

Thailand

Central Thailand (Chapter)

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Coverage includes: Ayuthaya Province, Around Ayuthaya, Lopburi Province, Lopburi, Kanchanaburi Province, Kanchanaburi, Around Kanchanaburi, Thong Pha Phum, Sangkhlaburi, and Around Sangkhlaburi.

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Central Thailand

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Why Go?

Overflowing with nearly as much history as it is nature, Central Thailand offers everything from cascading waterfalls to ancient temple ruins. Nature lovers are drawn to the cloud-canopied mountain ranges that separate Thailand from Myanmar (Burma) and the untamed jungle that shelters tigers, elephants and leopards. History buffs head north of Bangkok to Ayuthaya, the former capital of Siam. Once one of the world's most splendid cities, today visitors can cycle around its well-preserved ruins. Further north is the tiny town of Lopburi, where monkeys scamper among the Khmer-style temples.

Northwest from Bangkok is Kanchanaburi, where trekking and adventure activities are the big draw. Visitors also come to remember those who died in WWII building the 'Death Railway'.

In the northwest mountains sit Thong Pha Phum and Sangkhlaburi, home to several ethnic groups.

When to Go

Central Thailand experiences the country's three seasons in equal measure; Kanchanaburi can have baking sunshine while torrential rain buffets Sangkhlaburi. It is hot in the region from February to June, rainy from June to October, and cool (relatively speaking) from October to January: the one constant is the humidity.

Because of altitude, it can be cooler in Sangkhlaburi and surrounding national parks than in other areas. Ayuthaya and Lopburi sit in a wide-open plain that receives similar amounts of rain and heat as Bangkok.

AYUTHAYA PROVINCE

Ayuthaya

POP 137,553

พระนครศรีอยุธยา

Ayuthaya was once one of the most dazzling and dynamic cities in Asia; today, its temple ruins largely offer just tantalising hints of this former majesty. The city's most famous sites have been partially restored so it is easy to imagine how they must have looked in their prime, while others remain fully functioning temples.

Between 1350 and 1767 Ayuthaya was the capital of Siam. As a major trading port during the time of the trade winds, international merchants visited and were left in awe of the hundreds of glittering temples and treasure-laden palaces. At one point the empire ruled over an area larger than England and France combined. Ayuthaya had 33 kings who engaged in more than 70 wars during its 417-year period; however, fine diplomatic skills also ensured no Western power ever ruled Siam.

The last of the empire's battles was in 1767, when an invading Burmese army sacked the city, looting most of its treasures. What was left continued to crumble until major restoration work began. In 1991 Ayuthaya's ruins were designated a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Away from the temples, Ayuthaya has a growing number of attractions that focus on locally made produce and handicrafts.

Sights

At one time, 400 glittering temples stood proudly in Ayuthaya. Today, more than a dozen restored ruins can be found within the heart of the city, while there are also several working temples. The headless Buddha images, crumbling columns and battered balustrades recreate images of a once mighty city.

For simpler navigation, we've divided up the sites into 'on the island' and 'off the island' sections. It is easy to get between the sites by bicycle, and hiring a guide for some historical detail is useful.

Most temples are open from 8am to 4pm; the more famous sites charge an entrance fee. A one-day pass for most sites on the island is available for 220B and can be bought at the museums or ruins.

The ruins are symbols of royalty and religion, two fundamental elements of Thai society, and so please show respect (see p34).

ON THE ISLAND

The following sites are in central Ayuthaya.

Wat Phra Si Sanphet TEMPLE

(วัดพระศรีสรรเพชญ์; admission 50B) The three *chedi* (stupas) at Wat Phra Si Sanphet are perhaps the most iconic image in Ayuthaya. Built in the late 14th century, it was the city's largest temple and was used by several kings. It once contained a 16m-high standing Buddha (Phra Si Sanphet) covered with 250kg of gold, which was melted down by Burmese conquerors.

AYUTHAYA IN...

Two Days

Rise early to beat the Ayuthaya sun and cycle around the **Historical Park**. Stop for lunch at **Lung Lek's** noodle emporium before heading north of the island to catch a late-afternoon performance at **Ayuthaya Klong Sabua Floating Market and Water Theatre**. The following day hop on an elephant for a short ride among the ruins then finish your visit by sampling locally made produce at the **Ayothaya Floating Market**.

Four Days

Head out of the city to visit **Bang Pa In Palace** and the nearby **Bang Sai Arts and Crafts Centre**. On the way back, drop by at **Wat Phanan Choeng** and ensure good luck by releasing fish back to the river.

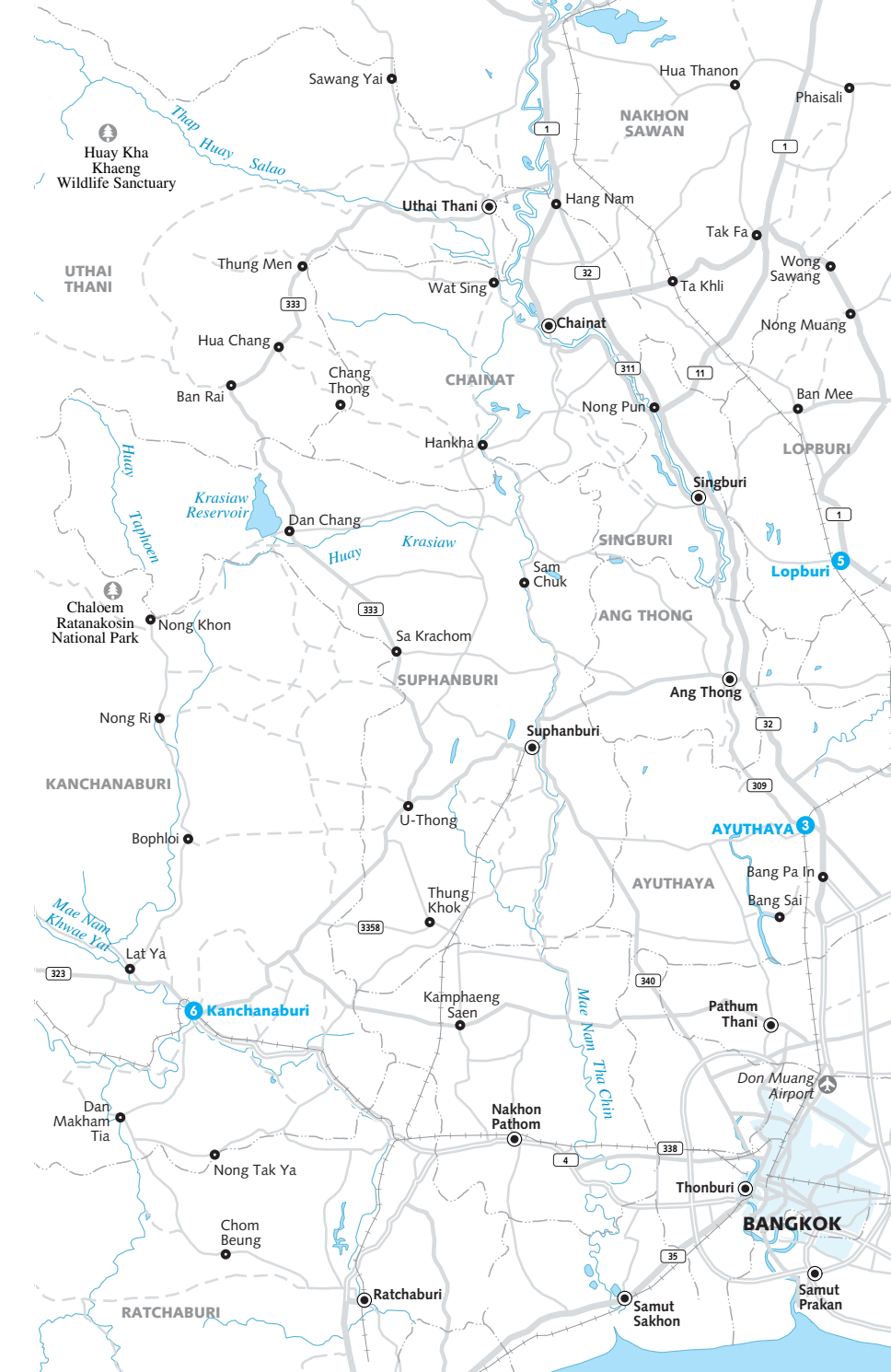
One Week

A week gives you plenty of time to see the temples and the nearby countryside. Cycle to **Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon** and mingle in the neighbouring Muslim markets before returning to the island for a sunset boat trip. With a few extra days spare, you can learn how to be a mahout at the **Ayuthaya Elephant Palace**.

Central Thailand Highlights

- 1 Exploring remote national parks, such as **Si Nakharin** (p186), to look for elusive tigers, elephants and gibbons
- 2 Clambering up the seven levels at **Erawan** (p183), one of Thailand's most impressive waterfalls
- 3 Cycling around the temple and palace ruins in **Ayuthaya** (p167)
- 4 Sampling the laid-back vibe of **Sangkhlaburi** (p188) and spending time with ethnic groups that live there
- 5 Watching monkeys scurrying around the temple ruins in **Lopburi** (p168)
- 6 Visiting the WWII museums and remembering the past in **Kanchanaburi** (p174)
- 7 Flying across zip-lines, riding elephants through the jungle, kayaking along rivers and enjoying other **adventure activities** (p188) around Sangkhlaburi





Sawang Yai

Hua Thanon

Phaisali

NAKHON SAWAN

Huay Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary

Thap Huay Salao

Uthai Thani

Hang Nam

Tak Fa

Wong Sawang

UTHAI THANI

Thung Men

Wat Sing

Ta Khli

Nong Muang

Hua Chang

Chainat

Ban Mee

Ban Rai

Chang Thong

CHAINAT

Nong Pun

LOPBURI

Huay Taphoen

Dan Chang

Hankha

Singburi

Nong Khon

Chaloem Ratanakosin National Park

Sa Krachom

SINGBURI

Lopburi

ANG THONG

SUPHANBURI

Ang Thong

Nong Ri

Suphanburi

KANCHANABURI

Bophloi

U-Thong

AYUTHAYA 3

AYUTHAYA

Bang Pa In

Bang Sai

Mae Nam Khwae Yai

Lat Ya

Thung Khok

Kamphaeng Saen

Pathum Thani

Don Muang Airport

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Dan Makham Tia

Nong Tak Ya

Nakhon Pathom

Thonburi

BANGKOK

Chom Beung

Ratchaburi

Samut Sakhon

Samut Prakan

RATCHABURI

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4

338

340

3358

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32

311

11

32

1

1

Ayuthaya

☉ Top Sights

Chao Sam Phraya	
National Museum.....	C3
Wat Chai Wattanaram.....	A4
Wat Phanan Choeng.....	F4
Wat Phra Si Sanphet.....	C2

☉ Sights

1 Ayothaya Floating Market.....	G1
2 Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre.....	D3
3 Chantharakasem National Museum.....	E1
4 Million Toy Museum.....	B2
5 Wat Ayuthaya.....	G1
6 Wat Kudi Dao.....	G1
7 Wat Na Phra Meru.....	C1
8 Wat Phra Mahathat.....	D2
9 Wat Ratburana.....	D2
10 Wat Suwan Dararam.....	F3
11 Wat Thammikarat.....	C2
12 Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon.....	G4
13 Wihaan Mongkhon Bophit.....	C3

☉ Activities, Courses & Tours

14 Tour With Thai.....	F2
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☉ Sleeping

15 Ayothaya Hotel.....	F2
16 Baan Are Gong.....	F2
17 Baan Khun Phra.....	F3
18 Baan Lotus Guest House.....	E2
19 Bann Thai House.....	G2
20 Chantana Guest House.....	F2
21 Krungsri River Hotel.....	F3
22 Promtong Mansion.....	D3
23 PU Inn Ubonpon.....	E2
24 River View Place Hotel.....	F4
25 Tony's Place.....	F2
26 Wiang Fa Hotel.....	E3

☉ Eating

27 Baan Watcharachai.....	A3
28 Gahn Glooy.....	D3
29 Hua Raw Night Market.....	E1
30 Krua Nai Pan.....	E3
31 Lung Lek.....	D2
32 Paa Grung Gao.....	F4
33 Roti Sai Mai Stalls.....	C4
34 Sai Thong.....	D4
Tony's Place.....	(see 25)

☉ Drinking

35 Spin.....	E2
36 Street Lamp.....	E2

TOP CHOICE Chao Sam Phraya National

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติเจ้าสามพระยา; adult/child 150B/free; ☺9am-4pm Wed-Sun) The largest museum in the city has 2400 items on show, ranging from a 2m-high bronze-cast Buddha head to glistening treasures found in the crypts of Wat Phra Mahathat and Wat Ratburana.

Wihaan Mongkhon

Bophit

HISTORICAL BUILDING

(วิหารมงคลบพิตร) Next to Wat Phra Si Sanphet is this sanctuary hall, which houses one of the largest bronze Buddha images in Thailand. This 17m-high figure has undergone several facelifts due to lightning strikes and fire.

In 1955 the Burmese Prime Minister visited the site and donated 200,000B to help restore the building, an act of belated atonement for his country's sacking of the city 200 years before.

Wat Phra Mahathat

TEMPLE

(วัดพระมหาธาตุ; admission 50B) The most photographed image in Ayuthaya is here; a sandstone Buddha head that lies mysteriously tangled within a tree's entwined roots. Built in 1374 during the reign of King Borom Rachathirat I, Wat Phra Mahathat also has a central *prang* (Khmer-style chedi) and rows of headless Buddha images. Nobody knows

TAILOR-MADE TÚK-TÚKS

Túk-túks (pronounced 'dúk dúk'; motorised transport) in Ayuthaya are different from the classic Thai design thanks to their strange dome-shaped fronts. Resembling Darth Vader's iconic mask, they zip around in a variety of colours and designs. One veteran driver remembers these distinctive taxis have looked the same for more than 50 years. It is thought they may have first been made in Japan, which could explain the samurai-like curved front.



Audio guides (150B) can be hired at Wat Phra Si Sanphet, Wat Phra Mahathat and Wat Chai Wattanaram. The English-language guides provide excellent background information and vivid detail that help visitors imagine exactly what once stood on these sites.

for sure how the Buddha head ended up in the tree. Some say the head was abandoned after the Burmese sacked Ayuthaya, and trees subsequently grew around it. Others believe thieves tried to steal the image, but gave up as it was too heavy.

Wat Ratburana

TEMPLE

(วัดราชบูรณะ; Ratcha-burana; admission 50B) The *prang* in this temple is one of the best extant versions in the city, with detailed carvings of lotus and mythical creatures. The temple, just north of Wat Phra Mahathat, was built in the 15th century by King Borom Rachathirat II on the cremation site for his two brothers who both died while fighting each other for the throne. Looters raided the site in 1957 and stole many treasures. Some of the culprits were arrested and a subsequent official excavation of the site uncovered many rare Buddha images in the crypt.

