

Thailand

Northeastern Thailand (Chapter)

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Coverage includes: Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat), Around Nakhon Ratchasima, Phimai, Khao Yai National Park, Buriram Province, Nang Rong, Phanom Rung Historical Park, Around Phanom Rung, Surin & Si Saket Provinces, Surin, Around Surin, Si Saket, Around Si Saket, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Ubon Ratchathani, Around Ubon Ratchathani Province, Chaiyaphum Province, Chaiyaphum, Around Chaiyaphum, Khon Kaen Province, Khon Kaen, Around Khon Kaen, Udon Thani Province, Udon Thani, Around Udon Thani, Nong Khai Province, Nong Khai, West Of Nong Khai, Loei Province, Loei, Chiang Khan, Phu Reua National Park, Dan Sai, Sirindhorn Art Centre, Tham Erawan, Phu Kradueng National Park, Bueng Kan Province, Bueng Kan, Ban Ahong, Wat Phu Tok, Ban Kham Pia, Nakhon Phanom Province, Nakhon Phanom, Renu Nakhon, That Phanom, Sakon Nakhon Province, Sakon Nakhon, Phu Phan Mountains, Mukdahan Province, Mukdahan, Around Mukdahan, Yasothon & Roi Et Provinces, Yasothon, Around Yasothon, Roi Et, Around Roi Et, Sa Kaew Province and Aranya Prathet.

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Northeastern Thailand

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Why Go?

For travellers and Thais alike, the northeast is Thailand's forgotten backyard. Isan (*ee-sahn*), as it's called, offers a glimpse of the Thailand of old: rice fields run to the horizon, water buffalo wade in muddy ponds, silk weavers work looms under their homes, and pedal-rickshaw drivers pull passengers down city streets. If you have a penchant for authentic experiences, it will surely be satisfied here.

Spend even just a little time in this colossal corner of the country and you'll discover as many differences as similarities to the rest of Thailand. The language, food and culture are more Lao than Thai, with hearty helpings of Khmer and Vietnamese thrown into the mix.

And spend time here you should because it's home to some of Thailand's best historic sites, national parks and festivals. Thailand's tourist trail is at its bumpiest here (English is rarely spoken), but the fantastic attractions and daily interactions could end up being highlights of your trip.

When to Go

Only 1% of foreign travellers who come to Thailand visit Isan, so you don't need to worry about high and low seasons. The relatively cool dry season from November through February is the most comfortable time to visit, and the Surin Elephant Round-up in November is one festival worth planning your travels around. As the March-to-May hot season (when temperatures can climb over 40°C) comes to a close, towns and villages across the region, most famously Yasothon, launch giant homemade rockets into the sky to call for rain.

Isan is at its most beautiful during the June-to-October rainy season because the forests and rice paddies turn green and the waterfalls run wild. Dan Sai's Phi Ta Khon Festival (June) and Ubon Ratchathani's Candle Parade (July) attract hordes of Thai tourists.

History

The social history of this enigmatic region stretches back some 5600 years, to the hazy days of the Ban Chiang culture, which, by at least 2100 BC, had developed bronze tools to till fields. Though Ban Chiang was a very advanced society, the Khorat Plateau, over which Isan spreads, was a sparsely populated region for most of its history due to poor soils and frequent droughts, and no major powers were ever based here – it was usually under the control of empires based around it.

The name Isan comes from Isanapura (now known as Sambor Prei Kuk), the 7th-century capital of the Chenla kingdom, which at the time included what is now northeast Thailand and is now the general term used to classify the region (*pâhk ee-sâhn*), people (*kon ee-sâhn*) and food (*ah-hâhn ee-sâhn*) of the northeast.

Evidence shows that the Dvaravati held sway here and then the Khmers came in the 9th century and occupied it for some 500 years. After the Khmer empire waned, Isan was under the thumb of Lan Xang and Siam kings, but remained largely autonomous.

But as the French staked out the borders of colonial Laos, Thailand was forced to define its own northeastern boundaries. Slowly but surely, for better and worse, Isan fell under the mantle of broader Thailand.

Long Thailand's poorest area, the northeast became a hotbed of communist activity. Ho Chi Minh spent some years proselytising in the area, and in the 1940s a number of Indochinese Communist Party leaders fled here from Laos and helped bolster Thailand's communists. From the 1960s until an amnesty in 1982, guerrilla activity was rife across Isan. But the various insurgencies evaporated as the Thai government, with considerable help (and most of the money) from the US, began to take an interest in developing the region, resulting in an improved economy and increased opportunity. Despite rapid improvement since then, the per capita income here remains only one-third the national average.

Language & Culture

Isan is a melting pot of Thai, Lao and Khmer influences. The Isan language, still a more common first language than Thai, is very similar to Lao. In fact, there are probably

EATING ISAN

Isan's culinary creations are a blend of Lao and Thai cooking styles that make use of local ingredients. The holy trinity of northeastern cuisine, *gâi yâng* (grilled chicken), *sôm-dam* (spicy papaya salad) and *kôw nêe-o* (sticky rice), is integral to the culture. Also essential are chillies, and a fistful of potent peppers find their way into most dishes, especially *lâhp* (spicy meat salad). Outsiders, including most other Thais, are not fans of *blah râh*, a fermented fish sauce (that looks like rotten mud), but Isan people (*kon ee-sâhn*) consider it almost essential to good cooking.

Fish dominates Isan menus, with *blah dûk* (catfish), *blah chôn* (striped snake-head) and *blah boo* (sand goby) among the most popular. These are mostly caught in the Mekong and other large rivers. Fish that families catch themselves are usually small (sometimes so tiny they're eaten bones and all) because they come from streams and rice paddies, as do crabs, frogs and eels. The most famous fish associated with the northeast is *blah bêuk* (giant Mekong catfish), but it's seldom eaten here because it's expensive. Fish farming, however, is slowly bringing it back to menus.

To both Westerners and other Thais, nothing stands out in Isan cuisine as much as insects. Even as recently as the 1970s insects composed a large part of the typical family's diet, though it became a fading tradition when the government promoted chicken and pig farming, thus lowering the prices of these now popular meats. Insects are still very common as snacks and chilli-sauce ingredients. Purple lights shining out in the countryside are for catching giant water bugs, which, along with crickets, grasshoppers, cicadas, *nôrn mái pài* (bamboo worms) and more, are sold in most night markets. In fact, there's still enough of a demand that imports come from Cambodia. Thailand has no shortage of silkworm larvae, which, after they're dropped into boiling water to remove the silk threads from the cocoon, are popped into the mouth. If they stay in the water long enough to get crispy on the outside, you're in for a literal taste explosion: try one when you visit a weaving village and you'll see what we mean.

Northeastern Thailand Highlights

- 1 Getting awestruck by the scenery in **Pha Taem National Park** (p441)
- 2 Having a blast at a **Rocket Festival** (p464)
- 3 Looking for elephants, tigers, pythons, monkeys and more in **Khao Yai National Park** (p419)
- 4 Stepping back in time at the restored Angkor-era temple complexes of **Phanom Rung Historical Park** (p424) and **Phimai** (p417)
- 5 Climbing the rickety walkways up the mountain at **Wat Phu Tok** (p480)
- 6 Travelling along the **Mekong River** (p474)
- 7 Making friends with elephants in **Ban Ta Klang** (p429)
- 8 Eating *sôm-dam* (spicy papaya salad) and drinking *lôw kôw* (white whisky) with the locals
- 9 Succumbing to the surreal at **Wat Pa Non Sawan** (p500)



more people of Lao heritage in Isan than in Laos. Many villages in the far south still maintain Khmer as their primary tongue.

The people of Isan are known by other Thais for their friendliness, work ethic and sense of humour: flip through radio stations and you'll surely hear DJs laughing at their own jokes. Respect and hospitality towards guests is a cornerstone of Isan life and most villagers, plus plenty of city folk, still pride themselves on taking care of others before themselves. The best food is usually reserved for monks and guests, and if you get invited to a village home, your hosts will likely kill one of their chickens to feed you (vegetarians should speak up early). Isan people are far less conservative than most Thais, but short shorts and spaghetti-strap tops will earn more stares than other places in Thailand because of the scarcity of tourists here.

Though this is by far Thailand's poorest region, surveys show that generally the people of the northeast are the happiest. (The country's recent political shenanigans have changed this for the short term since the politicians supported by the majority of northerners have come out on the losing end.) A strong sense of community and close family ties are the main reasons, but it also stems from the fact that the people of Isan seek happiness from the inside, not from what they own. In the villages it's often hard to tell who is rich or poor because big homes and fancy clothes garner little respect. Modern culture, however, is changing this in the minds of most young people. Additionally, the massive influx of Western men marrying local women has brought changes too and these days many Isan village women and their families hope to land a foreign husband of their own.

The region's music is born out of a distinctive folk tradition and uses instruments such as the *kaan* (a reed instrument with two long rows of bamboo pipes and a hardwood sound-box), *Bohng-lahng* (like a xylophone) and *pin* (a small three-stringed lute). The most popular song form is *lòok túng* (literally 'children of the fields'), which is far more rhythmic than the classical styles of central Thailand. Also huge is *mò lam*, the modern form of which features huge stage shows with Las Vegas-style showgirls and lowbrow comedy routines.

Thailand's best silk comes from the northeast. The region's cotton fabrics are also highly regarded, though less commonly sold in shops. The defining style is *mát-mèe*

(see boxed text, p453) in which threads are tie-dyed before weaving. Most large stores stock some fabrics naturally dyed using plant materials, an old process being revived across Isan. Prices for fabrics can be 20% to 30% cheaper (maybe 50% for less-common styles) in the weaving villages than in Bangkok shops. Sticky-rice baskets also make good souvenirs and can be bought in any ordinary market.

NAKHON RATCHASIMA PROVINCE

If you had just a single day to experience Thailand, Khorat, the original and still most commonly used name for Thailand's largest province, would be a great place to spend it. Most visitors are here to jump into the jungle at Khao Yai, Thailand's oldest national park and newest Unesco World Heritage Site. Its large size and easy access make it one of the best wildlife-watching sites in Thailand.

While Khao Yai is the soaring pinnacle of the province's tourist industry, silk and stone are solid cornerstones. Fashionistas should hit the shops in Pak Thong Chai, home of the region's silk-weaving industry, while history aficionados can soak up an evocative glimpse of the Angkor-era's heyday at the restored ruins at Phimai.

Khorat city offers little as a destination, but with a solid selection of hotels and restaurants, it makes a good base during your Isan sojourn.

Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)

นครราชสีมา (โคราช)

POP 215,000

Khorat doesn't wear its heart on its sleeve. Only those sporting a hefty set of rose-tinted specs will be reaching for their camera as they step off the bus in the brash gateway to the northeast. A bumper dose of urban hubbub reflects the city's affluence, and Khorat's one-time historic charm has been largely smothered under a duvet of homogenous development.

Khorat is a city that grows on you. It has a strong sense of regional identity – people call themselves *kon koh-ráht* instead of *kon ee-sám* – and is at its best in its quieter nooks, such as inside the east side of the historic moat, where local life goes on in its own uncompromising way.

Sights & Activities

Thao Suranari Monument

MONUMENT

(อนุสาวรีย์ท้าวสุรนารี; Th Rajadamnern) Thao Suranari, wife of the city's assistant governor during the reign of Rama III, is something of a Wonder Woman in these parts. Ya Mo (Grandma Mo), as she's affectionately called, became a hero in 1826 by organising a successful prisoner revolt after Chao Anou of Vientiane had conquered Khorat during his rebellion against Siam. As one version of the legend has it, she convinced the women to seduce the Lao soldiers and then the Thai men launched a surprise attack, which saved the city.

Her exploits have probably been greatly exaggerated or completely concocted – some reputable scholars suggest that she didn't even exist – to instil a sense of Thai-ness in the ethnic-Lao people of the province, but locals and visiting Thais dismiss all of this entirely and flock to the monument in adoring droves to burn incense and leave offerings of flowers and food. Those whose supplications have been honoured hire singers to perform *pleng koh-râht* (the Khorat folk song) on small stages.

Her monument sits photogenically in front of **Chumphon Gate**, the only original gate left standing: the other three are recent rebuilds. It was a part of the city walls erected in 1656 by French technicians on the orders of Ayuthaya King Narai. The little white building north of the gate that resembles the old fortifications is **Suranari Hall** (Th Chumphon; admission free; ☉9am-6pm Tue-Sun), a museum of sorts with a cool diorama and even cooler sculpted mural depicting the famous battle.

Wat Salalai

TEMPLE

(วัดศาลาลอย; Soi 1, Th Thaosura; ☉daylight hours) The city's most interesting temple was supposedly founded by Thao Suranari and her husband in 1827. Half of her ashes are interred in a small stupa here (the other half is at her monument) and so there are also singing troupes on hire to perform for her spirit here. A small statue of the heroine sits praying in the pond in front of the temple's award-winning *bôht* (chapel). Built in 1967, it resembles a Chinese junk and holds several unusual Buddha images, including one with nine faces and a large gleaming white one in a 'calming the ocean' posture. It, along with several other buildings, is decorated with Dan Kwian pottery (see p416).

Wat Phayap

TEMPLE

(วัดพายัพ; Th Posaen; ☉daylight hours) When the abbot of Wat Phayap learned that blasting for a quarry in Saraburi Province was destroying a beautiful cave, he rescued pieces of it and plastered the stalactites, stalagmites and other incredible rocks all over a room below his residence, creating a shrine like no other. Stone has since become a theme of the temple and it's now used in decoration elsewhere on the grounds.

Wat Phra Narai Maharat

TEMPLE

(วัดพระนารายณ์มหาราช; Th Chomphon; ☉daylight hours) This large temple is of interest because of three holy Khmer sandstone sculptures, of which Phra Narai (Vishnu) is the holiest, that were unearthed here. To see them, follow the signs with red arrows back to the special **Naranya Temple** (☉9am-8pm) at the southeast corner. The temple's *bôht* sits on an island and there are some enormous monitor lizards living in the pond.

Maha Viravong National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติมหาวีรวงศ์; Th Rajadamnern; admission 50B; ☉9am-4pm Wed-Sun) Though the collection at this seldom-visited museum is very small, it's also very good. There's ancient pottery – don't miss sneaking a peak at what's stored in the back – and a variety of Buddha images spanning the Dvaravati to Rattanakosin eras.



Festivals

Khorat explodes into life during the **Thao Suranari Festival**, when the city celebrates the namesake heroine. It's held annually from 23 March to 3 April and features parades, theatre and other events along Rajadamnern Rd.



Sleeping

Sansabai House

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4425 5144; www.sansabai-korat.com; 335 Th Suranaree; r 270-600B; 🏠📞) Walk into the welcoming lobby and you half expect the posted prices to be a bait-and-switch ploy. But no, all rooms are bright and cheerful and come with good mattresses, minifridges and little balconies.

Thai Inter Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 4424 7700; www.thaiinterhotel.com; 344/2 Th Yommarat; r 650-750B; 🏠📞) This little hotel tries to be hip by patching together an odd mix of styles, and it pretty much pulls

Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)

📍 Sights

- Chumphon Gate.....(see 4)
1 Maha Viravong National Museum..... C3
2 Naranya Temple.....F2
3 Suranari Hall.....C2
4 Thao Suranari Monument.....C2
5 Wat Phayap.....C1
6 Wat Phra Narai Maharat.....E2
7 Wat Salaloi.....G1

🛏 Sleeping

- 8** Assadang Hotel..... D2
9 Chaophaya Inn..... C3
10 Rachaphruk Grand Hotel.....A1
11 Sansabai House..... B2
12 Sri Ratna Hotel..... C2

- 13** Thai Inter Hotel..... F2

🍴 Eating

- Anego.....(see 9)
14 Big Chili.....D2
15 Gai Yang Saang Thai..... C1
16 Ming Ter.....C3
17 Rabieng Pa..... E2
18 Wat Boon Night Bazaar..... F2
19 Wawee Coffee.....E3

🎮 Entertainment

- Bar Nana.....(see 10)

🛍 Shopping

- 20** Night Bazaar Korat.....D3

it off. The lobby is homey and the rooms are comfy. It's got a good (though not so quiet) location near many good restaurants and bars.

Assadang Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 4424 2514; 315 Th Assadang; r 400-500B; 🍷🍷) There's no escaping the fact that this is just an old concrete box with small rooms, but a two-tone paint job and various little decorations (not to mention the dumbwaiter for your luggage) make for a nice change from the usual. The owner is very friendly.

V-One

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 4434 2444; www.v-onehotelkorat.com; Th Chang Phuak; r incl breakfast 800-6780B; 🍷🍷🍷) The self-proclaimed 'Trendy & Boutique Hotel' is a brash mixture of colours and styles that sometimes feels more like a children's playroom than a three-star hotel. But, in trying to be different - does anybody really want a Britney Spears-themed room? - they certainly earn an A for effort. All rooms have safes and other little amenities.

Rachaphruk Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 4426 1222; www.rachaphruk.com; Th Mittaphap; r incl breakfast 1200-1500B, ste 4500; 🍷🍷🍷) 'Grand' is laying it on a little thick, but this 10-storey tower in the city centre is still a decent top-end choice after all these years. The most recent renovation added furnishings that accentuate rather than hide its age. There's a fitness centre with a sauna, three restaurants and many other attached

entertainment options. Plus, wide views of the city.

Sima Thani

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 4421 3100; www.simathani.com; Th Mittaphap; r incl breakfast 1650-2925B, ste 4680-17,550B; 🍷🍷🍷) If V-One isn't your style, this place west of the city centre offers a more standard variety of luxury.

Chaophaya Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 4426 0555; www.chaophayainn.com, in Thai; Th Jomsurangyat; r 500-1000B; 🍷🍷) This centrally located and reasonably priced place is pretty ordinary overall, but it has just enough character to boost it past the jailhouse vibe endemic in so many of Isan's midrange options.

Doctor's House

HOMESTAY \$

(☎ 08 5632 3396; 78 Soi 4, Th Seup Siri; r 200-350B; 🍷) The five shared-bath guestrooms in this old wooden home are simple but clean. There are plenty of bars and restaurants out here, but with a 10pm curfew you won't get to explore them properly. Bikes (50B) and motorcycles (200B) are available for hire. It's signposted down a little soi before the train tracks.

Sri Ratna Hotel

HOTEL \$

(no roman-script sign; ☎ 4424 3116; 7 Th Suranaree; r 180-300B; 🍷) Sri Ratna trades the Doctor's House's homey vibe for a great central location. It has the ambience of an insane asylum, but the owners run it with the care and efficiency of a four-star resort.

Eating



Rabieng-Pa

THAI \$\$

(284 Th Yommarat; dishes 60-330B; ☺dinner) The leafiest restaurant in town and the most low-key on this stretch of Yommarat Street. You'll feel like you're dining in a real forest, but it's not all about the atmosphere. The food is simply excellent and the picture menu makes ordering risk free.

Wawee Coffee

CAFE \$

(285 Th Mahat Thai; espresso 45B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) Ever walked into a coffee shop and wanted to stay all day? From the lattes to the brownies and the music to the decor, this place is pretty much perfect.

Wat Boon Night Bazaar

THAI \$

(Th Chomphon; ☺5.30-10pm) This night market is an excellent place for culinary exploration.

Pidaso

ITALIAN \$\$

(☎0 4424 6700; Th Mittaphap; dishes 120-1800B; ☺lunch & dinner; ☺) If you want elegance with your dining experience, you'll find it at this trendy open-kitchen spot. Assuming you can actually find the restaurant, that is. It's 800m north of the Sima Thani Hotel.

Ming Ter

VEGAN \$

(Th Rajadamnern; dishes 30-80B; ☺breakfast & lunch; ☺) The menu at this homey vegetarian affair is in Thai only, but since it does mock-meat versions of Thai and Chinese standards you can just order your favourites and the message will probably get through. Or, just point to something in the buffet tray.

Cabbages & Condoms

THAI \$

(Th Seup Siri; dishes 35-200B; ☺lunch & dinner; ☺) This regular favourite offers a leafy terrace, a wine list (something of a rarity in Isan) and plenty of newspaper clippings celebrating the work of the nonprofit Population & Community Development Association, to-

wards which all proceeds go. It's just past the train tracks.

Gai Yang Saang Thai

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Rajadamnern; whole free-range chicken 150B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Has served some of the best *gài yâhng* (grilled chicken) in Khorat for over 40 years.

Big Chili

INTERNATIONAL, THAI \$\$

(158/8 Th Chakkri; dishes 80-480B; ☺dinner; ☺) A Thai-run restaurant serving a global menu (salmon sashimi, rack of lamb, spinach lasagne, chilli dogs, Caesar salads, and even Thai-Mexican fusion such as stir-fried burritos) to mostly Thai diners.

Anego

JAPANESE \$\$\$

(62/1 Th Jomsurangyat; dishes 30-600B; ☺dinner) Popular little place with a huge menu of Japanese dishes, plus one page of Italian pastas.



Drinking & Entertainment

Khorat has a glut of good bars. Worthwhile bar-hopping destinations include those around the Th Yommarat-Th Kudan junction, Th Mahat Thai from west of Th Manat to east of Th Chainarong, and the Th Seup Siri-Soi 3 area.

Bar Nana (Th Mittaphap), at the Racha-phruk Grand Hotel, and **U-Bar** (Hwy 2), 2.5km north of the centre, have student-filled dance floors. Both get hopping around 10pm and close at 2am.

About once a week or so, the **Sima Thani Hotel** (☎0 4421 3100; Th Mittaphap) hosts *Bohng-lahng* Isan music and dance shows for tour groups, though anyone can watch.

The movie theatre at the **Mall** (☎0 4428 8288; Th Mittaphap) shows some Hollywood movies with English subtitles. There's also a child-sized water park.



Shopping

Night Bazaar Korat

CLOTHING

(Th Manat; ☺5-10pm) While it's got nothing on Chiang Mai's version, this night market, selling mostly clothes, attracts a youthful crowd and is fun to stroll through.

Mall

MALL

(Th Mittaphap) This is Isan's largest and glossiest mall. Has a small branch of Asia Books.

DON'T MISS

PÀT MÈE KOH-RÂHT

One speciality you must try once is *pât mée koh-râht*. It's similar to *pât tai*, but boasts more flavour and is made with a local style of rice noodle (*mèe koh-râht*). It's widely available in Khorat Province, but hard to find anywhere else.

BUSES FROM TERMINAL 2

DESTINATION	FARE (B)	DURATION (HR)
Aranya Prathet (Rong Kluea Market)	190	4
Chaiyaphum	78-101	2½
Chiang Mai	435-653	12-13
Khon Kaen	118-230	3
Loei	263	6
Nang Rong	66-85	2
Nong Khai	210-420	6
Surin	90-157	4
Trat	324	8
Ubon Ratchathani	203-330	5-6
Vientiane (must have visa already)	320	6½

i Information

Emergency & Medical Services

Bangkok Hospital (☎0 4442 9999; Th Mittaphap)

Tourist Police (☎0 4434 1777; Hwy 2) Opposite Bus Terminal 2.

Internet Access

Walk two or three blocks and you're bound to pass an internet cafe. Like most, **Plearnta** (Th Rajadamnern; per hr 15B; ☎10am-midnight) stays open late.

Money

Klang Plaza 2 (Th Jomsurangyat) This shopping centre has a Bangkok Bank (changes cash only) open daily until 8pm, and an AEON ATM on the 5th floor.

Mall (Th Mittaphap) Has more extended-hours banks and another AEON ATM.

Post

Post office (Th Jomsurangyat; ☎8.30am-10.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 4-10.30pm Sat, 4-10.30pm Sun & holidays) Has a stamp museum.

Tourist Information

Immigration (☎0 4437 5138; ☎8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) Located at the *têt-sà-bahn* (city hall) in Dan Kwian.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☎0 4421 3666; tatsima@tat.or.th; Th Mittaphap; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Next to Sima Thani Hotel. Covers Khorat and Chaiyaphum Provinces.

i Getting There & Away

Bus

Khorat has two bus terminals. **Terminal 1** (☎0 4424 2899; Th Burin), in the city centre, serves

Bangkok and towns within Khorat Province. Buses to other destinations, plus more for Bangkok, use **Terminal 2** (☎0 4425 6006; Hwy 2), north of downtown. You never have to wait long for a bus to Bangkok (154B to 250B, three hours) since buses from most cities in Isan pass through Khorat on their way to the capital.

There are now vans to/from Ayuthaya (132B, four hours, every 30 minutes) and Lopburi (120B, 3½ hours, hourly) from Bus Terminal 2 and to Pak Chong (60B, one hour, every 20 minutes) from a roadside stop around the corner from Terminal 1.

Train

There are a lot of trains passing through **Khorat Railway Station** (☎0 4424 2044), but it's almost always faster and cheaper to take the bus. Fourteen daily trains go to/from Bangkok (3rd-class 100B, 2nd-class fan/air-con 243/325B, 1st-class sleeper upper/lower 810/1010B, most take six hours) via Ayuthaya. There are also seven Ubon Ratchathani (3rd-class 168B, 2nd-class fan/air-con 243/423B, five to six hours) and three Nong Khai (3rd-class 214B, 2nd-class air-con 368B, 5½ hours) trains.

i Getting Around

There are fixed *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* (pick-up truck; 8B) routes through the city, but even locals find it hard to figure them out because of the dizzying array of numbers and colours representing the many routes. Most pass the junction of Th Suranaree and Th Rajadamnern, so if you want to go somewhere just head there and ask around; someone will put you on the right one. Heading west on Suranaree, the yellow *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* 1 with white and green stripes will take you past

the train station, near Doctor's House – ask for *tà-nôn sèup si rì* – and to the tourism office, while red 12 passes the Mall. The white 15 with purple stripes and the blue-and-white 7 heading north on Rajadamnern – you can also catch them on Th Mittaphap – go to Bus Terminal 2 (*bor kôr sôr sǒng*).

Túk-túk cost between 30B and 70B to most places around town. Motorcycle taxis and *sǎhm-lór* (pedicabs; also spelt *sǎamláw*), both of which are common, always cost less. **Metered taxis** (☎0 4492 8678; flagfall 30B, call fee 20B) always seem to be full when they pass you on the street.

Korat Car Rental (☎08 1877 3198; www.koratarrental.com) is a local firm with a stellar reputation. The **Sima Thani Hotel** (p416) arranges cars with drivers who speak some English for 1500B per day. Shops on Th Suranaree near Bus Terminal 1 hire motorcycles.

Around Nakhon Ratchasima

DAN KWIAN

ด่านเกวียน

If you have even a small interest in ceramics, you should pay Dan Kwian a visit. Just a quick trip out of Khorat, this village has been producing pottery for hundreds of years and its creations are famous for their rough texture and rustlike hue. Only kaolin sourced from this district produces such results. Most of what's made and sold these days are cheap lawn ornaments (much of it made with cement) but there's also some attractive modern pottery plus cast reproductions of ancient Khmer sculpture. Some families in the village proper, south of the myriad shops lining the highway (turn left at the school), still use the old methods to produce their products, though the designs are modern.

Originally this was a bullock-cart stop for traders on their way to markets in old Khorat (*dǎhn gweean* means 'bullock-cart checkpoint'). The ramshackle private **Kwian Museum** displays a variety of old carts from around Isan as well as some farming implements and examples of old-style pottery. The owner has died, but if the gate is open you can look around.

To get here from Khorat, hop on a bus (14B, 30 minutes) from near the southern and eastern city gates or Terminal 2.

PAK THONG CHAI

ปักธงชัย

Amphoe Pak Thong Chai became one of Thailand's most famous silk-weaving centres when Jim Thompson (see boxed text,

p85) started buying silk here. Today there are almost a dozen mechanised silk factories in the district and thousands of families still work hand-loomed at home in every village in the district. Pak Thong Chai is known for following the latest trends, but some shops stock traditional styles like *mát-mèe* made in other provinces.

Because Pak Thong Chai is a fairly large town, it's not nearly as fun a place to visit as other Isan silk centres such as Chonnabot (p452) or Ban Tha Sawang (see boxed text on p430), but **Macchada** (☎8.30am-5.30pm), at the city's southern end, where you can watch weavers working, is worth seeking out if you do come. There are large highway signs directing you to the Silk Cultural Centre, but it's been closed for years.

Pak Thong Chai is 30km south of Khorat on Rte 304. Buses (30B, one hour) leave from Terminal 1 every half-hour.

BAN PRASAT

บ้านปราสาท

About 3000 years ago, a primitive agricultural culture put down roots at Ban Prasat, near the banks of the Than Prasat River. It survived some 1500 years, planting rice, domesticating animals, fashioning coloured pottery, weaving cloth and, in later years, forging tools out of bronze. The secrets of this early civilisation were revealed during extensive archaeological digs completed in 1991.

Three of the **excavation pits** (admission free) with skeletons (most are replicas) and pottery left in situ are on display in the village, and a small but good **museum** (admission free; ☎8am-4.30pm) houses some of the more interesting discoveries. It also explains what life was like in those days and in the village today. South of the museum, one family still does **silk weaving**, including raising their own worms and spinning their own thread. They welcome visitors to come by for a look.

Many families (a few of whom speak English) are part of an award-winning **homestay program** (☎08 1725 0791; per person incl 2 meals 400B) where villagers put up visitors in their homes and show them daily activities like basketry and farming. Reservations should be made at least a day in advance.

Ban Prasat is 45km northeast of Khorat, off Hwy 2, and buses (28B to 35B, 45 minutes) heading to Phimai will drop you off at the highway. A motorcycle taxi with a sidecar will zip you around to all the sites for 50B per person (including sightseeing time).

Phimai

พิมาย

The otherwise mundane little town of Phimai has one of Thailand's finest surviving Khmer temple complexes right at its heart. Reminiscent of Cambodia's Angkor Wat, Prasat Phimai once stood on an important trade route linking the Khmer capital of Angkor with the northern reaches of the realm. Phimai is an easy day trip out of Khorat, but if you prefer the quiet life, you could always make Khorat a day trip out of Phimai instead.

Sights

Phimai Historical Park

HISTORICAL SITE

(อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์พิมาย; ☎0 447 1568; Th Anantajinda; admission 100B; ☀7.30am-6pm) Started by Khmer King Jayavarman V (AD 968-1001) during the late 10th century and finished by his successor King Suryavarman I (AD 1002-49), this Hindu-Mahayana Buddhist temple projects a majesty that transcends its size. It has been painstakingly reconstructed by the Fine Arts Department and is one of the most complete monuments on the circuit. It may well be wishful thinking, but the **visitor centre** (☎8.30am-4.30pm) suggests Prasat Phimai was the model for the much grander Angkor Wat.

You enter over a cruciform **naga bridge**, which symbolically represents the passage from earth to heaven, and then through the southern gate (which is unusual since most Khmer temples face east) of the outer wall, which stretches 565m by 1030m. A raised passageway, formerly covered by a tiled roof, leads to the inner sanctum and the 28m-tall **main shrine** built of white sandstone and covered in carvings of both Buddhist and Hindu deities. At the centre of the **Brahmather prang**, in front of the main shrine, is a replica stone sculpture of Angkor King Jayavarman VII sitting cross-legged and looking very much like a sitting Buddha. The original is in the national museum.

A free brochure provides a good overview of the complex, and guides, a few of whom speak English, lead tours; the price is open to negotiation.

Phimai National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติพิมาย; Th Tha Songkhran; admission 100B; ☀9am-4pm Wed-Sun) Situated on the banks of Sa Kwan, a 12th-century Khmer reservoir, this museum houses a fine collection of Khmer sculptures from Prasat Phi-

mai, including many exquisite lintels, and other ruins from around Lower Isan. There's also some distinctive black Phimai pottery (500 BC-AD 500) and even older ceramics from nearby Ban Prasat.

Sai Ngam

PARK

(โบราณ; ☀daylight hours) A bit east of town is Thailand's largest and oldest banyan tree, a 350-plus-year-old megaflorem spread over an island in a large reservoir. The extensive system of interlocking branches and gnarled trunks makes the 'Beautiful Banyon' look like a small forest.

Other Historic Sites

Meru Bhamathat (Th Buchayan) is a toppled brick *chedi* dating back to the late Ayuthaya period (18th century). Its name is derived from a folk tale that refers to it as the cremation site of King Bhamathat.

