekend. I enjoy spending time with my dogs, am an avid reader and I love jigsaw puzzles! Ever since we have been in lockdown, my husband and I have started to play table tennis and discover new cooking recipes during the weekend.

How many of your countryfolk are living in Thailand? When and why did Thailand become a desirable destination for your people?

There are roughly 10,000 Swiss citizens living in Thailand and before the COVID-crisis, over 200,000 Swiss tourists visited the country every year. The mutual appreciation between Thailand and Switzerland started quite traditionally with tourism. In the 80s and 90s, Swiss people discovered Thailand as a touristic destination, liked what they saw and decided to settle. Age-

wise, the oldest Swiss community abroad resides in Thailand. Many older Swiss decide to spend their much-deserved retirement in sunny Thailand. Love quite often also plays a decisive role.

Do your country and Thailand have any exchange programmes for students today?



Switzerland and Thailand's universities, institutes and schools of applied sciences cooperate in numerous domains, which include exchange of students. Some Thai students also benefit from the annual Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships programme, which promotes international exchange and research cooperation.

If you could choose your next destination, where would you like to go?



As a diplomat, there is an important life lesson. Think and act in the moment and enjoy your current posting. Life goes by way too fast, especially when you rotate every four years, like we do. My husband and I have just arrived in Thailand. So I really try not to think of what will be in roughly three years.

Any memory from Thailand that you would like to share with us, an awkward situation, a fun moment etc.?

I might be among very few people who attended two trainings of the momentous and beautiful royal barge proceedings. When I arrived in Thailand, I was unsure if I would receive my royal permission to act as Ambassador on time. Therefore, my husband and I decided to attend a training. We were smitten by it. Returning to the office and gushing about it, my staff asked if we could organise our annual team outing by attending yet another training. So we did. In December, my husband and I attended the most memorable real barge proceedings. My husband in his white tie tailor made suit and I in a long evening gown in over 30 degrees Celsius. Friends back home in republican Switzerland were quite impressed with how glamorous our life can be.

Do you regularly meet up with your community?

Absolutely, it is a very important part of my work. There are several Swiss clubs in the region, and I intend to pay them all a visit. I enjoy close working relationships with the Swiss Thai Chamber of Commerce and regularly attend events at the Swiss School Bangkok. I enjoy speaking to community members, listen to their experiences and circumstance and eating Swiss food.

What do you believe is your most important task as Ambassador?

To be a worthy representative of my country.

What else would you like the expat community to know about your efforts?

Modern time Ambassadors are approachable, hardworking, and active members of communities. I personally do not enjoy alcohol too much. So please do not picture me sipping Champagne at cocktails and travelling first class. This is cliché and an outdated perception. There is however one cliché that I can fully confirm: Swiss chocolate does make one happy!



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