Wat Thammikarat

TEMPLE

(วัดธรรมิกราช) To the west of Wat Ratburana, this temple is a pleasant place to sit among the ruins. The most prominent feature is a central *chedi* surrounded by *singha* (guardian lion) sculptures. Local people believe that the temple predated the Ayuthaya period, a claim unsupported by architectural evidence.

Wat Suwan Dararam

TEMPLE

(วัดสุวรรณดาราราม) This temple is not one of the most-visited sites but its different architectural styles make it worth seeing. Set in the southeast of the island, King Rama I designed the exterior of the older-style

uposatha while Rama III was responsible for the interior. The slightly bowed line along the temple's edge and its plain finish are typical of the late Ayuthaya period. Next to it is a *wi-hahn* from Rama IV's reign, resplendent with a glittering external mosaic.

Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre

MUSEUM

(ศูนย์ศึกษาประวัติศาสตร์อยุธยา; Th Rotchana; adult/student 100/50B; ☎9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun) An impressive diorama of the city's former glories illustrates how spectacular Ayuthaya once was. Other features in this open-plan museum include timelines, examples of traditional village life and videos.

Chantharakasem National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติจันทราคเสม; Th U Thong; admission 100B; ☎9am-4pm Wed-Sun) Inside this national museum is a collection of Buddhist art, sculptures, ancient weapons and lacquered cabinets. The museum is within the grounds of Wang Chan Kasem (Chan Kasem Palace), which was built for King Naresuan by his father in 1577.

Million Toy Museum

TOY MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานของเล่นกรีกอุษพันธุ; adult/child 50/20B; ☎daily 9am-4pm) Godzilla, tin soldiers and a life-size Superman make this magical museum a fascinating place to wander around. The brainchild of associate professor Krikk Yoonpun, the collection of toys from around the world includes both old and new items, along with a display of Buddhist amulets and old Thai currency.

OFF THE ISLAND

On the opposite side of the water that envelops central Ayuthaya are several famous temples. You can reach some sites by bicycle, but others require a motorbike. Evening boat tours around the island are another way to see the highlights.



Wat Phanan Choeng

TEMPLE

(วัดพนัญเชิง; admission 20B) Inside this bustling temple is one of Ayuthaya's most revered Buddha images. The 19m-high Phra Phanan Choeng was created in 1325 and sits in the *wi-hahn* (large hall), surrounded by 84,000 Buddha images that line the walls.

The grounds have a Chinese shrine, where firecrackers rip through the air for good fortune, and a riverfront area where

AYUTHAYA'S TOP FIVE SITES

- » Wat Phra Si Sanphet (p157)
- » Wat Phanan Choeng (p162)
- » Wat Chai Wattanaram (p163)
- » Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon (p164)
- » Wihaan Mongkhon Bophit (p161)

bags of fish are bought and then released for good luck.

Wat Phanan Choeng, southeast of the old city, can be reached by ferry (5B) from the pier near Phom Phet Fortress. Your bicycle can accompany you across.



Wat Chai Wattanaram

TEMPLE

(วัดไชยวัฒนาราม; admission 50B) Just 40 years ago this temple was immersed in thick jungle. Today it is one of Ayutthaya's most-photographed sites thanks to its impressive Khmer-style central *prang*, which stands 35m high. Built in 1630 by King Prasat Thong, the temple is a great place to watch sunsets. The site is west of the island and can be reached on bicycle via a nearby bridge.



Ayutthaya Floating Market

MARKET

(ตลาดน้ำอโยธยา; ☀9am-8pm) Popular with Thais as well as tourists, the floating market sells a range of snacks, artwork and clothes. Set on wooden platforms above the water, the market is covered and so is ideal if the city's fierce heat gets too much. Traditional shows take place throughout the day and longboats (20B) can be hired. The market is to the east of the old city off Th Dusit, near Wat Kudi Dao.

Foreign Quarter

HISTORICAL SITE

(หมู่บ้านชาวต่างประเทศ) Ayutthaya's leaders were brilliant diplomats. As a result of their tolerance towards other religions and cultures, up to 40 ethnic groups settled in the city. The Portuguese were first to arrive in 1511, followed by the Dutch, British and Japanese. Up to 2000 Portuguese traders and diplomats lived in the area and there were three Catholic churches. A small group of group Thai Catholics still lives near the site today.

The Portuguese brought guns with them, and this modern weapon helped the Thais defeat the Burmese in 1520. As a result of this victory, the Portuguese were given land on which to build. In 1767 the Burmese invaders burned down the settlement and it wasn't until 1985 that a Portuguese foundation came to restore the village.

Just south of the island, the **Portuguese Settlement** displays the skeletal remains of 40 Portuguese settlers in an open pit. Look for the unusual spirit house with figures of St Joseph and St Paul. To the west of the Portuguese Settlement is a **Muslim quarter**, where an evening market is held

WAT A SIGHT BY NIGHT

The temple ruins look good during the day, but they are spectacular by night. Many of the main ruins are illuminated after dark and take on an ethereal glow. Wat Ratburana, Wat Chai Wattanaram, Wat Phra Ram and Wat Mahathat are lit up from 7pm to 9pm. The grounds are closed, but it is still worth strolling past or finding a nearby restaurant for dinner.

on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The area is picturesque and ideal for cycling. Along the way, stop at **Wat Phutthai Sawan** to see a reclining Buddha and Khmer-style *prang*.

Japanese Village

MUSEUM

(หมู่บ้านญี่ปุ่น; adult/child 50/20B; ☀8.30am-4.30pm) Up to 1500 Japanese settled in Ayutthaya. Some came to trade while others were fleeing the persecution of Christians in their homeland during the 16th century. This Japanese Village includes a video presentation that sets the scene and a giant electronic image of an oil painting by Dutch artists of the old city at its zenith. The village is 5km south from the Portuguese Settlement.

Phu Khao Thong

MONUMENT

(เขาคิชฌกูฏทอง) At the top of this *chedi's* 79 steps are splendid views of the city. Originally built by the Burmese during a 15-year occupation, the top section was added later by Thais. The statue at the front is a memorial to the all-conquering King Naresuan. Surrounding him are dozens of statues of fighting cockerels. Legend says that when Naresuan was a hostage in Burma his invincible fighting cockerels secured his fearsome reputation. Phu Khao Thong is northwest of the island.

Wat Na Phra Meru

TEMPLE

(วัดหนามพระเมรุ; Phra Mehn; admission 20B) This temple was one of only a few to escape the wrath of Burma's invading army in 1767 as it was used as their base.

Inside the *wi-hahn* is a magnificent 1500-year-old green sandstone Buddha from Sri Lanka. Its prominent facial features and joined eyebrows are typical of the Dvaravati period. The *bôht* (central sanctuary) houses a carved wooden ceiling showing the Buddhist heavens.

HELPING AN OLD FRIEND

Elephants helped Thailand win wars, build cities and transport kings. However, today these animals are the ones needing help, as their natural habitat has been slashed back and they are reduced to begging for food in the street. With only 4000 domestic and wild elephants remaining in Thailand, they need all the assistance they can get.

The **Ayuthaya Elephant Palace** (☎ 8066 87727; www.elephantstay.com) does its part by running a hugely successful breeding program and providing brief tourist rides around the ruins. This nonprofit organisation protects elephants by buying sick or abused animals, including bulls that have killed villagers.

Laithongrien Meepan opened the centre in 1996 after buying his daughter an elephant as a present. Australians Michelle Reedy, a former zoo keeper, and Ewa Nakiewicz run an Elephant Stay program (12,000B for three nights minimum) where visitors learn how to ride, bathe and earn the trust of the animals.

Paying for a pachyderm is not cheap, as they can munch their way through 150kg of food a day, so the taxi rides and Elephant Stay help cover costs. In turn, some elephants help earn their keep by turning their trunks to art, appearing in movies such as Oliver Stone's *Alexander* and even providing dung – which is made into paper, bookmarks and photo albums.

The site is not designed for walk-in tourists, but those that do spend time living with the elephants usually come away with a new-found admiration for Thailand's national animal.

Elephant Kraal

ELEPHANT STOCKADE

(พื้นที่คอกช้าง) Wild elephants were once rounded up and kept in this *kraal* (stockade). Each year the king would look on as the finest beasts were chosen and either put to work or used as war machines. This restored *kraal*, which has 980 teak logs, is northeast of the island.

Bahn Thanon Dusit

TEMPLES

(บานถนนดุสิต) For a more scenic side to the city, grab a bicycle and peddle around this rural patch, east of the island. **Wat Mahayong** is a popular weekend meditation retreat in a leafy courtyard near the temple ruins. Slightly further down the road is **Wat Kudi Dao**, which nature has taken a hold of and **Wat Ayuthaya**, which dates from the early Ayuthaya period and has a modest market on Wednesday evenings.

Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon

TEMPLE

(วัดใหญ่ชัยมงคล; admission 20B) A 7m-long reclining Buddha is the main feature at Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon. Rumour has it that if you can get a coin to stick to the Buddha's feet good luck will come your way. King U Thong built the monastery in 1357 to house monks from Sri Lanka. The bell-shaped *chedi* was built later to honour King Naresuan's victory over Burma.



Activities & Tours

Pedalling around the island is the best way to see the ruins. To see more of the surrounding countryside, guides are available and two-day trips are possible. Try **Tour With Thai** (☎ 3523 1084; www.tourwiththai.com; Th Naresuan).

Boat tours (200B per hour) can be arranged at the pier near the night market or at guest houses. Guest houses offer two-hour sunset tours of the ruins (200B) but they can be cancelled if numbers are too low.

For in-depth coverage of Ayuthaya's history, talk to staff at TAT (p167) about hiring a guide.



Festival & Events

Loi Kratong

CULTURAL FESTIVAL

In November, the Bang Sai Arts and Crafts Centre is the place to be for the Loi Kratong festival. Hundreds of beautiful lotus-shaped vessels containing candles and incense sticks are set afloat from the riverside. In late January, the centre holds its annual fair, showcasing its work.

Swan Boat Races

BOAT RACES

The Thailand International Swan Boat Races take place on the Mae Nam Chao Phraya at the Bang Sai Arts and Crafts Centre every September. It involves long-boats pitting international and domestic crews.

Songkran

WATER FESTIVAL

Unlike the water mayhem at places such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai, the Thai New Year festival here is more of a time for merit-making and paying homage to the elderly. It is held around April 12 to 14.

 Sleeping

Backpackers head for Soi 2, Th Naresuan, where there is a handful of guest houses. Midrange and top-end options can be found along the more scenic riverfront. Look for substantial discounts during the low season (April to November).

TOP CHOICE Baan Lotus Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3525 1988; 20 Th Pamaphrao; s 200B, d 400-600B; ④) Set in large, leafy grounds, this converted teak schoolhouse has a cool, clean feel and remains our favourite place to crash. Staff are as charmingly old-school as the building itself.

TOP CHOICE Tony's Place

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎ 0 3525 2578; www.tonyplace-ayutthaya.com; 12/18 Soi 2, Th Naresuan; r 200-1200B; ④) Budget rooms still offer just the basics, but the true flashpacker can hang out in renovated rooms that verge on the palatial, relatively speaking.

Promptong Mansion

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎ 0 3524 2459; www.promptong.com; off Th Dechawat; s/d/tr 500/700/1100B; ④) Tucked away off the main road, Promptong Mansion is a four-storey guest house that has a distinctive buzz, thanks to its enthusiastic staff.

Baan Thai House

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 35245 555; off Th Dusit; r 2100-2800B; ④) A gorgeous boutique resort set just off the island. Each of the dozen Thai-style villas is immaculate and set amid lush gardens. A túk-túk (pronounced 'dúk dúk'; motorised transport) to the old city costs 80B.

PU Inn Ubonpon

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3525 1213; www.puguesthouse.com; 20/1 Soi Thaw Kaw Saw; r 200-900B; ④) The upbeat staff here give the place a vibrant air and can also help arrange trips. Rooms are bright and clean. If you need a Japanese-speaking local, this is a good choice.

Chantana Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3532 3200; chantanahouse@yahoo.com; 12/22 Soi 2, Th Naresuan; r 400-500B; ④) Standing out

from the more ramshackle rooms along this strip is the Chantana with its helpful staff, clean rooms and a balcony – it's worth forking out an extra 50B to get the latter.

Baan Khun Phra

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3524 1978; www.bannkunpra.com; 48/2 Th U Thong; dm/d 250/600B; ④) A charming riverside teak property, built about 100 years ago, which is teeming with antiques; where else are you going to find Thai swords next to your bed? Dorms sleep up to four.

Krungsri River Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 3524 4333; www.krungsriver.com; 27/2 Th Rotchana; r1800-5738B; ④) Splendid river views and simple but stylish rooms make this four-star hotel the best spot in town.

Baan Are Gong

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3523 5592; siriporntan@yahoo.com.sg; off Th Rotchana; s 150B, d 350-500B; ④) Tucked away in the soi facing the train station is this 100-year-old teak guest house, run by a welcoming Thai-Chinese family. The 3B ferry to the island is nearby.

Wiang Fa Hotel

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3524 3252; 1/8 Th Rotchana; r 500B; ④) Rooms are small in this two-storey guest house, but an outdoor patio, coffee and waffle shop and laid-back feel help compensate.

Ayothaya Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 3523 2855; www.ayothayahotel.com; 12 Soi 2, Th Naresuan; r 650-3800B; ④) Located within range of the ruins, this hotel has friendly staff and plenty of facilities. The retro rooms to the rear are worth exploring. Look for low-season discounts.

River View Place Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 3524 1444; www.riverviewplacehotel.com; 35/5 Th U Thong; r from 2000B; ④) As the name suggests, this is in one of the most scenic on-island spots. Rooms are large and cosy.

 Eating

Ayuthaya's rich heritage has resulted in an equally diverse range of food, from sweet Muslim snacks to seafood. As well as Western-friendly restaurants on Soi 2, Th Naresuan, there are excellent options along the southern part of Th U Thong.

TOP CHOICE Sai Thong

THAI \$

(Th U Thong; dishes 90-150B; ☎ 9.30am-10pm) With 180 items on the menu, live music and spectacular food, this old-school restaurant

is the best place to eat on the island. As well as the regular fare, there are interesting variations, such as chicken marinated in whisky.



Baan Watcharachai

THAI \$\$

(no roman-script sign; off Th Worachate; dishes 100-200B) Located next to Wat Kasatthirat, take a seat on the wooden boat moored outside and feast on *yam Blah duk fò* (crispy catfish salad).