Three city gates remain. **Pratu Chai** (Victory Gate), the one that served the road to Angkor, is the most intact. The mounded dirt ridge alongside it shows what the ramparts formerly surrounding the entire city looked like. These city walls went up in the 13th century, as did what's now known as **Kuti Rusi** (Hermit's Quarters), but was probably a healing station built by Jayavarman VII, and **Tha Nang Sa Phom** (☀daylight hours), a laterite landing platform now on the grounds of the Fine Arts Department compound; turn right immediately after entering the gate.

Festivals & Events

Staged in mid-November, the **Phimai Festival** celebrates the town's history, with cultural performances, sound-and-light shows and long-boat races. A smaller version of the sound-and-light show is generally held on the last Saturday of the month from October to April.

Sleeping

Old Phimai Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

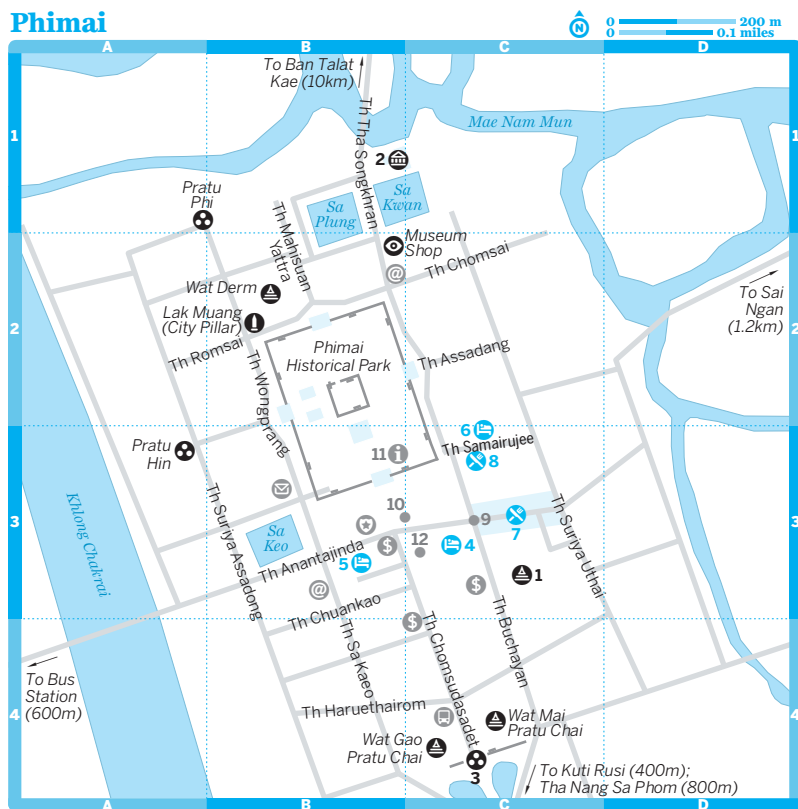
(☎08 0159 5363; www.phimai.org; Th Chomsudasadet; dm 100B, s 170B, d 200-370B; 🏠📞) This creaking wooden house tucked away down a soi is genuinely homey and attracts many backpackers. The friendly hosts can tell you all about Phimai and also run reasonably priced day trips to Phanom Rung.

Phimai Paradise

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4428 7565; www.phimaiparadise.com in Thai; Th Samairujee; r 400-600B; 🏠@📞) Nothing

Phimai



Phimai

📍 Sights

- 1 Meru BhramathatC3
 2 Phimai National MuseumB1
 3 Pratu Chai (Victory Gate)C4

🏠 Sleeping

- 4 Khru Pom GuesthouseC3
 5 Old Phimai GuesthouseB3
 6 Phimai ParadiseC3

🍴 Eating

- 7 Night BazaarC3
 8 Rabiang MaiC3

📍 Information

- 9 Clock TowerC3
 10 Historical Park EntranceB3
 11 Visitor CenterB3

🚗 Transport

- 12 Boonsiri GuesthouseC3

too fancy, but this newish tower has the best rooms in town.

Khru Pom Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$
 (☎ 0 4447 1541; Th Anantajinda; r 350-400B;
 📶📶📶) This quiet and immaculate little place at the back of the block won't excite you, but it won't let you down either.

🍴 Eating

The string of vendors next to Sai Ngan, open for breakfast and lunch, serve Thai and Isan basics including *pât pimai*, which is the same as *pât mée koh rât* (see boxed text, p414) except it uses a softer, handmade noo-

dle. Most restaurants in town have it on their menus too.

Rabiang Mai

(Th Samairjee; dishes 40-200B; ☺lunch & dinner) This semifancy place is a tad on the pricey side, but the food (mostly Thai, plus some Isan and *fa-rang* - Western - options) is quite good.

THAI \$

Night Bazaar

(Th Anantajinda; ☺4-9pm) Small, but plenty of variety.

THAI \$

i Getting There & Away

Phimai has a bus station, but there's no need to use it since all buses pass near Pratu Chai, the clock tower and the museum on their way in and out of town.

Buses for Phimai leave from Khorat's Bus Terminal 2 (36B to 50B, 1¼ hours) every half-hour until 10pm. If you're heading north, take the Khorat bus to Ban Talat Kae (10B to 13B, 15 minutes) on the highway and catch a connection there.

i Getting Around

Phimai is small enough to stroll, but to see its environs (for example, Sai Ngam), hire a bike from **Boonsiri Guesthouse** (Th Chomsudasadet; per hr/day 20/60B).

Khao Yai National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขายาย

Up there on the podium with some of the world's greatest parks, **Khao Yai** (☎08 6092 6529; admission 400B) is Thailand's oldest and most visited reserve. Covering 2168 sq km, Khao Yai incorporates one of the largest intact monsoon forests remaining in mainland Asia, which is why it was named a Unesco World Heritage Site (as part of the Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex). The mostly English-speaking staff at the **visitor centre** (☺8am-8pm) are very helpful.

Rising to 1351m at the summit of Khao Rom, the park's terrain covers five vegetation zones: evergreen rainforest (100m to 400m); semi-evergreen rainforest (400m to 900m); mixed deciduous forest (northern slopes at 400m to 600m); hill evergreen forest (over 1000m); and savannah and secondary-growth forest in areas where agriculture and logging occurred before it was protected.

Some 200 elephants tramp the park's boundaries. Other mammals include tigers, leopards, bears, gaur, barking deer, otters, crocodiles, various gibbons and macaques

and some rather large pythons. Khao Yai also has one of Thailand's largest populations of hornbills, including the great hornbill (*nók gòk* or *nók gah-hang*), king of the bird kingdom, as well as the wreathed hornbill (*nók graham cháhng*; literally 'elephant-jaw bird'), Indian pied hornbill (*nók kàak*) and brown hornbill (*nók ngéuak sée nám dahn*). The park's bird list boasts 315 species.

Khao Yai has two entrances. By far the busiest is to the north in Nakhon Ratchasima Province, with most travellers passing through the town of Pak Chong. The southern entrance is in Prachinburi Province; see the boxed text, p420, for full details.

👁 Sights & Activities

There are many **viewpoints** and **salt licks** (often attracting elephants in the early morning and evening) along the roads through the park. Khao Yai also has plenty of waterfalls. Little **Nam Tok Kong Kaew**, sitting right behind the visitor centre, is the easiest to see while **Nam Tok Haew Narok**, in the far south of the park (an 800m walk from the parking area) and whose three levels combine to form a 150m drop, is the biggest. The beauty award, however, goes to 25m **Nam Tok Haew Suwat**, which scooped a starring role in Danny Boyle's film *The Beach*. It has water year-round, and you can swim in the pool at the bottom. Though easily reached by car, Haew Suwat can also be accessed by a couple of footpaths including the 8km-long Kong Kaew-Haew Suwat Trail (aka Trail 1), a somewhat challenging path that starts behind the visitor centre. There's a good chance of seeing gibbons and hornbills, and it's probably the best footpath for spotting elephants, though encounters are unlikely; the roads are better for elephant-spotting.

The **Nong Phak Chi observation tower** overlooks a little lake and a salt lick, and is one of the best wildlife-spotting spots in the park. This is the most likely place you'll see a tiger, but you have to be very lucky (like lottery-winner lucky) to do so. The shortest way (1km) to the tower starts at the Km35 pillar, and it's a wide, well-maintained path. Trekkers can get there either by a 5.4km trail from the visitor centre or a 3km path starting at Km33. The latter is better for seeing wildlife along the way and is, according to some, Khao Yai's best bird-watching walk. In the early evening deer sightings are common from the **Mo Sing To observation tower** by the visitor centre.

KHAO YAI THROUGH THE BACK DOOR

The broad swathe of Khao Yai that spreads over Nakhon Nayok and Prachinburi Provinces is known for its waterfalls and rafting, and is visited almost exclusively by locals and week-ending Bangkokians. On weekdays it's nearly deserted.

Sights & Activities

The drive through the southern stretch of Khao Yai is just as beautiful as the more popular northern region, but there is more abundant wildlife, particularly elephants walking along the road at night. And visiting from the south lets you conveniently combine Khao Yai with a trip to Cambodia. **Palm Garden Lodge** (☎08 9989 4470) is in Prachinburi Province, just 12km from the entrance, and, for the most part, its day-long **park tours** (per person with 4 people 1300B) are the same as those offered by Pak Chong-based companies but with three key differences: tours visit Haew Narok waterfall (June to November, when it has water), there's the option of a night safari before leaving the park, and Klin is one of Khao Yai's few female guides.

Also in Prachinburi, near the park entrance, **Dasada** (☎0 3723 9800; www.dasada-happiness.com; Rte 3077, Km8) grows plants for the Bangkok market and puts on monthly **flower shows** (200B) in its giant greenhouse.

Most visitors to this region head to Nakhon Nayok Province where **Nam Tok Sarika** (Rte 3050; admission 200B; ☀8am-5pm), the biggest and best known of the area's waterfalls, tumbles 200m down the edge of the mountain range in nine steps. Also lovely (and not ridiculously overpriced like Sarika) is **Nam Tok Nang Rong** (Rte 3049; per car 50B, per person 10B; ☀8am-5pm). Both spots feature restaurants and picnic spots and places to frolic in the rivers. Water flows all year, but visiting is best from May to November. There are misty mountain views from the top of **Khun Dan Pra Kan Chon Dam** (Ta Dan Dam) near Nang Rong waterfall. On weekends, open-sided buses shuttle people across the dam for 20B.

Several businesses, including the veteran **Sarika Adventure Point** (☎08 1251 8317; www.sarikaadventurepoint.com, in Thai; Rte 3049 Km8), do leisurely rafting and kayaking trips on the Nakhon Nayok River. (They tell us there's some Class III white water in the rainy season.) The standard trip (350B per person) is 7km and 1½ hours, and you can choose

While the walks described here don't require a guide, the park recommends hiring them because, except for the short path to Nong Phak Chi, these trails aren't well trodden or well-marked. We've heard from travellers who got lost and were forced to sleep in the forest overnight. Park rangers can be hired as guides (prices negotiable) through the visitor centre. They can also lead you on longer off-trail treks for around 1000B per day (the price is negotiable). No matter where you hike, you should wear boots and long trousers. During the rainy season leeches are a problem; mosquito repellent helps keep them away.

Tours

Most of the hotels and resorts around Khao Yai arrange **park tours** and this is really the ideal way to visit because a good guide will show you creatures you never would have seen on your own. The typical day-long program (1300B to 2100B per person) in-

cludes some easy walks looking for wildlife and a visit to Haew Suwat waterfall. Lunch, snacks, water and, in the rainy season, 'leech socks' (gaiters) are always included, but sometimes the park entry fee is not, so do some comparison shopping. Half-day trips (300B to 500B) typically stay outside the park to visit a cave, swim in a spring and watch a million (give or take a few hundred thousand) rare wrinkle-lipped bats disgorge from a mountain-top cave. Bird-watching, camping, trekking and other speciality tours are also available. Greenleaf Guesthouse (p421) and Khaoyai Garden Lodge (p422) and have long earned enthusiastic praise for their trips and a new player, **Bobby's Jungle Tours** (☎0 4432 8177; www.bobbysjungle.com) also appears to have good guides, plus its tours finish at night so there's a better chance of encountering elephants along the park road. The park itself offers one-hour **night safaris** (☎08 1063 9241; per person 50B; ☀7pm & 8pm), which use

to mountain bike along country roads to the put-in (600B per person). For some actual adventure let them take you abseiling (2300B including park fee) down four cliffs at Than Rattana Waterfall.

Sleeping

The Nakhon Nayok area has a few upmarket resorts, but accommodation is mostly utilitarian family-run bungalows. **Phuiyara** (☎08 7059 5115; www.phuiyara.com, in Thai; r 1350-2600B, f 3200-5600B; 🏠📶🚰), east of the dam (follow the blue signs with elephant heads, or call to have them pick you up from the van terminal), falls comfortably in between. Its 30 large bungalows are in a tree- and stream-filled garden. The weekday discount is 25% and they'll pick you up at the bus stop for free.

There's still little accommodation around the park entrance. Our favourite is the long-running **Palm Garden Lodge** (☎08 9989 4470; www.palmgalo.com; r 400-650B, bungalows 1200B; 🏠📶🚰), 10km east of the park gate in Ban Khon Kwang. Set in a quiet garden and featuring homey fan and air-con rooms, this is a very relaxing and welcoming place. Motorcycles (250B per day) and tours are available. Be sure to say 'Hi' to the pet iguana.

Getting There & Away

Getting here without your own transport is easy, but getting around is impossible except by hitching, but that's not easy out here, especially on weekdays.

Vans from Bangkok's Victory Monument head to the dam (100B, 2½ to three hours, every 20 minutes) and for an extra 10B and 50B respectively, drivers will deliver you to Nang Rong and Sarika waterfalls. Get a phone number when they drop you off so that you can call for pick-up when you're ready to leave.

All vans to Kabinburi and some going to Aranya Prathet pass Ban Khon Kwang (100B, two hours, every 40 minutes), and will drop you 50m from Palm Garden Lodge. Prices and times to/from Aranya Prathet are the same. Buses between Aranya Prathet and Bangkok's Northeastern bus terminal also pass Ban Khon Kwang and there are five trains a day (26B to 115B, three hours) from Bangkok's Hua Lamphong station to Prachinburi town, a 150B tük-tük ride to Palm Garden.

spotlights to look for animals. There are often so many vehicles during the safari that it ruins the experience.

Sleeping

There are at least a hundred places to stay along Th Thanarat (Rte 2090), the road leading to the park, and plenty more in the not-so-pleasant gateway city of Pak Chong. Budget and some midrange places offer free transport to/from town, though usually only if you book a tour with them. All but the cheapies do weekday and off-season (April to October) discounts of 10% to 30%.

The best setting for sleeping is, of course, in the park itself. There are **campsites** (per person with own tent 30B, 2-6-person tents 150-400B) and a variety of **rooms and bungalows** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; 2-8 people 800-3500B) around the park, often quite far from the visitor centre.

Greenleaf Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 4436 5073; www.greenleafour.com; Th Thanarat, Km7.5; r 200-300B; 🏠📶) Step past the slightly chaotic common areas and you'll be surprised by the good-value rooms (with cold-water private bathrooms) at the back of this long-running family-owned place. Note that in the high season it might be 'full', if you don't book a tour.

Kirimaya HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 4442 6000; www.kirimaya.com; Rte 3052; r incl breakfast 10,530-11,700B, ste 20,475-23,400B, pool villas 25,895B, tented villas 38,610B; 🏠📶🚰) This luxury resort-spa makes an awesome first impression. Step 'through' the wooden front doors and you're greeted by a towering tilted restaurant and other Thai-Balinese fusion buildings rising from a lotus- and reed-filled pond and backed by the mountains. Rooms have genuine style

BEYOND THE FOREST

The greater Pak Chong region is a very popular escape for Bangkokians, and for many of them the national park is beside the point. The roads approaching Khao Yai from the north are lined with enough BB gun shooting ranges, sweet-corn stands, shopping malls and other tourist traps for families to stay busy all weekend without ever thinking about nature.

By far the most popular stop is **Farm Chokchai** (☎ 0 4432 8386; www.farmchokchai.com; Mittaphap Hwy, Km159; ☀ 9am-7pm), a 3200-hectare dairy farm overflowing with cowboy kitsch. The expanding empire now includes an ice-cream parlour, steakhouse, a souvenir shop and a safari-style tented camp (weekday/weekend per adult from 2665/3200B). There are 2½-hour **tours** (per person 250B; ☀ 10am & 2pm Tue-Fri, every 20min 9am-3.40pm Sat & Sun, reservations essential) of the milking parlour, petting zoo and cowboy show.

Thailand is the pioneer of 'New Latitude Wines' and with over a dozen wineries in the area, Khao Yai area is now the epicentre of this increasingly respectable industry. Two of the leaders – **PB Valley** (☎ 0 3622 6416; www.khaoyaiwinery.com; ☀ 8.30am-8pm Sun-Thu, to 10pm Fri & Sat), which corked its first bottle in 1998, and **GranMonte** (☎ 0 3622 7334; www.granmonte.com; ☀ 9am-9pm), which got into the game three years later – lie along Pansuk-Kudkla road, the direct route from Bangkok to Khao Yai (exit Km144). Both are scenically set and offer tours (book in advance), tastings, luxury lodging and classy restaurants. They're 22.5km and 16km respectively from the park gate.

Life Park (Th Thanarat, Km19.5; per activity 160-640B; ☀ 9am-6pm), at the Greenery Resort, is Khao Yai's biggest adventure park. It has go-karts, rock climbing, paintball, a bungee launch and much more.

and lots of little luxuries. We're not keen on having a golf course on the edge of the park (even one designed by Jack Nicklaus), but there's no denying this place is gorgeous. It's 7km east of the park gate. Always ask about discounts; we've seen promotional prices of 4475B for normal rooms and 7450B for pool villas.

Jungle House HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 0 4429 7183; www.junglehousehotel.com; Th Thanarat, Km19.5; r 800-2200B; 🍷🍷) The humdrum rooms won't wow you, but from its own little patch of untamed forest to an abundance of reptiles, this older place has got the jungle vibe down pat. It even has its own elephants (30-minute rides 300B).

Hotel des Artistes HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 4429 7444; www.hotelartists.com; Th Thanarat, Km17; r incl breakfast 3500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Breaking from the Khao Yai norm, this tasteful hotel goes for French-colonial chic rather than a nature theme; though with its gorgeous mountain views out the back you won't forget where you are.

Juldiss HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 4429 7272; www.juldiskhaoyai.com; Th Thanarat, Km17; r incl breakfast 1430-4800B,

bungalows 6000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Khao Yai's original luxury lodge has kept up with the times, and though rooms are pretty plain, they're great value for this area. Juldiss offers tennis courts, spa treatments and pleasant gardens.

Phuwanalee HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 4429 7111; www.phuwanalee.com; 700m off Th Thanarat Km14; tent 4600B, r 4800-6800B, villas 18,000B; 🍷🍷) A great garden setting and the option of safari tents with all the same mod cons as the normal rooms make this a good, albeit expensive, choice.

Khaoyai Garden Lodge HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 4436 5178; www.khaoyaijardgelodgekm7.com; Th Thanarat, Km7; r 250-2500B, f 3000B; 🍷🍷🍷) This friendly, family-run place offers a variety of rooms (the cheapest are sterile shared-bath rooms), all spread out around a garden. It's a bit worn, but it's still good value and the restaurant-lounge in front encourages interaction with your fellow guests.

Eating

Each of the lodges reviewed serves food, and there are many more restaurants along Th Thanarat. The park itself has restaurants at

all busy locations, including the visitor centre, campsites and some waterfalls, but even the campsite ones close around 6pm, so plan ahead.

Hi Pakchong

CAFE \$

(Th Trakmayon; espresso 25B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) If for some reason you need to spend time in Pak Chong, this friendly, antique-filled coffee shop east of the train station is as pleasant a place as possible to do it.

Getting There & Away

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou travel the 30km from Pak Chong down Th Thanarat to the park's northern gate (40B, 45 minutes) every half-hour from 6am to 5pm. They start their journey in front of the 7-Eleven near the artistic deer – they look like giraffes – statue. It's another 14km to the visitor centre, and park guards are used to talking drivers into hauling people up there. Some also do a side business hiring motorcycles for 500B per day.

Several motorcycle shops on Pak Chong's main road do rentals for 300B per 24 hours including **Petch Motor** (☎08 1718 2400; 361/3 Th Mittaphap, at Th Tesabarn 13), a bit west of the deer statue (look for the diamonds), and **Tawiyon** (no roman-script sign; ☎0 4431 1485; 734/1-4 Th Mittaphap, at Th Tesabarn 20), a bit to the east (it has a Honda sign). Both have limited Sunday hours.

All 2nd-class buses between Bangkok (108B to 139B, 2½ hours) and Khorat (60B to 74B, one hour) stop in Pak Chong. The bus station for most Bangkok buses is west of the traffic light at Th Thesabarn 8. Most buses for Khorat (and all other points north and east) stop about 500m east of the deer statue near *dǎ-l àht kàak*. Board 1st-class buses to both towns across the highway from the deer statue.

There are now also vans to Bangkok's Victory Monument (160B, 2½ hours, hourly) from the traffic light and to Khorat (60B, one hour, every 20 minutes) from *dǎ-l àht kàak*. You can also catch vans (departing from Khorat) to Ayuthaya (90B, 2½ hours) and Lopburi (70B, two hours) across the street from *dǎ-l àht kàak*, but only if they happen to have empty seats when they pass through.

You can also get to Pak Chong by train from Bangkok and Khorat, but it's much faster to go by bus or van. Ayuthaya, on the other hand, has no direct bus service so the train (3rd-class 53B, 2nd-class fan/air-con 83/173B, two to three hours, 13 daily) can be a good option.

BURIRAM PROVINCE

Buriram is not a province for urban exploration. Despite hanging on to half of its historic moat, Meuang Buriram, the provincial capital and only large town, is a tough sell as a tourist destination. Buriram Province is a place to get a glimpse of the past. The countryside is chock-a-block with tradition and peppered with over 50 Khmer ruins (out of 259 in the whole country). The crowning glory is Phanom Rung, a beautifully restored complex straddling the summit of an extinct volcano. The most spectacular Angkor monument in Thailand, Phanom Rung is well worth the journey and should impress even those who've already experienced Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

Nang Rong

นางรอง

POP 20,300

This workaday city is even more forgettable than Buriram, 45km to the north, but it's the most convenient base for visiting Phanom Rung. A full range of services and a good selection of hotels at least make it a friendly and comfortable one.

Sleeping & Eating



P California Inter

Hostel

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 1808 3347; www.pcalifornianangrong.webs.com; Th Sangkakrit; r 250-700B; ☺☺☺) This great place on the east side of town offers bright, nicely decorated rooms with good value in all price ranges. English-speaking Khun Wicha, who's a wealth of knowledge about the area, also provides bikes, rents motorcycles (200B per day) and leads tours. A motorcycle taxi from the bus station should cost 40B.

Honey Inn

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 4462 2825; www.honeyinn.com; 8/1 Soi Si Kun; r 250-350B; ☺☺☺) This Nang Rong veteran, 1km from the bus station, is less homey than it used to be, but with a new paint job it's still a good choice. Motorcycle hire and guided tours are also available. To find it, walk north from the bus station, cross the main road and head east until you see the sign.

Cabbages & Condoms

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 4465 7145; Hwy 24; r 240-1500B; ☺☺) The cheapest (shared bathroom) rooms at this Population & Community Development Association-run resort, set in a garden and

ringed by several little lakes, are pretty limp. But move up the price scale (where you get large rooms with stone floors) and this is a pleasant place to stay. The restaurant is also very good. There's a clothing and shoe factory on site, opened to bring work normally found in the city to the villages. It's 6.5km west of town.

Phob Suk

THAI \$

(Hwy 24; dishes 50-360B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📷) The picture menu at this well-known place near the bus station presents the typical mix of Thai, Isan and Chinese, but we recommend the city's famous *kāh mōo* (pork-rump roast).

i Getting There & Away

Nang Rong's **bus terminal** (☎0 4463 1517) is on the west side of town. See p425 for transport details.

Phanom Rung Historical Park

อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์เขพนมรุ่ง

The largest and best restored Khmer monument in Thailand, **Phanom Rung** (Phnom Rung; ☎0 4478 2715; admission 100B, bike/motorcycle/car fee 10/20/50B; ☺6am-6pm) has a knock-me-dead location. Crowning the summit of a spent volcano (the name is derived from the Khmer words for 'big mountain'), this sanctuary sits 200m above the paddy fields, and the Dangrek Mountains on the Cambodian border are clearly visible to the southeast.

The temple was erected between the 10th and 13th centuries, the bulk of it during the reign of King Suryavarman II (r AD 1113-50), which was the apex of Angkor architecture. The complex faces east and four times a year the sun shines through all 15 sanctuary doorways. The correct solar alignment happens during sunrise from 3 to 5 April and 8 to 10 September and sunset from 5 to 7 March and 5 to 7 October (some years are one day earlier.). The park extends its hours during these events, and locals celebrate the **Phanom Rung Fes-**

tival, around the April alignment, with ancient Brahmin ceremonies and modern sound-and-light shows. Camping is allowed during this time.

Below the main sanctuary, after the long row of gift shops, an **information centre** (☺9am-4.30pm) houses artefacts found at the site and displays about both the construction and restoration, which took 17 years. You can pick up a free informative brochure or arrange a guide (free, but tips are expected) here. Those who don't want to climb can use an upper parking lot, but the brochure isn't always available there.

Design

One of the most remarkable aspects of Phanom Rung is the **promenade** leading to the main gate. It's the best surviving example in Thailand. It begins on a slope 400m east of the main tower with three earthen **terraces**. Next comes a cruciform base for what may have been a wooden pavilion. To the right of this is a stone hall known locally as **Rohng Chang Pheuak** (White Elephant Hall) where royalty bathed and changed clothes before entering the temple complex. Flower garlands to be used as offerings in the temple may also have been handed out here. After you step down from the pavilion area, you'll come to a 160m-long promenade paved with laterite and sandstone blocks, and flanked by sandstone pillars with early Angkor style (AD 1100-80) lotus-bud tops. The promenade ends at the first and largest of three **naga bridges**. The first is flanked by 16 five-headed *naga* in the classic Angkor style.

After passing this bridge and climbing the **stairs** you come to the magnificent east gallery leading into the main sanctuary. The central **brah-sàht** has a gallery on each of its four sides and the entrance to each gallery is itself a smaller version of the main tower. The **galleries** have curvilinear roofs and false-balustrade windows. Once inside the temple walls, have a look at each of the galleries and the **gopura**, paying particular attention to the lintels over the porticoes. The craftsmanship at Phanom Rung represents the pinnacle of Khmer artistic achievement, on par with the reliefs at Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

Sculpture

The Phanom Rung complex was constructed as a Hindu monument to Shiva. Excel-



COMBO TICKET

A 150B combo ticket allows entry to both Phanom Rung and Muang Tam at a 50B discount.

VISHNU & THE KING OF POP

Phanom Rung's most famous sculpture is the **Narai Bandhomsindhu lintel**, a carving depicting a reclining Vishnu ('Phra Narai' in Thai) in the Hindu creation myth. Growing from his navel is a lotus that branches into several blossoms, on one of which sits the creator god, Brahma. Vishnu is asleep on the milky sea of eternity, here represented by a *naga* and alongside him are heads of Kala, the god of time and death. This lintel sits above the eastern gate (the main entrance) beneath the Shiva Nataraja relief.

Although it's arguably the most beautiful carving here, its fame instead comes from its role in a quarter-century-long whodunit-cum-David-versus-Goliath tale that began in 1965 when it was discovered to have been stolen. (It likely went missing several years earlier, but nobody had noticed.) In 1972 it was found on display at the Art Institute of Chicago and Thailand pressed for its return. Superstars Carabao (p735) helped the cause with their song 'Thaplang' (Lintel) featuring the line 'Take back Michael Jackson, Give us Phra Narai'. Phra Narai finally came home in 1988.

lent sculptures of both Shaiva and Vaishnava deities can be seen in the lintels and pediments over the doorways to the central monuments and in various other key points on the sanctuary exterior. On the east portico of the **mon-dòp** is a Nataraja (Dancing Shiva), which is late Baphuon or early Angkor style, while on the south entrance are the remains of Shiva and Uma riding their bull mount, Nandi. The central cell of the *Brah-sàht* contains a Shivalingam (phallus image).

i Getting There & Away

Getting to Phanom Rung without your own vehicle seems complicated, but it's not. *Sòrng-tàa-ou* (20B, 30 minutes, every half-hour) from in front of the old market (*nâh dâ-lâht go/uw*) on the east end of town and Chanthaburi-bound buses from the bus station go to Ban Ta Pek where motorcycle taxi drivers charge 200B to Phanom Rung, including waiting time. Chartering a *sòrng-tàa-ou* at Ban Ta Pek is likely to cost a hefty 800B.

Those coming from or heading to Ubon Ratchathani (125B, five hours, hourly), Surin (60B to 70B, two hours, every half-hour), Khorat (66B to 85B, two hours, hourly), Pak Chong (104B to 140B, 2½ hours, hourly) or Bangkok (Gitjagaan Tours; 275B, five hours, hourly) have the option of getting off at Ban Tako, a well-marked turn-off about 14km east of Nang Rong, and waiting for one of the buses or *sòrng-tàa-ou* from Nang Rong; or just taking a motorcycle taxi (300B return) all the way to Phanom Rung.

P California Inter Hostel's (p423) standard one-day tour (2340B for four people) is a good choice because as well as Phanom Rung, Muang Tam and Wat Khao Angkhan you'll get to visit a silk-weaving village.

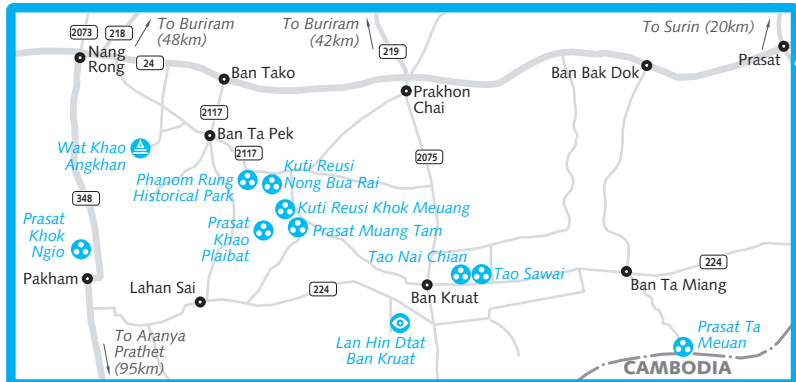
Around Phanom Rung

PRASAT MUANG TAM ปราสาทเมืองต่ำ
Prasat Muang Tam (admission 100B; ☀6am-6pm) is an ideal bolt-on to any visit to Phanom Rung, which is only 8km to the northwest. Dating back to the late 10th or early 11th century and sponsored by King Jayavarman V, 'Lower City' is Isan's third most interesting Khmer temple complex (after Phanom Rung and Phimai; fourth if you include Khao Phra Wihan) in terms of size, atmosphere and the quality of restoration work.

The whole complex, once a shrine to Shiva, is surrounded by laterite walls, within which are five *prang* and four lotus-filled reservoirs, each guarded by whimsical five-headed *naga*. The principal *prang* could not be rebuilt and the remaining towers, being brick, aren't nearly as tall or as beautiful as the sandstone *prang* at Phanom Rung. However, they do hold some superb lintels, including one depicting Shiva and his consort Uma riding the sacred bull, Nandi. As at Angkor Wat, the *prang* represent the five peaks of Mt Meru, the abode of the Hindu gods, and Barai Muang Tam (a 510m-by-1090m reservoir across the road) represents the surrounding ocean.

Begin your visit in the small **information centre** (admission free; ☀8am-4.30pm). You can also enquire here about the village's **homestay** (☎08 1068 6898; per person with 2 meals 300B) program. Another overnight option is slightly pricey **Tanyaporn Homestay** (☎08 7431 3741; dm/r 150/500B; ☹), southwest of the ruins.

Around Phanom Rung



Motorcycle-taxi drivers will add Muang Tam onto a trip to Phanom Rung for another 150B.

OTHER KHMER RUINS

For those with an insatiable appetite for Khmer ruins, the area around Phanom Rung offers a smorgasbord of lesser-known sites that, taken together, create a picture of the crucial role this region once played in the Khmer empire. Even history buffs will likely find these places of only minor interest, but driving through this rice-growing region offers an unvarnished look at village life and will surely make for an enlightening trip. Note that many roads around here are in terrible shape and signage is somewhat erratic. All of the following sites, restored or stabilised to some degree by the Fine Arts Department, are free of charge and open during daylight hours.

Kuti Reusi Nong Bua Rai sits right below Phanom Rung and **Kuti Reusi Khok Meuang** is just northwest of Prasat Muang Tam, so you might as well take a peek if you're heading this way.

Little of **Prasat Khao Plaibat** is left standing. But the adventure of finding it, along with cool views of both Phanom Rung and the Dangrek Mountains on the Cambodian border, makes it worth seeking out. The seldom-used trail starts at Wat Khao Plaibat, 3km from Prasat Muang Tam. Walk around the gate next to the giant Buddha image, veer right at the *gù-dì* (monks' quarters) and slip through the barbed-wire fence. From here take the path to the right, and then a quick left up the hill and follow the strips of orange cloth tied to trees. The walk up the

hill should take less than 30 minutes if you don't get lost along the way, though it's likely you will.

Prasat Khok Ngio, 3km before Pakham, has a small museum with old pots and Buddha images uncovered around the temple and is the only one of these sites that can conveniently be reached by public transport; buses and *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* heading south from Nang Rong will drop you off.

Archaeologists assume that much of the rock used to build these ancient structures came from the widely scattered **Lan Hin Dtat Ban Kruat** (Ban Kruat Quarry). It's actually more interesting for its beauty than its history. In the rainy season, stand in front of the big rock at the entrance to hear a curious echo effect from the little waterfall.

Also near Ban Kruat are **Tao Sawai** and **Tao Nai Chian**, two kilns that supplied pottery to much of the Khmer empire between the 10th and 12th centuries. Today they're little more than piles of dirt with roofs over them.

You can easily add Surin Province's **Prasat Ta Meuan** (p430) to your trip around this region. It's 55km from Phanom Rung.

WAT KHAO ANGKHAN

วัดเขาอังคาร

Although this peaceful **temple** (☉daylight hours) atop an extinct volcano has an ancient past, as evidenced by the 8th or 9th century Dvaravati sandstone boundary markers, it's the modern constructions that make Wat Khao Angkhan worth a visit. The *bòht* and several other flamboyant buildings were erected in 1982 in an unusual nouveau-Khmer style that sort of hearkens back to the age of empire. Inside the *bòht*, the

jataka murals, painted by Burmese artists, have English captions. The wát also hosts a Chinese-style pagoda, a 29m reclining Buddha and beautiful views of the surrounding mountains.

The temple is about 20km from either Nang Rong or Phanom Rung, and there's no public transport. The route is pretty well signposted, but if you're driving you'll have to ask directions at some junctions. A motorcycle taxi could cost as little as 200B from Ban Ta Pek and 300B from Nang Rong.

SURIN & SI SAKET PROVINCES

Surin and Si Saket Provinces are dotted with Angkor-era Khmer ruins. Most are rather modest, but for those with a history habit some are worth the effort to reach. On the other hand, Prasat Ta Meuan is very evocative and Khao Phra Wihan ranks among the northeast's best attractions, despite the Cambodian government's refusal to renovate it. The region's Khmer influence comes not only from the past, but also the present. Over one-third of the population of these two closely related provinces is ethnically Khmer and this remains the principal language in many villages.

Besides the temples, Surin Province is home to Ban Ta Klang elephant village and some famous craft centres, while Si Saket holds two of Thailand's most unusual temples. The capital cities are rather less interesting, although Surin makes a comfortable enough base.

part in battle re-enactments. Arguably the festival's best event is the elephant buffet on the Friday before the big show. VIP seats, which get you closest to the action, English commentary and guaranteed shade, cost between 500B and 1000B.

Surin National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติสุรินทร์; ☎0 4451 3358; Th Surin-Prasat; admission free; ☀9am-4pm Wed-Sun) Displays at this well-executed museum focus on the province's Khmer ruins and Surin's three ethnic groups: Lao, Khmer and Suai, the region's renowned elephant herders. It's 4km south of town on Rte 214; catch pink *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* 1 (10B) at the bus station or the clock tower by the fresh market (*dà-l àht sôt*). At the time of press, an admission fee of 100B looked likely to be introduced in the near future.

Queen Sirikit Sericulture Center

(ศูนย์หม่อนไหมเฉลิมพระเกียรติสมเด็จพระนางเจ้าสิริกิติ์ พระบรมราชินีนาถ (สุรินทร์); Rte 226; admission free; ☀8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) The easiest place to see the entire silk-making process, from larva to loom, is at this research centre 4km west of town.

San Lak Meuang

SHRINE

(ศาลหลักเมือง; Th Lak Meuang) Surin's gorgeous new city pillar shrine, just west of Th Thansarn, is a Khmer-style *prang* fronted by a copy of Phanom Rung's famous Narai Bandhomsindhu lintel (see the boxed text, p425).

LemonGrass

VOLUNTEERING

(☎08 1977 5300; www.lemongrass-volunteering.com) A well-run Surin-based outfit offering English-teaching (for children, adults and monks) and childcare placements. Bangkok-based Starfish Ventures (p39) also has a wide variety of projects in Surin.

👉 Tours

Saren Travel (☎0 4452 0174; 202/1-4 Th The-saban 2; ☀8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) offers tours (from 1500B per day) in and around Surin Province. Even if you pay extra for an English-speaking guide, these are great prices.

Tours from Pirom-Aree's House (p428) are very expensive, but also good.

🛏 Sleeping

Prices skyrocket during the Elephant Round-up and hotels fill up fast, so book as far in advance as possible.

Surin

สุรินทร์

POP 41,200

Surin doesn't have much to say for itself until November, when the provincial capital explodes into life for the Surin Elephant Round-up, during which the city hosts giant scrums of pachyderm. You've surely never seen so many well-dressed tuskers!

👁 Sights & Activities

Surin Elephant Round-up

FESTIVAL

(admission from 80B) Surin celebrates its famous festival for 10 days, but the massive crowds come on just the last weekend for the main event, which features 300 elephants showing their skills and taking

Maneerote Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 4453 9477; www.maneerotehotel.com; Soi Poi Tunggor, Th Krungsri Nai; r 400-450B; 🍷@☎) This hotel west of the fresh market scores off the charts in the high-quality-to-low-price ratio, though it's a little out of the way.

Pirom-Aree's House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 4451 5140; Soi Arunee, Th Thungpo; s/d 120/200B) The location for this long-time budget favourite, 1km west of the city, is inconvenient but peaceful. Simple wooden shared-bath rooms and a shady garden overlook a rice paddy. Aree cooks some pretty good food and Pirom is one of the best sources of information in the region. A tük-tük from the train station costs 50B.

Kritsada Grand Palace

HOTEL \$

(☎ 4471 3997; Th Suriyart; r 400-450B; 🍷@☎) Sitting on a quiet side street behind *säh-lah glahng* (provincial hall), this stark-white tower is a bit hard to find, but that makes for a quiet downtown location. Rooms are rather plain, but good value.

Surin Majestic Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 4471 3980; Th Jitrumrung; r 900-1200B, ste 1800-4500B; 🍷@☎) Surin's top digs sit alongside the bus terminal in the heart of town. The rooms are nothing special, but good for the price and the hotel has plenty of extras, like a fitness centre.

Sang Thong Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 4451 2099; 279-281 Th Tanasan; r 100-500B; 🍷) Though it's just an ordinary ageing cheapie, this hotel is run with jet-engine precision by an army of attentive staff. It's a short walk south of the train station, just past the fountain.

**BORDER CROSSING:
CHONG CHOM TO O SMACH**

Because of the casino, there are plenty of minibuses (60B, 1½ hours, every 20 minutes) from Surin's bus terminal to the Cambodian border (open 6am to 6pm) at Chong Chom, where visas are available on the spot (see p770 for details). There's little transport on the Cambodian side. A seat in a 'taxi' will cost 500B for the four-hour drive to Siem Reap, but if you arrive after about 9am you probably won't find any Cambodians making the trip and may have to pay 2500B for the whole car.

Ban Donmai

HOTEL \$

(no Roman-script sign; ☎08 9948 4181; Rte 226; r 300-500B; 🍷) The 'Treehouse', 3km from downtown, right along the highway, is a combination of *Gilligan's Island* and your grandparents' dishevelled basement. If this sounds good, you'll love it. Boonyai and Nan, the cheerful owners, prefer that guests book at least a day in advance; in return, they'll pick you up in town for free when you arrive.

 **Eating & Drinking****Night Market**

THAI \$

(Th Krungsri Nai; ☎5-10pm) A block south of the fountain, this good night market whips up an excellent selection of Thai and Isan dishes, including, as always, fried insects.

Tang Lak

THAI \$

(Th Sirirat; dishes 49-219B; ☎lunch & dinner; 🍷) This cute little place, popular with both Thai and *fa-ràng*, mixes fake wood and real antiques to create an old-timey feel. But it's not all about the style; the food is delicious. It's north of the Thong Tarin Hotel at the end of the road.

Kit Teung

CAFE \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Sanit Nikomrut; espresso 40B; ☎breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷) This bright modern place just southeast of the train station has some of the best coffee in town, but it really sets itself apart with a fun selection of Thai cakes and cookies.

Petmanee 2

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Murasart; dishes 20-80B; ☎breakfast & lunch) This simple spot south of Ruampaet Hospital by Wat Salaloi (look for the chicken grill in front) is Surin's most famous purveyor of *sôm-dam* and *gài yâhng*. The *súp nòr mái* (bamboo shoot salad) is good too. There's no English, spoken or written, but the food is so good it's worth stumbling through an order.

Starbeam

INTERNATIONAL, THAI \$\$

(Th Surin Packdee; dishes 80-255B; ☎breakfast, lunch & dinner Wed-Mon; 🍷) One of Surin's many expat hang-outs, this one has a broad menu that includes pizza, breakfast burritos and an almost-good-as-home grilled cheese. It's north of the bus station.

Larn Chang

THAI \$

(199 Th Siphathai Saman; dishes 45-220B; ☎dinner) Tasty and low-priced Thai and Isan dishes are served in and around an old

wooden house that overlooks a surviving stretch of the city moat. (The moat is now known as Sūan Rak, 'Love Park', and couples come here to hold hands at night.) The food and the setting are lovely, especially at sunset. It's a longish walk south of the centre, on the east side of the park.

Surin Chai Kit

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; 297 Th Tanasan; dishes 25-55B; ☺breakfast & lunch) This no-frills spot whips up tasty pan-egg breakfasts. The owners wear welcoming permagrans and give *fa-ràng* customers a handy city map. It's just to the right of the Sang Thong Hotel.

Surin's nightlife revolves around the Thong Tarin Hotel east of the bus station.

i Information

OTOP (Th Jitbumrung; ☺8am-5.30pm) Across from the Provincial Hall, this shop has the broadest selection of crafts, plus a city-specific tourist office.

Ruampaet Hospital (☎0 4451 3192; Th Thesaban 1)

Surin Plaza Mall (Th Thesaban 1) Has several banks open evenings and weekends. Located one block west of the fountain.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☎0 4451 4447; tatsurin@tat.or.th; Th Thesaban 1; ☺8.30am-4.30pm) Across from Ruampaet Hospital.

i Getting There & Away

Bus

Frequent buses from Surin's **bus terminal** (☎0 4451 1756; Th Jitbumrung) head to/from Bangkok (250B to 320B, seven hours). **Nakhonchai Air** (☎0 4459 5151) has a VIP service (372B, six daily). **999 VIP** (☎0 4451 5344) also has one departing daily at 9.30pm (496B). There are also buses to Ubon Ratchathani (105B to 200B, three hours, infrequently during the day), Roi Et (91B, 2½ hours, hourly), Khorat (90B to 157B, four hours, every half-hour) and Aranya Prathet (137B to 176B, six hours, three daily). Vans are the best way to Si Saket (70B, 1½ hours, every half-hour).

Train

Surin Railway Station (☎0 4451 1295) is on the line between Bangkok (3rd class 73B, 2nd-class fan/air-con 279/389B, 1st-class sleeper upper/lower 946/1146B, seven to nine hours, 10 daily) and Ubon Ratchathani (3rd class 81B, 2nd-class fan/air-con 122/150B, two to five hours, seven daily).

i Getting Around

Surin is very convenient for travellers; virtually everything you'll want or need is within a few blocks of the bus and train stations. If you don't want to walk, *túk-túk* charge around 40B for a trip within the centre. Surin also still has many cheaper pedicabs.

Pirom-Aree's House and Saren Travel hire cars.

Around Surin

BAN TA KLANG

บ้านตากลาง

To see Surin's elephants outside festival time, visit the **Elephant Study Centre** (☎0 4414 5050; admission 100B; ☺8.30am-4.30pm) in the Suai village of Ban Ta Klang where people and pachyderms live side by side. The main attraction is the one-hour **talent show** (☺shows at 10am & 2pm) with painting and basketball among the many tusker tricks. You can watch the stars bathe in the river (2km away) after the second show. There's also a little **museum** discussing elephants and elephant training, **elephant rides** (per 20min 200B) and a **homestay program** (per person 200B). During Visakha Bucha day (usually in May) all Suai villages in the area host **Elephant Parades**, with brightly painted pachyderms carrying the men who will enter the monkhood.

Surin Project (☎08 4482 1210; www.surinproject.org; elephant experience 12,000B) activities let you spend some quality time with Ban Ta Klang's elephants. These six-day stays are organised by the Elephant Nature Foundation, which works to improve the elephants' living conditions and provide sustainable income for their owners so they don't need to go begging on city streets. You'll work alongside the mahouts, caring for the elephants, constructing enclosures (so they won't be chained) and more. If there's space available, you can also work for just a day (1000B).

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou run from Surin's bus terminal (50B, two hours, hourly) with the last one returning at 4pm. If you're driving, take Rte 214 north for 40km and follow the elephant signs down Rte 3027 for 22 more.

CRAFT VILLAGES

There are many craft villages in easy striking distance of Surin town. The province's distinct fabrics, most notably *pâh hohl* (similar to *mât-mèe*), have a Khmer influence and often use natural dyes. Surin silks aren't readily available in other parts of Thailand and prices can be 30% cheaper here.

The most famous weaving centre is **Ban Tha Sawang**.

Ban Khwao Sinarin and **Ban Chok**, next-door neighbours 18km north of Surin via Rte 214 and Rte 3036, are known for silk and silver respectively. However, these days you can buy both in each village. One of the silk specialities is *yók dôrk*, a much simpler brocade style than what's made in Ban Tha Sawang, but it still requires up to 45 foot pedals on the looms. Khun Manee, who runs **Phra Dab Suk** (☎08 9865 8720) on the main drag, takes visitors out to see silk being woven (price negotiable); he prefers that you call in advance. The silver standout is *Brà keum*, a Cambodian style of bead brought to Thailand by Ban Chok's ancestors many centuries ago. **Ban Choke Silverware Handicraft Group** (Glüm Hát-tá-gaam Krêung Ngern Bâhn Chôh; ☎08 1309 4352), off the main road south of the police station, creates unique silver jewellery. Big blue *sông-tâa-ou* to Ban Khwao Sinarin (25B, 1½ hours, hourly) park on an unnamed soi between the fountain and the train station: look for the 'Osram' signs.

The residents of **Ban Buthom** (14km out of Surin on Rte 226 on the way to Sikhoraphum) weave sturdy, unlacquered rattan baskets, including some rather flat ones that pack well.

PRASAT TA MEUAN ปราสาทตาเมือน
The most atmospheric of Surin's Khmer ruins is a series of three sites known collectively as **Prasat Ta Meuan** (admission free; ☺daylight hours) on the Cambodian border that lines the ancient route linking Angkor Wat to Phimai.

The first site, **Prasat Ta Meuan** proper, was built in the Jayavarman VII period (AD 1181–1210) as a rest stop for pilgrims. It's a fairly small monument with a two-door, 10-window sanctuary constructed of laterite blocks; only one sandstone lintel remains.

Just 300m south, **Prasat Ta Meuan Toht**, which was the chapel for a 'healing station', is a bit larger. Also built by Jayavarman VII, the ruins consist of a *gopura*, *mon-dòp* and main *prang*, all surrounded by a laterite wall.

Nearly 1km further on, next to the army base at the end of the road, is the largest site, **Prasat Ta Meuan Thom**. This Shiva shrine pre-dates the others by as much as two centuries. Despite a somewhat haphazard reconstruction, this one nearly justifies

the effort it takes to get here. Three *prang* and a large hall are built of sandstone blocks on a laterite base and several smaller buildings still stand inside the boundary wall. Many carvings encase the principal *prang*, although the best were pried away and sold to unscrupulous Thai dealers by the Khmer Rouge who occupied the site in the 1980s. A stairway on the southern end drops to Cambodian territory. Landmines and undetonated hand grenades still litter the thick jungle surrounding the complex; heed the 'danger' signs.

The sites begin 10.3km south of Ban Ta Miang (on Rte 224, 23km east of Ban Kruat) via a winding road used by far more cows than cars. You need your own transport to get here and a visit is just as convenient from Phanom Rung (p424) as Surin town. The ongoing border conflict has forced closure of this area at times, so check on the situation before driving all the way out here.

OTHER KHMER TEMPLE RUINS

The southern reaches of Surin Province harbour several minor Khmer ruins. The 11th-century **Prasat Ban Phluang** (admission 50B; ☺7am–6pm), 33km south of Surin, is just a solitary sandstone *prang* without its top, but some wonderful carvings (including a lintel above the entrance with the Hindu god Indra riding his elephant, Airavata; Erawan in Thai) make it worth a stop. The site sits 600m off Rte 214; the turn-off is 2.5km south of Hwy 24. Any vehicle bound for Kap Choeng or the border can drop you nearby (25B, 30 minutes).

Prasat Sikhoraphum (admission 50B; ☺7.30am–6pm) is a larger and more rewarding Khmer site 30km northeast of town. Built in the 12th century, Sikhoraphum features five brick *prang*, two of which still hold their tops, including the 32m-tall central one. Only one lintel remains, but it's a stunner. Featuring a dancing 10-armed Shiva it's in nearly pristine condition and one of the most beautiful pieces of Khmer art ever carved. Below it are the only two *apsara* (celestial dancers) carvings in Thailand. There's a sound-and-light show here during the Elephant Round-up. Sikhoraphum can be reached by bus (25B to 30B, one hour, hourly) or train (7B to 50B, 30 minutes) from Surin town.

If you happen to be driving to Sikhoraphum, you may as well take a 400m detour off Rte 226 for a peep at **Prasat Muang**

BAN THA SAWANG

Chansoma (☉8am-5pm) has made Ban Tha Sawang one of the most renowned silk villages in Thailand. Its exquisite brocade fabrics (*pâh yók torng*) incorporate threads made of real gold and silver but the weaving process is even more impressive than the finished cloth. Four (sometimes five) women, including one sitting a floor below the others, work the loom simultaneously and collectively manage over 1000 heddles. Not surprisingly, they produce just a few centimetres per day.

Many of the finished products are destined for the royal court, but you can custom order your own at an average price of 30,000B per metre. Other shops around Chansoma sell typical silks to a steady stream of Thai visitors. The village is 8km west of Surin via Rte 4026, but finding it on your own is tough since English-language signage is scatter-shot. *Sörng-tǎa-ou* (15B, 20 minutes) run regularly from Surin's fresh market, and a *túk-túk* should cost between 150B and 200B.

Thi (admission free; ☉daylight hours). The three remaining brick *prang* are in sad shape (one looks like it's ready to topple), but they're so small they're kind of cute.

Prasat Phumpon (admission free; ☉daylight hours), a pre-Angkor Vishnu shrine dating from the 7th or 8th century, is the oldest Khmer *Brah-sàht* in Thailand. However, that's its only claim to fame and you'll likely be disappointed by this simple brick *prang*. It's 9km south of Hwy 24 in Amphoe Sangkha; veer right through the village at the fork in the road.

Si Saket

ศรีสะเกษ

POP 42,800

There's not a whole lot to do in the humdrum town of Si Saket, but if you're headed to Khao Phra Wilhan, you may pass through. Si Saket is centred on its train station. The bus terminal is about 2km south on Th Kuang Heng and the commercial centre lies between.

Staff at the **Si Saket Tourism Information Center** (☎0 4561 1283; cnr Th Lak Muang & Th Thepa; ☉8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) are enthusiastic about their province; pity they don't have more to promote.

👁 Sights

Tàk Khun Ampai Panich HISTORIC BUILDING (บ้านขุนอำไพพานิช; Th Ubon; ☉9am-7pm) The city's principal attraction is this restored wood-and-stucco Chinese-style shophouse built in 1925. It now houses an OTOP shop selling locally produced silks and crafts and a little upstairs **museum** (admission free; ☉9am-3pm) with a few antiques. It's about a 10-minute walk southeast of the train station.

Sisaket Aquarium

AQUARIUM

(ศูนย์แสดงพันธุ์สัตว์น้ำเทศบาลเมืองศรีสะเกษ; Bypass Rd; admission 30B; ☉10am-4pm Tue-Sun) The new pride and joy of Si Saket features fresh and saltwater fish species from around Thailand and two walk-through tunnels.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

If you're pinching pence, there are several flophouses north of the train station, but there's nothing to recommend about them other than the price.

Boonsiri Boutique Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎08 1958 9915; www.boonsiriboutiquehotel.com, in Thai; Th Wichit Nakorn; r incl breakfast 480-560B; ♿) One of many shiny new hotels in Si Saket, but the only one in the city centre, this unmistakable place east of the train station opted for a pink doll's-house theme in its lobby. Thankfully, the rooms are more tasteful.

Night Market

THAI \$

(Th Ratchakan Rotfai 3; ☉4-11pm) There's a lot of culinary razzmatazz in this large market south of the train station.

📍 Getting There & Away

There are frequent buses to Bangkok (310B to 394B, 8½ hours) from Si Saket's **bus terminal** (☎0 4561 2500), including VIP service with **Nakhonchai Air** (☎0 4561 3191) departing at 9.15am, 9.15pm and 9.30pm (470B). Also, two companies depart from their own offices on Th Si Saket just north of the train station during the morning and evening. Vans are better than buses for Ubon Ratchathani (50B, one hour, hourly) and Surin (70B, 1½ hours, every half-hour).

There are eight daily trains from **Si Saket Railway Station** (☎0 4561 1525) to Bangkok (3rd-class 237B, 2nd-class fan/air-con 311/461B,

BORDER CROSSING: CHONG SA-NGAM TO CHOAM

This Thai–Cambodian border crossing doesn't see a lot of tourist traffic, despite the road to Siem Reap being in excellent shape, because it can't be done entirely by public transport. Visas are available; see p770 for details.

1st-class sleeper upper/lower 946/1146B, eight to 11 hours) and seven to Ubon Ratchathani (3rd class 13B, 2nd-class fan/air-con 29/50B, one hour).

Around Si Saket

KHAO PHRA WIHAN NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาวีหาร

The main attraction of this 130-sq-km **national park** (๒0 4581 8021; admission 200B, bike/motorcycle/car fee 10/20/30B) is **Khao Phra Wihan** (Preah Vihear in Khmer), one of the region's great Angkor-period monuments. Technically it's just inside Cambodia, but it's almost always visited via Thailand. Hugging the edge of a cliff on the brow of the Dangrek escarpment and accessed via a series of steep stepped *naga* approaches, the large temple complex towers 500m above the plains of Cambodia, offering both evocative ruins and dreamy views.

Claimed by both countries because of a misdrawn French map (that went unchallenged by Thailand for decades), the temple was awarded to Cambodia in a 1962 World Court ruling. Thailand's bruised pride never healed. In June 2008, as the Cambodian government sought Unesco World Heritage status for the complex, a border conflict over 4.6 sq km of land in front of the temple flared and has since led to several deadly clashes between the nations' armies and become a cause célèbre of Thailand's ultranationalist 'yellow-shirts'. This situation remains unresolved and the park is currently closed.

Renewed access to the temple may be years away – previously the Cambodians charged 200B and the Thais required a 5B border pass – though the park could reopen earlier. Its best feature is **Pha Mo-E-Daeng**, a cliff with some fabulous views of the temple and also the oldest bas-relief in Thailand. The 1000-plus-year-old carving depicts

three figures sitting below a roughly cut pig (which might represent Vishnu) whose identities are an enigma to archaeologists and art historians. Although they give the general impression of representing deities, angels or kings, the iconography corresponds to no known figures in Thai, Mon or Khmer mythology. Nearby **Nam Tok Khun Sri** is a waterfall flowing (June to October only) over a cave large enough to hold an orchestra.

Landmines have been laid during the present conflict and others remain from the Khmer Rouge era, so don't stray from any well-worn paths and heed all skull-and-crossbone signs.

Sleeping

The park has four **bungalows** (๒0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; 6 people 1000-2000B; ☹) and a **campsite** (per person with own tent 30B, 2–10-person tent hire 150-600B). Kantharalak, the nearest town with accommodation, has several simple but decent places to lay your head, including **SB Hotel** (๒0 4566 3103; Th Anan Ta Pak Dee; r 250-500B; ☹@☹) in the heart of town.

Getting There & Away

First take a bus from Si Saket (45B, 1¼ hours, every half-hour) or Ubon Ratchathani (50B, 1½ hours, every half-hour) to Kantharalak (there are also buses to Kantharalak from towns to the west along Hwy 24) and then catch a *sōrng-tāa-ou* to Phum Saron (35B, 40 minutes, every half-hour). At Phum Saron you'll have to hire a motorcycle taxi to the park; figure on 200B return with a couple of hours waiting time. A truck will cost at least double.

OTHER KHMER RUINS

Thirty kilometres west of Si Saket via Rte 226 in Amphoe Uthumphon Phisai, **Prasat Sa Kamphaeng Yai** (admission free; ☺ daylight hours), built as a shrine to Shiva, features four 11th-century *prang* and two *wi-hāhn*. The *prang*, including the main one, which was built of sandstone but restored with brick, have lost their tops, but several lintels and other Baphuon-style carvings remain. Behind the modern temple buildings are some amusing statues depicting what punishments may await people in the Buddhist version of Hell as a result of various misdeeds in this life. Hit your parents, for example, and you'll have enormous hands. Buses from Si Saket (20B, 30 minutes) and Surin (55B, 1½ hours) can drop you right nearby.

Eight kilometres west of Si Saket on the way to Kamphaeng Yai (on the north side

of the highway in a temple with no sign in English) is the even more modest and completely unadorned **Prasat Sa Kamphaeng Noi** (admission free; ☀daylight hours), which, like many other Khmer ruins in the area, Angkor King Jayavarman VII commissioned as a healing station.

TEMPLES

Officially it's Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaeo, but these days nearly everyone calls it **Wat Lan Khuat** (☀daylight hours), the 'Million Bottle Temple'. In 1982 the abbot dreamt of a *Brah-sàht* in heaven made of diamonds and gems. Realising that this symbolised the need for clarity of purpose in one's life, he decided to replicate the idea as best he could on earth by covering nearly every surface of every building of his temple with glass bottles. The project would, he believed, have many benefits, including fostering co-operation within the community, encouraging younger people to come to the temple, and saving lots of money on paint. The more you look around, the less the name seems like an exaggeration. He took the theme one step further by using bottle caps to create much of the adornment. It's in Khun Han, 11km south of Hwy 24 via Rte 2111. Turn west at the roundabout in the centre of town.

Wat Phra That Rueang Rong (☀daylight hours) is another unusual temple. A previous abbot, lamenting the loss of the old ways, built the *bòht* to look like an oxcart being pulled by two giant bulls. He also created a **museum** (admission free; ☀7.30am-5.30pm) housing old tools, musical instruments and the like from the province's four cultures: Lao, Khmer, Suai and Yer. Concrete statues of people and oversized animals around the grounds offer life lessons. The wát is 7km north of town; take *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* 2 (10B, 20 minutes) from in front of the train station.

UBON RATCHATHANI PROVINCE

This varied province, famous across Thailand for its forest temples, pushes down into the jungle-clad intersection of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. To bolster the region's tourist profile TAT has labelled its southern reaches the 'Emerald Triangle' in recognition of its magnificent green landscapes, and drawing obvious parallels with northern Thailand's 'Golden Triangle'. Despite having plenty to entertain the rustic rover,

the hoped-for hordes of visitors have failed to arrive.

Phu Chong Nayoi and Pha Taem National Parks are two of Thailand's most remote corners, and Ubon remains one of the region's more charming cities.

Ubon Ratchathani

อุบลราชธานี

POP 115,000

Survive the usual knot of choked access roads and the 'Royal City of the Lotus' will reveal an altogether more attractive face. Racked up against Mae Nam Mun, Thailand's second-longest river, the historic heart of the city has a sluggish character rarely found in the region's big conurbations. There are many temples of interest that will appeal to even those suffering acute temple overload. Few cities in Thailand reward aimless wandering as richly as Ubon.

Ubon grew prosperous as a US air base during the Vietnam War era and is now a financial, educational and agricultural market centre. The nearby Thai-Lao border crossing at Chong Mek generates a small but steady stream of travellers.

👁 Sights & Activities

Wat Thung Si Meuang

TEMPLE

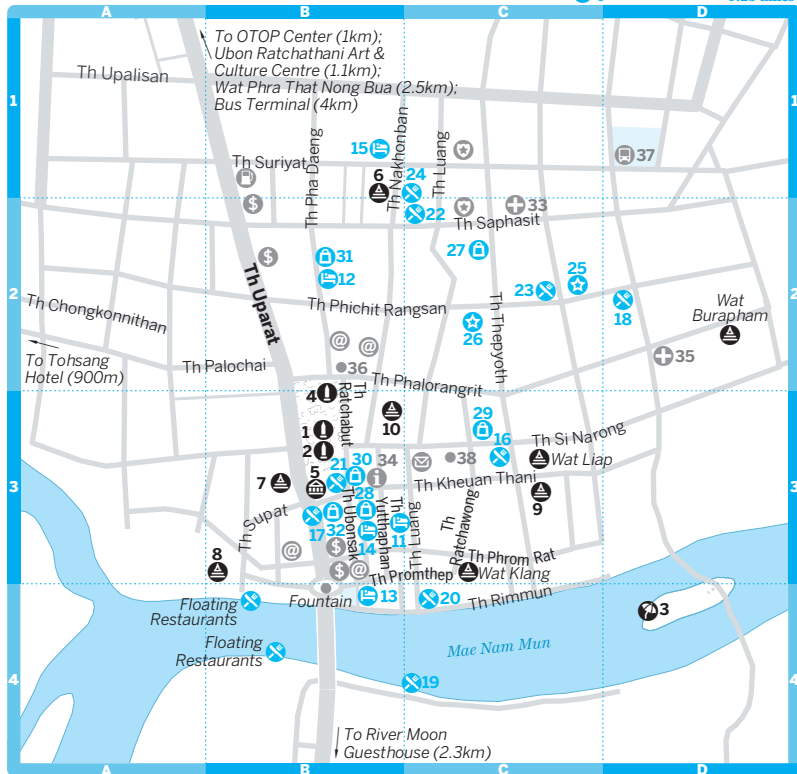
(วัดทุ่งศรีเมือง; Th Luang; ☀daylight hours) Wat Thung Si Meuang was built during the reign of Rama III (1824-51) and has a classic *hǒr drai* (Tripitaka hall) in excellent shape. Like many *hǒr drai*, it rests on tall, angled stilts in the middle of a pond to protect the precious scriptures (written on palm-leaf paper) from termites. It's kept open so you can look around inside. The 200-year-old murals in the little *bòht* beside the *hǒr drai* show life in that era.

Ubon Ratchathani National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติอุบลราชธานี; Th Kheuan Thani; admission 100B; ☀9am-4pm Wed-Sun) Occupying the former city hall, this is a very informative museum with plenty on show, from Dvaravati-era Buddhist ordination-precinct stones and a 2500-year-old Dong Son bronze drum to Ubon textiles and betelnut sets. The museum's most prized possession is a 9th-century Ardhhanarisvara, a composite statue combining Shiva and his consort Uma into one being; one of just two ever found in Thailand.