Hua Raw Night Market

MARKET \$

(Th U Thong) This evening market offers simple riverside seating and a range of Thai and Muslim dishes; for the latter look for the green star and crescent.

Roti Sai Mai Stalls

DESSERTS \$

(Th U Thong; ☉10am-8pm) Ayuthaya is famous for the Muslim dessert *roh-dee sai mai*. This is created by rolling together thin strands of melted palm sugar and wrapping them inside the roti. Stalls can be found opposite Ayuthaya Hospital.

Lung Lek

NOODLES \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Chee Kun; dishes 30-40B; ☉8.30am-4pm) For the tastiest, most slurpable noodles around, visit this long-established restaurant opposite Wat Ratburana. The perfect spot for a between-temples meal.

Gahn Gloopay

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; cnr Th Rotchana & Th Chee Kun; dishes 120-150B; ☉5pm-midnight) If you want to see Thais unwind, head to this relaxed restaurant where karaoke sessions often take centre stage.

Tony's Place

WESTERN \$

(Soi 2, Th Naresuan; dishes 60-100B) Set at the front of the guest house of the same name, this is an ideal pit stop as it comes with simple Thai/Western dishes, a few veggie nibbles and plenty of fellow travellers.

Krua Nai Pan

THAI \$\$

(no roman-script sign; cnr Th U Thong & Th Chee Kun; dishes 80-250B) Serving up superb north-eastern cuisine is this stylish, wood-panelled restaurant, where the speciality is the super-spicy soup.

Pae Krung Gao

THAI \$\$

(Th U Thong; dishes 100-200B) A well-established riverside restaurant serving top-notch Thai food. The English-language menu is more limited than the Thai version so if you know what you like, just ask.



Drinking & Entertainment

Nightlife on the island is restricted due to the proximity of the revered ruins. Backpackers hang out along Soi 2, Th Naresuan, listening to live music at Street Lamp. Young Thais sip fruit/vodka combos at **Spin** (cnr Th Naresuan & Th Khlong Makhamriang).

Off the island, a collection of bars can be found just off Th Rotchana, near the northern bus terminal. Khlawng Phleng (no roman-script sign) is the best, and least salacious, of these with live music and a lively crowd.

Ayuthaya Klong Sabua Floating Market and Water Theatre

THEATRE

(ตลาดน้ำซบซบกลางสระบัว; www.ayuthayafloatingmarket.com; admission 99-199B; ☉10am-5.30pm Sat & Sun) Billed as the only water theatre in the kingdom, performers seemingly glide across the water's surface while staging traditional shows with a few dramatic touches, such as fire-breathing. There are five daily performances between 11am and 4.30pm. Tickets, which include a buffet, are cheaper after 2.30pm. Despite the name, don't expect much of a market. To reach the water theatre, follow the road that goes past Wat Na Phra Meru for 2km.



Information

Dangers & Annoyances

Traffic lights are often absent from road junctions in Ayuthaya where they would seem a prudent choice. This means extra care is needed, especially when on a bicycle. Remember Thailand's unofficial road rules: if you're faster and larger, you have right of way. When cycling, put bags around your body, not in baskets where they could be snatched.

At night several packs of dogs roam the streets. Avoid eye contact and be sure to keep your distance.

Emergency

Tourist police (☎emergency 1155; Th Si Sanphet)

Internet Access

Several shops on and around Soi 2, Th Naresuan have connections for 30B per hour.

Medical Services

Ayuthaya Hospital (☎emergency 1669, 0 3532 2555-70; cnr Th U Thong & Th Si Sanphet) Has an emergency centre and English-speaking doctors.

Money

ATMs are plentiful along Th Naresuan, near the Amporn Shopping Centre.

Bank of Ayuthaya (Th U Thong near Th Naresuan)

Kasikorn Bank (Th Naresuan)

Siam City Bank (Th U Thong)

Siam Commercial Bank (Th Naresuan)

Post

Main post office (Th U Thong; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun)

Tourist Information

Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☑0 3524 6076; 108/22 Th Si Sanphet; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) The TAT office, next to the police station, has a good selection of free maps and brochures.

i Getting There & Away

Boat

Several tour companies run boats along the river to Bangkok (see p100).

Bus

Ayuthaya's provincial bus stop is on Th Naresuan, a short walk from the guest-house area. Destinations include:

Bang Pa In (25B, hourly every 20 minutes; via *sǎrng-tǎa-ou*)

Lopburi (40B, two hours, every 45 minutes)

Suphanburi (60B, two hours, every 30 minutes) Transfer in town for buses to Kanchanaburi.

Bangkok-bound buses and minivans leave from stops on Th Naresuan to the following areas of the city:

Victory Monument (60B, 1½ hours, every hour from 5.30am to 7pm)

Rangsit (40B, one hour, every 15 minutes)

Southern (Sai Tai Mai) station (70B, one hour, every 30 minutes from 4.30am to 7pm)

Northern (Mo Chit) station (50B, 1½ hours, every 20 minutes) Also stops at Don Muang airport.

The bus terminal servicing northern Thailand is 5km east of the old city, off Th Rotchana. A *túk-túk* from the terminal to the old city will cost 100B. Destinations include:

Chiang Mai (403B to 806B, nine hours, frequent)

Nan (386B to 497B, eight hours, one morning and two evening departures)

Phitsanulok (224B to 227B, five hours, frequent)

Sukhothai (255B to 328B, six hours, every two hours)

Train

The train station is east of central Ayuthaya. Destinations include:

Bang Pa In (3B)

Bangkok's Hua Lamphong station (ordinary/rapid/express 15B/20B/315B, 1½ hours, frequent morning and night departures)

Bangkok's Bang Sue station (ordinary/rapid/express 15B/20B/315B, 1½ hours, frequent morning and night departures) A convenient station to the Th Khao San area.

Chiang Mai (ordinary/rapid/express 586B/856B/1198B, six departures a day)

Khon Kaen (ordinary/rapid/express 173B/265B/375B, six hours, four departures a day)

Pak Chong (ordinary/rapid/express 23B/73B/130B, frequent) The nearest station to Khao Yai National Park.

The train station is accessible by a quick cross-river ferry from the centre of town (4B) or *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* (50B).

i Getting Around

Sǎhm-lór (three-wheeled pedicabs; also spelt *sǎamláw*) or *túk-túk* are readily available. Always agree on a price before you get on. For trips on the island, the rate is 30B to 40B.

As most of the ruins are close together, the most environmentally friendly way to see them is by bicycle or elephant. Guest houses rent bicycles (30B) and motorcycles (200B). You can take brief rides around the historical park by elephant (200B to 500B) or by horse and carriage (300B). The elephants stay at a *kraal* on Th Pa Thon.

See p164 for information on hiring a long-tail boat for trips around the island.

Around Ayuthaya

BANG PA IN PALACE

บางปะอิน

An intriguing assortment of architectural styles makes up Thailand's most eclectic **palace** (admission 100B; ☎8am-4pm). Originally built in the 17th century, the palace was restored during the reign of Rama V (King Chulalongkorn; 1868-1910). The European, Chinese and Thai buildings may seem incongruous, but they reflect the broad influences of Rama V.

Highlights of the palace include a replica of the Tiber Bridge in Rome, the quite stunning Chinese-style **Wehut Chamrun**, the

Victorian-influenced observatory **Within Thatsana** and a Thai pavilion in the middle of a pond housing a statue of Rama V.

In 1880, Queen Sunanta drowned during a journey to the palace. Thai law at the time forbid courtiers from touching the queen, and so nobody dared jump in and save her. As a result of the tragedy King Rama V changed the law. A marble obelisk in memory of the queen is in the palace grounds.

Self-drive carts (400B for one hour, 100B per hour thereafter) are available to get around.

Wat Niwet Thamaprawat, located to the rear of the palace car park, is the most unlikely of temples. Designed to resemble a cathedral, its Gothic style, stained-glass windows and knights in armour stand in contrast to the Buddha images. Take a free, monk-operated cable car to the other side of the water.

To reach the palace, take a public *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (25B, one hour, frequent) from the provincial bus stop on Th Naresuan in Ayuthaya. Once the *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* drops you at the Bang Pa In bus station, jump on a motorbike taxi (30B) to the palace, which is 4km away. Trains run from Ayuthaya (3rd class 3B, 30 minutes). The train station is closer to the palace than the bus station, but you'll still need a motorbike taxi (20B) to complete the last leg. Another option is to charter a *túk-túk* for about 400B return.

BANG SAI ARTS & CRAFTS CENTRE

ศูนย์ศิลปาชีพบางไทร

Another 17km southwest of the palace is **Bang Sai Arts and Crafts Centre** (☎9am-5pm). The centre preserves traditional Thai art by offering 30 training courses, ranging from ceramics, silk weaving and mask making. Launched in 1984 with support from Queen Sirikit, this 180-hectare site includes **Sala Phra Ming Kwan** pavilion, which sells a wide range of goods, and an excellent arts and crafts village. A **bird park** (20B) and Thailand's largest freshwater fish **aquarium** (adult/child 100/50B) will keep younger visitors hooked. Avoid coming here on a Monday, when some attractions are closed.

To reach the arts centre, take a train to Bang Pa In then hire a motorbike taxi or *sǒrng-tǎa-ou*.

LOPBURI PROVINCE

POP 26,500

Lopburi

ลพบุรี

Languid Lopburi is a pleasant town notable mainly for its temple ruins – and an infamous troop of monkeys.

Lopburi had a role in the Dvaravati, Khmer, Sukhothai and Ayuthaya empires and the ruins, all within the old part of town, reflect this.

As one of Thailand's oldest cities, Lopburi was first developed during the Dvaravati period (6th to 10th centuries), when it was known as Lavo. The enormous influence of the Khmer empire can still be seen in the architecture and artwork. During the Ayuthaya period, Lopburi was a second capital and hosted many foreign dignitaries, which led to advances in architecture, astronomy and literature.

Today, it is the monkeys that take centre stage as they scamper, scavenge and swing around town. These macaques live among the ruins, but don't be surprised if their mischievous faces also peer through your hotel window.

Lopburi, which is 150km north of Bangkok, is renowned for its sunflower fields, coconut jelly and rattan furniture, while sugar cane and rice are the main crops.

👁 Sights

TOP CHOICE **Phra Narai Ratchaniwet**

MUSEUM

(วังนารายณ์ราชินีนคร; entrance Th Sorasak; admission 150B; ☎gallery 8.30am-4pm Wed-Sun, palace grounds 8am-5.30pm) Start your tour of Lopburi at this former royal palace. Inside the palace grounds is the **Lopburi Museum** (officially called Somdet Phra Narai National Museum), which houses displays of local history. The museum is divided into three separate buildings. In Phiman Mongkut Pavilion there are sculptures and art from the Lopburi, Khmer, Dvaravati, U Thong and Ayuthaya periods. The Chantara Phisan Throne Hall contains paintings and artefacts in memory of King Narai, while the European-style Phra Pratiab Building has a small display of traditional handicraft and hunting tools.

Built between 1665 and 1677, with help from French and Italian engineers, the palace was used to welcome foreign dignitar-

ies. The main entry point is through **Pratu Phayakkha** gate, off Th Sorasak. To your left are the remains of the palace reservoir and former reception hall.

Ahead of these are the elephant stables and towards the rear of the compound is the **Suttha Sawan** throne hall, where King Narai died.

A 150B one-day pass to the main ruins can be bought here.



Prang Sam Yot

MONUMENT

(ปราสาทสามยอด; Th Wichayen; admission 50B; 8am-6pm) Prang Sam Yot is the most famous and most photographed attraction in Lopburi. The three linked towers originally symbolised the Hindu Trimurti of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. Now two of them contain ruined Lopburi-style Buddha images. The towers are accessible and offer relief from the heat and monkeys.

Young guides show visitors around for a small donation and, while their English is minimal, their catapults keep the monkeys at bay. The monument is the best example of Khmer-Lopburi architecture, and looks especially good at night when illuminated.

Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat

TEMPLE

(วัดพระศรีรัตนมหาธาตุ; Th Na Phra Kan; admission 50B; 7am-5pm) Opposite the train station is this 13th-century Khmer wát. Once the town's largest monastery, it has been heavily renovated and makes for a great photo opportunity. The central Phra Prang has bas-relief depicting the life of the Buddha while its arched gate has images in the style of the Lawo period. The northwestern prang has U Thong-style angels; their oblong faces and unusual halos are rare.

Ban Wichayen

HISTORICAL BUILDING

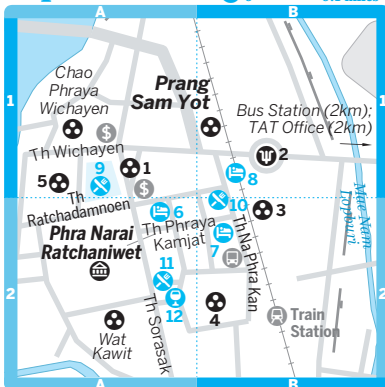
(บ้านวิชัยเขนง; Th Wichayen; admission 50B; 9am-4pm) King Narai built this Thai-European palace as a residence for foreign ambassadors. Greek diplomat and trader Constantine Phaulkon was its most famous resident. The palace is across the street and northeast of Wat Sao Thong Thong.

Prang Khaek

RUINS

(ปราสาทแขก) The oldest monument in Lopburi, this 11th-century tower is on a triangular piece of land bordered by Th Wichayen to the north. The structure has Khmer-style brickwork and was possibly once a temple to the Hindu god Shiva.

Lopburi



Lopburi

Top Sights

- Phra Narai Ratchaniwet A2
- Prang Sam Yot B1

Sights

- 1 Prang Khaek A1
- 2 San Phra Kan B1
- 3 Wat Nakhon Kosa B2
- 4 Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat B2
- 5 Wat Sao Thong Thong A1

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Nature Adventure (see 7)

Sleeping

- 6 Nett Hotel A2
- 7 Noom Guest House B2
- 8 Sri Indra Hotel B1

Eating

- 9 Central Market A1
- 10 Khao Tom Hor B2
- 11 Thaisawang House A2

Drinking

- Noom Guest House (see 7)
- 12 Sahai Phanta A2

Wat Nakhon Kosa

RUINS

(วัดนครโกษา; Th Na Phra Kan) Just along from the train station is Wat Nakhon Kosa. Built in the 12th century it may have originally been a Hindu shrine. The main *chedi* was built during the Dvaravati period, while the *wi-hahn* was added later by King Narai. To the rear is a collection of headless Buddha images.

MONKEY MAGIC

Grown men arm their catapults, old women grab 2m-long poles and toy crocodiles peer out from shop windows. Welcome to Lopburi, where these methods are used in a vain attempt to prevent the iconic monkeys from taking over.

Every day the monkeys put on a public performance as they swing, somersault and scamper across town. Residents make up the supporting cast as they lay their hands on anything they can to keep the creatures at bay.

The monkeys are a type of macaque that are an integral part of Lopburi's character. Stay in one of the old town's hotels and you will see them scurrying across power cables, pounding over corrugated roofs or squabbling over a tomato.

Their favourite haunts are **San Phra Kan** (Kala Shrine; Th Wichayen) and **Prang Sam Yot** (Th Wichayen). While visiting these places, put bottles of water and anything that may be mistaken for food inside a bag. Any bottles on display will be considered fair game. It is also wise to only take your camera, and not its carrying bag.

While locals may seem to dislike their simian neighbours, the monkeys are never harmed due to the Buddhist belief of preserving all life. In addition, some feel the animals are 'descendants' of the Hindu god Kala and so to injure one would be seriously bad karma. Monkey souvenirs are nearly as omnipresent as the real thing; there is even now a 'monkey beer' brewed by the Lopburi Inn Hotel and Resort.

A feeding station has been set up to discourage the monkeys from pilfering tourists' food, and so at 10am and 4pm every day heaps of vegetables and fruit are distributed, and quickly scoffed down, next to San Phra Kan.

Care should be taken when being around the monkeys. They may look cute but they are wild animals, and wherever there is a sweet baby monkey, you can bet a protective mother is not far behind. Take a look at the arms of the young guides who offer to show you around for proof that the monkeys can, and sometimes do, bite.

Wat Sao Thong Thong

RUINS
(วัดเสาทอง; Th Wichayen) Northwest of the palace centre, Wat Sao Thong Thong is remarkable for its unusual Gothic-style windows, which were added by King Narai so it could be used as a Christian chapel.

(33B, two hours, every 30 minutes) stop by the dam.



Activities

Khao Chin Lae

ROCK CLIMBING

This 240m mountain has more than 40 climbing routes, meaning there is a way up for just about anyone. Those who conquer the mountain are rewarded with views of Lopburi's famous sunflower fields (providing they come between November to January when the flowers are in bloom). If you want to just see the sunflowers, take the bus east from Lopburi to Khao Noi (15B) and ask the driver to stop at Khao Chin Lae. The fields are a short walk away, and most are free to enter. The mountain is 20km from Lopburi.

For more details on Khao Chin Lae, contact **Nature Adventure** (☎0 3642 7693; www.noomguesthouse.com; 15-17 Th Phraya Kamjat).

Wat Khao Wong Kot

TEMPLE, CAVES
(วัดเขาวงกต) About 30km west of Lopburi is Wat Khao Wong Kot, home to an enormous bat cave. At sunset hundreds of thousands of bats emerge for their nocturnal hunt. To find the cave, take the 280 steps to the right of the temple entrance. The temple can be reached by taking a train (6/26B) north from Lopburi to Ban Mee station and then catching a motorbike taxi. Buses (23B) also run hourly to Ban Mee. However, the last train to Lopburi departs at 4.45pm while the last bus is at 5.30pm so you will need private transport to witness the bat exodus.

Pa Sak Jolasid Dam

PICNIC SPOT

(เขื่อนป่าสักชลสิทธิ์) This 4860m-long dam is a popular picnic spot and has several food and drink stalls. Trams (25B) take visitors for short rides by the water's edge. Camping and bungalows are available. Buses running the 50km east from Lopburi to Wang Moun



Festivals & Events

King Narai Festival

TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL

Held from 16-22 February every year at the Phra Narai Ratchaniwet. Locals don traditional clothes and stage a colourful parade that leads to the former palace. Highlights

include a demonstration of *lá-kon ling* (a traditional drama performed by monkeys).

Monkey Festival

MONKEY FESTIVAL

The real macaques take centre stage during the last week of November for their very own Monkey Festival. Thousands gather to watch the simians devour their banquet.

Sleeping

Options in the old town are limited to budget rooms, but staying there does mean you can stroll to all the main ruins. A few mid-range options can be found in the new part of town; most have access to local buses that can take you to the attractions.



Noom Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3642 7693; www.noomguesthouse.com; Th Phraya Kamjat; r 150-300B; 🏠🚶) Bamboo-roofed bungalows facing a leafy garden make this one of the more pleasant places to stay. Upstairs rooms have shared bathrooms. A sister guest house around the corner takes any overspill.

Nett Hotel

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3641 1738; netthotel@hotmail.com; 17/1-2 Th Ratchadamnoen; r 300-550B; 🏠🚶) Still one of the best-value spots, the renovated rooms are clean and the location couldn't be more central. Cheaper rooms are fan-only and have cold-water showers.

Thepthani Hotel

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3641 1029; Th Phra Narai Maharat; r 400B; 🏠) Run by the Rajabhat University's tourism and hospitality department, rooms are spotless and staff are friendly. A 10B blue bus stops outside and runs to the old and new towns.

Sri Indra Hotel

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3641 1261; 3-4 Th Na Phra Kan; r 200-350B; 🏠) Opposite the train station, the Sri Indra has views of the San Phra Kan, simple rooms and great service. Cheaper options are fan-only.

Residence 1

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 3661 3410; Th Kanklorngchonbratahn; r 600-1200B; 🏠🚶🚶) On the outskirts of town but within walking distance of the bus station, the main perk here is the swimming pool. Some rooms lack natural light, so ask to see before choosing one.

Lopburi Inn Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 3641 2300; www.lopburiinnhotel.com; 28/9 Th Phra Narai Maharat; r 700-950B; 🏠🚶🚶) If you haven't had enough of monkeys, a 3m-bronze one and 30 small simian statues greet guests here. The top rooms come with enormous bathrooms.

Lopburi Inn Resort

RESORT \$\$

(☎ 0 3642 0777; www.lopburiinnresort.com; 1144 M.3 Th Pahonyohtin, Tambon Tha Sala; r 900-1300B; 🏠🚶🚶) Lopburi's fanciest resort offers a pool and spacious grounds, but the rooms

WORTH A TRIP

SARABURI SIGHTS

Nestled between its more well-known neighbours of Ayuthaya and Lopburi, **Saraburi** is a small province with a handful of attractions. Fortunately, two of the best spots are next to each other.

Wat Phra Puttachai

In this cave temple a silhouette said to be of the Buddha can be seen on one of its hillside walls. Behind six Buddha images are prehistoric paintings dating back 3000 years. If you look closely, chickens and religious images can just be made out. Clamber to the top of the hill and you'll be rewarded with magnificent views of the plains down below. The temple is on Rte 3042, 5km from Hwy 1.

Nam Tok Sam Lan National Park

(☎ 0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; adult/child 200/100B) Just 2km down the road from the temple is this national park. Covering 44 sq km, the park has a central plain and offers good trekking opportunities and the chance to see pheasants, barking deer, wild boar and butterflies. While the park doesn't quite match its 'three million waterfall' moniker, Nam Tok Sam Lan, Nam Tok Rak Sai and Nam Tok Pho Hin Dat are all near the main entrance and worth a visit. Guides from the main office can lead visitors on a three-hour trek. Tents (200B to 400B) and bungalows (600B to 2400B) are available.

need a makeover. A minibus makes the 5km run to the old town.

Eating & Drinking

Lopburi's street markets are great places to discover new snacks. On Wednesdays a market fills Th Phraya Kamjat, while in the evenings vendors selling noodles and desserts line up along Th Na Phra Kan.



Khao Tom Hor

THAI-CHINESE \$

(cnr Th Na Phra Kan & Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 30-80B) The busiest place in town offers excellent Thai-Chinese dishes, including *salid tôrd* (deep-fried salted fish) and *pàd gàprow gài* (chicken with kaprao leaf). Service is speedy and efficient.

Teu

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Prato Chai; dishes 40-70B; ☎3pm-12.30am) To eat with the locals, pull up a plastic stool and snack on the fantastic *gaang Bâh nêua* (curry) and slushy frozen beer. Seating is opposite the restaurant by a grassy verge or inside, next to the chaotic kitchen. Look for the big red sign.

Central Market

MARKET \$

(off Th Ratchadamnoen & Th Surasongkhram; ☎6am-5pm) Wander through the narrow alleyways and take in the sights and smells of this local market. Blood-red strawberries, orange prawns and silver fish are laid out alongside *kôw ðom mùd* (rice wrapped in coconut leaves), *da-go peu-ak* (taro custard with coconut milk) and *gài tôrt* (fried chicken). In the centre is a vegetarian pavilion.

Thaisawang House

THAI-VIETNAMESE \$

(Th Sorasak; dishes 60-100B; ☎8.30am-8pm) Opposite Phra Narai Ratchaniwet, the Thai-Vietnamese menu here is extensive and portions are generous. Steamed pancakes are a particular favourite. Check out the 'shrine' surrounded by toy action figures behind the counter.

Noom Guesthouse

BAR

(Th Phraya Kamjat) One of a couple of old town options, where expats cradle their Changs and Leos.

Sahai Phanta

BAR

(Th Sorasak) Around the corner from Noom, this is a popular venue with its Karabao-style house band. There's no English sign, so look for the giant 'Benmore' banner on the roof.

Good View

BAR

(Th Naresuan; dishes 80-150B; ☎5pm-1am) With its split-level design and great seafood, the best of the open-air restaurants and bars on Th Naresuan in the new town.

Information

There are several banks in the old part of Lopburi and some next to the bus station. Several internet cafes and online game shops sit shoulder to shoulder along Th Na Phra Kan. The going rate is 15B to 20B per hour. Free wi-fi is available at the **Zon Coffee Bar** (Th Naresuan).

Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT; Th Phra Narai Maharat; ☎8.30am-4.30pm)

Muang Narai Hospital (☎0 3661 6300; Th Pahonyohtin)

Police (☎0 3678 0042) The police station is 2km west of the old town.

Post office (Th Phra Narai Maharat)

TAT (☎0 3642 2768-9; Th Phra Narai Maharat; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) The office is a rather inconvenient 5km east of the old town, along Th Phra Narai Maharat, but it is worth finding for TAT's excellent free map.

Getting There & Away

Bus & Minivans

Lopburi's **bus station** (Th Naresuan) is 2km from the old town. Destinations include:

Ayuthaya (40B, two hours, every 30 minutes)

Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) bus terminal (80B, three hours, every 30 minutes)

Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima) (2nd/1st class 120/155B, 3½ hours, hourly)

Suphanburi (60B, three hours, every 90 minutes) Transfer in town for buses to Kan-chanaburi.

Other nearby destinations include Singburi and Ang Thong. Motorbike taxis from the station to the old town cost 30B.

Bangkok-bound **minivans** (KO Travel; ☎0 3661 8755) leave every 20 minutes from Th Na Phra Kan between 3.30am and 8pm and drop passengers by the Victory Monument (110B). Vans leave from the capital between 5am and 8pm. If your bag is too big, it will also need a ticket.

Train

The **train station** (Th Na Phra Kan) is conveniently located within walking distance of the old town. Destinations include:

Ayuthaya (ordinary/rapid/express 13/20/336B, frequent daytime departures)

Bangkok's Hua Lamphong station (ordinary/rapid/express 28/50/345B, frequent daytime departures) Express trains take three hours,

ordinary trains take four hours. Get off at Bangkok's Bang Sue station and take the nearby subway to the city centre.

Phitsanulok (ordinary/rapid/express 49/99/393B, frequent)

If you are not stopping long, luggage can be stored at the station for 10B per bag per day.

i Getting Around

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou and city buses run along Th Wichayen and Th Phra Narai Maharat between the old and new towns for 10B per passenger; *sǎhm-lór* will go anywhere in the old town for 30B.

KANCHANABURI PROVINCE

POP 849,361

Despite being Thailand's third-largest province, Kanchanaburi remains blissfully undeveloped.

The area, which boasts a rugged mountain range along its border with Myanmar, attracts nature lovers thanks to its tumbling waterfalls, national parks and numerous crystal-lined caves.

Visitors tend to spend a few days in the provincial town visiting its WWII memorials before heading northwest to camp in the national parks, where tigers, elephants and gibbons live.

In the far northwest are remote towns that are home to ethnic groups who have

fled the military regime in Myanmar. These frontier towns are sleepy, sedentary sanctuaries of calm that often detain visitors for longer than they had planned.

Kanchanaburi

กาญจนบุรี

POP 47,147

The provincial town of Kanchanaburi is an ideal base from which to explore Thailand's wild west.

Today the town is busy and alive but the WWII memorials and museums are a reminder of darker times. Japanese forces used Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and conscripted Southeast Asian labourers to build a rail route to Myanmar. The harrowing story was told in Pierre Boulle's book *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* and in the 1957 movie based on the book. The bridge is one of the main attractions in Kanchanaburi. Roads in the guest-house area are named after countries that were involved in the conflict.

Sitting in the slightly elevated valley of Mae Nam Mae Klong, the town is surrounded by fields filled with tapioca, sugar cane and corn. Being just 130km from Bangkok, many city folk come here for the weekend, though they prefer to board booming karaoke boats than enjoy the serenity.

Travellers congregate around Th Mae Nam Khwae, which is now a mini version of Bangkok's Th Khao San. The street is centrally located and a 10-minute walk from the

KANCHANABURI IN...

Two Days

Fortunately, many of the main attractions are all centrally located, so it is possible to see most of them within 48 hours. Begin at the **Thailand-Burma Railway Centre** before crossing the road to see the **Allied War Cemetery**. Spend the afternoon around the **Death Railway Bridge** and then head to the other side of town for a coffee and stroll along the charming **Heritage Walking Street**. For your second day, take a train ride along the Death Railway to **Sai Yok Noi Waterfall** and see some of the verdant countryside.

Four Days

Head north of the provincial town to visit **Erawan National Park** and the must-see **Hell-fire Pass**.

One Week

Seven days gives you the opportunity to explore more remote towns such as **Sang-khlaburi**, where misty morning boat rides and zip-lining await. Ensure you have one night spare to stay in the treetop huts at **Thong Pha Phum National Park**, where giant hornbills are regular visitors.

Kanchanaburi Province



train station. Most accommodation is built beside or floating on the river, although there are some midrange options on Th Saengchuto. In-town attractions are too spread out to cover on foot, so you'll need a bicycle or motorbike.

Sights

Death Railway Bridge (**Bridge Over the River Kwai**)

HISTORICAL SITE
(สะพานข้ามแม่น้ำแคว; Th Mae Nam Khwae) The 300m railway bridge is an iconic symbol that



represents the efforts of those who toiled to build a crossing here. It is also the biggest attraction in town, so side-step the numerous hawkers and walk, carefully, along the wooden and metal slats. The centre of the bridge was destroyed by Allied bombs in 1945 so to-

day only the outer curved spans are original. Once you make it to the other side there are cafes and greenery by the waterfront.