Ubon Ratchathani



Wat Si Ubong Rattana

TEMPLE

(วัดศรีอุบลรัตนาราม; Th Uparat; ☀daylight hours) The *bòht* at this important temple resembles Bangkok's Wat Benchamabophit, but it's the 7cm-tall topaz Buddha inside that most visitors come to see. Phra Kaew Butsarakhm, as it's known, was reportedly brought here from Vientiane at Ubon's founding and is one of the city's holiest possessions. It sits behind glass high up the back wall, all but out of sight; bring binoculars if you have them. The image directly in front of the largest Buddha is a copy.

The temple has turned a beautiful old wooden *sáh-lah* into a **museum** (admission free; ☀9am-4pm) of religious items. The highlight is the collection of 18th-century *dò prá drai Bìdòk*, gorgeous boxes used for storing sacred palm-leaf texts. If you can understand Thai, someone will demonstrate the process used to paint the designs with real gold.

Wat Ban Na Meuang

TEMPLE

(วัดบ้านนาเมือง; ☀daylight hours) Wat Sa Prasan Suk, as it's also known, stands out from other temples in many ways. Most famously, the *bòht* sits on a boat: a ceramic-encrusted replica of King Rama IX's royal barge *Su-phannahong*, complete with a sculpted crew. The *wi-hahn* also has a boat-shaped base, this one resembling the second-most important royal barge, *Anantanagaraj*; and it's surrounded by an actual pond. These were not just artistic endeavours: the water represents our desires and the boats represent staying above them.

The commissioner of these creations, Luang Pu Boon Mi, died in 2001 and his body is on display (they're waiting to finish building a museum before cremating him) in the *sáh-lah* next to the boat *bòht*.

Finally, to reach all of these you must pass under an immense statue of Airavata (Erawan in Thai), Hindu god Indra's

Ubun Ratchathani

📍 Sights

- 1 Candle Parade float..... B3
- 2 City Pillar Shrine..... B3
- 3 Ko Hat Wat Tai..... D4
- 4 Monument of Merit..... B3
- Thung Si Meuang..... (see 1)
- 5 Ubun Ratchathani National Museum..... B3
- 6 Wat Jaeng..... B1
- 7 Wat Si Ubun Rattanaram..... B3
- 8 Wat Supatanaram..... B3
- 9 Wat Tai..... C3
- 10 Wat Thung Si Meuang..... B3

🛌 Sleeping

- 11 New Nakornluang Hotel..... B3
- 12 Phadang Mansion..... B2
- 13 Sri Isan Hotel..... B4
- 14 Srikamol Hotel..... B3
- 15 Thongcome Mansion..... B1

🍴 Eating

- 16 Boon Niyon Uthayan..... C3
- 17 Chiokee..... B3
- 18 Jumpa-Hom..... D2
- 19 Krua Ruen Pae..... C4
- 20 Moon Lover..... C4
- 21 Night Market..... B3
- 22 Porntip Gai Yang Wat Jaeng..... C2

- 23 Risotto..... C2
- 24 Rung Roj..... C1
- U-Bake..... (see 18)

🎮 Entertainment

- 25 E-Ba..... C2
- 26 U-Bar..... C2

🛍 Shopping

- Ban Khampun..... (see 12)
- 27 Camp Fai Ubun..... C2
- 28 Grass-Root..... B3
- 29 Maybe..... C3
- 30 Punchard..... B3
- 31 Punchard..... B2
- 32 Rawang Thang..... B3

🏥 Information

- 33 Saphasit Prasong Hospital..... C2
- 34 Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)..... B3
- 35 Ubonrak Thonburi Hospital..... D2

🚗 Transport

- 36 Sakda Travel World..... B2
- 37 Sǒrng•tǎa•ou to Phibun Mangsahan..... D1
- 38 Ubon Rental Cycle..... C3

three-headed elephant mount. The temple is about 4km northwest of town, and 1km off the ring road. *Sǒrng•tǎa•ou* 8 passes it, but you need to tell the driver you're going here.

Wat Phra That Nong Bua

TEMPLE

(วัดพระธาตุหนองบัว; Th Thammawithi; ☀daylight hours) The richly adorned 55m *chedi* at this temple loosely resembles the Mahabodhi stupa in Bodhgaya, India. It's the only square stupa in Ubun Province unless you count the older one it was built over (you can enter to see the original between 8am and 6pm) or the four similar but smaller ones at the corners. Some of the *jataka* reliefs covering its exterior are quite expressive and two groups of four niches on each side of the *chedi* contain Buddhas standing in stylised Gupta or Dvaravati closed-robe poses. The temple is on the outskirts of town; to get there, take *sǒrng•tǎa•ou* 10.

FREE Ubun Ratchathani Art & Culture Centre

MUSEUM

(ศูนย์ศิลปวัฒนธรรมกาญจนาภิเษกฯ; Th Jaeng Sanit; ☀8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) The museum in the lower level of this striking contemporary Isan-design tower at Rajabhat University is more scattershot than the National Museum, but there are some interesting cultural displays, particularly of houses and handicrafts. There's also a whole lot of wax sculpture.

Wat Jaeng

TEMPLE

(วัดแจ้ง; Th Nakhonban; ☀daylight hours) Founded 436around the same time as the city, Wat Jaeng has an adorable Lan Xang-style *bòht* (built in 1887) with large *naga* eave brackets on the sides, crocodiles on the railings and Airavata along with two mythical lions atop the carved wooden facade. A travelling market fills up the wāt grounds every Wednesday.

Thung Si Meuang

(ทุ่งศรีเมือง) The centrepiece of this city-centre park is a huge concrete **replica of a Candle Parade float** (below). The humble brick obelisk in the northeast corner is the **Monument of Merit**, erected by former allied forces POWs (brought here for forced labour by the Japanese, who occupied Thailand during WWII) in gratitude for the secret assistance they received from ordinary Thai citizens while in the prison camps. The **City Pillar Shrine** (San Lak Meuang) is in the south.

PARK

Wat Supatanaram

(วัดสุทัศนาราม; Th Supat; ☺daylight hours) Called Wat Supat for short, the unique *bôht* at this riverside temple, built between 1920 and 1936, features a Thai roof, European arches and a Khmer base. And, in contrast to other temple structures of the region, it's made entirely of stone. In front is a wooden bell, reputed to be the largest in the world.

TEMPLE

Ko Hat Wat Tai

(เกาะหาดวัดไทร) Picnicking families flock to this island in Mae Nam Mun during the hot, dry months from February to May when beaches rise along its shore. A makeshift bamboo bridge connects it to the northern shore and floating restaurants set up shop on the river.

BEACH



Festivals & Events

Ubon's famous **Candle Parade** (Kabuan Hae Tian) began during the reign of King Rama V when the appointed governor decided the city's rocket festival was too dangerous. The original simple designs have since grown (often with the help of styrofoam) to gigantic elaborately carved wax sculptures. The parade is part of Khao Phansaa, a Buddhist holiday marking the commencement of the Rains Retreat (Buddhist Lent) in July.

Prize-winning candles go on display along Th Si Narong next to Thung Si Meuang for a week after the parade and most of them will be parked at the city's temples at least through Ork Phansaa, the end of the Rains Retreat, three months later. Construction, also done on temple grounds, begins at least a month before the parade. The festival is very popular with Thai tourists and the city's hotels are booked out long in advance.



Sleeping



Sri Isan Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4526 1011; www.sriisanhotel.com; Th Ratchaburi; r 380-800B; ๙@๙) The exception to the rule of Isan's typically uninspired budget hotels, the bright, cheerful lobby of this hotel is full of natural light streaming down through the atrium. The rooms are small and the air-conditioning takes a while to cool them down, but even the cheapest have enough charm to help you forget this. For the price, they're unbeatable. They'll pick you up at the train station or airport for 50B and from the bus station for 100B.

Sunee Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 4535 2900; www.suneegrandhotel.com; Th Chayangkun; r incl breakfast 1600-3000B, ste 4250-12,500B; ๙@๙๙) One of the few hotels in Isan that could hold its own in Bangkok, the Sunee Grand is a stunner; and far less expensive than its peers in the capital. From the stylish light fixtures to the at-a-snap service, it will meet expectations. There's a large business centre, a piano player in the lobby and an adjacent shopping mall with a kid-sized rooftop water park.

Phadang Mansion

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4525 4600; 126 Th Pha Daeng; r 500B; ๙@๙) There are enough copies of classic paintings on the walls for this hotel to call itself a fine art gallery. You can, and should, snicker at this bit of hubris, but they're a nice touch. Rooms are boxy, but they're good and have little balconies.

Tohsang Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 4524 5531; www.tohsang.com; Th Palochai; r incl breakfast 1200-1800B, ste 4000B; ๙@๙) The tasteful decor here almost manages to hide Tohsang's age. The lobby is downright elegant while the rooms are as comfortable as they should be at these prices. They'll pick you up for free when you arrive.

Thongcome Mansion

HOTEL \$

(☎08 1579 3629; Th Suriyati; r 350B; ๙@๙) This little family-run place has some of Ubon's spiffest rooms in this price range. And, because it's a new building, it doesn't suffer the quirks of older properties.

Srikamol Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4524 6088; 26 Th Ubonsak; r 400B; ๙) From the chandelier in the lobby to the panelled wood doors, there are still signs from Srikamol's time as one of Ubon's best; though

WARIN CHAMRAP DISTRICT TEMPLES

The famous monk and meditation master Luang Pu Cha Suphattho, a former disciple of Luang Pu Man, known for his simple and direct teaching method, was quite a name in these parts. During his life he founded the following two well-known forest monasteries and many more around the world.

Peaceful **Wat Nong Pa Phong** (☀daylight hours) is known for its quiet discipline and daily routine of work and meditation, and some Thai-speaking Westerners live here. The wát features the golden *chedi* where Luang Pu Cha's relics are interred and a three-storey **museum** (admission free; ☀8am-4.30pm) displaying an odd assortment of items, from Luang Pu's worldly possessions to ancient artefacts to world currencies. The temple is about 10km past the river. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* 3 gets you within 2km; a motorcycle taxi (if you can find one) should cost 20B for the final hop.

A Western-oriented wát opened in 1975 specifically for non-Thais: English is the primary language at **Wat Pa Nanachat** (www.watpahnachat.org; ☀daylight hours). There's nothing really to see here, but visitors are welcome to drop by. A senior monk is available to answer questions most days after the 8am meal and someone will likely be around until 11am. Those with previous meditation experience are welcome to apply to stay here (write to: Guest Monk, Wat Pa Nanachat, Ban Bung Wai, Amphoe Warin Chamrap, Ubon Ratchathani 34310). Guests must follow all temple rules including eating just one meal a day and rising at 3am, and after three days men must shave their heads. A *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* from Warin Market or any Si Saket bus can drop you on Rte 226, about 500m from the entrance. The wát is in the forest behind the rice fields.

those days are way behind it. It's not better than newer hotels at a similar price, but if you like it old school, you'll like this one.

River Moon Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 4528 6093; 21 Th Sisaket 2; r 150-200B; @☎) This crumbling old place offers travellers something out of the ordinary. The rustic rooms, 500m from the train station, are in old railway workers' quarters and facilities are shared.

New Nakornluang Hotel HOTEL \$

(☎0 4525 4768; 84-88 Th Yutthaphan; r 170-350B; @☎) Unlike River Moon, which is run down with character, this hotel is simply old. But, if you want to spend as little as possible and still be in the city centre, the cheap fan rooms are clean enough.

Eating

Jumpa-Hom THAI \$\$

(Th Pichit Rangsan; dishes 55-1500B; ☀dinner; ☎) One of the loveliest and most delicious restaurants in Isan, Jumpa-Hom has a very broad set of choices including some not-so-common dishes. You can dine on a water-and-plant-filled wooden deck or in the air-con dining room, which offers a choice of tables and chairs or cushions for floor seating.

Rung Roj

THAI \$
(no roman-script sign; 122 Th Nakhonban; dishes 30-165B; ☀lunch & dinner; ☎) What this Ubon institution lacks in service, it more than makes up for with excellent food using only the freshest ingredients: the meals look straight out of a foodie magazine photo shoot. It's the restaurant with the bold plate, fork and spoon sign.

Night Market THAI \$

(Th Kheuan Thani; ☀4pm-midnight) Over the past few years, Ubon's city-centre night market has grown into an excellent dining destination.

Porntip Gai Yang Wat Jaeng NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Saphasit; dishes 20-130B; ☀breakfast, lunch & dinner) It looks like a tornado has whipped through this no-frills spot, but the chefs cook up a storm of their own. This is considered by many to be Ubon's premier purveyor of *gǎi yǎhng*, *sǒm-dam*, sausages and other Isan foods.

Risotto ITALIAN \$\$

(Th Pichit Rangsan; dishes 100-300B; ☀lunch & dinner) The dining room can't quite pull off an Italian vibe, but the kitchen offers a dash of *la dolce vita*. The menu has a full roster of pasta, plus salmon steak and one of the best pizzas in Isan.

Krua Ruen Pae

THAI \$

(no Roman-script sign; dishes 40-300B; ☺lunch & dinner) One of several floating restaurants on the Mae Nam Mun, Krua Ruen Pae serves up tasty Thai and Isan food and a relaxed atmosphere. The *dôm kàh gài* (chicken with galangal in coconut milk) is lovely. If driving here, exit to the west and then go under the bridge.

Moon Lover

CAFE \$

(Th Rimmun; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Enjoy coffee, smoothies and waffles with jazz and river views at this attractive little coffee shop.

U-Bake

BAKERY \$

(Th Pichit Rangsan; chocolate cake 55B; ☺lunch & dinner) There are many good bakeries in town, but only U-Bake gets to share space with the lovely restaurant Jumpa-Hom.

**Boon Niyon Uthayan**

VEGETARIAN \$

(Th Si Narong; per plate 10-20B; ☺breakfast & lunch Tue-Sun; ♻️) Run by the ascetic Santi Asoke group, which has split from mainstream Thai Buddhism, this restaurant has an impressive vegetarian buffet under a giant roof. Most of the food is grown organically just outside the city.

Chiokee

THAI \$

(307-317 Th Kheuan Thani; dishes 35-120B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) A steady stream of old-timers linger over congee, tea and newspapers at this classic spot to have breakfast.

**Drinking & Entertainment****U-Bar**

NIGHTCLUB

(Th Pichit Rangsan) While other clubs have come and gone over the years, U-Bar has long remained at the top of the heap for the college crowd, partly because the best bands from Bangkok often play here when they visit Ubon. If you go, try a Blue Kamikaze, served out of a sinister-looking slushy machine behind the bar.

e-Bar

NIGHTCLUB

(Th Pichit Rangsan) A newer and more spacious club that attracts an older (but equally enthusiastic) crowd than U-Bar.

Ubon Ratchathani Art & Culture Centre

CULTURAL CENTRE

(☎0 4535 2000; Th Jaeng Sanit) There are sometimes Isan music and dance performances here.

**Shopping**

Isan maybe be silk country, but Ubon is a cotton town. Shops selling natural-dyed, handwoven cotton clothing, bags and fabric abound. First stop should be **Camp Fai Ubon** (189 Th Thepyoth), which is signed as Peaceland. **Grass-Root** (87 Th Yutthaphan) is smaller, but also good. Although not all the cotton at **Maybe** (124 Th Si Narong; ☺8am-7pm) is made with natural dyes, this store has the broadest selection of clothing styles.

**Rawang Thang**

HANDICRAFTS

(Th Kheuan Thani; ☺9am-9pm) There's also Ubon cotton at this shop, which sells fun and funky T-shirts, pillows, postcards, picture frames and assorted bric-a-brac, most made or designed by the friendly husband-and-wife owners. They can fill you in on all things Ubon.

Ban Khampun

HANDICRAFTS

(124 Th Pha Daeng) Ubon's famous silk specialist makes some exquisite fabrics using many patterns and styles you won't find elsewhere. For two days during the Candle Festival, the owner hosts a mini cultural festival at his gorgeous home-workshop-museum just outside town.

Punchard

HANDICRAFTS

(156 Th Pha Daeng; ☺10am-9pm) Though pricey, this is the best all-round handicrafts shop in Ubon. The **Th Ratchabut branch** (☺9am-8pm) is mostly home decor.

OTOP Center

HANDICRAFTS

(Th Jaeng Sanit) A crafts mall with a varied shopping selection.

**Information****Emergency & Medical Services**

Tourist Police (☎0 4524 5505; Th Suriyat).

Ubonrak Thonburi Hospital (☎0 4526 0285; Th Phalorangrit) Has a 24-hour casualty department.

Internet Access

Internet cafes aren't hard to find in Ubon. **29 Internet** (Th Nakhonban; per hr 12B; ☺24 hr) and **25 Hours** (Th Pha Daeng; per hr 15B; ☺24 hr) are open at all hours.

Money

Ying Charoen Park (Th Ratchathani) This shopping centre across from Rajabhat University has banks that open evenings and weekends nearest to downtown.

City Mall (Th Chayangkun) In front of Suneo Grand Hotel; has an AEON ATM.

Post

Post office (Th Luang; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

Tourist Information

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☎0 4524 3770; tatubon@tat.or.th; Th Kheuan Thani; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Has helpful staff.

i Getting There & Away**Air**

Air Asia (☎0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com) and **THAI** (☎0 4531 3340; www.thairways.com) each fly twice a day to Bangkok's Suvarnaphumi Airport. Air Asia's fares are as low as 1350B one way while THAI charges at least 1000B more. Air Asia also does three flights a week direct to Phuket for as little as 1450B. **Nok Air** (☎0 2900 9955; www.nokair.com) flies to Bangkok's Don Muang Airport three times a day, from 1300B.

Many travel agencies, including **Sakda Travel World** (☎0 4525 4333; www.sakdatour.com; Th Phalorangrit), sell tickets.

Bus

Ubon's **bus terminal** (☎0 4531 6085) is north of town; take *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* 2, 3 or 10 to the centre. Buses link Ubon with Bangkok (385B to 473B, 8½ to 10 hours) frequently in the morning and evening, plus a few in the middle of the day. The top VIP service is offered by **999 VIP** (☎0 4531 4299), departing at 6.30pm (730B), and **Nakhonchai Air** (☎0 4526 9777) at 10.15am and 9.45pm (552B). The cross-border bus to Pakse, Laos (200B, three hours) leaves at 9.30am and 3.30pm. Vans are the best way to Si Saket (50B, one hour, hourly).

DESTINATION	FARE (B)	DURATION (HR)
Chiang Mai	590-893	17
Khon Kaen	216-252	4½
Khorat	203-330	5-6
Mukdahan	75-135	3½
Rayong	427-641	13
Roi Et	108-139	3
Sakon Nakhon	117-211	5
Surin	105-200	3
Yasothon	66-85	1½

Train

The **railway station** (☎0 4532 1588) is in Warin Chamrap; take *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* 2 from Ubon. There's an overnight express train to/from Bangkok (2nd-class fan/air-con 371/551B, 1st-class sleeper upper/lower 1080/1280B) The six other departures also take 11 to 12 hours except the 5.45am (from Bangkok) and 2.50pm (from

Ubon) special express service, which takes 8½ hours. All trains also stop in Si Saket, Surin and Khorat.

i Getting Around

Numbered *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (10B) run throughout town. TAT's free city map marks the routes, most of which pass near its office. A túk-túk trip within the centre should cost from 30B to 40B. Ubon also has a few **metered taxis** (☎08 9421 6040; 35B flagfall, 15B call fee) which park at the bus station. From the airport, two car-hire counters provides rides to anywhere in town for 80B.

Chow Watana (☎08 1967 9796) Car hire with driver from 1300B per day.

Ubon Rental Cycle (☎0 4524 4708; 115 Th Si Narong) Has a few bikes for hire at 100B per day. If the office is closed, ask at the house next door.

Around Ubon Ratchathani Province**BAN PA-AO**

บ้านผาอำ

Ban Pa-Ao is a silk-weaving village, but it's best known for producing brass and bronze items using the lost-wax casting method. It's the only place in Thailand where the entire process is still done by hand. You can watch workers creating bells and bowls at **Soon Thorng Leuang Ban Pa-Ao** (☎8am-5pm) on the far side of the village. There's also a silk-weaving centre on the way into town. During our last visit the village's temple was completing a gorgeous new museum building to hold its collection of artefacts from farms and homes.

Ban Pa-Ao's **homestay program** (☎08 1076 1249; per person incl breakfast 250B) offers the chance to try your hand at both of the town's trades, though little English is spoken.

Ban Pa-Ao is 3.5km off Hwy 23. Buses to/from Yasothon pass the turn-off (20B, 20 minutes), and a motorcycle taxi from the highway should cost 20B.

PHIBUN MANGSAHAN

พิบูลมังสาหาร

Thais often stop in the dusty town of Phibun Mangsahan to see a set of rapids called **Kaeng Sapheu**, just downstream of the Mae Nam Mun bridge. The rocky islets make 'Python Rapids' rise between February and May, but the shady park here is a pleasant stop year-round. It has a Chinese temple, several simple restaurants (most serving deep-fried frog skins; *nǎng gòp tǒrt*) and a long line of souvenir shops. Many fishermen work here and they'll take you on boat trips

in little long-tails: it's 500B for a two-hour trip to an island temple. Ask at 'dāaw' restaurant if you'd rather ride a bigger boat (500B per hour), which can hold 20 people.

The *bòht* at **Wat Phu Khao Kaew** (☺daylight hours) on the west side of town has some atypical artistic flair. The exterior is covered in tiles, the upper interior walls have reliefs of important stupas from around Thailand and a very unusual style of *yák* (temple guardian) keeps watch outside.

Villages just over the bridge as you drive toward Khong Jiam are famed for forging iron and bronze gongs, both for temples and classical Thai-music ensembles. You can watch the gong-makers hammering the flat metal discs and tempering them in rustic fires at many roadside workshops. Small gongs start at around 500B and the 2m monsters fetch as much as 200,000B. People make drums and cymbals around here too.

Visa extensions are available at Phibun Mangsahan's **immigration office** (☎0 4544 1108; ☺8.30am-noon, 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri), 1km south of the bridge on the way to Chong Mek.

Sleeping & Eating

In the centre of town, midway between the bus stop and the bridge, the friendly **Phiboonkit Hotel** (☎0 4544 1201; chompoonuch@hotmail.com; Th Phiboon; r 200-300B; ✨) is your usual, slightly chaotic, budget hotel.

Phiboon Cafe (Th Luang; ☺breakfast & lunch), a ramshackle shop right at the bridge, has made Phibun famous for *sah-lah-Bow* (Chinese buns; 5B each). Countless shops on the highway have piggybacked on its success.

Getting There & Away

Phibun's bus park behind the market serves ordinary buses (35B, one hour, every 20 minutes) to Ubon's bus station – these stop to pick up passengers at Warin Market across the river, but you may not get a seat if you board there – and *sǎng-tǎa-ou* to Chong Mek (40B, one hour, every 20 minutes). *Sǎng-tǎa-ou* (40B, 1½ hours, every half-hour) go to Talat Ban Du (Ban Du Market), near Ubon's city centre, and Khong Jiam park (40B, one hour, four each morning), near the bridge.

KAENG TANA

NATIONAL PARK อุทยานแห่งชาติแก่งตะนะ
Five kilometres before Khong Jiam you can cross the Pak Mun dam to little **Kaeng Tana National Park** (☎0 4540 6888; admission 100B). After circling thickly forested Don

Tana (Tana Island), linked to the mainland by a small suspension bridge, Mae Nam Mun roils through its beautiful namesake rapids and passes below some photogenic cliffs. In the rainy season the rapids lie under water; and toward the end of the dry season naturally cut holes in the rock, similar to those at Sam Phan Bok (see boxed text, p442), emerge. Beyond the rapids and the adjacent **visitor centre** (☺8am-6pm) there are good short walks to other waterfalls and viewpoints. The 1.5km clifftop trail to **Lan Pha Phueng** viewpoint is especially serene. **Nam Tok Tad Ton** is a wide and lovely waterfall just a 300m walk from the road that you'll pass as you drive into the park from the south.

There's a **campsite** (per person with own tent 30B, 4-/8-person tent hire 150/225B) and four **bungalows** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; 6/10 people 1000/2000B). The simple restaurant opens during the day only.

By road, the park is 14km from Khong Jiam. There's no public transport, but boats in town will take you upriver and drop you at the park for 800B. They'll wait a few hours for you to stroll around before bringing you back.

KHONG JIAM

โขงเจียม

Khong Jiam sits on a picturesque peninsula at the confluence of the Mekong River and Mae Nam Mun, which the Thais call **Mae Nam Song Si** (Two-Colour River) after the contrasting currents formed at the junction. In the rainy season the multicoloured merger is visible from the shore, but the rest of the year you'll need to go out in a boat to see it properly. (Or, in April, just before the rains begin, you can walk out.) A large boat that has a sunshade and can carry 10 people costs 350B, while you'll pay 200B in a tiny boat that holds two or three. The big boats can also take you to Kaeng Tana National Park (800B) or elsewhere along the Mekong River.

Above the town is **Wat Tham Khu Ha Sawan** (☺daylight hours). The awesome views alone are worth the trip, but this well-known temple also has a unique nine-pointed *chedi*, an all-white *bòht*, an impressive orchid garden and the body of the late abbot, Luang Pu Kam, on display in a glass case atop a flamboyant altar.

Naga fireballs (see the boxed text, p465) began appearing at Khong Jiam in 2005.

Sleeping & Eating

Khong Jiam doesn't get many *fa-ràng* visitors, but it's popular with Thais, so there's an abundance of lodging. There are several simple restaurants near the Mae Nam Song Si, including two pricey ones floating on the Mekong.

Tohsang Khongjiam Resort HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 4535 1174; www.tohsang.com; r incl breakfast 2355-3885B, villas 3530-7060B, Sedhapura pool villas 12,500-14,500B; 🍷@🍷) The glitz and gloss at this large resort-spa are somewhat incongruous for this stretch of rural Thailand, but it holds all the aces in the posh-accommodation stakes, and the prices for the rooms are fair for what you get. The 3rd-floor rooms have the best views. There's a good restaurant and a spa and it rents bikes and kayaks. It's 3.5km from town on the south bank of the river.

Banpak Mongkhon HOTEL \$

(☎0 4535 1352; www.mongkhon.com, in Thai; Th Kaewpradit; r 250-800B, f 2500B; 🍷@🍷) From the simple fan rooms to the four cute stilted wooden cottages, this place near the highway has friendly owners and lots of character, making it a great choice for any budget.

Apple Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 4535 1160; Th Kaewpradit; r 200-300B; 🍷) Behind a general store, the recently spruced up Apple has wooden buildings with concrete rooms below. It's the cheapest place in town and good enough for the price.

Khong Jiam Homestay HOMESTAY \$

(☎08 7448 9399; r 500B) Talk about yin and yang – these simple wooden cottages with mattresses on the floor sit in a patch of forest right next to the Tohsang Resort. There's no food, but you can cook over a fire, or splash out and eat next door. It's often empty, but sometimes it's full with groups from Bangkok. Call when you get to town and someone will pick you up.

Baansuan Rimnam Resort HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 9792 1204; Th Rimmoon; r incl breakfast 800-1000B; 🍷) This quiet, shady spot sits along Mae Nam Mun. The most expensive bungalows have terraces looking at the water through a line of trees. To get there, turn right at the school just before the temple.

Getting There & Away

All transport to town stops at the highway junction. The only direct bus to Ubon (77B, 2½ hours) leaves at 6am and returns to Khong Jiam at 2.30pm. You can also take one of the four morning *sǎng-tǎa-ou* to Phibun Mangsahan (40B, one hour) and continue from there. Buses to Bangkok (400B to 500B) leave at 7.30am (2nd class) and 4.30pm (1st class).

Apple Guesthouse has bikes (100B per day) and motorcyles (300B per day) for hire and Banpak Mongkok also rents motorcycles (200B per day).

PHA TAEM NATIONAL PARK อุทยานแห่งชาติผาแต้ม

Up the Mekong from Khong Jiam is a long cliff named Pha Taem, the centrepiece of unheralded **Pha Taem National Park** (☎0 4531 8026; admission 200B). From the top you get an awesome bird's-eye view across the river into Laos, and you can see the first sunset in Thailand. Down below a trail passes prehistoric rock paintings dating to at least 1000 BC. Mural subjects include *Blah bèuk* (giant Mekong catfish), elephants, human hands, fish traps (looking much like the huge ones still used today) and geometric designs. The second viewing platform fronts the most impressive batch. A clifftop **visitor centre** (☎7.30am-sunset) contains exhibits pertaining to the paintings and local ecology.

North of the cliff is **Nam Tok Soi Sawan**, a 25m-tall waterfall flowing from June to December. It's a 19km drive from the visitor centre and then a 500m walk, or you can hike (with a ranger) for about 15km along the top of the cliff. What the park calls **Thailand's largest flower field** (blooming November to February) lies near the falls.

The northern half of the park holds more waterfalls, ancient art and wonderful views. **Pa Cha Na Dai** cliff serves Thailand's first sunrise view (Pha Taem is about one minute behind) and amazing **Nam Tok Saeng Chan** flows through a hole cut into the overhanging rock. Scattered across the 340-sq-km park are many oddly eroded rocks, including four sites known as **Sao Chaliang**, which are mushroom-shaped stone formations similar to those found in Mukdahan's Phu Pha Theop National Park.

Pha Taem has **campsites** (per person with own tent 30B, 2-/6-person tent hire 125/300B), **cabins** (4 people 300B) and five **bungalows** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; 6-person bungalows with fan 1200B, 5-person with

SAM PHAN BOK

Visit Sam Phan Bok (3000 Holes) and you'll feel as much like you're visiting another planet as another country. Eons of erosion have made Swiss cheese of this narrow, rocky Mekong bend, creating the most stunning moment of the river's epic journey. The river drowns it during the rainy season, but when it's fully exposed (usually between December and May) you can explore for hours. Even in the shoulder months, when it only partly protrudes, it's still worth the trip for a look from the cliff above. Boat rides beyond Sam Phan Bok are also very rewarding. There's no shade out here, so early-morning and late-afternoon visits are best.

It's just north of Pha Taem National Park, near the village of Ban Song Khon, and there's no public transport anywhere near it. You can camp there, and a few people even hire tents. The nearest accommodation is in the village overlooking Hat Salung, a lovely stretch of river in its own right. **Song Khon Resort** (☎08 7256 1696; www.songkhonresort.com, in Thai; r 500-700B) has adequate rooms and a great location. Definitely book ahead on weekends and holidays during Sam Phan Bok season.

air-con 2000B; ☎). Vendors sell snacks and fast food near the visitor centre until about sunset.

Pha Taem is 18km from Khong Jiam via Rte 2112. There's no public transport, so the best way to get there is to hire a motorcycle in Khong Jiam (from 200B).

CHONG MEK

ช่องเม็ก

South of Khong Jiam, at the end of Rte 217, is the small border town of Chong Mek. The opening of the bridge in Mukdahan has reduced traffic on this route and stolen much of the bustle from the Chong Mek market, which used to be a big hit with Thai tourists. If you get stuck here after hours, there are several cheap guest houses north of the market.

The little bus terminal down the road from the border serves *sōrng-tāa-ou* to Phibun (40B, one hour, every 20 minutes), vans to Ubon (100B, 1¼ hours, every half-hour) and buses to Bangkok (392B to 544B, 10 hours, five daily). There's no public transport

between Chong Mek and Khong Jiam; either go through Phibun or hire a motorcycle taxi/túk-túk for 200/350B.

PHU CHONG NAYOI NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติทองนาฮอย

Sitting at the heart of the 'Emerald Triangle' is the little-known **Phu Chong Nayoi National Park** (☎0 4541 1515; admission 200B), one of Thailand's wildest corners and healthiest forests. Resident fauna includes elephants, tigers, Malayan sun bears, barking deer, gibbons, black hornbills and endangered white-winged ducks.

The park's primary attraction is **Nam Tok Huay Luang**, which plunges 40m over a cliff in two parallel streams. A short trail leads to the top and you can walk down 274 steps to the bottom where you can swim, though the water dries up around March. Rangers love taking visitors on short bamboo-raft trips (200B to 300B) above the falls, though water levels are too low from February to April and occasionally too high when it rains. At the far end of the 687-sq-km park, from atop **Phu Hin Drang**, there are superb views of the surrounding countryside, which looks much like the view from Pha Taem cliff (p441) but with jungle instead of the Mekong at the bottom of the valley. It's a 50km drive from the main park entrance and then a 5km hike or tractor ride.

Stargazing is superb here, so consider spending the night. There are three **bungalows** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/park reserve; 4-/6-person bungalows 600/1200B) plus a **campsite** (per person with own tent 30B, 6-person tent hire 300B). Snacks and drinks are available daily and a couple of restaurants

BORDER CROSSING: CHONG MEK TO VANGTAO

The crossing here is largely hassle free. Visas can be bought on the spot and buses wait for passengers to complete the paperwork (see p770 for details). Lao officials will probably try to extract 'stamping fees', but they're usually not too insistent. Pakse is about 45 minutes by road and if you didn't arrive on the direct bus, it's easy to catch a ride here.

operate on weekends and holidays, but only during the day.

From Ubon catch one of the four morning buses to the town of Na Chaluai (70B, three hours) where *túk-túk* cost about 400B for the 20km journey to the park. You could also get off before Na Chaluai at Ban Gang Reuang, 5km from the park, and try to hitch, but traffic is light in this area.

CHAIYAPHUM PROVINCE

Travelling through Chaiyaphum Province, you're almost as likely to run into a tiger as a foreign tourist – and this is not a province with lots of tigers. Geographically it's at the heart of the country, but realistically it's a remote region that remains something of a mystery to Thais, who know only of the Siam Tulips (Dok Krachiao) that bloom a bright purple and pink in several parks around the province between June and August. For travellers, the primary appeal is the peace and quiet and sense of straying off the beaten track.

Chaiyaphum

POP 55,500

ชัยภูมิ

Chaiyaphum is a bit of a nowhere town used mostly as a base for visiting surrounding attractions rather than a destination in itself. Fashionistas should head west to the silk village of Ban Khwao and the outdoorsy should hit the mountains. There are several national parks in the province, of which Tat Ton is the easiest to reach.

👁️ Sights

Chaiyaphum's attractions define modest.

Just east of the city, **Prang Ku** is a small Khmer *prang* constructed during the reign of the final Angkor king, Jayavarman VII (1181–1219), as a place of worship at a 'healing station' on the route between the Angkor capital in Cambodia and Prasat Singh in Kanchanaburi Province. The Buddha figure inside the *ku* (stupa) purportedly hails from the Dvaravati period (6th to 10th centuries).

Built in 1950 as the governor's residence and now restored as a museum, **Tamnak Keow** (Green Hall; Th Burapha; admission free; ☉9am–4pm) has ho-hum displays of pottery, *mât-mêe* cloth and photos from King Rama IX's 1955 visit. Ask the guard to find the man with the key. The nearby **Chaiyaphum**

Cultural Centre (Th Bannakan; admission free; ☉8am–4pm Mon–Sat) has mock-ups of traditional homes. Ask for the key in the room at the top of the stairs.

🌟 Festivals

Chaiyaphum residents celebrate two nine-day festivals in honour of Jao Pho Phraya Lae, a Lao court official who settled this area in the 18th century and later strategically switched allegiances to Bangkok when Chao Anou from Vientiane declared war on the more powerful (and eventually victorious) Siam in the early 19th century.

The **Jao Pho Phraya Lae Fair** starts on 12 January, the date of his death, and takes place around his statue at the entrance to town. A **Jao Pho Phraya Lae Offering Ceremony** takes place during April or May at the same time as Bun Duean Hok (an Isan merit-making event) at a lakeside shrine erected where he was killed, about 3km southwest of the centre. Both events feature an elephant parade.

🛏 Sleeping

Deeprom Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 4482 2222; www.d-promhotel.com; 339/9 Th Bannakan; r 800–900B, ste 1800B; 🏠☎) With its crazy colour scheme and bold boast (the name means 'perfect'), this hotel demands attention. Rooms are less flashy, but fair for the price.

Tonkoon Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4481 7881; 379 Th Bannakan; r 500B; 🏠☎) Rooms rather resemble a college dorm; nevertheless, this spick-and-span 'mansion' standard hotel is a good choice at this price.

Siam River Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

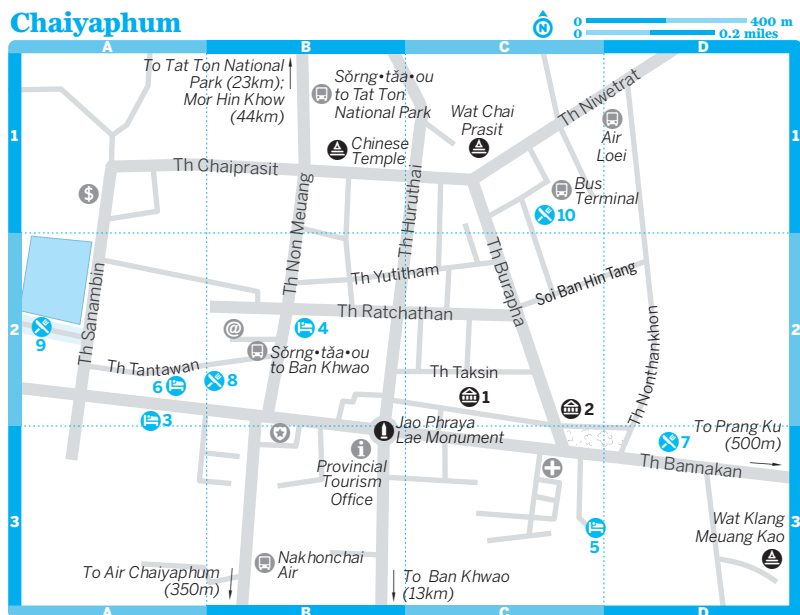
(☎0 4481 1999; www.siamriverresort.com; Th Bannakan; r 990–2900B, bungalows 2900–5500B; 🏠☎☎☎) Chaiyaphum's top spot is in the city centre, but hidden out of earshot of the hubbub of the city – what little there is, anyway. Guests get free use of bicycles.

Ratanasiri Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4482 1258; 667/19 Th Non Meuang; r 200–500B; 🏠☎) This dowdy giant is a great choice for those on a budget, but if you're planning on spending in the upper price range head for Tonkoon because rooms at Ratanasiri don't get much better as the price rises. Smiling staff make up for the lack of atmosphere and there's wi-fi in the lobby.

Chaiyaphum



Chaiyaphum

Sights

- 1 Chaiyaphum Cultural CentreC2
- 2 Tamnak KeeowC2

Sleeping

- 3 Deeprom Hotel.....A2
- 4 Ratanasiri HotelB2
- 5 Siam River Resort.....C3
- 6 Tonkoon Hotel.....A2

Eating

- 7 Chorragah Lahp Gory.....D3
- 8 Jae Hai TekB2
- 9 Night Bazaar.....A2
- 10 Night Market.....C1

Eating

Chaiyaphum's signature food is *mahm* (sour beef and liver) sausages, but they're an acquired taste and don't make it onto many menus.

Night Bazaar

THAI \$
(☺4-11pm) This street market west of downtown is a better foraging destination than the night market by the bus station.

Chorragah Lahp Gory

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; 299/21 Th Bannakan; dishes 20-80B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) With its concrete floor, corrugated-metal roof and old-time foods, like the namesake *gory* (raw beef with lemon, chilli, fish sauce and extra blood), this no-nonsense Isan eatery takes diners back to the village. The partial picture menu gets you through the language barrier.

Jae Hai Tek

VEGAN \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Tantawan; dishes 25-40B; ☺breakfast & lunch; ☑) Unlike most Thai *jae* restaurants, which only have a buffet tray, this hole in the wall cooks up food to order using mock chicken, cuttlefish (*Blah mèuk*) and more. Either ask for your favourite dish or point to the pictures hanging on the gate.

Information

Pat Pat (Th Non Meuang; internet per hr 15B; ☺11am-10pm) Friendly internet cafe and coffee shop. English-speaking owner Bun is a good source of information about Chaiyaphum and there's a tiny book exchange.

Provincial Tourism Office (☎0 4481 1376; Th Bannakan; ☺8am-4pm)

Tesco-Lotus (Th Sanambin) Has an AEON ATM and the city centre's only bank open evenings and weekends.

i Getting There & Away

Khon Kaen (58B to 81B, 2½ hours, hourly) and Khorat (78B to 101B, 2½ hours, every half-hour) buses leave from Chaiyaphum's **bus terminal** (☎0 4481 1344). So do some buses for Bangkok (196B to 252B, five hours); however, most people travel to Bangkok with **Air Chaiyaphum** (☎0 4481 1556) and **Air Loei** (☎0 4481 1446), which have their own terminals. They both charge 252B for 1st class and 294B for VIP. Air Loei also has a midnight VIP departure (392B).

Nakhonchai Air (☎0 4481 2522) runs six buses between Ubon Ratchathani (234B to 347B, seven hours, between 10.40pm and 4.40am) and Chiang Mai (370B to 716B, 11 hours, between 7.10pm and 1.10am), also from its own station. The office is back behind the orange gate.

i Getting Around

A túk-túk should cost no more than 30B for any destination in town.

Around Chaiyaphum

BAN KHWAO

บ้านหว้า

Most visitors to Chaiyaphum make a stop in the silk town of Ban Khwao, 13km to the southwest on Rte 225, where many shops sell fabric and clothing. The town is known for its low prices due to the *mát-mèe* fabrics (see boxed text, p453) being rather thin. Most weaving is now done in other villages, but several families here still have looms under their houses. Actually, these days embroidery is all the rage and many women use their sewing machines as often as their looms. The **Silk Development Centre** (no roman-script sign; admission free; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) by the market has a small display about *mát-mèe*, but no longer arranges tours.

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou to Ban Khwao (20B, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes) park near Pat Pat internet cafe in Chaiyaphum.

TAT TON NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติตาดโตน

A scenic little spot on the edge of the Laenkha mountain range, **Tat Ton National Park** (☎0 4485 3333; admission 200B) is 23km north of the city. Covering 218 sq km, Tat Ton is best known for its photogenic namesake waterfall, which is only 6m tall but stretches to 50m wide during the May-to-October rainy season. Some people think it's more beautiful from January to April, because the water is clearer then. Smaller **Tat Fah** waterfall, about 20km from Tat Ton, functions as a 20m waterslide during the rainy season.

The park has **campsites** (per person with own tent 30B, 2-/6-person tent hire 280/660B) and **bungalows** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; 2-14 people 600-3500B), scenically situated along the river, plus several simple restaurants.

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou (35B, one hour) from Chaiyaphum pass the park entrance (a hilly 1.5km walk from the falls) frequently in the morning, but there are few after 9.30am and sometimes none after 1pm, so it's usually faster to hitchhike back to town.

KHON KAEN PROVINCE

Khon Kaen Province, the gateway to Isan for those arriving from northern Thailand, serves up an interesting mix of old and new. Farming and textiles still dominate life in the countryside, while things are booming in the increasingly modern capital city.

THE STONEHENGE OF THAILAND

Mor Hin Khaw (☎0 4481 0903; admission free), the most popular part of Phu Laenkha National Park, means 'hill with white rocks' in Isan, but tourism boosters decided a more creative moniker was needed and dubbed it 'The Stonehenge of Thailand'. It features a line of five natural stone pinnacles with tapered bottoms that rise to 15m and in no way resemble their namesake. Between these and the sunset-perfect **Pha Hua Nak** (Naga-head Cliff), another 2.5km up the mountain, are three more fields of less dramatic but still oddly sculpted rocks and an observation tower. It's a lovely and peaceful place to explore, and on weekdays you'll probably have it all to yourself.

Camping (2-/4-person tent hire 100/200B) at the little visitor centre is free, but bring your own food because the restaurants have limited weekend and holiday hours.

It's 21km northwest of Tat Ton National Park on a well-signposted route. There's no public transport.

Khon Kaen

POP 145,300

As the site of the northeast's largest university and an important hub for all things commercial and financial, Khon Kaen is youthful, educated and on the move. It's the kind of place that's more likely to land on a best-places-to-live list than a traveller's itinerary, but there are enough interesting attractions and good facilities to make a stop worthwhile.

Khon Kaen has ridden Isan's economic boom for all it's worth, filling the streets with traffic and draping a sterile concrete veneer over most of the town. But make no mistake, Isan's idiosyncratic appeal is still here, you just have to work a little harder to uncover it these days.

Sights

BUENG KAEN NAKHON

บึงแก่นนคร

This 100-hectare lake is the most pleasant place in town to spend some time, and the paths hugging its shore link quite a few interesting places. There's bike hire at the market and down along the west shore across from Wat Klang Muang Kao; the latter has two- and three-seaters (20B per hour per seat).

Wat Nong Wang

TEMPLE

(วัดหนองแวง; Th Robbung; ☺daylight hours) Down at the south end of the lake, **Phra Mahathat Kaen Nakhon** (☺8am-6pm), the stunning stupa at the heart of this important temple, is Khon Kaen's one must-see. It features enlightening murals depicting Isan culture; various historical displays, including a collection of rare Buddha images on the 4th floor; and a 9th-floor observation deck.

Mahesak Shrine

SHRINE

(ศาลเจ้าพ่อมเหศักดิ์; Th Robbung) This modern Khmer-style *prang* is dedicated to the Hindu god Indra. It's almost spooky at night.

Rim Bueng Kaen Nakhon Market

MARKET

(ตลาดริมบึงแก่นนคร; Th Robbung; ☺4-10pm) This fun little market, in the shadow of the soaring *bòht* and *chedi* of **Wat That**, features food, shopping and paint-your-own pottery stalls. During the day there are paddleboats for hire (30B per half-hour).

Khon Kaen City Museum

MUSEUM

(โสมนังมั่งเมืองขอนแก่น; Th Robbung; admission 90B; ☺9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Inside the amphitheatre, the well-done Hong Moon Mung museum provides a good introduction to Isan with

dioramas and displays going back to the Jurassic period.

Sanjao Bueng Tao Gong Ma

TEMPLE

(ศาลเจ้าปึงถางจมา; Th Robbung) Sometimes called Sanjao Bueng Kaen Nakhon, this is Khon Kaen's biggest and most beautiful Chinese temple. There's a large Guan-Im (Chinese Goddess of Mercy) statue in the park across the street.

Wat Pho Ban Nontan

TEMPLE

(วัดโพธิ์โนนพัน; Th Phot Thisan; ☺daylight hours) Just off the lake, this peaceful tree-filled temple pre-dates the city and has a *sàh-lah* like no other in Thailand. The ground floor is covered with ingeniously sculpted trees, animals and village scenes of people acting out old Isan proverbs.

One Pillar Pagoda

SHRINE

(ศาลเจาศาเดียง; Th Robbung) This replica of Hanoi's iconic temple was built by Khon Kaen's sizeable Vietnamese community. It's a good sunset-watching spot.

ELSEWHERE IN KHON KAEN

Khon Kaen National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติขอนแก่น; Th Lang Sunratchakan; admission 100B; ☺9am-4pm Wed-Sun) This interesting collection of artefacts spans pre-historic times to the present. Highlights are Ban Chiang pottery and a beautiful Dvaravati *sàir-mah* (temple boundary marker) depicting Princess Pimpa cleaning Lord Buddha's feet with her hair. The household and agricultural displays shed light on what you'll see out in the countryside.

Wat Tham Uthayan

TEMPLE

(วัดธรรมอุทยาน; Th Mittaphap; ☺daylight hours) This peaceful temple, 10km north of the city, has many beautiful monuments, including a 23m-tall white walking Buddha image, spread across its vast grounds. It has become a well-known meditation centre because rather than teaching a formal method, Luang Po Gluai encourages people to find their own path to inner peace. Take *sòrng-tàa-ou* 4 (15B) from Na Muang or Prachasamoson streets.

Art & Culture University Museum

MUSEUM

(หอศิลป์วัฒนธรรม มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น; admission free; ☺10am-7pm) The focus of Khon Kaen University's cultural showcase is the two-storey art gallery, which features monthly installations of both student and professional work. The **Educational Museum** (admission free; ☺8.30am-4.30pm) upstairs and in the

back provides a brief intro to Isan culture, but only if you can read Thai.



Activities

Two tour companies based in Khon Kaen can show you around town or take you across Isan.

Khon Kaen Education & Travel Programs

TOURS

(☎08 3359 9115; www.tourisaan.com) Aims a little more for leisure travellers. Some trips include quiet-water kayaking on the Nam Phong River near Ubonrat Dam.

Veena Spa

MESSAGE COURSE

(☎08 9711 8331; veenaspaa@gmail.com; Soi Supatheera) Teaches Thai massage in English.



Festivals

The **Silk Fair** and **Phuk Siaw Festival** are held simultaneously over 12 days starting in late November. Centred on the *sāh-lah glahng*, the festival celebrates and seeks to preserve the tradition of *pòok sèe-o* (friend bonding), a ritual union of friends during which *fāi pòok káan* (sacred threads) are tied around one's wrists. More than just a symbolic act, the friends gain a standing on par with siblings in each other's families. Other activities include a parade, Isan music and lots of shopping.



Sleeping

Piman Garden

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 4333 4111; Th Glang Meuang; r 850-1250B, ste 1450-1650B; ☎@☎) Set back off the road around an attractive garden, Piman offers serenity and privacy despite its city-centre location. All come with safes and fridges plus most have balconies or porches. Even with the new higher prices, it's still a good choice.

Glacier Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 4333 4999; www.glacier-hotel.com; Soi Na Muang 25; s incl breakfast 1800-2100B, d incl breakfast 2050-2350B; ☎@☎☎) This trendy boutique hotel, shaped like a giant ice cube and sticking firmly to a white-and-blue colour code, works its 'cool' angle a bit hard, but overall it's lovely and fun. All rooms have individual designs and all the mod cons they should at these prices.

Charoenchit House

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4322 7300; www.chousekhonkaen.com; Th Chuanchun; r 400-600B; ☎@☎) Viewed from the outside, you don't expect to find much

to get excited about inside these two stark white towers north of the lake. But at both the basic 400B level and attractively decorated 600B level the rooms have a fair amount of va-va-voom for the price.

KK Centrum

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 1574 0507; www.kk-centrum.com; 33/17-18 Soi Supatheera; r incl breakfast 650-850B; ☎☎) What seems like an ordinary small Thai hotel sets itself apart in the details. All rooms have high-quality furnishings and the owner, who lives on site, is serious about service. It's also quiet because it's built in the back of the block.

Saen Samran Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4323 9611; 55-59 Th Glang Meuang; s/d 200/250B; @☎) The city's oldest hotel is also its most charismatic, with the wooden upper floor clinging to its once-upon-a-time glory. The rooms are worn but clean and the owner is a good source of Khon Kaen advice.

Pullman Raja Orchid

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 4332 2155; www.pullmanhotels.com; off Th Prachasumran; r incl breakfast 2725-2950B, ste 3450-5450B; ☎@☎☎) A stunning lobby sets the tone for one of Isan's best hotels. This international-standard Accor-run place in the heart of the city has plenty of razzle-dazzle, including a luxurious spa and gym, a microbrewery and well-equipped rooms. Definitely pay the extra 225B to move up to the Superior level which gets you a recently renovated room and a better view.

Roma Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4333 4444; Th Glang Meuang; r 230-1000B; ☎☎) A simple but effective renovation has cheered up what would otherwise be a depressing old building, making the cheaper rooms good value. Boutique rooms, costing an extra 100B, are more colourful but less tasteful, and at the upper prices you'd be better off staying elsewhere.

Grand Leo Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4332 7745; 62-62/1 Th Sichant; r 350-450B; ☎) This humdrum place, around the corner from Khon Kaen's nightlife district, is functional albeit a little frumpy.

Biggie & Biggie Place

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 4332 2999; Th Robbung; r 650-800B; ☎☎) If you're in Khon Kaen to relax rather than live it up, this hotel at the foot of the lake is a good bet. Rooms are rather bland, but not bad overall.

Khon Kaen

📍 Sights

- 1 Khon Kaen City Museum C4
- 2 Mahesak Shrine C4
- 3 Rim Bueng Kaen Nakhon Market C4
- 4 San Jao Bueng Tao Gong Ma C4
- 5 Wat Pho Ban Nontan D4

🏠 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 6 Centrum Spa B2

🏠 Sleeping

- 7 Charoenchit House C3
- 8 Glacier Hotel B3
- 9 Grand Leo Hotel B2
- KK Centrum (see 6)
- 10 Piman Garden C1
- 11 Pullman Raja Orchid B2
- 12 Roma Hotel C1
- 13 Saen Samran Hotel C1

🍴 Eating

- 14 Dee Dee B3
- 15 First Choice C1
- 16 Food Stalls C1
- 17 Hom Krun B3
- 18 Night Market B3
- Pavilion Café (see 11)
- 19 Plapanoy C4
- 20 Pomodoro B2
- 21 Restaurant Didine B2
- Rim Bueng Kaen Nakhon Market .. (see 3)

- 22 Slove U C4
- 23 Tasty Chocolat B4
- 24 Turm-Rom C3

🎮 Entertainment

- 25 Central Plaza A2
- 26 Fairy Plaza B3
- 27 Rad A3
- 28 U-Bar B2

🛍 Shopping

- 29 International Books, Travel and More B2
- 30 Prathammakant B3
- 31 Rin Thai Silk B3
- 32 Sueb San C1
- 33 Talat Banglamphu C2
- 34 Talat Bobae C2
- The Souvenir (see 12)

📍 Information

- 35 Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) C1
- Très Bien Travel (see 13)
- 36 Tukcom B2

🚗 Transport

- 37 Air-conditioned Bus Terminal C2
- 38 Narujee B2
- 39 Ordinary Bus Terminal B1
- THAI office (see 13)

this friendly closet-sized one, attractively cluttered with knick-knacks, is one of our favourites.

Hom Krun

THAI \$

(Th Reunrom; dishes 45-199B; 🍽lunch & dinner) Coffee shop by day, bar by night, the chill atmosphere and shady deck make this one of our favourite places in Khon Kaen.

Gai Yang Rabeab

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Theparak; dishes 30-160B; 🍽lunch) Most Thais believe Khon Kaen Province makes Thailand's best *gài yâhng* and this simple joint, serving an all-Isan menu, gets the most nods as best of the best in the city since both the owners and the chickens come from Khao Suan Kwang, the most hyped *gài yâhng* town in the province.

Tawantong

VEGAN \$

(Th Lang Sunratchakan; dishes 25-35B; 🍽breakfast & lunch; 🌱) This large, all-veggie, health-food buffet sits across from the National Muse-

um. The food is so good it also gets many carnivorous diners.

Plapanoy

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Robbung; dishes 30-250B; 🍽lunch & dinner) This large alfresco spot near Bueng Kaen Nakhon is where locals bring out-of-town guests to sample genuine Isan food. Fish is the speciality.

Restaurant Didine

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Th Prachasumran; dishes 45-355B; 🍽dinner) Didine's French chef-owner whips up swanky *fa-ràng* food, such as red snapper with saffron, that you wouldn't expect to find in Khon Kaen. His Italian dishes disappoint.

Pomodoro

ITALIAN \$\$

(Soi Khlong Nam; dishes 140-320B; 🍽dinner; 🍷) The best Italian in town, bar none.

Pavilion Café

INTERNATIONAL \$\$\$

(Th Prachasumran; breakfast/lunch/dinner 400/460/660B; 🍽breakfast, lunch & dinner)

The Pullman hotel's principal restaurant features an excellent international buffet. The nearby Kosa Hotel has a similar but smaller set-up for half the price.

First Choice INTERNATIONAL-THAI \$
(Th Pimpassut; dishes 40-250B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📶📶) The closest thing Khon Kaen has to a backpacker hostel, First Choice serves the standard guest-house menu of local and *fa-ràng* dishes, the only difference is that the Thai food isn't bad. The no-frills rooms upstairs (150B to 200B) are cheap for good reason.

Tasty Chocolat CAFE \$
(☎0 08 9572 7997; Th Nikorn Samrann; ☺lunch & dinner; 📶) Isan's very own gourmet chocolate shop.

★ Entertainment

Rad NIGHTCLUB
(Th Prachasumran) The exuberant anchor of Khon Kaen's downtown nightlife, this is a multifaceted place with live music, DJs, karaoke, 'coyote' dancers and an alfresco restaurant.

U-Bar NIGHTCLUB
(Soi Khlong Nam) Almost exclusively the domain of Khon Kaen University students, U-Bar is smaller than Rad, but just as loud and crowded.

Central Plaza CINEMA
(Th Sichant) Khon Kaen's glossiest shopping mall screens movies in English and has a bowling alley.

🛍 Shopping

Khon Kaen is the best place to buy Isan handicrafts.

TOP CHOICE **Walking Street Market** MARKET
(Th Na Soon Ratchakan; ☺6-11pm Sat) In the spirit of Chiang Mai's street markets, hundreds of vendors, many of them students, gather to sell handmade handbags, T-shirts, postcards, picture frames and more; and almost nothing costs more than 150B. Dancers, musicians and other buskers work strategic corners.

Prathamkant HANDICRAFTS
(Th Reunrom; ☺9am-7.30pm) By far the largest and best selection of handicrafts in town, including an impressively large choice of silk, this well-known shop makes a perfect one-stop shop.

Phrae Pan HANDICRAFTS
(131/193 Th Chatapadung) Run by the Handicraft Center for Northeastern Women's Development, this out-of-the-way store (near the Vietnamese consulate) has a superb selection of natural-dyed, handwoven silk and cotton, which is produced in nearby villages.

Souvenir FOOD
(46/3 Th Glang Meuang; ☺7am-8pm) Few Thai visitors leave Khon Kaen without stuffing their suitcase full of local foods: *gun chee-ang* (red pork sausages) are especially popular. *Kà-nòm tùa* (sweets made with peanuts) and *kà-nòm tan-yá-pêut* (sweets made with seeds) are another local specialty and this business has been making its own for nearly a century. Free samples are available.

Sueb San HANDICRAFTS
(no roman-script sign; 16 Th Glang Meuang; ☺8am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) More accessible than Phrae Phan, this store also stocks natural-dyed fabrics, plus some atypical handmade souvenirs.

Rin Thai Silk HANDICRAFTS
(412 Th Na Meuang) Many locals, especially brides-to-be, looking for top-quality silk shop here.

Talat Bobae & Talat Banglamphu MARKETS
(Th Glang Meuang) There's little here that could qualify as a souvenir, but these side-by-side markets, home to fresh foods, household goods and secondhand clothes make for good browsing.

International Books, Travel & More BOOKS
(Soi 4, Th Sichant; ☺9am-6pm Mon-Sat) For secondhand books.

📍 Information

Consulates

Laos (☎0 4324 2857; Th Prachasamoson; ☺8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) Visas take 15 to 30 minutes. Payment is by baht only, and at a poor exchange rate, so it's much cheaper to pay in dollars at the border.

Vietnam (☎0 4324 2190; www.vietnamconsulate-khonkaen.org/en; 65/6 Th Chatapadung; ☺9-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Apply in the morning and pick up in the afternoon.

Emergency & Medical Services

Khon Kaen Ram Hospital (☎0 4333 3800; Th Sichant) Has a 24-hour emergency room.

Tourist Police (☎0 4322 6195; Th Mittaphap) South of town next to HomePro.

Internet Access

Finding an internet cafe in Khon Kaen isn't too tough. Insomniacs can head to **S-Force** (Th Na Meuang; per hr 17B; ☎24hr).

Money

Khon Kaen's three largest shopping malls, **Central Plaza** (Th Sichant), **TukCom** (Th Sichant) and **Fairy Plaza** (Th Na Meuang) have banks open evening and weekend hours. Central and Fairy have AEON ATMs.

Post

Main post office (Th Glang Meuang; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays) Has a small postal museum.

Tourist Information

Immigration (☎0 4346 5242; Hwy 2; ☎8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) North of town, near the entrance to Khon Kaen University.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☎0 4324 4498; tatkhkn@tat.or.th; Th Prachasamon; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Distributes maps of the city and can answer question about the surrounding provinces too.

Travel Agencies

Très Bien Travel (☎0 4332 2155; Pullman Raja Orchid, off Th Prachasumran; ☎8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat)

i Getting There & Away

Air

THAI (☎0 4322 7701; www.thaiairways.com; Pullman Raja Orchid, off Th Prachasumran; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Fri) operates three daily flights between Bangkok and Khon Kaen (2600B one way).

Several hotels, including the Pullman and Piman Garden send shuttles (70B) to meet flights at Khon Kaen Airport and you don't need to be staying at the hotels to use them.

Bus

Khon Kaen is a busy transport hub and you can ride directly to nearly all cities in Isan and many beyond. A new air-conditioned bus terminal has been built on the ring road south of town, but we're skeptical that it will be operational any time soon. For now the **ordinary bus terminal** (☎0 4333 3388; Th Prachasamon) and the **air-conditioned bus terminal** (☎0 4023 9910; Th Glang Meuang) are central and convenient. The air-con terminal should

be called the '1st-class and VIP bus terminal', since 2nd-class air-con (and some 1st-class) buses use the ordinary terminal. The best VIP service to Bangkok (512B) is with **Nakhonchai Air** (☎0 2936 0009), departing at 11.15am, 11.15pm and 11.20pm, and **999 VIP** (☎0 4323 7300) at 11pm. You must already have a Lao visa to buy a ticket to Vientiane (180B, four hours, 7.45am and 3.15pm) at the air-con terminal.

BUSES FROM THE ORDINARY BUS TERMINAL

DESTINATION	COST (B)	DURATION (HR)
Chaiyaphum	58-81	2½
Khorat	118	3
Loei	129	3½
Mukdahan	155	4½
Nakhon Phanom	221	5
Nong Khai	110	3½
Phitsanulok	202-223	6
Roi Et	73-94	2½
Udon Thani	76	2

BUSES FROM THE AIR-CONDITIONED BUS TERMINAL

DESTINATION	COST (B)	DURATION (HR)
Bangkok	329-512	6-7
Chiang Mai	437-504	12
Khorat	118-230	3
Nakhon Phanom	221	5
Mukdahan	187	4
Nong Khai	139	3½
Phitsanulok	290	6
Suvarnabhumi (Airport) bus station	335	6½
Ubon Ratchathani	216-252	4½
Udon Thani	101	2

Train

There is one morning and two early-evening express trains between Bangkok (2nd-class air-con 399B, 1st-class sleeper upper/lower 968/1168B, eight hours) and **Khon Kaen Railway Station** (☎0 4322 1112). There's also a cheaper evening rapid train. Four trains to Udon Thani (3rd-class 25B, 2nd-class air-con 117B, 1½ to two hours) leave in the afternoon and early morning; only the morning trains continue to Nong Khai.

i Getting Around

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou (9B) ply regular routes across the city. Some of the handiest (all of which pass the air-con terminal on Th Glang Meung) are line 8, which goes to Wat Nong Wang and also northwest through the university; line 10, which passes in front of the Lao and near the Vietnamese consulates (the latter is 150m north of the stoplight east of Khon Kaen Hospital); line 11, which passes the train station; and line 21 (orange), which goes out to the National Museum.

For individual rides, *túk-túk* are the most expensive way to get around (expect 40B to 60B for a short trip in town), but they're the method most people use because it's rare to find **metered taxis** (☎0 4346 5777, 0 4334 2800; 30B flagfall, 20B call fee) on the street and when you call for one you usually have to wait a long time. About the only place you're likely to find a taxis or motorcycle taxis (within town 20-30B) parked is at the bus stations and Central Plaza shopping mall.

There are many car-hire outlets around Tuk-Com mall; **Narujee** (☎0 4322 4220; Soi Kosa), which charges from 1200B for a car with driver, is a reliable choice.

Around Khon Kaen

CHONNABOT

ชนบท

This small town located 55km southwest of Khon Kaen is one of Thailand's most successful silk villages and is famous for producing top-quality *mát-mèe*. The **Sala Mai Thai** (no Roman-script sign; ☎0 4328 6160; admission free; ☀9am-5pm Thu-Tue) is a silk-weaving museum on the campus of Khon Kaen Industrial & Community Education College where you can learn about the entire silk-making process, and even take a turn at a loom. Out back is an exhibition hall showing the wooden contraptions devised to spin, tie, dye and weave silk by hand in the village and a large machine used in factories. A room upstairs cata-

THE ORCHID PARK

If you're visiting Chonnabot between late December and early February (exact dates depend on the weather), take time for a detour to **Wat Pa Mancha Khiri** (☀daylight hours), 11km to the west. During this time thousands of foxtail (aka Chang Kra) orchids fill the temple grounds. The local TAT office (p451) will know the exact dates.

logues traditional *mát-mèe* patterns and a pair of mock-Isan houses hold various traditional household items. It's on the highway 1km west of town.