The first version of the bridge, completed in 1943, was wooden and was later replaced by a steel bridge. During the last week of November and first week of December a nightly sound-and-light show marks the Allied attack on the Death Railway in 1945. Rooms are hard to come by at this time, so book ahead.

The bridge spans Mae Nam Khwae Yai, which is 2.5km from the centre of Kanchanaburi. This means it is walkable from Th Mae Nam Khwae or you can jump on a northbound *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* (10B) along Th Saengchuto. A mini train runs regular trips (20B) over the bridge from the nearby train station.

TOP CHOICE Allied War Cemetery

HISTORICAL SITE

(สุสานทหารพันธมิตรดอนรัก; Th Saengchuto; ☎8am-6pm) Across the street from the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre is the Allied War Cemetery, which is immaculately maintained by the War Graves Commission. Of the 6982 POWs buried here, nearly half were British; the rest came mainly from Australia and the Netherlands. It is estimated that at least 100,000 people died while working on the railway, the majority being labourers from nearby Asian countries, though not one of these has an identifiable grave. If you are looking for the resting place of a loved one, a small office to the side has lists of names and their locations within the cemetery.

TOP CHOICE Thailand-Burma Railway Centre

MUSEUM

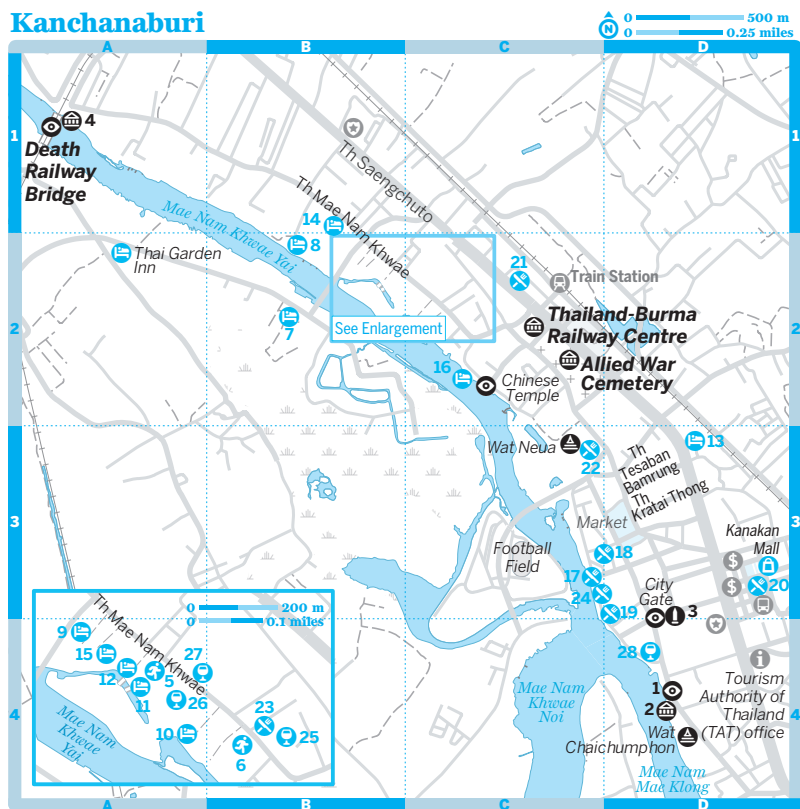
(ศูนย์รถไฟไทย-พม่า; www.tbrconline.com; 73 Th Chaokanen; adult/child 100/50B; ☎9am-5pm) This informative museum uses video footage, models and detailed display panels to explain Kanchanaburi's role in WWII. Nine galleries tell the story of the railway, how prisoners were treated and what happened after the line was completed. Upstairs is a display of wartime artefacts, including one POW's miniature chess set, and an excellent collection of related books. A poignant video from POW survivors ensures that the deaths remain a tragedy, not merely a statistic.

Jeath War Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์สงคราม; Th Wisuttharangi; admission 30B; ☎8am-5pm) This small museum resembles the bamboo-*ata* in which POWs were kept. Newspaper cuttings, letters and artwork

Kanchanaburi



line the sides of the long hut and offer harsh reminders of the brutal punishments meted out by Japanese troops. The archives focus heavily on surgeon Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop, who saved hundreds of lives by operating on injured soldiers and fighting to improve basic medical conditions. The museum is run by the monks of the adjacent **Wat Chaichumphon** (Wat Tai), which in itself is worth a visit. Jeath is an acronym of the countries involved in the railway: Japan, England, Australia/USA, Thailand and Holland. The war museum is at the west end of Th Wisuttharangsi (Visutransigi).

Heritage Walking Street HISTORICAL STREET

Set within the heart of the old town, more than 20 yellow signs tell the history and architecture of this fascinating street. Set aside at least an hour to stroll and note the variety of buildings, which include Sino-Portuguese, Thai and Chinese styles. Former residents include Boonpong Sirivejbandh, who helped

POWs send messages back home during WWII using secret codes. Many shops date from the turn of the 20th century and are still owned by the same family. Look out for the erstwhile hotel that, back in the good old days, charged 1B per night.

Chung Kai Allied War Cemetery HISTORICAL SITE

(สุสานทหารพันธมิตรของไค) Chung Kai was the site of a major prisoner camp during WWII, and Allied prisoners built their own hospital and church close to here. Most graves have brief, touching epitaphs for the 1400 Commonwealth and 300 Dutch soldiers buried here.

The cemetery is 4km south of central Kanchanaburi across the Mae Nam Khwae Noi and can be reached by bicycle.

Lak Meuang LANDMARK
(ศาลหลักเมือง; City Pillar; Th Lak Meuang) The city pillar is at the centre of the old town and is

Kanchanaburi

📍 Top Sights

Allied War Cemetery	C2
Death Railway Bridge	A1
Thailand-Burma Railway Centre.....	C2

📍 Sights

1 Heritage Walking Street.....	D4
2 Jeath War Museum	D4
3 Lak Meuang	D3
4 WWII Museum	A1

📍 Activities, Courses & Tours

Apple & Noi's Thai Cooking Course	(see 7)
AS Mixed Travel	(see 7)
5 Good Times	A4
6 River Kwai Canoe Travel Services.....	B4

📍 Sleeping

7 Apple's Retreat	B2
8 Bamboo House	B2
9 Blue Star Guest House.....	A4
10 Jolly Frog.....	A4

11 Ploy Guesthouse	A4
12 Pong Phen	A4
13 River Kwai Hotel.....	D3
14 Sabai@Kan	B1
15 Sam's House.....	A4
16 VN Guest House	C2

📍 Eating

Blue Rice.....	(see 7)
17 Floating Restaurants.....	C3
18 Food Vendors.....	D3
19 Jukkru	D3
20 Market.....	D3
21 Night Market	C2
22 Saisowo	C3
23 Sri Rung Rueng.....	B4
24 Thai Seri.....	C3

📍 Drinking

25 Buddha Bar	B4
26 No Name Bar.....	A4
27 Sugar Member.....	A4
28 Tham Naan.....	D4

said to give shelter to local spirits. Just down the road is a statue of King Rama III and the renovated city wall, which used to stretch for more than 400m and had six fortresses. Three original cannons remain.

Wat Tham Sua & Wat Tham Khao Noi

TEMPLES

(วัดถ้ำเสือ/วัดถ้ำขนาน้อย) These neighbouring hill-top monasteries are of interest due to their vastly different styles. Wat Tham Khao Noi (Little Hill Cave Monastery) has an intricately designed Chinese-style pagoda while next door the larger Wat Tham Sua (Tiger Cave Monastery) has several styles of *chedi* and an 18m-tall Buddha covered in a golden mosaic. In front of the Buddha image a conveyor belt has small silver trays into which donations are made and then tipped into a central pot. You can walk to the top or take the easy option and go by cable car (10B).

The temples are around 14km south of the town centre. If coming by motorbike, take the right fork of the highway when you reach Tha Meuang, turn right across the Kheuan Meuang (City Dam) and right again on the other side. By bicycle, avoid the highway by using back roads that follow the river. Follow Th Pak Phraek and cross the bridge towards Wat Tham Mangkon Thong. Once over the bridge, turn left

and follow the river for 14km, at which point you should see the hilltop pagodas on your right. Buses (10B) leave from Kanchanaburi bus station to Ratchaburi every 20 minutes. Get off at Tha Meuang Hospital and hire a motorbike taxi (40B).

WWII Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์สงครามโลกครั้งที่สอง; admission 40B; ☺8am-6pm) One of the most eclectic and downright odd sites, this museum houses everything from wartime artefacts to paintings of former beauty queens.

The museum is divided into two buildings. Inside one is a display of Japanese wagons used to transport prisoners, old photographs and unconvincing waxwork POWs. Notes about the area's history are scrawled on the walls, but the translations sometimes go badly awry, with unfortunately comic results. One sign about the victims of an Allied bombing raid reads: 'the bodies lay higgledy-piggledy beneath the bridge'. Another says simply: 'England was pushed into the sea by Dunkirk'.

The larger building resembles a Chinese temple and is far more opulent, or garish, depending on your viewpoint. The top level is the best place to see the nearby Death Railway Bridge at sunset.

Between the two buildings is a pyramid-shaped family shrine with coloured bowls decorating the exterior. The museum is immediately south of the Death Railway Bridge.

Wat Bahn Tham

TEMPLE

(วัดบันทม) The web of hillside caves for which this temple is famous holds many ancient secrets, according to folklore. Getting to the caves involves ascending a flight of steps that passes through a 'dragon's mouth' entrance. Of the five caves near the top, one has a standing Buddha image which is illuminated by a single shaft of sunlight breaking through the top of the hill. A stone in one cave is said to resemble an innocent woman, Bua Khli, who was killed by her husband 400 years ago. The stone is painted and given different dresses throughout the year as her soul was once thought to inhabit there. Another blocked-off passageway leads to a village inhabited by giants, or so legend says.

To find the temple, which is 15km south of the town, cross the Kheuan Meuang (City Dam) and go right on the other side of the river. Follow the road parallel to the river and look for the temple to your left.



Activities & Courses

Thai Cooking

Apple & Noi's Thai Cooking Course

COOKING COURSE

(www.applenoi-kanchanaburi.com; Apple's Retreat, Bahn Tamakahm; course 1250B) If you don't know your *sôm-dam* from your *dôm yam* then Khun Noi can assist. The one-day course starts at the local market and ends, four dishes later, at the dining table.

Trekking & Cycling

Elephant rides, trips to Thailand's best waterfalls and bamboo rafting are all easily booked with tour agents.

More adventurous experiences, including cycling tours, canoeing, and overnight jungle trekking, can also be arranged. As a rule of thumb, the further north you go, the wild-

WHY BRIDGE THE RIVER KHWAE?

The construction of the 'Death Railway' was an astonishing feat of engineering. However, the prisoners and conscripted workers who toiled to build it paid a terrible price. Around 100,000 labourers died due to the extreme conditions.

The railway was built during the WWII-era Japanese occupation of Thailand (1942–43) and its objective was to link 415km of rugged terrain between Thailand and Burma (Myanmar) to secure an alternative supply route for the Japanese conquest of other west Asian countries. Some considered the project impossible but the track was completed despite a lack of equipment and appalling conditions.

Construction began on 16 September 1942 at existing stations at Thanbyuzayat in Myanmar and Nong Pladuk (Ban Pong) in Thailand. Japanese engineers estimated it would take five years to link Thailand and Burma by rail. In reality, the Japanese army forced the POWs to complete the 1m-gauge railway in 16 months. Much of the work was done by hand with simple tools used to build bridges and carve cuttings into the sides of the mountains.

As the Japanese demand for faster construction grew, so conditions worsened. The meagre rice supplies were often laced with kerosene, a by-product of Allied bombing raids over rice stocks. Cholera, malaria and dysentery were rife, and Japanese guards employed barbaric punishments for anyone who stepped out of line.

The rails were finally joined 37km south of Three Pagodas Pass; a Japanese brothel train inaugurated the line.

The bridge that spans the River Kwai near Kanchanaburi (dubbed the 'Death Railway Bridge') was used for just 20 months before the Allies bombed it in 1945. Rather than a supply line, the route quickly became an escape path for Japanese troops. After the war the British took control of the railway on the Burmese side and ripped up 4km of the tracks leading to Three Pagodas Pass for fear of the route being used by Karen separatists.

On the Thai side, the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) assumed control and continues to operate trains on 130km of the original route between Nong Pladuk, south of Kanchanaburi, to Nam Tok. See p182 for transport information.

er things get. Most of Kanchanaburi's roads are in good condition and perfect for bicycle or motorbike touring, while some off-road routes lead to rarely visited waterfalls and caves. Several trips stay overnight in a Mon or Karen village and involve a combination of rafting, trekking and elephant rides.

For those with less time, the countryside close to Kanchanaburi is replete with wonderful vistas and a bicycle is an ideal way to see them. One particularly scenic route lies immediately behind the backpacker guest houses. From the northern end of Th Mae Nam Khwae, cross Sutjai Bridge and head right. Explore Bahn Thamakhm and Bahn Hua Hin, where lemongrass, corn, tapioca and teak trees soak up the sun while in the distance mist-covered mountains serve as a breathtaking backdrop.

Some package tours are cancelled if not enough people sign up, so check before booking. The following agencies are reputable.

AS Mixed Travel TREKKING, CYCLING
(☎ 0 3451 2017; www.appleno-kanchanaburi.com; Apple's Retreat) A well-organised company with knowledgeable staff. Trips can be tailor-made depending on travellers' preferences, and pockets.

Good Times Travel TREKKING, CYCLING
(☎ 0 3462 4441; www.good-times-travel.com; 63/1 Tha Mae Nam Khwae) All the normal day trips are available, plus adventure packages to more remote areas. Cycling tours can be arranged from here.

Kayaking

Paddle power is one of the most fun ways to get around.

River Kwai Canoe Travel Services KAYAKING
(☎ 0 3451 2017; riverkwaicanoe@yahoo.com; Th Mae Nam Khwae) Arranges one- or two-day trips that include visits to the main attractions.

Sleeping

Most of Kanchanaburi's sleeping spots are along a 1km stretch of Th Mae Nam Khwae. Many budget places offer riverfront views, sometimes on raft houses, and easy access to the main attractions. Across the river and out of town are the top-end resorts. The erstwhile backpacker hub along Soi Th Rong Hip Oi now has only a few options thanks partly to the noise from passing karaoke boats, but the disturbances are fleeting and some good budget rooms are available.