The pavilion sells silk too, but most people buy from the myriad shops on Th Sriboonruang, aka **Silk Road**, some of which also stock attractive cotton fabrics made in the nearby village of Ban Lawaan. If you get away from the centre of town, particularly to the north near the temple and school, you'll often see women working looms under their houses and they rarely mind if you stop by to take a look.

Buses bound for Nakhon Sawan, departing from Khon Kaen's ordinary bus terminal, will drop you in Chonnabot (39B, one hour, six daily). Or take a bus (30B to 40B, one hour, every half-hour) or train (9B, 30 minutes) to Ban Phai, where you can get a bus to Chonnabot (15B, 20 minutes, every hour).

PRASAT PUAY NOI

ปราสาทเขื่อนน้อย

The 12th-century **Prasat Puay Noi** (admission free; ☀daylight hours) is the largest and most interesting Khmer ruin in northern Isan, though it can't compete with even some of the not-so-famous ruins further south. About the size of Buriram's Prasat Muang Tam, but less grand, the east-facing monument comprises a large central sandstone sanctuary surmounted by three partially collapsed *prang* and surrounded by laterite walls. There are still some excellent carvings intact, including Shiva riding his bull Nandi, on the pediment on the back of the 'library' and some almost lifelike *naga* on the corner of the main gate.

By public transport from Khon Kaen, catch a bus (30B to 40B, every half-hour) or train (9B, 30 minutes, 7.55am or 8.39am) to Ban Phai, then a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to Puay Noi (35B, one hour). The last *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* back to Ban Phai leaves at 2pm. If you have your own wheels, head 40km south from Khon Kaen on Hwy 2 to Ban Phai, then east on Hwy 23 (signposted to Borabu) for 11km to Rte 2301. Follow it and Rte 2297 for 24km southeast through the rural countryside to Ban Puay Noi.

PHU WIANG NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูเวียง

Uranium miners discovered a giant patella bone in this region in 1976 and the palaeontologists who were called to investigate then unearthed a fossilised 15m-long herbivore

MÁT-MÈE

Thanks to growing interest from both Thais and foreigners, the once-fading Isan tradition of *mát-mèe* has undergone a major revival and is now one of Thailand's best-known weaving styles. Similar to Indonesian *ikat*, *mát-mèe* is a tie-dye process (*mát* is 'tie' and *mèe* is 'strands') that results in a geometric pattern repeatedly turning back on itself as it runs up the fabric.

To start, the weavers string their thread (either silk or cotton) tightly across a wooden frame sized exactly as wide as the finished fabric will be. Almost always working from memory, the weavers then tie plastic (traditionally the skin of banana plant stalks was used) around bunches of strands in their desired design. The frame is then dipped in the dye (nowadays usually a chemical colour, though natural sources such as flowers and tree bark are regaining popularity), which grips the exposed thread but leaves the wrapped sections clean. The wrapping and dipping continues for multiple rounds resulting in intricate, complex patterns that come to life on the loom. The more you see of the process, the more you understand how amazing it is that the finished product turns out so beautifully.

Most of the patterns, handed down from mother to daughter, are abstract representations of natural objects such as trees and birds, but increasingly designers are working with weaving groups to create modern patterns, which invariably fetch higher prices.

later named *Phuwiangosaurus sirindhornae* after Princess Sirindhorn. Dinosaur fever followed (explaining the epidemic of model dinosaurs in Khon Kaen), more remains were uncovered and **Phu Wiang National Park** (☎0 4335 8073; admission 200B) was born.

Enclosed **excavation sites** (☎8.30am-4.30pm), including one with a partial skeleton of *Siamotyrannus isanensis*, an early ancestor of *Tyrannosaurus rex*, can be easily reached by trails from the visitor centre or nearby parking areas. Those who want to explore further (best done by 4WD or mountain bike) will find dinosaur footprints, waterfalls and a superb viewpoint.

Phu Wiang Museum (☎0 4343 8204; ☎9am-5pm Tue-Sun; admission free), 5km before the park, has palaeontology and geology displays, including full-size models of the dinosaur species that once lived in the area. Kids will love it. They'll also go ape over the giant photogenic dinosaur statues in nearby **Si Wiang Dinosaur Park**. Wiang Kao, the district inside the horseshoe-shaped mountains that comprise the park, is a fruit-growing area and a great place to explore by car, if you want to look at traditional village life.

The park has one 12-person **bungalow** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; bungalows 1200B) and a **campsite** (per person with own tent 30B, 4-/6-person tent hire 400/600B). Simple food is available during the day only.

The park entrance is 90km west of Khon Kaen. Buses from Khon Kaen's ordinary bus terminal go to Phu Wiang town (40B to 50B, 1½ hours, every half-hour) where you can hire a tük-tük (400B return) or motorbike taxi (200B) for the remaining 19km to the park entrance. If you only pay for a one-way trip, you'll risk not being able to get a ride back.

NAM NAO NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติน้ำหนาว

One of Thailand's most valuable nature preserves, **Nam Nao National Park** (☎0 5681 0724; admission 200B) covers nearly 1000 sq km across the Phetchabun Mountains of Chaiyaphum and Phetchabun Provinces, just beyond Khon Kaen Province. Although it covers remote territory (this remained a People's Liberation Army of Thailand stronghold until the early 1980s), Hwy 12 makes access easy.

With an average elevation of 800m, temperatures are fairly cool year-round (*ám nõw* means 'the water feels cold') and frost occasionally occurs in December and January. Three rivers are sourced here, the Chi, Saphung and Phrom, and there are both evergreen and deciduous forest mixed with some vast bamboo groves.

The 1560-sq-km **Phu Khaiw Wildlife Sanctuary** lies adjacent to the park, so wildlife is particularly abundant; however, the animals here are more timid than at nearby Phu Kradueng National Park and

so are spotted less often. Lucky visitors might spot elephants, Malayan sun bears, banteng (wild cattle), Asian jackals, barking deer, gibbons, pangolins and flying squirrels. There are even a few tigers. More than 200 species of bird, including parrots and hornbills, fly through the forest.

A fair system of hiking **trails** branches out from the visitor centre to several scenic overlooks. **Haewsai Waterfall** is 17km east of the visitor centre, while the best sunrise/morning fog (5km) and sunset (11km) **viewpoints** lie to the west.

There are **campsites** (per person with own tent 30B, 2-6-person tent hire 100-300B), a variety of **bungalows** (☎ 0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; bungalows 4-12 people 1000-4000B) and some simple restaurants next to the visitor centre.

Hourly buses between Khon Kaen (115B, 2½ hours) and Phitsanulok travel through the park. The visitor centre is 1.5km from the highway.

BAN KHOK SA-NGA COBRA VILLAGE

หมู่บ้านงูจงอางบ้านโคกสง่า

The self-styled 'King Cobra Village' of Ban Khok Sa-Nga has a thing about snakes. Locals rear hundreds of the reptiles, and most families have some in boxes under their houses.

The custom began in 1951 when a travelling medicinal herb salesman, Ken Yongla, began putting on snake shows to attract customers. His plan was a success, and the art of breeding and training snakes has been nurtured in this village ever since. Today the King Cobra Club of Thailand puts on **snake shows** (donations expected; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) where handlers taunt snakes and tempt fate; they often lose, as the many missing fingers show. Medicinal herbs are still sold in the village.

The village is located 50km northeast of Khon Kaen via Hwy 2 and Rte 2039. Take a Kranuan bus from Khon Kaen's ordinary bus terminal to the turn-off for Ban Khok Sa-Nga (30B, one hour, every half-hour) and then take a túk-túk (20B per person) to the showgrounds.

If you're driving from Khon Kaen, consider taking the rural route that takes you past **Phra That Kham Kaen** (Tamarind Heartwood Reliquary), a revered *chedi* in the village of Ban Kham.

UDORN THANI PROVINCE

Udon Thani

อุดรธานี

POP 227,200

Udon Thani has one foot on the highway and the other off the beaten track. The city boomed on the back of the Vietnam War as US air bases were established nearby and it subsequently became the region's primary transport hub and commercial centre. Today you have to dig deep behind its prosperous concrete veneer to find any flashes of its past. Udon sees relatively few foreign travellers, its main selling point being the abundance of Western foods and facilities preventing Isan's largest expat community from getting too homesick.

Sights

Udon Sunshine Nursery

GARDEN

(สวนกล้วยไม้หอมอุดรชานันท์; 127 Th Udon-Nong Samrong; ☎ 8am-5pm) Ever seen a plant dance? Well, you can here. Originally earning notoriety for producing the first perfume made from an orchid, the Udon Sunshine Nursery, just northwest of town, has since developed a hybrid of *Codariocalyx motorius ohashi leguminosae* that 'dances' to music. The mature gyant has long oval leaves, plus smaller ones of a similar shape. If you sing or talk to the plant in a high-pitched voice (saxophone or violin works even better), a few of the smaller leaves will shift back and forth. It's no hype; we've seen it ourselves, although it's much more of a waltz than a jig. The plants are most active from November to February, the cool season, and from 7am to 9.30am and 4.30pm to 6.30pm.

The plants aren't for sale. You can, however, buy Udon Dancing Tea, made from the plant, along with the more famous Miss Udon Sunshine orchids and perfumes. The nursery's newest product is Udon Toob Moob Maeng Kaeng, a perfume derived from brown stink bugs.

To get here, go under the Ban Nongsamrong sign on Rte 2024, then after 150m follow the Udon Sunshine Fragrant Orchid sign. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* 16 (catch it on Th Prajak in front of Central Plaza) brings you the closest, but route 6 and the 'yellow bus' get you nearby. A túk-túk from Udon's city centre should cost about 80B.

FREE Udon Thani Provincial Museum

(พิพิธภัณฑ์เมืองอุดรธานี; Th Phosri; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat & Sun) Filling a 1920s colonial-style building that used to be a girls' school, this museum has an interesting catch-all collection ranging from geology to handicrafts.

Nong Prajak Park

(หนองประจักษ์) Udon's most popular park starts to rev up as the afternoon winds down, and there's a lot to do here, from feeding the fish to riding a bike. A bike-hire outlet on the northeast shore has one-, two- and three-seaters for 20/40/50B per hour. Much of the action takes place on the sunset-watching side of the lake, along Th Thesa. Dozens of streetside massage artists start doing rubdowns around 2pm and paint-your-own pottery shops open two hours later. Restaurants serve all day.

Sanjao Pu-Ya

(ศาลเจ้าปู่; Th Nittayo; ☎daylight hours) This large, brash Chinese temple on the southern shore of Nong Bua attests to the wealth of the local Thai-Chinese merchant class. At its heart, the **Pu-Ya Shrine** houses small images of the Chinese gods Pu (Grandpa) and Ya (Grandma).

FREE Ho Chi Minh Educational & Tourism Historical Site

(แหล่งศึกษาและท่องเที่ยวเชิงประวัติศาสตร์ (โฮจิมินห์); ☎08 7437 7852; ☎8am-5pm) During 1928 and 1929, Ho Chi Minh used the jungle around Hong Hang village as one of his bases to train soldiers and rally Isan's sizeable Vietnamese community for his resistance against the French occupation of Vietnam. The proud local Vietnamese community has recently built a replica of his thatched-roof, mud-wall house and a big museum. Both buildings were largely empty when we visited, though we were told displays would be coming soon. Check with the tourism office to see if they have. *Bahn lung hoh* (Uncle Ho's House), as locals call it, is 10km from Udon. Take *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* 14 (13B, 20 minutes) running south along Makkamontri street to the junction and then follow the signs for 750m.

★ Festivals & Events

For the first 15 days of December, Udon celebrates the **Thung Si Meuang Fair**, with Isan cultural performances and all the usual

shopping and eating. The Pu and Ya statues from Sanjao Pu-Ya spend the first 10 days in a temporary temple in City Field. The transfers on the 1st and 10th are grand processions accompanied by a 99m dragon; there's also dragon dancing on the 5th.

🛏 Sleeping

TOP CHOICE Much-che Manta

(☎0 4224 5222; www.much-chemanta.com; 209-211 Th Makkang; r incl breakfast 850-1500B, ste 5000B; 🍷@🍷) A lovely boutique hotel that, for our money, tops the better-known Prajaktra, with which it's inevitably compared. Creative lighting, liberal use of real wood and random splashes of colour craft a unique design while the lovely backyard restaurant features wood-fire pizzas as part of an international menu.

P & Mo Guesthouse

(☎08 4031 8337; arnudechbks@yahoo.co.th; 39 Th Rung Sun; r 300-400B; 🍷@🍷) Rooms are simple, but this friendly place gives the biggest bang for your baht in Udon. Despite fronting the bus station, it's relatively quiet.

Udon Backpackers

(☎08 9620 8684; www.udonbackpacker.com; 299/5 Soi Fairach 1; per person 170B; 🍷) Nothing fancy here, just simple, clean rooms (cold-water showers in most) but they're *far* better than anything else in this price range. And a friendly welcome from owner Sammie is included.

City Lodge

(☎0 4222 4439; 83/14-15 Th Wattananuwong; r 500-600B; 🍷@🍷) The already colourful rooms at this British-owned property are cheered up even more with wicker furniture.

Centara

(☎0 4234 3555; www.centarahotelsresorts.com; Th Teekathanont; r/ste from 2000/5000B; 🍷@🍷) Long Udon's flagship hotel, the former Charoensri Grand has undergone a six-month renovation to keep it atop the pack. Rooms are a little small, but otherwise excellent and the full range of facilities (including a sauna, spa and fitness centre) are top-notch.

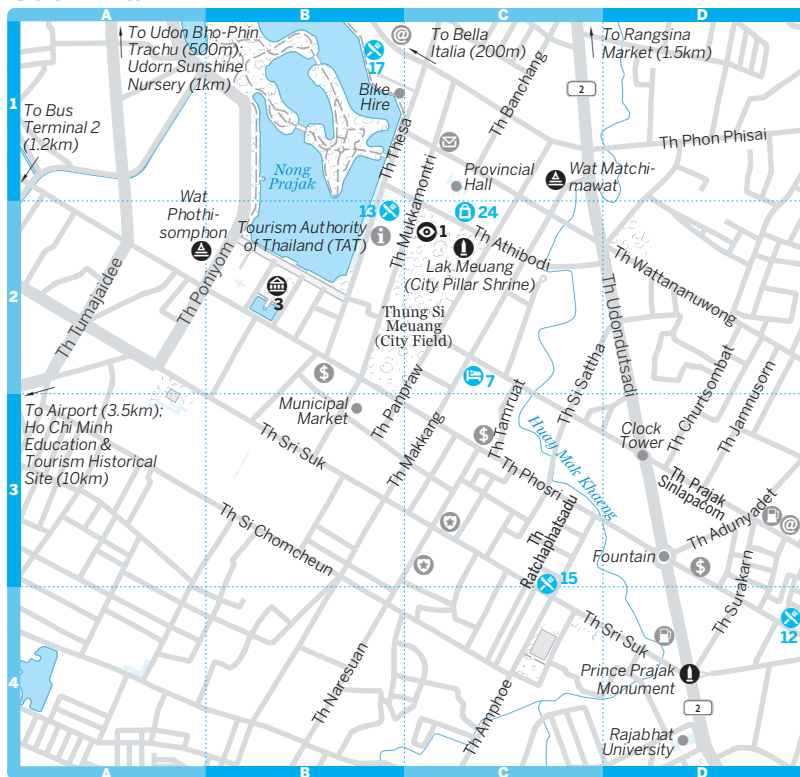
Top Mansion

(☎0 4234 5015; topmansion@yahoo.com; 35/3 Th Sampanthamit; r 370B; 🍷@🍷) This impressively spick-and-span hotel warrants consideration despite being on 'Soi Falang'.

Lotus Condotel

(☎0 4234 07777; 43/4 Th Thepburi; r 279-329B; 🍷@🍷) It looks like a grain silo on the

Udon Thani



outside and feels like a hospital in the hallways; but the rooms are what matters most, and these are big, clean and priced right. But, the best feature is the neighborhood full of university students.

Eating

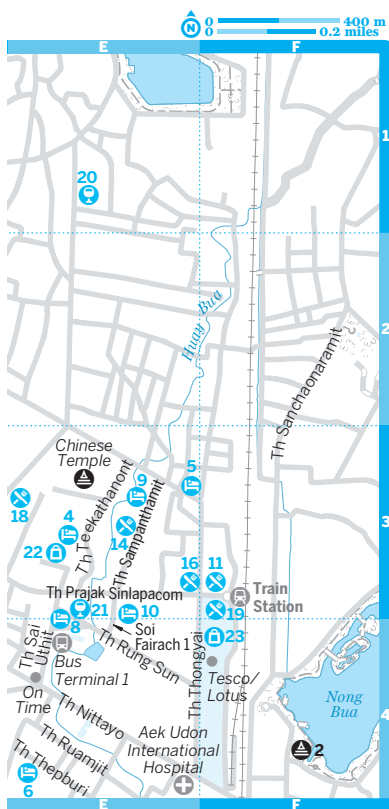
Udonites take their **night markets** (Th Prajak; ☺4-11pm) very seriously. The three adjoining markets in front of the train station (Centre Point, Precha and UD Bazaar) offer an impressive spread of food and a large beer garden.

Rabiang Phatchanee THAI \$
(Th Suppakitchanya; dishes 50-250B; ☺lunch & dinner) This place on the lake's east shore offers all the usual Thai dishes, but also many you've probably never tried before, such as fish-stomach salad. Eat on the shady deck or in air-conditioned dining rooms.

Bella Italia INTERNATIONAL THAI \$\$
(70/4 Th Suppakitchanya; dishes 60-600B; ☺dinner; 📞) This Italian-owned restaurant at Nong Prajak lake is as close to Italy you'll get in Isan, but the menu goes global with choices such as green curry or salmon in salsa.

Maeya THAI \$
(no Roman-script sign; 79 Th Ratchaphatsadu; dishes 45-270B; ☺lunch & dinner) One part Thai restaurant and three parts English tearoom, this labyrinth has waiters dressed in black tie and a menu stretching from ham sandwiches to wild boar in red-curry sauce. The English menu is a little cryptic: the 'rice with spit in sauce' is really 'rice with liver in sauce'.

Ziocco THAI \$\$
(38/2 Th Adunyadet; dishes 59-259B; ☺dinner) This open-air Thai-style pub is the kind of place where groups of friends come to eat, drink and eat some more. If you're looking



for a mellow night with first-rate food and a little class, Zirocco will satisfy. There's no English on the menu, but some staff can speak a little.



Gib Shop

JUICE BAR \$

(Th Thesa; from 15B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Not all juice is created equal, and this lakeside stand proves it. Most of the fruits and veggies are organic and you can choose to have no added sugar.

Irish Clock

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(19/5-6 Th Sampanthamit; dishes 50-420B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☎) This wood-trimmed, Guinness-infused pub is an island of class in a sea of pick-up joints. The menu has Thai, *fa-ràng* and Indian food.

Chai Dun

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; 539/14 Th Phosri; buffet 60B; ☺ lunch & dinner) The crowds are exhibit A for how tasty (and cheap) this all-you-can-eat buffet is.



Drinking & Entertainment

The night markets offer a range of diversions. Besides dining you can shop for clothes, sing karaoke, play snooker, get a tattoo and have your fortune told. On some weekends you can watch football games on the big screen or listen to live bands.

Central Plaza (p457) screens some movies in their original English and also has a bowling alley.

Udon has the largest and most in-your-face sex tourism scene in Isan and the 'Soi Falang' (Th Sampanthamit) area is rather sleazy at night. That said, most of the people out for a night in the bars here aren't looking for extracurricular activities.

The **Bookhouse & Coffee Shop** (Soi 8, Th Adunyadet; ☺ 9am-9pm) is Udon's best bookstore, and one of the best in Isan. **Fuzzy Ken's** (302/10 Th Prajak; ☺ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat) has a smaller selection, but better location. Both shops feature food and drink and are *fa-ràng* gathering spots.



Shopping

Udon Bho-Phin Trachu

HANDICRAFTS

(no roman-script sign; Th Poniyoum; ☺ 7am-6.30pm) There's a great selection of silk and cotton, including some natural-dyed fabrics, at this large spot northwest of Nong Prajak Lake. Look for the sign with the wooden roof.

Udon City Walking Street

MARKET

(Th Athibodi; ☺ 5-10pm Fri & Sat) With just a handful of vendors selling handmade items, Udon's Walking Street pales in comparison to the markets in Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen that inspired it. Still, it's got a fun, youthful atmosphere.

Central Plaza (Th Prajak; ☺ 11am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-9pm Sat & Sun) is Udon's biggest shopping mall, though strolling the open-air **UD Town** (Th Thongyai; ☺ 11am-10pm) is more fun.



Information

Emergency Services

Aek Udon International Hospital (☎ 0 4234 2555; 555/5 Th Phosri) Has a 24-hour casualty department.

Tourist Police (☎ 0 4221 1291; Th Naresuan)

Money

Central Plaza (Th Prajak) and **Tesco/Lotus** (UD Town) have banks that stay open late and on weekends. The latter also has an AEON ATM.

Udon Thani

📍 Sights

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🏠 Sleeping

- 4 Centara..... E3
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🍴 Eating

- 11 Centre Point Night Market..... F3
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🍷 Drinking

- 20 Bookhouse & Coffee Shop E1
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🛍 Shopping

- 22 Central Plaza E3
 23 UD Town F4
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Post

Post office (Th Wattananuwong; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

Tourist Information

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☎0 4232 5406; tatudon@tat.or.th; Th Thesa; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Covers Udon Thani, Nong Khai and Bueng Kan Provinces.

Udon Thani Map (www.udonmap.com) This map and its companion magazine the *Udon Thani Guide* are excellent sources of information, available free at *fa-rang*-focused businesses.

📍 Getting There & Away

Air

THAI (☎0 2288 7000; www.thaiairways.com) and **Air Asia** (☎0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com) connect Udon Thani to Suvarnaphumi Airport in Bangkok while **Nok Air** (☎0 2900 9955; www.nokair.com) uses Don Muang airport. Regular promotional fares by the latter two keep prices around 1500B. Air Asia also has a daily direct flight to Phuket (1600B) and Nok Air goes daily direct to Chiang Mai (2500B).

Buy tickets at **On Time** (☎0 4224 7792; 539/72 Th Sai Uthit; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun), one of several travel agencies in this area.

Bus

For most destinations, including Bangkok (321B to 412B, eight to nine hours, every half-hour), buses use the downtown **Bus Terminal 1** (☎0

4222 2916; Th Sai Uthit). **Chan Tour** (☎0 4234 3403; 550B; 8 daily) and **999 VIP** (☎0 4222 1489; 641B; 9pm) have VIP service to Bangkok. Other destinations include Khorat (181B to 248B, 4½ hours, every half-hour), Sakon Nakhon (100B to 130B, 3½ hours, every half-hour), Khon Kaen (76B to 101B, two hours, every half-hour), Bueng Kan (150B, 4½ hours, 12 daily), Pattaya (365B to 585B, 11 hours, 10 daily), Suvarnabhumi (Airport) bus station (418B, eight hours, 9pm) and Vientiane (80B, two hours, six daily; you must already have a Lao visa).

Bus Terminal 2 (☎0 4221 4914), on the ring road west of the city, serves many of the same destinations plus it's the only station for western destinations such as Loei (66B to 92B, three hours, every half-hour), Phitsanulok (212B to 275B, seven hours, nine daily) and Chiang Mai (409B to 613B, 12 hours, six daily).

There are buses to Nong Khai (35B to 47B, one hour) from both terminals, but the most frequent departures are from Rangsina Market. Buses arriving from other cities sometimes drop passengers here after stopping at Bus Terminal 1.

Train

Two express trains from Bangkok (2nd-class air-con 479B, 1st-class sleeper upper/lower 1077/1277B; 10 to 11 hours) depart in the afternoon for **Udon Thani Railway Station** (☎0 4222 2061), and there's also one in the morning. Three morning trains head to Nong Khai (3rd-class 11B, 2nd-class fan/air-con 55/85B, about one hour).

i Getting Around

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou (white) run regular routes across town. Route 6 (white) is handy since it runs along Th Udondutsadi past Rangsina Market and out to Bus Terminal 2. There are also two city buses (10B). The White bus follows Th Udondutsadi while the Yellow tracks Th Phosri-Nittayo, connecting the two bus terminals in the process. The *Udon Thani Map* shows all bus and *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* routes.

You can rarely flag a **metered taxi** (☎0 4234 3239; 30B flagfall, 30B call fee) down on the street, but they park at Bus Terminal 1. *Túk-túk* (called 'skylab' here), on the other hand, are seemingly everywhere. The cost from Central Plaza to Nong Prajak Park is usually 80B. Cheaper pedicabs are also still common in Udon.

Many hotels pick guests up at the airport for free, otherwise vans to downtown cost 100B per person. There are many car-hire outlets around Central Plaza, including **Fuzzy Ken's** (☎08 6011 4627; 302/10 Th Prajak).

Around Udon Thani

BAN CHIANG

บ้านเชียง

This was once an important centre of the ancient Ban Chiang civilisation, an agricultural society that thrived in northeastern Thailand for thousands of years. Archaeological digs here have uncovered a treasure trove of artefacts dating back to 3600 BC that overturned the prevailing theory that Southeast Asia was a cultural backwater compared to China and India at the time.

What's now one of Southeast Asia's most important archaeological sites was discovered quite accidentally in 1966. Stephen Young, a student from Harvard, tripped while walking through the area and found the rim of a buried pot right under his nose. Looking around he noticed many more and speculated that this might be a burial site. He was right. Serious excavations began soon after and over a million pottery pieces and dozens of human skeletons were unearthed. The now iconic burnt-ochre swirl-design pottery (made between 300 BC and AD 200) is just one of many styles these people created over the years. Researchers also found the earliest evidence of the manufacture of metal tools – they began working bronze around 2000 BC – in the region. The area was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1992.

👁 Sights

With a lack of hills and traffic, but an abundance of quaint farms and villages, the

countryside around Ban Chiang is a great place to explore by bike. Lakeside Sunrise Guesthouse provides an outdated, but still helpful map.

Ban Chiang National Museum MUSEUM

(admission 150B; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) This excellent museum exhibits a wealth of pottery from all Ban Chiang periods, plus myriad metal objects, including spearheads, sickles, fish hooks, ladles and neck rings. The displays (with English labels) offer excellent insight into the region's distant past and how its mysteries were unravelled. Hidden in back is a room showcasing the culture of the Tai Phuan people, who migrated here about 200 years ago and founded the town. One kilometre east at Wat Pho Si Nai is an original **burial ground excavation pit** (☎8.30am-6pm), with a cluster of 52 individual burial sites dating to 300 BC. It shows how bodies were laid to rest with (infants placed inside) pottery.

Phuan Thai House

LANDMARK

About 300m southwest of the burial site (follow the signs for 'Phuan House which the King and Queen visited in 1972'), this traditional Isan house is also promoted as an attraction, but the still-lived-in houses throughout the village are more interesting.

Wat Pa Lelai

TEMPLE

(☎daylight hours) For something completely different, visit this wát 500m north of the burial site, across the little bridge. The awesome childlike murals in the two-story building at the back are both enlightening and entertaining.

CRAFTS

Rice cultivation remains the town's primary livelihood, but selling souvenirs comes a close second. Some of the items, including Ban Chiang-style pottery, are made in the area. Walk down the road facing the museum to find a couple of touristy **pottery workshops**. One street west of the museum is a large and interesting **women's weaving group** that makes, among other things, *mát-mée* and indigo cotton. The women's group also usually has some sticky-rice basket weavers around, though most of these are woven in the village of **Ban Dong Yen** east of Ban Chiang. To see pottery made using the ancient paddle-and-anvil method, visit **Ban Kham Or**. It's a convenient stop on your way out of town since it's right on the highway. *Túk-túk* cost the same as coming to

Ban Chiang from Ban Nong Mek. Visiting on your way into town isn't recommended because you'll likely wait a long time to find a lift to Ban Chiang.

Sleeping & Eating

Lakeside Sunrise Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$ (☎0 4220 8167; banmail167@hotmail.com; r 250B; @) In a countryside setting yet within easy striking distance of the museum, this old wooden house is reason enough to spend the night in town. The simple rooms share a spacious verandah and bathrooms downstairs. The joyful owner speaks good English and hires out bikes (50B per day) and motorcycles (250B per day).

There are several restaurants on the road fronting the museum, one of which stays open for dinner.

Getting There & Away

From Udon Thani, take a bus bound for Sakon Nakhon or Nakhon Phanom and get off at Ban Nong Mek (40B, 45 minutes), where a *túk-túk* will charge 60B per person for the 8km ride to Ban Chiang.

KUMPHAWAPI

กุ่มกาฬปี

Like a little Lopburi, this otherwise ordinary town 50km southeast of Udon has a troop of monkeys living alongside its human residents. They live in the city-centre park but frequently wander beyond it to climb and lounge on buildings. After you've had enough monkey time, stroll east to Nong Han lake, which is full of lotuses and fishing rafts.

Buses to Wangsamma from Udon's Bus Terminal 1 stop in Kumphawapi (22B to 31B, one hour, every 45 minutes).

BAN NAKHA

บ้านนาข่า

Once a renowned centre for its *kit*-patterned cotton weaving (*kit* is a diamond-grid minimal-weft brocade), Na Kha village is now one of the best fabric shopping destinations in Thailand. Downtown is a covered market with dozens of shops selling a great variety of silk and cotton from Thailand and Laos. Except at the large shops on the highway, most of the fabrics are handmade. **Maa Bah Pah Fai** (☎6.30am-6pm), across from the temple entrance, has as good a selection as any, including some century-old *kit*.

Before leaving, take a peek at **Wat Na Kha Taewee** (☉daylight hours), founded by a wandering monk who found a hole from which belled the sound and smoke of a *naga*. He plugged the hole with a rock and built the small *bòht* right in front of it. Pottery,

gold Buddha images and human skeletons unearthed during various construction projects at the temple are on display.

Udon's White Bus runs to the village, 16km north of Udon.

PHU PHRABAT HISTORICAL

PARK

อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์ภูพระบาท

Steeped in mythical intrigue and peppered with bizarre rock formations, **Phu Phrabat** (☎0 4225 1350; admission 100B; ☉8am-4.30pm) is one of Isan's highlights. Sometime around the turn of the millennium, during the Dvaravati era, local people built Hindu and Buddhist shrines alongside the many spires, whale-sized boulders and improbably balanced rocks here. But prehistoric paintings on several rock overhangs, best seen at side-by-side **Tham Wouu** and **Thom Khon**, show this was probably regarded as a holy site at least 1500 years earlier. A climb beyond these rock formations to **Pha Sa Dej**, at the edge of the escarpment, ends with dramatic views of the farms and forest beyond. A web of trails meanders past all these sites and you can see them in a leisurely two hours, but it's worth spending several more. A remoter northern loop is lovely, but not well marked so it's easy to get lost.

Many of the rock formations feature in a fairy tale about a king (Phaya Kong Phan), his stunningly beautiful daughter (Nang U-sa), a hermit (Ruesi Chanta) and a love-struck prince (Tao Baros) from another kingdom. The most striking rock formation, **Hor Nang U-sa**, an overturned boot-shaped outcrop with a shrine built into it, is said to be the tower where the beautiful princess was forced to live by her overprotective father. Many of these rock formations are signposted with names in Thai and English alluding to the legend, a short version of which can be read in the museum. If you're staying at the Mut Mee Garden Guesthouse in Nong Khai (p465), you can read the entire tale.

Near the entrance is **Wat Phra Phutthaht Bua Bok**, with its namesake Lao-style *chedi* covering a Buddha footprint. It also has some odd temple buildings in the general mood of those in the park.

There are **campsites** (per tent with own tent 20B, 2-/8-person tent hire 50B/200B) and three lovely **bungalows** (2/4/6 people 300/600/1000B) with rock-hard mattresses.

Getting There & Away

The park is 65km from Udon Thani and Nong Khai, near Ban Pheu, and can be visited as a day

trip from either city. *Sörng-täa-ou* from Nong Khai's bus station to Ban Pheu (50B, 1½ hours) travel via Tha Bo. Vehicles from Udon's Rangsin Market continue past Ban Pheu to Ban Tiu (37B, one hour), the village at the base of the hill where a motorcycle taxi costs 50B for the final 5km climb. If you're in a hurry, *túk-túk* from Ban Pheu cost 200B to 300B (round trip) and motorcycle taxis are half that – some people will tell you there are no motorcycle taxis in Ban Pheu, but there are a few.

If you're using public transport, you should leave the park by 3pm for Nong Khai and 4pm for Udon.

WAT PHO CHAI SRI

วัดโพธิ์ชัยศรี

With brightly painted statuary that's even more bizarre than Nong Khai's Sala Kaew Ku, this *wát* (☺daylight hours) is a perfect add-on to Phu Phrabat and even worth a trip on its own. The life-size figures around the temple grounds are acting out scenes from Isan culture and fairy tales and demonstrating the punishment awaiting the wicked in the Buddhist version of Hell.

The temple is also home to **Luang Po Naak**, a very holy 1200-year-old Buddha image shaded by a seven-headed *naga* that locals believe is responsible for many miracles.

Also known as Wat Ban Waeng, the temple is about 5km out of Ban Pheu. A *túk-túk* should cost no more than 100B round trip with waiting time.

NONG KHAI PROVINCE

Lady Luck certainly smiles on the location. Occupying a narrow sweep along the banks of the Mekong, Nong Khai Province is a beautiful, intriguing region. Being on the travel route to/from Vientiane, Laos, just a short hop across the river via the Friendship Bridge, Nong Khai city is one of northeastern Thailand's most popular destinations. But long before the river was spanned, the surreal Sala Kaew Ku sculpture park was a must-see on any jaunt through the region while the towns and temples along the

SALA KAEW KU ศาลาแก้วกู่

One of Thailand's most enigmatic attractions, this **sculpture park** (admission 20B; ☺8am-6pm) is a surreal journey into the mind of a mystic shaman. Built over a period of 20 years by Luang Pu Boun Leua Sourirat, who died in 1996, the park features a weird and wonderful array of gigantic sculptures ablaze with Hindu-Buddhist imagery.

As he tells his own story, Luang Pu tumbled into a hole as a child and met an ascetic named Kaewkoo who introduced him to the manifold mysteries of the underworld and set him on course to become a Brahmanic yogi-priest-shaman. Shaking up his own unique blend of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, mythology and iconography, Luang Pu developed a large following on both sides of the Mekong in this region. In fact, his original project was on the Lao side of the river where he had been living until the 1975 communist takeover in Laos.

The park is a smorgasbord of large and bizarre cement statues of Buddha, Shiva, Vishnu and other celestial deities (as well as numerous secular figures), all born of Luang Pu's dreams and cast by workers under his direction. Some of the sculptures are quite amusing. If you're travelling with kids, they'll enjoy the serene elephant wading though a pack of anthropomorphic dogs (which teaches people not to be bothered when people gossip about them). The tallest sculpture, a Buddha seated on a coiled *naga* with a spectacular multiheaded hood, is 25m high. Also of interest is the Wheel of Life, which you enter through a giant mouth. It boils Luang Pu's philosophies down to a single, slightly baffling image. An explanation is available on the back side of the handy map to the sculpture park provided by Mut Mee Garden Guesthouse.

The main shrine building, almost as strange as the sculptures, is full of Buddha images of every description and provenance (guaranteed to throw an art historian into a state of disorientation), photos of Luang Pu at various ages and Luang Pu's corpse lying under a glass dome ringed by flashing lights.

All buses headed east pass the road leading to Sala Kaew Ku (10B), which is also known as Wat Kaek. It's about a five-minute walk from the highway. Chartered *túk-túk* should cost 100B to 150B return with a one-hour wait, or you can reach it by bike in about 30 minutes. The Mut Mee map shows the scenic route.

Mekong west of the capital encourage travellers to slow down.

Nong Khai

หนองคาย

POP 61,500

As a major staging post for those on their way from Vientiane, Nong Khai hosts a steady stream of travellers. A clutch of excellent places to sleep and eat have sprung up to accommodate them, making this the only Isan town with a full-fledged backpacker scene, albeit a modest one. But Nong Khai's popularity is about more than just its proximity to Laos and bounty of banana pancakes. Seduced by its dreamy pink sunsets and sluggish pace of life, many visitors who mean to stay one night end up bedding down for many more.

History

Crammed between nations, Nong Khai is both a historic and physical bridgehead between Thailand and Laos. Nong Khai once fell within the boundaries of the Vientiane (Wiang Chan) kingdom, which itself vacillated between independence and tribute to Lan Xang and Siam. In 1827 Rama III gave a Thai lord, Thao Suwothamma, the rights to establish Meuang Nong Khai at the present city site, which he chose because the surrounding swamps (*nong*) would aid in the city's defence.

The area came under several attacks by *jeen hor* (Yunnanese) marauders in the late 19th century. The Prap Haw Monument (*Brahp hor* means 'defeat of the Haw') in front of the former provincial office commemorates the victims of invasions in 1874, 1885 and 1886.

In 1891, under Rama V, Nong Khai became the capital of *monthon* Lao Phuan, an early Isan satellite state that included what are now Udon, Loei, Khon Kaen, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom and Nong Khai Provinces, as well as Vientiane. But, when western Laos was partitioned off from Thailand by the French in 1893, the French demanded that Thailand have no soldiers within 25km of the border and so the capital was moved to Udon Thani, leaving Nong Khai's fortunes to fade.

One hundred and one years later, the opening of the US\$30 million, 1174m-long Saphan Mittaphap Thai-Lao (Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge) marked a new era of development for Nong Khai as a regional trade

and transport centre. The skyline has been creeping slowly upwards ever since.

Sights

Tha Sadet Market

MARKET

(ตลาดท่าเสด็จ; Th Rimkhong; ☉8.30am-6pm) The most popular destination in town, almost everyone loves a stroll through this covered market. It offers the usual mix of clothes, electronic equipment, food and assorted bric-a-brac, most of it imported from Laos and China, but there are also a few shops selling quirky quality stuff. There are some floating restaurants behind the market and you can arrange boat trips here.

Wat Pho Chai

TEMPLE

(วัดโพธิ์ชัย; Th Phochai; ☉5am-6pm) Luang Po Phra Sai, a large Lan Xang-era Buddha image awash with gold, bronze and precious stones, sits at the hub of Nong Khai's holiest temple. The head of the image is pure gold, the body is bronze and the *ut-sà-nit* (flame-shaped head ornament) is set with rubies. Due to a great number of dubious miracles people attribute to it, this royal temple is a mandatory stop for most visiting Thais.

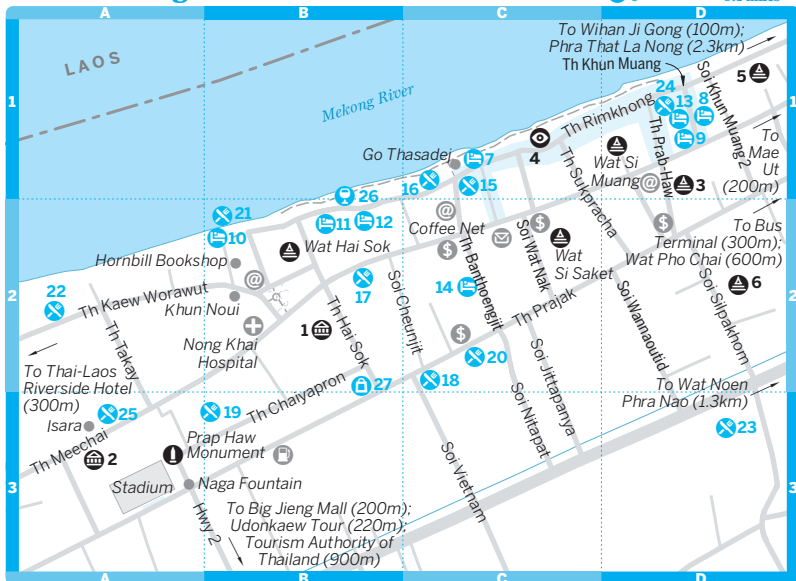
Luang Po Phra Sai was one of three similar statues made for each of the daughters of Lao King Seththathirat, and they were taken as bounty after King Rama I sacked Vientiane in 1778. The murals in the *bòht* depict their travels from the interior of Laos to the banks of the Mekong, where they were put on rafts. A storm sent one of the statues to the bottom of the river where it remains today. It was never recovered because, according to one monk at the temple, the *naga* like having it. The third statue, Phra Soem, is at Wat Patum Wanaram next to Siam Paragon in Bangkok. Phra Sai was supposed to accompany it, but, as the murals show you, the cart carrying it broke down here, and so this was taken as a sign that it wished to remain in Nong Khai.

Nong Khai Aquarium

AQUARIUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์สัตว์น้ำจังหวัดหนองคาย; admission 100B; ☉9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) This big green building displays freshwater and ocean-dwelling fish from Thailand and beyond, with the giant Mekong catfish in the 'giant tank' the star attraction. It's a fun place to visit, though it's far out of town on the Khon Kaen University campus and not served by public transport.

Central Nong Khai



NORTHEASTERN THAILAND NONG KHAI

Central Nong Khai

📍 Sights

- 1 Governor's Mansion Museum..... B2
- 2 Nong Khai Museum..... A3
- 3 Sanjao Pu-Ya..... D1
- 4 Tha Sadet Market..... C1
- 5 Wat Lam Duan..... D1
- 6 Wat Tung Sawang..... D2

🛏 Sleeping

- 7 Baan Mae Rim Nam..... C1
- 8 E-San Guesthouse..... D1
- 9 Jumemalee Guesthouse..... D1
- Kiangkhong Guesthouse..... (see 12)
- 10 Mut Mee Garden Guesthouse..... B2
- 11 Rimkhong Guesthouse..... B2
- 12 Ruan Thai Guesthouse..... B2
- 13 Sawasdee Guesthouse..... D1
- 14 Thai Nongkhai Guesthouse..... C2

🍴 Eating

- 15 Café Thasadej..... C1
- 16 Daeng Namuang..... C1
- 17 Darika Bakery..... B2
- 18 Dee Dee Pohchanah..... C2
- 19 Hospital Food Court..... B3
- 20 Mariam Restaurant..... C2
- 21 Nagarina..... B2
- 22 Nung-Len Coffee Bar..... A2
- 23 Paradise View..... D3
- 24 Roti Naihua..... D1
- 25 Saap Lah..... A3

🍷 Drinking

- Gaia..... (see 21)
- 26 Warm Up..... B1

🛍 Shopping

- 27 Village Weaver Handicrafts..... B2

Village Vocational Training Center

CRAFT WORKSHOP

(ศูนย์ฝึกอบรมอาชีพชนบทหนองคาย; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Sat) Run by the Good Shepherd Sisters, this workshop 7km south of town (take Hwy 2 and turn east just after the Km2 pillar) provides training and jobs for locals. It's a

great place to see *mát-mèe* weaving, and it also has a pottery workshop and mushroom farm.

Wat Noen Phra Nao

TEMPLE

(วัดเนินพระนางาม; ☀daylight hours) This forest wát on the south side of town is a respected

THE MEKONG EXPLORER

Mekong River Cruises (www.cruise-mekong.com) and its gorgeous boat the *Mekong Explorer* offer a new way to explore the Mekong River in Isan. Its week-long voyages between Nong Khai and Mukdahan sail November to March, and sightseeing while lounging on the deck can be as rewarding as the onshore excursions to places like That Phanom, Thailand and Tha Khaek, Laos.

vipassana (insight meditation) centre on pleasant, tree-shaded grounds. It serves as a spiritual retreat for those facing personal crises, Westerners included, if they're serious about meditation. Some extremely ornate temple architecture, including perhaps the most rococo bell tower we've ever seen, stands in contrast with the usual ascetic tone of forest monasteries. There are many Vietnamese and Chinese graves here and some of the statuary wouldn't be out of place at Sala Kaew Ku. The temple is unsigned off Rte 212, 1.5km east of the Grand Princess Hotel; turn south by the plant shop.

Phra That Klang Nam

STUPA

(พระธาตุกลางน้ำ; Th Rimkhong) The 'Holy Reliquary in the Middle of the River' (sometimes called Phra That Nong Khai) is a ruined Lao-style *chedi* submerged in the middle of the Mekong and can only be seen in the dry season when the waters lower about 13m. The *chedi* was gobbled up by the meandering Mekong in the middle of the 18th century and it toppled over in 1847. When the waters drop low enough coloured flags are fastened to it. **Phra That La Nong**, a replica erected on land, glows brightly at night.

Other Temples

Wat Lam Duan

TEMPLE

(Th Rimkhong; ☺daylight hours) You can easily pick out this wát on the skyline because an immense Buddha image sits atop the *bôht*. You're welcome to climb up (shoes off) and gaze over the Mekong with it.

Wat Tung Sawang

TEMPLE

(Soi Silpakhom; ☺daylight hours) The *bôht* here is one of the city's smallest, but the artistic flair put into the decoration makes it one of the prettiest. Nine sculptures of celestial deities sit on fanciful pedestals alongside it.

Wihan Ji Gong

TEMPLE

(Th Rimkhong) The city's newest Chinese temple is dedicated to Ji Gong, an eccentric and heavy-drinking Chinese monk - he's usually depicted with a bottle of wine in his hand - now worshipped as a deity who assists and heals people in need. Also known as Sanjao Tek-Ka-Ji, it features an eye-catching octagonal tower with murals creatively done in black and white.

The immaculate **Sanjao Pu-Ya** (Th Prabhaw; ☺daylight hours) is a more typical Chinese temple.

Museums

FREE Governor's Mansion

Museum

MUSEUM

(Th Meechai; ☺8.30am-6pm) The renovated 1929 French-colonial mansion has more shine outside than in. It's lovely lit up at night.

FREE Nong Khai Museum

MUSEUM

(Th Meechai; ☺9am-4pm Mon-Fri) This little museum in the former city hall has little more than old photographs, but there's enough English labelling to make it worth a few minutes of your time, and the price is right.

Volunteering

Thailand-wide organisations Isara (p39) and Open Mind Projects (p39) are based in Nong Khai and have many opportunities here. If you're not looking for a long-term commitment you can drop by Isara's offices anytime to help out in other ways.

★ Festivals & Events

During Songkran (p23) the priceless image of Luang Pu Phra Sai from Wat Pho Chai (p462) is paraded around town.

Like many other cities in the northeast, Nong Khai has a **Rocket Festival** (Bun Bång Fai), which begins on Visakha Bucha day (p24) in late May/early June, but it doesn't come close to competing with Yasothorn's version (see p497).

At the end of Buddhist Lent (Ork Phansaa) in late October/early November, there are **long-boat races** on the Mekong. These correspond with the October full moon, which is when **naga fireballs** can be seen.

One particularly fun event is Nong Khai's version of the **Chinese Dragon Festival**, held over 10 days in late October and early November, with dragon dancing, acrobatics, Chinese opera and lots of firecrackers.

The **Anu Sahwaree Festival** (5 to 15 March) marks the end of the Haw rebellions and boasts the city's biggest street fair.

Sleeping

Catering to the steady flow of backpackers heading across the border, Nong Khai's budget offerings are the best in Isan.

Mut Mee Garden Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 4246 0717; www.mutmee.com; Soi Mutmee; r 150-1200B; 🍷🍴) Occupying a sleepy stretch of the Mekong, Nong Khai's budget old-timer has a garden so relaxing it's intoxicating, and most nights it's packed with travellers. A huge variety of rooms (the cheapest with shared bath, the most expensive with an awesome balcony) are clustered around

a thatched-roof restaurant where the owner, Julian, holds court with his grip on local legend and his passion for all things Isan. Because nobody will ever be required to vacate their room (people often stay longer than planned), only a few reservations are taken per day. There's a yoga studio in front.

Ruan Thai Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 4241 2519; 1126/2 Th Rimkhong; r 200-400B, f 1200B; 🍷🍴📺) Once little more than a small private home, this pleasant spot has grown with the boom time. It now boasts a variety of good-quality rooms, from simple shared-bathroom basics to a family room in a little wooden cottage. Factor in the tangle of flower-filled garden greenery and the friendly vibe and it's a winner.

GREAT BALLS OF FIRE

Mass hysteria? Methane gas? Drunken Lao soldiers? Clever monks? Or perhaps the fiery breath of the sacred *naga*, a serpent-like being that populates folkloric waterways throughout Southeast Asia. For many Lao and Thai who live by the Mekong River, it's not a matter of whether or not to believe. Since 1983 (or for ages, depending on who you ask), the sighting of the *bâng fai pá yah nâhk* (loosely translated, 'naga fireballs') has been an annual event along the Mekong River. Sometime in the early evening, at the end of the Buddhist Rains Retreat (October), which coincides with the 15th waxing moon of the 11th lunar month, small reddish balls of fire shoot from the Mekong River and float a hundred or so metres into the air before vanishing without a trace. Most claim the *naga* fireballs are soundless, but others say a hissing can be heard if one is close enough to where they emerge from the surface of the river. People on both sides of the Mekong see the event as a sign that resident *naga* are celebrating the end of the holiday.

So what, you might ask, is the real cause behind *naga* fireballs? There are many theories. One, which aired on a Thai exposé-style TV program, claimed that Lao soldiers taking part in festivities on the other side of the Mekong were firing their rifles into the air. Interestingly, the reaction to the TV program was anger and a storm of protest from both sides of the river. Some suggest that a mixture of methane gas and phosphane, trapped below the mud on the river bottom, somehow reaches a certain temperature at exactly that time of year and is released. Many simply assume that some monks have found a way to make a 'miracle'. The latter was the premise behind a 2002 comedy film entitled *Síp Hâh Kâm Deuan Síp èt* (Fifteenth Waxing Moon of the Eleventh Lunar Month), re-released with English subtitles under the peculiar title *Mekhong Full Moon Party*.

Naga fireballs have become big business in Nong Khai Province and curious Thais from across the country converge at various spots on the banks of the Mekong for the annual show. Little Phon Phisai, the locus of fireball-watching, hosts some 40,000 guests. Special buses (30B) make the return trip to Nong Khai city and several hotels run their own buses where you'll get a guaranteed seat. Mut Mee Garden Guesthouse sails its boat there and back (2600B, including lunch and dinner).

If you don't come with the right mindset, you'll likely be disappointed. The fireball experience is more than just watching a few small lights rise from the river; it's mostly about watching Thais watching a few small lights rise from the river. And even if the *naga* doesn't send his annual greeting on the day you come (it's sometimes delayed by a day due to the vagaries of calculating the arrival of the full moon), it'll be an interesting experience.

Jumemalee Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 08 5010 2540; 419/1 Th Khun Muang; s 200-300B, d 300-400B, q 700B; 🏠🚶) Filling two old wooden houses, Jumemalee is less lovely but more homey than its neighbour the E-San, and all rooms here have a private bathroom. The family runs the business to honour the wishes of their parents that the house never be sold. Use of bikes is free.

E-San Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 08 6242 1860; 538 Th Khun Muang; r 250-450B; 🏠🚶) Just off the river in a small, beautifully restored wooden house ringed by a long verandah, this is a very atmospheric place to stay. The cheapest rooms share bathrooms and there are also rooms in a new building. Bikes are free.

Baan Mae Rim Nam HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 08 4242 0256; www.baanmaerimnam.com; Mekong Promenade; r 500-700B; 🏠🚶) A new hotel right on the riverfront, this bright yellow building has great rooms with balconies and river views. The 500B rooms in back, however, are less inviting.

Khiangkhang Guesthouse HOTEL \$
(☎ 08 4242 2870; 541 Th Rimkhong; r 300-400B; 🏠🚶) You can snag some river views from the 3rd-floor terrace (and some of the rooms) at this concrete tower that falls somewhere between guest house and hotel.

Sawasdee Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 08 4241 2502; www.sawasdeeguesthouse.com; 402 Th Meechai; s 160B, d 200-450B; 🏠🚶) If you could judge a hotel by its cover, this charismatic guest house in an old Franco-Chinese shophouse would come up trumps. The tidy rooms (the fan options share bathrooms) mostly lack the old-school veneer of the exterior and lobby, but at least you'll sleep well in the knowledge that you're bedded down in a little piece of living history. The owner is quite a character.

Budsabong Fine Resort HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 08 1666 5111; www.budsabongfineresort.com; Th Donsawan-Wattad; r incl breakfast 1600-1800B, ste 3800-4400B; 🏠🚶) The stark white exterior won't inspire love at first sight, but get inside and you'll find large, attractive and well-appointed rooms, many with terraces stepping right into the enormous pool. It's out in the country, beyond Sala Kaew Ku.

Thai Nongkhai Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 08 4241 3155; www.thainongkhai.com; 1169 Th Banthoengjit; r 450-550B, 🏠🚶) The seven

rooms and bungalows here are fairly humdrum, but they are gleaming clean and the backyard location makes it pretty peaceful.

Rimkhong Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 08 1814 5811; 815 Th Rimkhong; s/d 150/220B) A simple place with sparse, shared-bath rooms. The owners set a sluggish pace and allow hush to prevail in the leafy courtyard.

Thai-Laos Riverside Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 08 4246 0263; www.thailaoshotel.com, in Thai; 51 Th Kaew Worawut; r incl breakfast 700-900B; 🏠🚶) This tour-bus favourite doesn't bother much with maintenance, but if you want a river view, you can do no better. And if you're into tacky hotel clubs, you'll find three of them here.

Eating

TOP CHOICE Nagarina THAI \$
(☎ 08 4241 2211; Th Rimkhong; dishes 40-250B; ☺lunch & dinner; 🏠🚶) As with nearly all *fa-rang*-focused guest houses in Thailand, the Thai food at Mut Mee Garden Guesthouse is toned down and not recommended. (The Western breakfasts, on the other hand, are quite tasty.) But fear not lovers of Thai food, the kitchen of its floating restaurant turns out nothing but the real deal. It specialises in fish and often features unusual species from the Mekong. There's a sunset cruise (100B) most nights around 5pm.

TOP CHOICE Dee Dee Pohchanah THAI \$
(no roman-script sign; Th Prajak; dishes 40-230B; ☺lunch & dinner) How good is Dee Dee? Just look at the crowds – but don't be put off by them. Despite having a full house every night, this simple place is a well-oiled machine and you won't be waiting long. Open until 2am.

Darika Bakery THAI \$
(668 Th Meechai; dishes 30-70B; ☺breakfast & lunch) If you're an early riser, this spartan English-speaking outfit will be waiting for you from 5am with hearty egg-and-toast breakfasts, banana pancakes, baguette sandwiches and more.

Daeng Namnuang VIETNAMESE \$
(Th Rimkhong; dishes 45-180B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🏠) This massive river restaurant has grown into an Isan institution and hordes of out-of-towners head home with car boots

and carry-on bags – there's an outlet at Udon Thani's airport – stuffed with *năm neu-ang* (pork spring rolls).

Mae Ut

VIETNAMESE \$

(no roman-script sign; ☑0 4246 1204; Th Meechai; dishes 30-40B; ☺lunch & dinner) While Daeng Namnuang operates as much like a factory as a restaurant, this little place, serving just four items, including fried spring rolls and *khà o gee -ab Bahk mǎr* (fresh noodles with pork), is more like grandma's kitchen. Look for the orange building with tables under a blue awning. English is limited.

Café Thasadej

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(387/3 Th Bunterngjit; dishes 60-375B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Sophistication is in short supply in Nong Khai, but it oozes out of this little restaurant. Both the menu and liquor list, the latter among the best in town, go global. Gyros, Weiner schnitzel, fish and chips, lasagne, tuna salad and smoked salmon are some of the most popular options.

Nung-Len Coffee Bar

INTERNATIONAL, THAI \$

(1801/2 Th Kaew Worawut; dishes 30-180B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This petite place with an ever-smiling owner has good java and juices plus an eclectic menu of Thai and *fa-ràng* food, and even a few fusions of the two, such as 'spaghetti fried chilli with chicken'.

Saap Lah

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; 897/2 Th Meechai; dishes 25-60B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) For excellent *gài yâhng*, *sôm-dam* and other Isan foods, follow your nose to this no-frills food shop.

Mariam Restaurant

INDIAN \$

(850/5 Th Prajak; dishes 30-80; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☑) This Muslim restaurant serves Indian (Pakistani, actually) and southern Thai food. For 120B you get three dishes, two roti and one drink.

Hospital Food Court

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Meechai; ☺breakfast & lunch) A dozen cooks here whip up the standards.

Paradise View

THAI \$\$

(Rte 212; dishes 65-290B; ☺dinner) You can sample Isan food (it also serves Thai and Chinese) and see nearly the whole city from the Grand Paradise Hotel's open-air rooftop restaurant.

Roti Naihua

THAI \$

(429/6 Th Rimkhong; roti 20-60B; ☺lunch & dinner; ☑) A roti supercenter with a wide choice of stuffings (blueberry jam to cashews to tuna) and showboat staff.



Drinking

Gaia

BAR

(Th Rimkhong; ☺closed Tue) Much of the Mut Mee crowd and many resident *fa-ràng* fill this laid-back lounge on the Mekong. There's a great drinks list, a chilled vibe and sometimes live music. It often hosts fundraisers for local charitable projects.

Warm Up

BAR

(Th Rimkhong) This little place rises above, both figuratively and literally, the other bars at this end of Th Rimkhong. It looks out over the river, has a free pool table and is popular with both Thais and travellers.

For something completely Thai, follow the Mekong-hugging Th Rimkhong east past Tha Sadet Market and as you approach Phra That La Nong you'll pass a bevy of restaurants and bars, some earthy, some fashionable, churning out dinner and drinks. There are some expat-owned bars around here too.



Shopping

Village Weaver Handicrafts

HANDICRAFTS

(1020 Th Prajak) This place sells high-quality, handwoven fabrics and clothing (ready made or made to order) that help fund development projects around Nong Khai. The *mât-mèe* cotton is particularly good here.

Hornbill Books

BOOKS

(Soi Mut Mee; ☺10am-7pm Mon-Sat) Buys, sells and trades English-language books. Has internet access too.



Information

Internet Access

Coffee Net (Th Bunterngjit; per hr 30B;

☺10am-9pm) Free coffee and tea while you surf.

SC Net (187 Soi Lang Wat Hai Sok; per hr 15B;

☺10am-10pm)

Medical Services

Nong Khai Hospital (☑0 4241 1504; Th Meechai)

Money

Big Jieng Mall (Hwy 2) Has several banks that are open in the evening and on weekends. It also has an AEON ATM.

BORDER CROSSING: NONG KHAI TO VIENTIANE

If you don't have a Lao visa, take a tük-tük (no more than 100B for two people from the bus station) to the **border** (☎6.30am-10pm) where you get stamped out of Thailand. From there regular minibuses (20B) ferry passengers across the bridge to the hassle-free, but sometimes busy, Lao immigration checkpoint where 30-day visas (see p770 for details) are available. (Unless you're travelling in a large group, there's no good reason to use the visa service agencies in town.) From there it's almost 20km to Vientiane. Plenty of buses, tük-tük and taxis will be waiting for you.

If you already have your visa for Laos, there are six direct buses a day to Vientiane from Nong Khai's bus terminal (55B, one hour). There are also direct Vientiane buses from Udon Thani, Khon Kaen and Nakhon Ratchasima.

You can also go to Laos by train; though not to Vientiane. The 15-minute ride (20B to 30B, departs 9am and 2.45pm) drops you in Thanaleng (aka Dongphasay) station just over the bridge leaving you to continue to town on your own. There are immigration booths at both stations.

Post

Main post office (Th Meechai; ☎8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, Sun & holidays)

Tourist Information

Immigration (☎0 4242 3963; ☎8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) South of the Friendship Bridge. Offers Thai visa extensions.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☎0 4242 1326; Hwy 2; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Inconveniently located outside of town.

Travel Agencies

Go Thasadej (☎08 1592 0164; www.go-thasadej.com; Mekong Promenade; ☎10am-8pm Mon-Sat) One of the most reliable all-round travel agents in Thailand.

i Getting There & Away

Air

The nearest airport is 55km south in Udon Thani.

Udonkaew Tour (☎0 4241 1530; Th Pranang Cholpratan; ☎8.30am-5.30pm) travel agency runs vans (150B per person) to/from the airport. Coming into town they'll drop you at your hotel or the bridge; going back you need to get yourself to their office. It's best to buy a ticket in advance. A private driver to the airport costs 700B at most travel agencies.

Bus

Nong Khai's **bus terminal** (☎0 4241 1612) is located just off Th Prajak, about 1.5km from the main pack of riverside guest houses. Udon Thani (35B to 47B, one hour, every half-hour) is the most frequent destination. There are also buses for Khon Kaen (110B to 139B, 3½ hours, hourly) and Nakhon Phanom (210B, 6½ hours, six daily until 12.30pm). For those travelling west along the Mekong, there are five buses to Pak Chom, and the 7.30am bus continues all the way to Loei

(130B, 6½ hours). For Chiang Mai, you have to change at Udon's Bus Terminal 2 (*bor-kör-sör mài*).

Bangkok buses (350B to 450B, 10 to 11 hours) are frequent in the late afternoon and early evening, but less so during the day. **Chan Tour** (☎0 4246 0205; 600B; ☎departs 10.15am, 7.30pm, 8.45pm) and **999 VIP** (☎0 4241 2679; 700B; ☎departs 8pm) offer VIP buses. There's also one bus direct to Suvarnabhumi (Airport) bus station (454B, nine hours, 8pm).

Train

Two express trains, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, connect Bangkok (2nd-class air-con 498B, 1st-class sleeper upper/lower 1117/1317B, 11 to 12 hours) to **Nong Khai Railway Station** (☎0 4241 1592), which is 2km west of downtown. There's also one cheaper rapid train leaving Bangkok in the evening.

i Getting Around

Nong Khai is a great place for cycling due to the limited traffic and the nearby countryside. Many guest houses let you use bikes for free. If you need to hire one, **Khun Noui** (☎08 1975 4863; Th Kaew Worawut; ☎8am-5pm), who sets up on the roadside across from the entrance to Mut Mee, has reliable bikes (30B per day) and motorcycles (200B).

A tük-tük between the Mut Mee area and either the bus station or bridge should be 30B to 40B.

West of Nong Khai

The people living west of Nong Khai are obsessed with **topiary**, and along Rte 211 you'll pass hedges and bushes sculpted by ambitious gardeners into everything from elephants to boxing matches. The river road

(Th Kaew Worawut), lined with floodplain fields of tobacco, tomatoes and chillies, is another option for the first stretch of the route west, though cyclists should note that it has no shoulder.

The tourism office in Nong Khai has information about village homestay programs (300B to 500B including meals) along the way, and if you stop by their office they'll help arrange your visit.

WAT PHRA THAT BANG PHUAN

วัดพระธาตุบังพวน

Boasting a beautiful *chedi* that locals believe holds 29 Buddha relics, **Wat Phra That Bang Phuan** (☺daylight hours) is one of the region's most sacred temples. Nobody knows when the first stupa was erected here, but after moving his capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane in 1560, Lan Xang King Setthathirat commissioned grand temples to be built all around his kingdom, including a new stupa built over an older one here. Rain caused it to lean precariously and in 1970 it finally fell over. It was rebuilt in 1976–77. The current one stands 34m high on a 17-sq-metre base and has many unsurfaced *chedi* around it, giving the temple an ancient atmosphere; and it's this, much more than the main stupa, that makes a trip here rewarding.

The temple is 22km from Nong Khai on Rte 211. Take a Pak Chom-bound bus (20B, 45 minutes).

THA BO

POP 16,000

ท่าบ่อ

Prosperous Tha Bo is the most important commercial centre between Nong Khai and Loei, and the covered market, which spills out to the surrounding streets, is full of locally grown products. A large Vietnamese population lives here, and they've cornered the market on noodle production. You'll see masses of *sên lèk* (small rice noodles) drying in the sun on the west side of town. From about 5am to 10am you can watch people at the factories making the noodles, and then at around 2pm they start the cutting, all by hand.

It used to be mostly spring-roll wrappers laid out on the bamboo racks, but noodles are easier to make and sell so people have made the switch. Ban Hua Sai, 10km upriver just before Si Chiangmai, is now the area's spring-roll-wrapper capital.

Tha Bo is mostly a day-trip destination, but there are some cheap guest houses, if you want to spend the night.

The 'yellow bus' runs regularly between Nong Khai and Tha Bo (27B, one hour, every half-hour), taking the scenic riverside route.

Around Nong Khai

0 10 km
0 6 miles



Pick it up in Nong Khai at the bus station or near the hospital on Th Meechai.