DON'T BE A BUFFALO

The movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai* made the waterway famous, and also left a generation pronouncing it incorrectly. You should talk about the River Khwae (sounds like 'square' without the 's') and not Kwai (sounds like 'why'). Get it wrong and you'll be referring to the River Buffalo, which the Thais always find amusing.

Th Saengchuto has a handful of mid-range hotels that are favoured by Thais coming for the weekend. Check out **Kanchanaburi Info** (www.kanchanaburi-info.com) for more choices.

TOP CHOICE **Apple's Retreat** GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 0 3451 2017; www.appleno-kanchanaburi.com; 153/4 M.4 Bahn Tamakhm; r 490-690B; ☎) With the most welcoming smiles in town, friendly and knowledgeable staff give the place a homely feel. All the compact, clean rooms look out over a well-maintained garden. In a bid to be ecofriendly, the rooms lack a TV and fridge. Noi's one-day Thai cooking courses are popular.

TOP CHOICE **Jolly Frog** GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 0 3451 4579; 28 Soi China; s 70B, d 150-400B; ☎☎) A favourite for those just off the bus from Th Khao San, this place lacks certain luxuries, such as organised staff and flushing toilets, but does compensate by having a large communal garden and a range of rooms. The Frog gets bonus points for free wi-fi and a good restaurant.

TOP CHOICE **Sabai@Kan** HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 0 3462 5544; www.sabaiatkan.com; 317/4 Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 1300-1600B; ☎☎☎) This two-level boutique resort is handily located along the main drag. Rooms overlook a swimming pool and have heaps of natural light.

Pong Phen GUEST HOUSE \$\$
(☎ 0 3451 2981; www.pongphen.com; Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 150-1000B; ☎☎☎) The best-value option if you need a pool, Pong Phen has rooms that range from backpacker simplicity to more spacious options with balconies. The restaurant offers decent Western and Thai dishes.

Sam's House

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎ 3451 5956; www.samsguesthouse.com; Th Mae Nam Khwae; d 400-800B; ♿) A walkway set over a bed of hyacinths leads off to basic but clean rooms, most of which have balconies. The A-frame designs and gnarly wood patterns add character.

Blue Star Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 3451 2161; bluestar_guesthouse@yahoo.com; 241 Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 150-650B; ♿☎) This collection of wooden bungalows is enveloped by trees, giving it a natural, out-of-the-way feel. The more expensive rooms are down by the riverfront. The variety of rooms makes it a good idea to see a few before deciding on one.

U Inchantree Kanchanaburi

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 3452 1584; www.ukanchanaburi.com; 443 Th Mae Nam Khwae; r from 2825B; ♿☎☎) This gorgeous boutique resort 1km north of the bridge has thought of just about everything. Clever touches include a free mp3 player in every room (you choose the tunes in advance), infinity pool, split-level riverside seating, a gym and library. Service is impeccable, while the rooms have subtle hints of the famous bridge a few metres away.

Bamboo House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 3462 4470; bambooguesthouse@hotmail.com; 3-5 Soi Vietnam, Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 200-500B; ♿) For a sense of truly being away

from the maddening crowds, this is ideal. Set in large, open grounds, the river raft rooms have stunning sunset views of the Death Railway Bridge. Cheaper rooms have shared bathrooms.

VN Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 3451 4082; www.vnguesthouse.net; 44 Soi Th Rong Hip Oi; r 280-450B; ♿☎) Still the best option along this strip, VN remains popular due to the beautiful river views and floating raft houses. Prepare for a few passing karaoke rafts if you stay at the weekend.

Ploy Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎ 3451 5804; www.ploygh.com; 79/2 Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 750-1000B; ♿☎) If you manage to find the rather elusive receptionists, Ploy has stylish rooms, some open-air bathrooms and a pleasant rooftop terrace.

Felix River Kwai Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 3455 1000; www.felixriverkwai.co.th; 9/1 M.3 Bahn Tamakahm; s 4800B, d 5300B, ste from 8700B; ♿☎☎) Felix markets itself as the only five-star resort in Kanchanaburi, and it has the facilities, opulence and panache to back up such a claim. Renovation work means Felix, which is 2km west of the bridge, is still the king of Kanchanaburi's resorts.

Kasem Island Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 3451 3359, in Bangkok 0 2254 8871; r 1000-1800B; ♿☎) Set on its very own island on Mae Nam Mae Klong, this relaxed resort offers a variety of slightly dated wooden rooms, all river-facing and with private balconies. A free shuttle boat runs to and from Th Chaichumphon.

River Kwai Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 3451 3348; www.riverkwai.co.th; 284/15-16 Th Saengchuto; r from 1800B; ♿☎☎) A major renovation has breathed new life into this hotel, and its pastel-coloured rooms, lift, gym and spa make it ideal for those wanting to stay in the town centre. Also here is 'Glitzzy', the only nightclub in town.

Royal River Kwai Resort & Spa

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 3465 3342; www.royalriverkwairesort.com; 88 Kanchanaburi-Saiyok Rd; r 1750-3360B; ♿☎☎) Beautiful Thai-style rooms, enormous grounds and an equally huge pool make this one of the finest resorts in town. The spa, with riverfront rooms, provides a range of treatments. The resort is located 4km north of town.

SINGING THE KARAOKE BLUES

One minute you're sitting with your toes dipped in the cool river, listening to the rustle of branches overhead. The next the silence is splintered by the booming beats of a passing karaoke boat.

During the evenings, especially at weekends, Bangkokians and mainly Korean tourists are bussed in for a trip along the river. The commotion used to make guest houses along Soi Rong Hip Oi unappealing, but now the all-nighters have virtually stopped and the boats are just a temporary nuisance. Bridges prevent the boats from going too far, so guest houses along Th Mae Nam Khwae are unaffected. If you want to experience the floating karaoke, boats can be hired for 4000B. Food and drink are extra.

Eating

From market snacks to riverside restaurants, Kanchanaburi is not short of eating options. Sprinkled along Th Mae Nam Khwae is a string of restaurants serving pizzas, burgers and standard Thai dishes. For more authentic food, check out the **night market** (Th Saengchuto; ☺Thu-Tue) near the train station, which is packed with stalls serving fried treats and blended drinks. Several good-quality **floating restaurants** (Th Song Khwae) are often full of Korean or Thai package-company tourists. The **market** (Th Saengchuto) near the bus station is well-known for its excellent *høy tørt* (fried mussels in an egg batter).

Blue Rice

THAI \$
(153/4 M.4 Bahn Tamakahn; dishes 50-100B) Along with standard Thai dishes, chef Apple has created some ingenious culinary twists, such as the eponymous rice and the wonderful *yam sôm oh*.

Jukkru

THAI \$
(no roman-script sign; Th Song Khwae; dishes 60-100B) This well-established restaurant has a regular nightly crowd thanks to its simple but delicious dishes. Look for the blue tables and chairs outside. The collection of Burmese artefacts and shrine to the rear is fascinating.

Sri Rung Rueng THAI WESTERN \$
(Th Mae Nam Khwae; dishes 60-150B) With pasta, steak, vegetarian and nine pages of drinks to pick from, the menu defines comprehensive. Thai food comes with some Western compromise, but remains tasty and fresh.

Saisowo NOODLES \$
(no roman-script sign; Th Chaokunen; dishes 20-25B; ☺8am-4pm) When a place is this popular with locals, it must be doing something right. This long-established noodle spot has a few surprise options, such as the excellent *gôay dêeo dôm yam kài kem* (noodle soup with salty eggs).

Thai Seri THAI-CHINESE \$
(no roman-script sign; dishes 80-150B) Set away from the noisy karaoke boats, this pleasant floating restaurant has a mix of Thai/Chinese cuisine with a few surprises thrown in, such as the excellent *tört man Blah mèuk* (squid cakes).

LEAF IT ALONE

The tapioca fields dotted throughout Kanchanaburi don't look remarkable, yet sometimes they get special attention from travellers. Tour guides have spotted visitors surreptitiously picking the leaves and stuffing them into their bags. The guides then have to patiently explain that while the leaves may closely resemble a marijuana plant, they really are just plain old tapioca.

Drinking

Tourists tend to spend their evenings along Th Mae Nam Khwae, where there are bars, pool tables and an increasing number of prostitutes, though the latter are largely at the southern end. For true budget drinking, street-side bars offer shots of local spirits for a mere 10B. Thais head to Th Song Khwae, which has a handful of bars and clubs.

Tham Naan BAR
(Th Song Khwae) The best of the bars along this strip, with live music and a country vibe.

Sugar Member BAR
(Th Mae Nam Khwae) Has hip, friendly staff who will sip whisky buckets with you all night.

No Name Bar BAR
(Th Mae Nam Khwae) Gets the expat crowd.

Buddha Bar BAR
(Th Mae Nam Khwae) Attracts dreadlocked backpackers.

Information

Emergency
Tourist police (☎0 3451 2668, 1155; Th Saengchuto)

Internet Access
Internet cafes can be found along Th Mae Nam Khwae for 30B per hour.

Medical Services
Thanakarn Hospital (☎0 3462 2366, emergency 0 3462 2811; Th Saengchuto) Near the junction of Th Chukkadon, this is the best-equipped hospital to deal with foreign visitors.

Money
Several major Thai banks can be found on Th Saengchuto near the market and the bus terminal.

AS Mixed Travel (☎ 0 3451 2017; Apple's Retreat) Foreign-exchange service available out of bank hours.

Bangkok Bank (Th U-Thong) Near the market.

Krung Thai Bank (Th Saengchuto) Near the River Kwai Bridge.

Thai Military Bank (Th Saengchuto) Near the bus station.

Post

Main post office (Th Saengchuto; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun)

Telephone

Many private shops along Th Mae Nam Khwae offer long-distance calls.

Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist Information

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☎ 0 3451 2500; Th Saengchuto; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Pick up free copies of town and regional maps from here.

i Getting There & Away

Bus

Kanchanaburi's bus station is to the south of the town on Th Saengchuto. Destinations include:

Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) bus terminal (2nd/1st class 95/122B, two hours, every 90 minutes between 6.30am and 6pm) Go here if heading to northern Thailand.

Bangkok's Southern (Sai Tai Mai) bus terminal (2nd/1st class 84B/99B, two hours, every 15 minutes between 4am and 8pm)

Ratchaburi (2nd/1st class 47B/65B, two hours, frequent) Use this to head south then change to a Hua Hin or Phetchaburi-bound bus.

Sangkhlaburi (2nd/1st class 180/192B, four hours, frequent from 7.30am to 4.30pm)

Suphanburi (47B, two hours, every 20 minutes until 5.30pm) Connections to Ayuthaya and Lopburi.

Minibuses also run from the bus station. Destinations include:

Bangkok's Victory Monument (110B, two hours, every 10 minutes until 8pm) Stops at the Southern (Sai Tai Mai) bus terminal.

Northern (Mo Chit) terminal (120B, two hours, every 90 minutes until 6pm)

Srimongkol Transport (☎ 08 4471 8282, 350B) runs air-conditioned buses to Rayong, stopping at Pattaya.

Train

Kanchanaburi's train station is 2km northwest of the bus station and near the guest house area. Kanchanaburi is on the Bangkok Noi-Nam Tok

rail line, which includes a portion of the historic Death Railway built by WWII POWs during the Japanese occupation of Thailand. The SRT promotes this as a historic route, and so charges foreigners 100B for any one-way journey along the line, regardless of the distance. Coming from Bangkok Noi station (located in Thonburi), 100B is reasonable, but for short trips in Kanchanaburi it seems steep. The most historic part of the journey begins north of Kanchanaburi as the train crosses the Death Railway Bridge and terminates at Nam Tok station. Destinations include:

Nam Tok (two hours, 5.30am, 10.30am and 4.19pm) Return journeys from Nam Tok leave at 5.20am, 12.55pm and 3.15pm. Sai Yok Noi waterfall is within walking distance.

Thonburi's Bangkok Noi station (three hours, 7.19am and 2.44pm) Trains leave Bangkok at 7.44am and 1.55pm.

The SRT runs a daily **tourist train** (☎ 0 3451 1285) from Kanchanaburi to Nam Tok (300B one way). This is the same train that carries the 100B passengers. For those who simply want to cross the Death Railway Bridge, a rainbow-coloured mini train (20B, 15 minutes, frequent) runs trips from 8am to 10am and noon to 3pm.

i Getting Around

Boat

The river ferry that crosses Mae Nam Mae Klong costs 5B per person for a one-way trip. Long-tail boats offer 1½-hour trips to various attractions by the riverside. Prices start at 800B but are negotiable. Boats leave from the pier off Th Chukkadon or from the Jeath War Museum.

Motorcycle

Motorcycles can be rented at guest houses and shops along Th Mae Nam Khwae for 150B a day. Bicycle rentals cost 50B.

Public Transport

Trips from the bus station to the guest-house area will cost 50B on a *sāhm-lór* and 30B on a motorcycle taxi. Public *sōrng-tāa-ou* run up and down Th Saengchuto for 10B per passenger (get off at the cemetery if you want the guest-house-area). The train station is within walking distance of the guest-house area.

Around Kanchanaburi

Away from the provincial town the area's natural beauty is abundant. It's possible to see some of the highlights on one-day outings from Kanchanaburi, but you will need to stay overnight elsewhere to reach some parts.

The waterfalls outside of Kanchanaburi are best visited during the rainy season from June to October or in November and December, when water levels are at their peak.

In the north of the province, the tiny towns of **Thong Pha Phum** and **Sangkhlaburi** are completely unspoiled, slow-paced places from which to plan excursions into the nearby national parks. These parks give visitors the opportunity to explore thick jungle, stay with ethnic groups and visit incredible waterfalls and caves. This is all part of the **Western Forest Complex**, one of Asia's largest protected areas.

Entry to the parks is 200B for foreigners. Bungalows and camping facilities are available at most sites, but it is important to book ahead (☎ 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th).

Park headquarters have free booklets and maps, and most have guides that can lead trekking trips. Temperatures range from 8°C to 45°C depending on the time of year, so bring appropriate clothing.

Some tour companies in Kanchanaburi town can arrange tours of the parks with English-speaking guides.

ERAWAN NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเอราวัณ

The majestic seven-tiered **waterfall** within **Erawan National park** (☎ 0 3457 4222; admission 200B; ☀ 8am-4pm, levels 1-2 5pm) is one of the most popular in Thailand. The top level is so-called due its resemblance to Erawan, the three-headed elephant of Hindu mythology. Walking to the first three tiers is easy work, but after that good walking shoes and some endurance are needed to complete the 1.5km hike. Levels 2 and 4 are impressive, but be wary of monkeys who may snatch belongings while you're taking a dip.

Elsewhere in this 550-sq-km park, **Tham Phra That** is a cave with a variety of limestone formations. Guides carrying paraffin lamps lead visitors through the gloom, pointing out the translucent rocks, glittering crystals and bat-covered caverns. Geologists find the caves of interest due to a clearly visible fault line. You will need your own transport or a guide to reach the cave, which is 12km northwest of the park entrance, or you can negotiate a ride with park staff. The approach road is a dirt track and there is a stiff walk up to the cave entrance. Another 5km north is the enormous and scenic **Si Nakharin Reservoir**.

Around 80% of Erawan is forest, and many of the park's various trees can be

seen along three nature trails, which range from 1km to 2km. Bird-watchers try to spy hornbills, woodpeckers and parakeets from the camping areas and observation trails. Tigers, elephants, cobras and gibbons also call the park home.

Park bungalows (☎ 0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; bungalows 800-5000B, camping 150-300B) sleep between two and 50 people. If you bring your own tent, there is a 30B service fee.

Buses from Kanchanaburi stop by the entrance of the Erawan waterfall (50B, 1½ hours, every hour from 8am to 5.20pm). The last bus back to Kanchanaburi is at 4pm. Within the park, you can rent bicycles for 20B to 40B per day.

HELLFIRE PASS MEMORIAL ช่องเขาขาด
To truly understand the suffering that occurred along the Burma-Thailand Railway in WWII, a visit to this **war memorial** (www.dva.gov.au/commem/oaawg/thailand.htm; admission by donation; ☀ 9am-4pm) is imperative. Start at the museum on the top level, look out over the contemplation deck, then walk along the trail that runs alongside the original rail bed.

Near the start of the route is the infamous cutting known as **Hellfire Pass** (locally referred to as Konyu Cutting). The area earned its name following the three-month 'Speedo' construction period where shifts of 500 prisoners worked 16 to 18 hours a day. The glow from burning torches cast eerie shadows of the Japanese guards and of the gaunt prisoners' faces, so that the scene was said to resemble Dante's *Inferno*.

Poor hygiene, a lack of medical equipment and the brutal treatment of prisoners claimed the lives of around 15,000 Allied prisoners of war and tens of thousands of civilian labourers from Southeast Asian countries.

At the time of writing, Thai officials had blocked off about one-third of the walking route, so the **Pack of Cards Bridge**, which earned its name after collapsing three times, was off limits.

A walking trail map and excellent audio guide are available. The museum is 80km northwest of Kanchanaburi on Hwy 323 and can be reached by the Sangkhlaburi-Kanchanaburi bus (60B, 1½ hours, frequent departures). The last bus back to Kanchanaburi passes here at 4.45pm.

SAI YOK NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติไทรโยค

This 500-sq-km **national park** (☎ 3468 6024; www.dnp.go.th; admission 200B) is home to limestone mountains, waterfalls, caves – and some extremely rare animals.

The park is well signposted and free leaflets provide information about hiking trails and how to hire canoes, rafts or bicycles. A cycling route is available to the Kittī's hog-nosed bat cave where the eponymous creature, the smallest mammal in the world, was first spotted in 1973.

Near the visitors centre is Nam Tok Sai Yok Yai (Sai Yok Yai waterfall), which is more of a creek than a waterfall. It empties into Mae Nam Khwae Noi near a suspension bridge. The park was the setting for the famous Russian-roulette scenes in the 1978 movie *The Deer Hunter*.

Among the animals to keep an eye out for in the teak forest are elephants, tigers, wild pigs, wreathed hornbills, gibbons, and the red, white and blue queen crab, first discovered in the park in 1983.

Forestry department **bungalows** (☎ 2562 0760; bungalows 800-2100B) are available and sleep up to seven. Several raft guest houses near the suspension bridge offer fantastic views, while eating is never an issue as there are floating restaurants nearby and rows of food stalls near the visitors' centre.

Around 18km south of Sai Yok Noi is **Tham Lawa** (admission 200B), which runs for 500m and has five large caverns with imposing stalactites and stalagmites. To get here private transport is best, or you can take the

train to Nam Tok station and try to find a motorcycle taxi.

The entrance to the park is 100km northwest of Kanchanaburi and 5km from Hwy 323. The Sangkhlaburi–Kanchanaburi bus (55B, two hours, frequent departures) goes past the turn-off to the park, and from there a motorcycle taxi is needed to reach the entrance. Tell the driver you want '*nám ðòk sai yòhk yài*'. The last bus back to Kanchanaburi passes at 5.10pm.

Long-tail boats near the suspension bridge can be hired for sightseeing trips along the river, and also to **Tham Daowadung**. It is wise to take a guide and torch with you before entering the cave. Chartering a long-tail costs about 800B per hour, but rates are negotiable.

SAI YOK NOI WATERFALL

น้ำตกไทรโยคน้อย

Not so much a waterfall as a paddling pool, this is where Thais come to have fun. These gentle falls within the park are a minute's walk from the main road and are hugely popular at weekends, when Thais sit on mats, snack on *sôm-dam* and clamber over the sloping rocks. Buy some bags of deep-fried taro or sweet potato from the snack shops on the main road, then eat them by the waterfall.

The waterfall is 60km northwest from Kanchanaburi on Hwy 323 and can be reached by using the Sangkhlaburi–Kanchanaburi bus (50B, one hour, frequent departures); tell your driver you're going to '*nám ðòk sai yòhk nóy*'. The last bus back is at 5.30pm. Nam Tok train station is 2km away (100B; see p182 for train departure times).

TIGER SANCTUARY OR TOURIST TRAP?

Having once started as a refuge for abandoned cubs, nowadays the **Tiger Temple** seems more about Disney than *dhamma*. How many other temples have a giant cartoon tiger over the entrance and charge 600B to get in? Still, the tourists still flock here, enticed by the chance to sit in a canyon and have their photographs taken next to chained-up tigers.

The temple has been dogged by claims that the animals are drugged, ill-treated and even traded, all allegations that are strongly refuted by the temple.

One explanation given for the tigers' placid manners is that they eat and are exercised immediately before their public appearances, and that they have been trained from birth to be used to human contact.

Schemes to build a temple, education centre and reforestation scheme have been discussed for years, but progress seems slow. Some tour operators now decline to take visitors to the Tiger Temple, and Lonely Planet no longer recommends visiting.

It is important to do some research before deciding whether to go. See www.care-forthewild.org for a detailed report about alleged abuses.

PRASAT MEUANG SINGH HISTORICAL

PARK อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์ปราสาทเมืองสิงห์
This **historical park** (admission 100B; ☉8.30am-5pm) preserves the remains of a 13th-century Khmer outpost that may have been a relay point for trade along Mae Nam Khwae Noi. The restored ruins show a Bayon style of architecture and cover 73.6 hectares.

All the park's shrines are constructed of laterite bricks and are situated in a huge grassy compound surrounded by layers of laterite ramparts and city walls. Sections of the ramparts show seven additional layers of earthen walls, suggesting cosmological symbolism.

Meuang Singh, or City of the Lion, has two main monuments and two ruins where little more than the bases remain. The principal shrine **Prasat Meuang Singh** is in the centre and faces east (the cardinal direction of most Angkor temples). Walls surrounding the shrine have gates in each of the cardinal directions; the ponds and ditches around it represent the continents and oceans.

Also within the grounds is a **burial site**, excavated in 1986, that shows skeletons and pottery thought to date back 2000 years.

Prasat Meuang Singh is 40km west of Kanchanaburi and is best reached by private transport. Trains heading from Kanchanaburi to Nam Tok stop nearby at Tha Kilen station (100B; see p182 for train departure times). From here it is a 1km walk to the entrance, but it's best having some form of transport as the grounds are large.

DAEN MAHA MONGKOL MEDITATION CENTRE

แดนมหามงคล

Should you dream of a stress-free world without mobile phones, reality TV and email, then you are in luck. This **meditation centre** (☉7am-5pm), founded in 1986, is a popular retreat set within well-kept and spacious grounds. Tamara, an English woman who has lived there for several years, leads two-hour meditation classes, which take place at 4am and 6pm. Cross the teak bridge over the Mae Nam Khwae Noi to get in, and first pay respects before the wooden Buddha image in the meditation pavilion. About 300 people stay at the centre, most of them permanently. Most are nuns, but there is a separate area for men. There is no charge for visiting or even staying here, but donations are appreciated. Day visitors

MAKE MINE A SPIRIT

The abandoned Pilok mine in E-Thong gained its name thanks to the supernatural. When an outbreak of malaria hit the tin and wolfram mine, several workers died. Afterwards, villagers began to see strange apparitions near the mine and believed that the spirits of the miners (*pěe*) were playing tricks (*lok*) on them. They would cry out 'pilok' and the name stuck. Pilok is also the name of the subdistrict.

are welcome, while basic accommodation is available for those who want to stay longer. White shirts and trousers are provided free at the entrance and should be worn.

The centre is off Hwy 323, 12km from the Tiger Temple, and is well signposted. By train, get off at Maha Mongkol station.

THONG PHA PHUM

NATIONAL PARK อุทยานแห่งชาติทองผาภูมิ

This **park** (☎0 3453 2114; Thong Pha Phum district) includes the **Jorgrading** waterfall and simple tree-top **accommodation** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; 600-1200B).

The 62km ride from Thong Pha Phum to the park is along a serpentine but well-made road shaded by soaring hillside trees. The main waterfall is 5km from the park entrance.

Keep going for another 8km along Hwy 3272 to visit the frontier village of **E-Thong**, where most of the population is Burmese. It may not be a second Pai quite yet, but its reputation for tranquil living is spreading. If you stay at **Nao Prai Homestay** (mrtripop@hotmail.com; r 600-1200B) ask for Khun Tripop, as he speaks English and can arrange treks. Entrepreneurial children offer their own brief guided tour of the village, the old Pilok mine and Burmese quarter.

Yellow *sörng-täa-ou* (170B, 1½ hours, 10.30am, 11.30am and 12.30pm) run from Thong Pha Phum's market to E-Thong. The return trip leaves at 6.30am and 7.30am.

KHAO LAEM NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาแหลม

With the mighty Khao Laem Reservoir at its heart, this 1497-sq-km **park** (☎0 3453 2099; Thong Pha Phum district) is particularly picturesque.

HELPING TO NURTURE NATURE

The largest mainland conservation area in Southeast Asia is comprised of **Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary** and **Huay Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary**. Designated a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1991, the sanctuaries, which cover 6200 sq km, host an incredible range of fauna and flora.

Set in the northeastern corner of Kanchanaburi and sprawling into neighbouring provinces, the sanctuaries are largely a mountainous wilderness with rivers and streams separating the grassy lowlands and valleys.

The sanctuaries are protected areas, not national parks, and so visitors require prior permission to enter. One way to do this is via P Guest House in Sangkhlaburi (see p189).

The sanctuaries are one of the last natural habitats for around 700 tigers, who share space with 400 types of bird, 96 reptiles and 120 mammals, including leopards, gaur, bears and maybe even the Javan rhinoceros.

Thung Yai Naresuan (large field) takes its name from its enormous central grassland plain and the fact that King Naresuan once used the area as a temporary army base. Huay Kha Khaeng has more amenities and camping sites, though there are no restaurants or bungalows. The park includes the Khao Hin Daeng nature study route, which can be reached by private transport via Uthai Thani by following Hwy 333, then Hwy 3438.

There are two **camping areas** within Huay Kha Khaeng: Cyber Ranger Station and Huay Mae Dee. Cyber Ranger Station is 7km from the main office and has several waterfalls and valleys within trekking distance. The 37km off-road track to Huay Mae Dee passes a Karen village and is set within thick forest. Thai-speaking guides can be hired from both sites. Camping (30B per tent) sites are available, but you will need to bring all your own equipment.

The main office is best reached by private transport. The closest buses or trains run is to Lan Sak, from where it is a 35km drive to the office.

Ornithologists flock to **Kroeng Kravia Swamp** to see the birdlife, which includes the Asian fairy bluebird and green-billed malkoha. To reach the swamp, go to the Kroeng Kravia substation 45km south of Sangkhlaburi.

More than 260 species of wildlife have been recorded at the park, including gibbons, deer and wild boar. The dam is surrounded by several waterfalls and huge limestone mountains.

Kra Teng Jeng waterfall begins 400m from the park entrance and has a 4km shaded trail leading towards the main falls. A guide is required.

Approximately 1km north from the park entrance is **Pom Pee substation**. From here you can hire long-tail boats to cross the reservoir to Pha Pueng or Kai Uu substations, or head back to the Mon settlement of Wang Kha (or Ka). Hiring a boat with eight people costs around 2000B. Pom Pee also has a campsite and **bungalows** (๓0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; r from 900B) whereas the main park only offers camping facilities.

Approximately 12km south from the park entrance is the 15m-high **Dai Chong Thong** waterfall. The park headquarters are 28km south of Sangkhlaburi. From Thong Pha

Phum, *sörn-g-tāa-ou* go to Kroeng Kravia Swamp (35B, one hour, every 45 minutes).

The **Lake House Adventure** (www.lakehouseadventure.com; adult/child/dm 15,900/12,000/12,900B) houseboat includes kayaking, elephant rides and a visit to a Karen village on its laid-back five-day trip that goes to Sangkhlaburi.

SI NAKHARIN NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติศรีนครินทร์
The seven-tiered **Huay Mae Khamin** waterfall, close to the **park** (๓0 3451 6667; Si Sawat district) entrance, is one of Thailand's most beautiful falls. In addition, the park has hot springs, limestone caves and a hiking route. At the heart of the 1500-sq-km park is the Si Nakharin Reservoir, which is fed by surrounding streams and tributaries.

For many years getting here has involved arduous off-road travel or boat trips, but the times are changing. An improved road linking the park to **Erawan National Park** is being completed, meaning you can visit both falls in one day. If you still want to take the old school route, a car ferry crosses the reservoir between Tha Ong Sit in the east and Tha Kamnantuet

in the west. The ferry runs from 6am to 8pm and leaves once it is full, or you can charter it for 300B per vehicle. After the 45-minute crossing, the park entrance is 7km from Tha Kamnantuet. Alternatively, charter a speedboat on the east side from Tha Kradan pier (about 1500B).

Camping (☎ 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; r 150-700B) and **bungalows** (900-2700B) are available.

CHALOEM RATANAKOSIN NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเฉลิมรัตนโกสินทร์

The area's smallest **park** (☎ 3451 9606; Nong Preu district) manages to pack a lot in to its 59 sq km. Highlights include **Tham Than Lot Noi** and **Tham Than Lot Yai**. The former is unremarkable but leads to a pleasant 2.5km nature trail. At the end of the trail is Tham Than Lot Yai, an enormous opening with jagged stalactites.

Sleeping options include **bungalows** (☎ 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; r 600-2700B) or **tents** (250-600B). Another option is to stay nearby with a friendly Karen family at the solar-powered **Khao Lek Homestay** (100-300B). Contact tour agents in Kanchanaburi for details. Most visitors arrive by private transport along Hwy 3086.

Thong Pha Phum

ทองผาภูมิ

POP 62,848

Overlooked by mountains – and often tourists – Thong Pha Phum is a tranquil town that enjoys a slower way of life.

The town, used as a stop-off point on the way to Sangkhlaburi, has its own charm and is easy to get around as there is only one main street. Mae Nam Khwae Noi runs parallel to the east of the town. Facilities are sparse although there are now some banks and a handful of guest houses.

The market, at the epicentre of the town, is the perfect place to find breakfast. Browse the dozens of stalls and choose from deep-fried banana, sugary snacks or noodles. Behind the market is the three-tiered **Krua Tom Nam** restaurant, with views of the river. Other restaurants reflect the large Burmese and ethnic communities that live here; the large metal pots full of tempting curries are typically Mon.

At night the illuminated hilltop **temple** casts an ethereal glow over a town that has long gone to bed. To reach the temple, follow

the riverfront road towards the main highway, cross a footbridge and walk up.

As well as being within reach of Sangkhlaburi, the town is close to a growing number of adventure activities. **Phuiyara Resort** (www.phuiyaresort.com; r 1000-1500B) has a zip-line, rope bridge and climbing net course, along with ATV and trekking tours. It can also arrange trips to Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary (see the boxed text, p186).

South of Thong Pha Phum town is **Hin Dat Hot Springs** (admission 50B; ☉ 6am-10pm). If the effects of its two geothermal pools aren't sufficiently soothing, there is a massage pavilion nearby.

The *bòr nám rón* (hot springs) is accessible via the Sangkhlaburi-Kanchanaburi bus on Hwy 323 (Km 105 marker) and is 1km from the main road.

Along the same road as the hot springs is **Nam Tok Pha That**, (200B), a pretty, multi-level waterfall that doesn't get many visitors.

Khuan Khao Laem, known locally as Vachiralongkorn Dam, is 9km northwest of the town. Some **bungalows** (☎ 3459 8030; r 600-800B; ☉) are set within the grounds. Activities include golf, tennis, a shooting range and a boat tour of the dam.

Of the in-town accommodation, **Som Jainuk Hotel** (☎ 3459 9001; 29/10 Mu 1; r 200-500B; ☉) has simple fan rooms or stone-walled bungalows with balconies. The real bonus is June, the owner, who speaks English and can offer invaluable travel tips. **Barn Cha Daan** (☎ 3459 9035; Mu 1; r 450B; ☉) is near the entrance to town and has split-level rooms set among a wooded courtyard.

i Getting There & Away

Air-conditioned buses leave from opposite Siam City Bank on the main road. Tickets are sold at the back of the **Krua Ngobah** (☎ 3459 9377) restaurant, opposite Siam City Bank. Destinations include:

Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) terminal (2nd/1st class 179/227B, five hours, every 90 minutes) Depart until 3.40pm.

Sangkhlaburi (2nd/1st class 62/79B, two hours, four times a day)

Local buses leave from the market.

i Getting Around

You can try your bartering skills on the motor-bike taxi drivers at the market, who may let you rent their bikes out for around 300B a day. *Sòrng-táa-ou* run up and down the main road and should cost about 10B for rides within town.

Sangkhlaburi

จังหวัดสุพรรณบุรี

POP 47,147

For many travellers Sangkhlaburi is the end of the line, but for many residents it represents the start of a new journey. Few places in Thailand have such a blend of ethnic identities, with Burmese, Karen, Mon, Thai and some Lao each calling this home.

Many cross the Burmese border driven by economic need or through fear of oppression. The result is a melange of cultures, beliefs and even languages.

Remote Sangkhlaburi overlooks the vast Kheuan Khao Laem (Khao Laem Reservoir), and owes its existence to the waters. It was founded after an old village, near the confluence of the three rivers that feed the reservoir, was flooded.

Several NGOs in town help the ethnic communities survive and fight for what few rights they have. As a result, there is a constant need for volunteers (p188).

In the last week of July the town is abuzz due to **Mon National Day**.

Sights & Activities

Wang Kha

MON SETTLEMENT

(วังชา) A rickety **wooden bridge** (Saphan Mon), said to be the longest of its kind in Thailand, leads to this Mon settlement. The village relocated here after the dam's construction flooded the original settlement. Burma's conflicts forced many Mon into Thailand and now Wang Kha has its own unmistakable character. Children play a form of cricket, women smoke giant cheroots and many wear traditional white face powder.

At the end of the bridge is **Dok Bua Homestay** (☎08 6168 6655; r 300-500B), which has rafterhouses and regular rooms. A **day market** in the village centre is always busy, while north of this is **Wat Wang Wiwekaram** (Wat Mon), the spiritual centre of the Mon people in Thailand. The temple has

two complexes 640m apart. To the right of the T-junction is the multiroofed *wi-hahn* with heavy, carved wooden doors and marble banisters. To the left of the T-junction is the Chedi Luang Phaw Uttama, constructed in the style of the Mahabodhi *chedi* in Bodhgaya, India. At night the 6kg of gold that cover it are illuminated. Men only may climb to the top. In the same courtyard are an ageing *chedi* and a handicrafts market.

The temple was the home of a highly respected monk, Luang Phaw Uttama. Born in Burma in 1910, he fled to Thailand in 1949 to escape the civil war and was a cornerstone of the Mon community. He helped secure this area after the Mon village's previous location was flooded by the construction of the dam. In 2006 he died aged 97 at Bangkok's Srirat Hospital and his medical bills were covered by the queen.

Be sure to hire a **private boat** (400B) and immerse yourself in the pre-dawn mist that envelops the dam. Trips go under the wooden bridge and past the old Mon temple, which is sometimes submerged depending on the time of year.

Khao Laem Reservoir

LAKE

(เขื่อนเขาแหลม) This enormous lake was formed when the Vachiralongkorn Dam (known locally as Khao Laem Dam) was constructed across Mae Nam Khwae Noi in 1983. The lake submerged an entire village at the confluence of the Khwae Noi, Ranti and Sangkhalia Rivers. In the dry season **Wat Sam Prasop** is clearly visible.

The pre-dawn hour is a magical time, when the grey and blue mists and sounds of nature envelop the water.

Baan Unrak

ORPHANAGE, VOLUNTEERING

(บ้านอนุรักษ; House of Joy; www.baanunrak.org) The large orange building overlooking the town is Baan Unrak, which cares for orphaned or abandoned children from ethnic groups.

As well as the children's home, Baan Unrak runs a weaving centre to provide an income for local women, helps single mothers, and works with HIV/AIDS patients.

Most of the children at Baan Unrak are Karen and all follow the home's neohumanist philosophy of vegetarianism, universal love and meditation.

Due to the large refugee numbers in Sangkhlaburi there is great demand for such services, and volunteers are always needed. The home usually only accepts helpers for six months or longer, but visitors are wel-

LIVING ON THE EDGE

On the way up the steps of **Chedi Luang Phaw Uttama**, visitors face a challenge. A footprint of the Buddha is in the middle of the stairs and resting on it are dozens of coins. The task is simple and the reward immense – if you can make your coin balance on its edge, good luck will follow you everywhere.

WHO ARE THE MON?

The Mon people have a proud history, but today they are in danger of being lost forever. As well as introducing Theravada Buddhism to the region, their Dvaravati kingdom covered much of the central plains of Thailand and Burma between the 6th and 11th centuries.

Many Mon have fled the oppressive regime in Burma and live as refugees around Sangkhlaburi. Less than a million people speak the Mon language and they face a fight to preserve their heritage, beliefs and independence.

For centuries there has been conflict between the Burmese and the Mon. The British exploited this tension during its colonisation of Burma by promising the Mon independence in return for their support. Once Burma achieved independence in 1948, the Mon launched a campaign for self-determination but protests were swiftly crushed, with Mon leaders killed and their villages razed. In 1974 a semi-autonomous state, Monland, was created and a ceasefire was declared in 1996, but clashes continue to this day.

Lai Phipit, who is in his 60s, is one of many who left their homeland due to violence. He said: 'When I was a child, soldiers came and told all the men and boys to come and help carry weapons to fight the communists. Anybody who refused would be shot. My family decided to flee to Thailand.'

Of Sangkhlaburi's 47,000 residents, 23,800 are from ethnic groups. Thailand does little more than tolerate their presence. The Mon are given Thai ID cards that offer virtually no rights, travel is restricted and there are checkpoints all around Sangkhlaburi and Three Pagodas Pass. Many Mon and Karen work for 150B a day or less, below the Thai minimum wage but still more than they would receive in Burma. They fear being fined, deported or even attacked and so often have a self-imposed curfew.

The Mon people in Burma continue to suffer and reports of rape, beatings and arrests are common. They are stuck between a country where they are repressed and a country where they have few rights. Because of this, there are fears their once proud traditions and culture could eventually become completely assimilated and lost forever.

A Mon village close to E-Thong preserves its culture by offering a **homestay** (450B) and performing a traditional show. Contact **Phuiyara Resort** (☎ 0 3468 5632) for details.

come. The children stage yoga performances at the home every Wednesday at 6pm.

Hilltribe Learning Centre

SCHOOL, VOLUNTEERING

(ศูนย์การศึกษาตามอัธยาศัยไทยภูเขา) Set on a remote hillside 10km south of Sangkhlaburi is the Hilltribe Learning Centre. When Buddhist nun Pimjai Maneerat went to meditate in the forest in 1997 she was soon asked by ethnic groups to teach them. The centre she founded has grown and now has a rudimentary school for its 70 children, but remains an extremely remote outreach program. Students are mostly Karen and learn Thai language and basic life skills. Without the centre, they would have no education. Nun Pimjai, who runs the place virtually single-handedly, welcomes any volunteers who can teach or help with daily chores. English teachers are particularly needed.

Basic accommodation is available for anyone wanting to stay a few days. For details contact P Guest House.

Sleeping

P Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$\$\$

(☎ 0 3459 5061; www.pguesthouse.com; 8/1 Mu 1; r 250-950B; ☹) With English-speaking staff and fabulous views, it is no surprise that you need to call in advance to guarantee a room. Fan-rooms are simple affairs with shared bathrooms. Trips out can be arranged from here, along with motorbike, bicycle and canoe hire.



The Nature Club

ADVENTURE RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 0 3459 5596; www.thenatureclubresort.com; r 800-2500B, tents 300B) Catering for the thrill-seeking, nature-loving market, this giant resort on the outskirts of Sangkhlaburi features reputedly Thailand's longest zip-line (at 800m), lakes and kayaking. Nonguests can also try out the activities.

Ban Thor Phan

HEALTH RESORT \$\$\$

(☎ 0 3459 5018; r 2500-36,000B; ☹☹) Crystal healing, chlorophyll baths and yoga are a

few of the holistic treatments on offer in this stunning retreat. Rooms are cool and calming.

Burmese Inn GUEST HOUSE \$\$
(☎ 0 3459 5146; www.sangkhlaburi.com; 52/3 Mu 3; r 400-800B; ☹) Having undergone a facelift, even the cheapest rooms are now rather pleasant and come with TV and hot water. The on-site restaurant has a range of Burmese and Thai dishes.

Eating & Drinking

Guest houses tend to be the favourite eating venues, thanks largely to their scenic waterfront locations. As with most Thai towns, the market offers the greatest variety of food. Be sure to sample some of the delicious Thai and Burmese curries (20B). Nightlife consists of a beer in your guest house or the Western Bar and Country, which does great burgers and most Thai dishes.

Baan Unrak Bakery BAKERY \$
(snacks 25-90B) Vegetarians will love this meat-less cafe, which has fine pastries. The bakery is part of the Baan Unrak organisation.

Shopping

Visitors interested in Karen weaving can pick up authentic products at the Baan Unrak Bakery or at a shop outside P Guest House; the products are made by the Baan Unrak women's cooperative.

Weaving for Women CLOTHING, HANDICRAFTS
(www.weavingforwomen.org) Along the same road as P Guest House, it sells hand-woven goods made by Mon and Karen refugee women.

Information

For money matters go to Siam Commercial Bank (ATM), near the market. Internet shops are also near the market and charge 15B to 20B per hour. There is an international phone in front of the post office (located on the main street).

Getting There & Away

Across from the market is a bare patch of land that serves as Sangkhlaburi's bus station. Destinations include:

Kanchanaburi (150B, five hours) Bus 8203 leaves at 6.40am, 8.15am, 9.45am and 1.15pm, stopping at Sai Yok and Kanchanaburi.

For Bangkok-bound transport, head to the booking office near the market or the minivan office behind the market.

Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) terminal (2nd/1st class 228/293B, seven hours) Buses depart at 7.30am, 9am, 10.30am and 2.30pm. The 2.30pm bus is the only 1st-class option.

Kanchanaburi (175B, 3½ hours, every 30 minutes from 6am to 4pm). Minibuses stop at Thong Pha Phum (80B).

A motorbike taxi to guest houses will cost about 15B. Sangkhlaburi is about 230km from Kanchanaburi and 74km from Thong Pha Phum.

Around Sangkhlaburi

THREE PAGODAS PASS ด่านเจดีย์สามองค์
The eponymous pagodas (*prá-jair-dee sáhm ong*) may be unremarkable, but the border town is worth visiting for its heavy Burmese influence.

Across the border is the town of Payathonzu, with a **souvenir market** and **tea-houses**. If you plan on seeing it, check before heading out as the Myanmar government habitually shuts its side of the border due to fighting between Burmese military and ethnic armies. At the time of writing, the border was open for the first time in three years, but only for Thai nationals.

If there is no way through, then the **market** on the Thai side is full of traders selling Burmese whisky, jewellery, cigars and bizarre health treatments involving goats' heads. At the entrance to one noodle restaurant is a time capsule that was buried in 1995 by Allied POWs to mark the 50th anniversary of the 'Death Railway'. Come here on 20 April 2045 and you can see it being opened.

If the border is accessible, foreigners can obtain a day pass, but not visa extensions. You will need to temporarily surrender your passport and provide a passport photo to the Thai immigration office. At the Myanmar immigration office, a copy of the photo page of your passport and a passport photo is needed, plus 500B or US\$10. When you return to Thailand, you will receive your passport back. There is a small photocopy shop near the Thai immigration office.

The pass has a history of violence and smuggling, and even today it is rumoured to be an important drug smuggling route, notably for wood, semiprecious stones and amphetamines.

Green *sǒrng-tāa-ou* leave from Sangkhlaburi's bus station (30B, 40 minutes) every 40 minutes. The border is a short walk from the *sǒrng-tāa-ou* stop in Three Pagodas Pass.

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