WAT HIN MAK PENG

วัดหินหมากเป้ง

Overlooking a lovely stretch of the Mekong, this vast forest **temple** (☺6am-7pm) is centred on a cliff rising out of the river. The very peaceful temple is highly respected because of the Thai people's continuing reverence for the founding abbot, Luang Pu Thet, who they believe reached enlightenment. Several monuments in his honour, including a glistening *chedi* housing his few earthly possessions and a lifelike wax statue, are found around the grounds. Visitors must dress politely: no shorts above the knees or sleeveless tops.

The temple is midway between Si Chiang-mai and Sangkhom. Sangkhom-bound buses from Nong Khai (50B, 2¼ hours) pass the entrance, and then it's a longish walk to the buildings.

SANGKHOM

สังขม

The little town of Sangkhom, facing the Lao island of Don Klang Khong, makes a great brief stop for those following the Mekong between Nong Khai and Loei. Staring at the lovely Mekong and mountain scenery tends to dominate visitors' time here, but there are also some wonderful attractions around town.

The forest wát peering down on the town from the hills, **Wat Pa Tak Sua** (☺daylight hours), lies just 2km away as the crow flies, but it's 19km to drive. (Take the turn-off across from Nam Tok Than Thong.) It has the most amazing Mekong views we know of. The sunset scene is superb and you might see the valley filled with fog on early mornings during the cold season. The footpath used by the monks every morning begins east of town just before the Km81 pillar. Follow Soi 5 past the last house and then veer right by the mango and papaya trees.

About 14km past the temple road is interesting **Phiang Din Cave** (admission by donation; ☺6am-6pm), which some locals believe is the home of a *naga* king. If you can speak Thai, you'll hear some fanciful stories. Guides lead a 30-minute route with lights or a two-hour route using torches (flashlights). On both you'll need to manoeuvre through some small, wet passages and you can't wear shoes.

Three-tiered **Nam Tok Than Thip waterfall** (admission free; ☺daylight hours), 13km west of Sangkhom (2km off Rte 211), is the largest waterfall in the area. The lower level

drops 30m and the second, easily reached via stairs, falls 100m. The 70m top drop is only barely visible through the lush forest. **Nam Tok Than Thong waterfall** (admission free; ☺daylight hours), 11km east of Sangkhom, is a wider but shorter drop. The short nature trail takes you down by the Mekong. Than Thong is more accessible than Than Thip, but can be rather crowded on weekends and holidays. Both dry up by February.

Sleeping & Eating



Bouy Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☺0 4244 1065; Rte 211; r 200-280B; ☺) As the ever-smiling Bouy will tell you, Sangkhom's veteran lodge has just a few 'simple huts' (the cheaper ones sharing bathrooms), but they're popular for good reason. They come with hammocks and wooden decks and the riverside location, just west of town, is wonderfully relaxing. Bike/motorbike hire costs 50B/200B and river trips are available.

Poopae Ruenmaithai

HOTEL \$\$

(☺0 4244 1088; Rte 211; r 500-1500B; ☺☺) This attractive set-up, featuring wooden walkways and decorative stonework, should have made better use of the river views, though it will definitely satisfy those who demand a certain level of comfort. The cheapest rooms, all but one of which have shared baths, are a little *Being John Malkovich*, but most people will be able to stand up straight. The restaurant is good and there's a four-person Jacuzzi for rent (200B per half-day). It's 1.5km east of downtown.

Sangkhom Away

CAFE \$

(Rte 211; ☺breakfast & lunch) A fun little place in the heart of town.

Getting There & Away

There are five rickety fan buses a day from Nong Khai (55B, three hours) and the earliest of those continues all the way to Loei (70B, 3½ hours).

LOEI PROVINCE

Stretching south from the sleepy arc of the Mekong River at Chiang Khan to the vast mountain plateau of Phu Kra-dueng National Park, Loei (meaning 'to the extreme') is a diverse, beautiful province untouched by mass tourism, despite all it has to offer. This isn't the wildest place in Thailand, but the region's tranquil national parks and nature reserves (there are far more good ones than we can feature here) can lead you to some

splendid isolation. And, if you have the luck to arrive at the right time, you can balance the hush of nature with the hubbub of Dan Sai's incredible Phi Ta Khon Festival.

The terrain here is mountainous and temperatures fluctuate from one extreme to the other: it's hotter than elsewhere in Thailand during the hot season and chillier during the cold season. This is one of the few provinces in Thailand where temperatures drop below 0°C, a fact tourist brochures love to trumpet. In December and January the crisp air paints leaves red and yellow at high elevations, such as around Phu Kradueng and Phu Reua.

Loei

POP 33,000

Arrive here after a sojourn in the region's remote countryside and the capital city is little more than a reminder that concrete and congestion still exist. Not that it's a bad

place, but, as the Tourism Authority of Thailand itself says, 'the city of Loei has little to hold the traveller's interest'.

Sights

Loei's museums are hardly worth a special trip, but if you won't be visiting Dan Sai, there are Phi Ta Khon festival masks and photos (plus pottery and other artefacts) to see at the **Loei Museum** (Th Charoenrat; admission free; ☎8.30am-4.30pm), above the TAT office, and the **Loei Cultural Centre** (Rte 201; admission free; ☎8.30am-4pm), 5km north of town at Rajabhat University.

Sleeping

Sugar Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

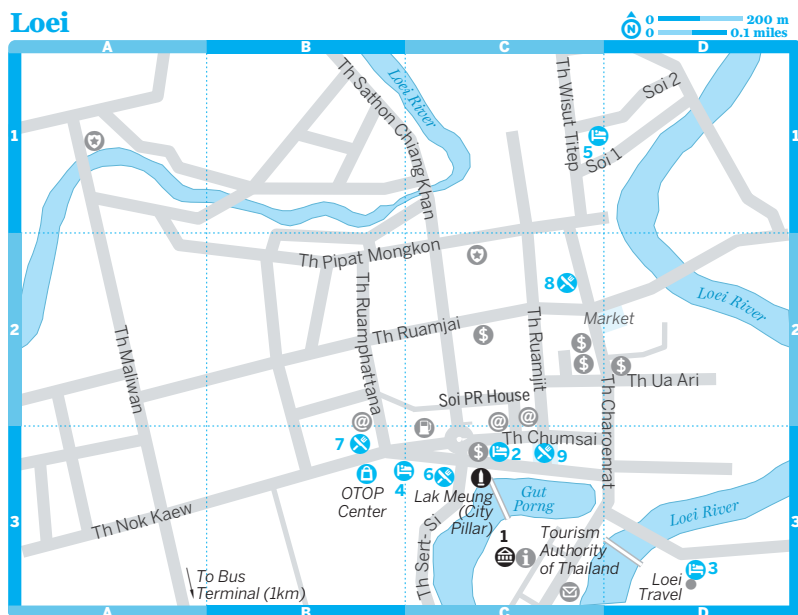
(☎08 9711 1975; www.sugarguesthouse.blog.com; Soi 2, 4/1 Th Wisut Titep; r 180-380B; 📶📶📶) One of the cheapest places in town (the fan rooms share a bathroom) is the friendliest. The English-speaking owner arranges trips around the province at reasonable prices, or,

Loei Province

0 20 km
0 10 miles



Loei



Loei

📍 Sights

1 Loei Museum C3

🏠 Sleeping

2 King Hotel C3

3 Loei Palace Hotel D3

4 Phutawan Mansion B3

5 Sugar Guesthouse C1

🍴 Eating

6 Baan Yai C3

7 Ban Thai B3

8 Krua Nid C2

9 Walking Street C3

if you'd rather get there yourself, hires bikes (50B) and motorcycles (250B). Be wary of the dog.

King Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 4281 1701; 11/8-12 Th Chumsai; r 500-1500B; 📶) Fit for a king? No; though a major modernisation has given the rooms a simple but attractive style and made it a pleasant place to stay. The restaurant is good and guests can borrow bikes for free.

Phutawan Mansion

HOTEL \$

(☎ 4283 2983; <http://phutawan-loei.com>, in Thai; Th Nok Kaew; r 350-650B; 📶) The bright newly built hotel is plain, but offers good-value rooms (they feature a fridge and quality mattresses) in a quiet, convenient location.

Loei Palace Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 4281 5668; 167/4 Th Charoenrat; r 1200-2500B, ste 3500B; 📶📶📶) Loei's flagship hotel sports some wedding-cake architecture, helpful staff, plenty of mod cons and usually a high vacancy rate, so ask about discounts. Wi-fi covers the first two floors only. Check out the flood marker and photos next to the reception desk to see what the city suffered in September 2002.



Eating

Baan Yai

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Sert-Si; dishes 25-150B; ☺lunch & dinner) This big, leafy place with a funky variety of wooden tables and chairs is a genuine Isan restaurant where the menu (no English) has entire sections for ant eggs, insects and frogs. It also serves *dìdng mǎo*

(pork in a sour-and-spicy sauce), a dish you probably won't find elsewhere. At night there are movies and football to watch or live music.

Walking Street

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(Th Ruamjit; ☀4-11pm) Loei's grandly named, but otherwise typical, night market is a good dining destination.

Krua Nid

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; 58 Th Charoenrat; dishes 25-40B; ☀breakfast, lunch & dinner) Fronted by a big glass buffet case, this no-frills eatery serves *hòr mòk* (soufflé-like curry steamed in banana leaves) and other central-Thai dishes. Look for the white awning.

Ban Thai

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(22/58-60 Th Nok Kaew; dishes 49-370B; ☀lunch & dinner) Mr Chris, as everyone calls this restaurant, is the first choice for a fix of *fa-ràng* food. German and Italian dishes dominate the menu.



Information

The **Tourism Authority of Thailand** (TAT; ☎0 4281 2812; tatloei@tat.or.th; Th Charoenrat; ☀8.30am-4.30pm) provides a good map and has helpful staff.

Internet cafes are spread around the city centre, while most banks are around Th Charoenrat, including **Krung Thai Bank** (Th Ua Ari; ☀10am-6pm), which offers convenient hours.



Getting There & Away

Air

Solar Air (☎0 2535 2455; www.solarair.co.th) and **Nok Air** (☎0 2900 9955; www.nokair.com) connect Loei to Bangkok using Don Muang Airport with prices starting around 1700B. **Loei Travel** (☎0 4283 0741; www.loeitavel.com), inside the Loei Palace Hotel, sells tickets.

Bus

The most frequent service from Loei's **bus terminal** (☎0 4283 3586) is to Udon Thani (66B to 92B, three hours, every half-hour). There are also buses to Khon Kaen (129B, 3½ hours, every half-hour), Khorat (263B, six hours, hourly), Phitsanulok (139B to 178B, four hours, five daily) and Chiang Mai (409B to 526B, 10 hours, six daily). The only bus to Nong Khai (130B, 6½ hours) leaves at 6am, and it's worth catching because it follows the scenic Mekong River route. It's faster, however, to go via Udon Thani.

Buses to Bangkok (321B to 412B, 11 hours) leave hourly throughout the day and every 20 minutes in the early evening. There are VIP buses (640B) with **Air Muang Loei** (☎0 4283

2042; ☀departs 8.30pm) and **999 VIP** (☎0 4281 1706; ☀departs 9pm).



Getting Around

Sòrng-tǎa-ou (10B) run from the bus station through town or you can take a *túk-túk* for about 30B. Airport shuttles to downtown cost 200B. The Loei Palace Hotel rents bikes (50/80B per half-/full day).

Chiang Khan

เชียงใหม่

Please pardon our lamentation, but we really miss the old Chiang Khan. Virtually overnight, what was once a sleepy little-known riverside town full of traditional timber houses became a trendy destination for Thais, and now tour buses arrive daily. That said, it's far from ruined and we still think it's a good place to visit: it's just no longer great. The photogenic views of the river and the Lao mountains beyond are still there and things remain fairly peaceful in the daytime, before the evening shopping stampede begins.



Sights & Activities

Temples

Like most of Chiang Khan's temples, the *ubosot* (chapel) at **Wat Si Khun Meuang** (Th Chai Khong; ☀daylight hours), which probably dates to the Rama III era, is mostly Lao-style (in particular, note the sweeping roof), but it also freely mixes central (the lotus pillars) and northern (the guardian lions) Thai stylings. It's fronted by a superb mural and there's plenty of topiary around the grounds.

Wat Mahathat (Th Chiang Khan; ☀daylight hours), in the centre of town, is Chiang Khan's oldest temple. The *bòht*, constructed in 1654, has a new roof over old walls with the faded original mural on the front.

About 2km before Kaeng Khut Khu, **Wat Tha Khaek** (☀daylight hours) is a ramshackle,

BORDER CROSSING: THA LI TO KAEN THAO

Foreigners can now get Lao visas (see p770 for details), at the seldom-used **Thai-Lao Nam Heuang Friendship Bridge** (☀8am-6pm) in Amphoe Tha Li, 60km northwest of Loei, but the road to Luang Prabang is rough and public transport is scarce.

700-year-old forest temple housing three 300-year-old stone Buddha images. They sit on a ledge over a larger, modern Buddha in the wát's still unfinished *bòht*.

Kaeng Khut Khu

With the mountains making an attractive backdrop, this famous bend in the Mekong is well known across Thailand. The surrounding park has a bevy of vendors selling *má-prów gàaw* (coconut candy), the local speciality. This is also a good place to try *gúng-tòrt-gròrp* (crispy fried shrimp), which looks a little like a frisbee, and *gúng dên* (dancing shrimp), little bowls of live shrimp. It's 5km downstream from town; túk-túk drivers charge 50B per person.

Boat Trips & Tours

Most guest houses arrange boat trips to Kaeng Khut Khu or further afield, and the mountain scenery makes longer trips highly recommended. Rates swing with petrol prices, but the typical 1½-hour trip in a boat that can hold 10 people costs between 800B and 1000B.

Another option is to kayak the river (1500B per person, minimum four) with **Mekong Culture & Nature Resort** (☎ 4282 1457), 1km upstream from town.

Huan Mai Sri Chiang Khan Homestay (☎ 4282 1825; www.huanmaisrichiangkhan.ob.tc, in Thai; 145 Th Chai Khong) offers an early morning tour (departing at 5am; 100B per person) that includes seeing the sunrise (and maybe a sea of fog during the cool season) from atop nearby **Phu Thok** mountain.

Bike hire generally costs 50B per day while motorcycles are between 200B and 250B. Most guest houses have free bikes for their customers.

PHI KON NAM

Similar to Dan Sai's Phi Ta Khon Festival (p476), but barely promoted, the Phi Kon Nam festival in Ban Na Sao, 7km south of Chiang Khan, is part of the village's rain-inducing Rocket Festival (Bun Bàng Fai) and coincides with Visakha Bucha (p24) in May or June. Locals believe that the souls of their cows and buffaloes wander around the village after they die, so to show respect, the villagers don wild bovine-inspired masks and colourful costumes. If you're in the area, don't miss it.

Sleeping

Chiang Khan's rocketing popularity means hotel owners have no need to price their rooms reasonably. You can usually save money by staying on a soi rather than along the river road, and most of the pricier places have weekday discounts. Also note that preserving the historic character of buildings means shared bathrooms (unless stated otherwise) and thin walls.

Poonsawasdi Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 08 0400 8777; www.poonsawasdi.com in Thai; Soi 9; r 800B; 🚻🚿) The oldest hotel in Chiang Khan has been creatively jazzed up with coloured wood and antique furnishings, and, unlike most of the wooden oldies in town, this one still radiates historic charm inside the rooms, not just in the lobby.

Chiang Khan

Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎ 04 4282 1691; www.thailandunplugged.com; 282 Th Chai Khong; s/d/tr 300/450/600B; 🚻) This traditional-style place is all creaking timber and tin roofing and the terrace sits really close to the river. Owner Pim will make you feel completely at home. She can also arrange *Bohng-lahng* shows (2500B) performed by local students, who keep the cash to put towards their studies.

Loogmai Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 08 6234 0011; 112 Th Chai Khong; r 450-550B) Combining some minimalist modern artistic styling with oodles of French-colonial class, this old-school villa offers sparse but atmospheric rooms (one with private bathroom), an airy terrace with river views and a real sense of history. The owner leaves the villa at 6pm, but you get a key.

Chiang Khan Hill Resort

HOTEL \$\$

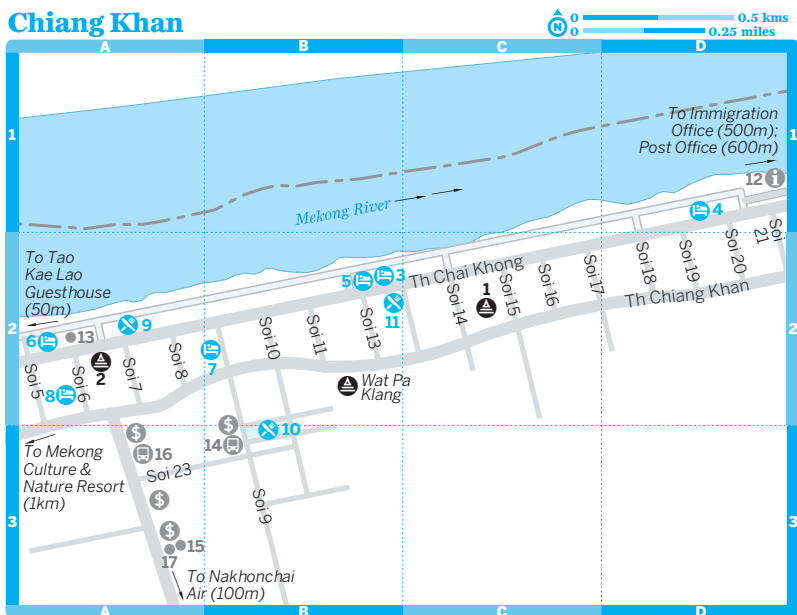
(☎ 04 4282 1285; www.chiangkhanhill.com; r 800-4000B; 🚻🚿🚿) The best views of Kaeng Khut Khu are from the town's only resort, which overlooks the rapids. Rooms are nice for the price and the restaurant is quite good.

Tao Kae Lao Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎ 08 1311 9754; taokaelao@gmail.com; 92 Th Chai Khong; r 600-700B; 🚻🚿) Rooms here are super simple, just mattresses on the floor, but the young Bangkokian owners put heaps of funky style into the rest of the place, making it a good spot to chill. Two rooms have river views.

Chiang Khan



Chiang Khan

📍 Sights

- 1 Wat Mahathat..... C2
2 Wat Si Khun Meuang..... A2

🏠 Sleeping

- 3 Ban Sangthong B2
4 Chiang Khan Guesthouse..... D1
5 Chiangkhan Riverview
Guesthouse B2
6 Loogmai Guesthouse..... A2
7 Poonsawasdi Hotel..... B2
8 Torng Sai Homestay..... A2

🍴 Eating

- 9 Ban-Jerd-Loei..... A2

- 10 Municipal Market..... B3
11 Sum-Ran-Na B2

📍 Information

- 12 Chiang Khan Information
Center D1
13 Hua Mai Sri Chiang Khan
Homestay A2

🚗 Transport

- 14 999 VIP B3
15 Air Muang Loei..... A3
16 Phu Kradung Tours..... A3
17 Sǒng-tǎa-ou to Loei & Ban Tad A3

Chiangkhan Riverview
Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 0741 8055; www.chiangkhan.741.com; 277 Th Chai Khong; r 300-600B; 📶🚰) The most diverse choice in town, this riverside spot has rooms with fan and air-conditioning, shared and private bathrooms, and a mix of old and new construction. Some rooms have river views and the terrace is very inviting.

Ban Sangthong

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 4282 1305; 162 Th Chai Khong; s/d 200/400B; 📶🚰) This slightly chaotic little place, stuffed with the owner's art, has the cheapest rooms on the river and an attractive little terrace.

Torng Sai Homestay

GUEST HOUSE \$

(no roman-script sign; ☎08 6227 2667; 129/3 Soi 6; s/d/tr 200/300/450B) This old wooden shophouse hasn't been gussied up like those on the riverfront. You get just a

mattress on the floor; a fan and a warm welcome. If the owners aren't around, they're probably at the temple: just call and they'll rush over.



Eating

Ban-Jerd-Loei

THAI \$

(187/1 Th Chai Khong; dishes 35-150B; ☺lunch & dinner) Mekong fish (try the 'black pepper fried river fish') is the speciality of this riverside place hiding behind a barber shop, but its other Thai dishes are good too.

Sum-Ran-Na

CAFE \$

(165 Th Chai Khong; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; @☺) This cute, little corner coffee shop has free wi-fi and computers for customers.

Municipal Market

MARKET \$

(☺breakfast & dinner) Though small, this market is really good.



Information

There are still no banks with exchange facilities, but there are several ATMs. There are some internet cafes around town, but Sum-Ran-Na (p476) is a more pleasant place to check email.

Chiang Khan Information Center (Soi 21, Th Chai Khong) This place may or may not open eventually.

Immigration (☎0 4282 1911; Soi 26, Th Chai Khong at; ☺8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) For visa extensions.



Getting There & Away

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou to Loei (35B, 1¼ hours) depart about every 15 minutes in the early morning, and then whenever there are enough passengers, from a stop on Rte 201, while eight buses (34B, 45 minutes) leave from the **Nakhonchai Air** (☎0 4282 1905) terminal 300m further south. The buses continue to Khorat (297B, seven hours) via Chaiyaphum (212B, five hours).

Three companies, departing from their own offices, make the run direct to Bangkok (10 hours): **Air Muang Loei** (☎08 9842 1524; old Shell petrol station, Rte 201) at 8am and 6.30pm (479B); **999 VIP** (☎0 4282 1002; Soi 9) at 9am, 6pm, 7pm and 7.30pm (347B to 694B); and **Phu Kradung Tours** (☎08 7856 5149; Rte 201) at 6.30pm (347B).

No transport runs direct to Nong Khai. The quickest way there is via Loei and Udon Thani, but for the scenic river route take a Loei-bound *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* south to Ban Tad (20B, 30 minutes) where you can catch the bus to Nong Khai that leaves Loei at 6am. Another option is to hire a car to take you to Pak Chom (about 600B) where there are buses to Nong Khai at 10am, 1pm and 3pm.

If you're heading west and you've got your own wheels, consider following the seldom-seen back roads along Mae Nam Heuang; they'll eventually deposit you in Dan Sai.

Phu Reua National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูเรือ

Phu Reua means 'Boat Mountain', a moniker that owes its origins to a cliff jutting out of the peak that's sort of in the shape of a Chinese junk. At only 121 sq km, **Phu Reua National Park** (☎0 4280 7624; admission 200B) isn't one of Thailand's most impressive reserves, but it does offer some dreamy views from the summit (1365m), reached by either a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* or a 1km footpath. For a longer hike to the top, take the easy 2.5km trail from the lower visitor centre to 30m-tall **Nam Tok Huai Phai**, arguably the park's most scenic waterfall, and then keep going.

There are two campgrounds. The upper one is informal and facilities are poor, but the **campsites** (per person with own tent 30B, tent hire 150-450B) and rough bucket-shower **rooms** (500-700B) put you pretty close to the summit for sunrise and sunset. There's hot water, all-day electricity and wi-fi at the more attractive lower **campsite** (per person with own tent 30B, 2-/4-person tent hire 270/540B), which also has six comfortable **bungalows** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; 4/6 people 2000/3000B) with TV and fridge. There are many small resorts below the park with cheaper prices. The restaurants at the campsites only open from September to February and sometimes weekends and holidays the rest of the year. Night-time temperatures can drop below freezing in December and January, so come prepared.

The park is 50km west of Loei on Rte 203. Buses heading west from the city can drop you in the town of Phu Reua (50B to 60B, 1½ hours), and then you'll have to hitch or charter a truck for around 500B (including a few hours' wait) to the park itself. The summit is 8km from the highway.

Dan Sai

ด่านซ้าย

For 362 days a year, Dan Sai is an innocuous little town, a borderline backwater community where life revolves around a small market and a dusty main street. For the remaining three days, however, it's the site of one of the country's liveliest and loudest festivals.

Falling during the fourth lunar month, Dan Sai's **Phi Ta Khon Festival** (also called Bun Phra Wet) combines the Phra Wet Festival – during which recitations of the *Mahavessantara Jataka* (a story about one of the Buddha's past lives) are supposed to enhance the listener's chance of being reborn in the lifetime of the next Buddha – with Bun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival). For those wishing to plunge headlong into Isan life, this curious cross between the drunken revelry of Carnival and the spooky imagery of Halloween is a must see.

The origins of the Phi Ta Khon Festival are shrouded in ambiguity, but some aspects appear to be related to tribal Tai (possibly Tai Dam) spirit cults. In fact, the dates for the festival (usually June) are divined by Jao Phaw Kuan, a local spirit medium who channels the information from the town's guardian deity. On the first day Jao Phaw Kuan performs a sacrifice to invite Phra Upakud (an enlightened monk with supernatural powers who chose to transform himself into a block of white marble to live eternally on the bottom of Mae Nam Man) to come to town. Locals then don wild costumes and masks for two days of dancing that's fuelled by *lôw kôw* (white whisky) and full of sexual innuendo, before launching the rockets and heading to the temple to listen to sermons through the night and into the third day.

Sights & Activities

FREE Phi Ta Kon Museum MUSEUM
(พิพิธภัณฑ์วัดไผ่ฯ; Th Kaew Asa; ☉9am-5pm) Wat Phon Chai, the temple behind the big white gate, plays a major role in the Phi Ta Khon festivities, so it's an appropriate home for this museum. It has a collection of costumes worn during the celebrations, a display showing how the masks are made and video from the festival.

Wat Neramit Wiphatsana TEMPLE
(วัดนรมิตวิปัสสนา; ☉daylight hours) Built on a wooded hill overlooking Phra That Si Songrak, this gorgeous (it almost looks like a Buddhist-themed resort) meditation wát features buildings made of unplastered laterite blocks. Famous Thai temple muralist Pramote Sriprom spent years painting images of *jataka* tales on the interior walls of the massive *bôht*, which also hosts a copy of the Chinnarat Buddha in Phitsanulok's Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat (see p349). The wát is dedicated to the memory of the

late Luang Pu Mahaphan, a much-revered local monk.

Phra That Si Songrak STUPA
(พระธาตุศรีสองรัก; Rte 2113; ☉7am-5pm) The most highly revered stupa in Loei Province, this whitewashed Lao-style *chedi* stands 20m high and was built in 1560–63 on what was then the Thai–Lao border as a gesture of unity between the Lao kingdom of Wiang Chan (Vientiane) and the Thai kingdom of Ayuthaya in their resistance against the Burmese. A pavilion in front of it contains a very old chest that supposedly contains an even older carved stone Buddha about 76cm long. Despite use of the name Phra That, there are no Buddha relics here. You can't wear shoes, hats or the colour red, or carry food or open umbrellas if you climb up to the *chedi*. Down below is a modest **museum** (admission free; ☉9am-4pm) with random artefacts donated by locals.

Sleeping & Eating

Homestay HOMESTAY \$
(☎08 9077 2080; dm/tw/tr 150/400/550B) A couple of villages just outside town have been running a successful homestay program for many years, and the families dote on *fa-ràng* guests (meals 70B). When not at work (most of the English-speaking

THE GARDEN OF ISAN

The Phu Reua region is famous for its flower farms and the riot of colours along the roadside makes the highway between Loei and Dan Sai one of the most scenic drives in Thailand. The cool, dry climate also allows farmers to grow a variety of crops not common in Isan, such as strawberries, coffee (the growing Coffee Bun chain is based here and its blend includes Loei-grown beans), macadamia nuts, petunias and persimmons.

One stop that most travellers with their own wheels make is **Chateau de Loei** (www.chateaudeloei.com; Rte 203 at Km60; ☉8am-5pm), which released the first commercially produced Thai wine in 1995. It's a nickel-and-dime operation compared to the attractive and well-managed wineries around Khao Yai, but visitors are welcome to taste its wines and brandies way back in the utilitarian main building.

SUAN HIN PHA NGAM

With intriguingly warped and eroded limestone outcroppings, 'Beautiful Rock Garden' is an apt name for this hidden oasis, though Thais know it as **Kunming Meuang Thai** (สวนหินผางาม; per group 100B; ☎8.30am-5.30pm). 'Thailand's Kunming', due to its resemblance to the Stone Forest in Kunming, China. Most people just ride a tractor (10B per person one way) up to the easy-to-reach viewpoint for a quick look, but the best thing to do is walk back with your guide through the labyrinth paths. At times the route is a little rough and you need to duck through some small passageways, which creates a small sense of adventure. Plan on an hour to walk back. The site is 20km southwest of Nong Hin. There's no public transport and hitching is highly impractical.

hosts are teachers) they'll take you out to share typical daily activities. Everything can be arranged at Kawinthip Hattakham (see later).



Phunacome

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 4289 2005; www.phunacomeresort.com; Rte 2013; r 3500-4900B; 🍷🍷🍷) This luxury resort makes the most of its country location, and the kitchen makes use of the organic rice and veggies grown on the grounds. (They make their own low-impact soaps and detergents too.) Two styles of room line a row of ponds: standard hotel rooms and some cool wood-and-thatch Isan-inspired cottages. Both are plush and lovely with nice views. The lobby has a library, massage service and restaurant with Thai and Western food. Its mascot is the buffalo and three real ones roam the grounds.

Ban Sabaadee 2

HOTEL \$

(☎08 0748 1555; Rte 2013; r 300B; 🍷🍷) This colourful little place 2km east of the Th Kaew Asa junction has ordinary but adequate rooms.

Dansai Resort Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4289 2281; Rte 2013; r 300-500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Dan Sai's most centrally located lodging has been on a building spree and now has rooms ranging from past-their-prime cold-water fan rooms to big new cottages.

Im Un

THAI \$

(no Roman-script sign; Rte 2013; dishes 60-150B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Thai standards and Isan favourites, such as *gaang Bâh* (jungle curry) and *lâhp hêt* (mushroom laap), are served under a thatched roof in a garden setting. It's on the edge of town, 900m east of the Th Kaew Asa junction.

Night Market

THAI \$

(Th Kaew Asa; ☎4.30-9.30pm) On the main road across from the municipal market.



Shopping

Kawinthip Hattakham

SOUVENIRS

(กวันทิพย์หัตถกรรม; 75 Th Kaew Asa; ☎8am-7pm) This shop selling authentic Phi Ta Khon masks and other festival-related souvenirs makes for a fun browse. It also has bike hire (100B per day) and coffee.

Information

The main road through town is Th Kaew Asa. At its north end, near the municipal market, is the **library** (☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), which has free internet and festival displays, and the **city hall** (*têt-sà-bahn*; ☎0 4289 1231; www.tessaban.dansai.com; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), where English-speaking staff enjoy answering questions. **Krung Thai Bank** (Rte 2013; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), which changes cash and travellers cheques, is on the main highway.

Getting There & Away

Buses between Loei (60B, 1½ hours) and Phitsanulok (94B, three hours) stop in Dan Sai near the junction of Th Kaew Asa and Rte 2013 every couple of hours.

Sirindhorn Art Centre

ศูนย์ศิลป์สิรินธร

FREE **Sirindhorn Art Centre** (Rte 210; ☎8am-6pm) can be found at the unlikely location of Wang Saphung, 23km south of Loei. It was built to honour Sangkom Thongmee, a famous local teacher (since retired) at the adjoining school whose students, mostly farmers' children, won thousands of awards for their work. Student works (and sometimes professional pieces) are always on dis-

play and often for sale. There's also a nice sculpture garden in front.

Tham Erawan

ถ้ำเอราวัณ

High up the side of a beautiful limestone mountain, **Tham Erawan** (☀7am-6.30pm) is a large cave shrine, featuring a giant seated Buddha. Gazing out over the mountain-studded plains below, the Buddha is visible from several kilometres away and can be reached by a winding staircase of 600 steps. The views are superb, especially at sunset. More stairs and a line of lights lead you through the massive chamber and out the other side of the mountain. Be sure to get out of the cave before they turn the lights out.

The temple is along Rte 210, just across the Nong Bualamphu Province line. Buses from Loei (25B to 35B, 1¼ hours, every half-hour) to Udon Thani will drop you 2.5km away. A motorcycle taxi will shuttle you to the temple for 30B.

Phu Kradueng National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูกระดึง

Capped off by its eponymous peak, **Phu Kradueng National Park** (☎0 4287 1333; admission 400B; ☀trail to summit 7am-2pm Oct-May) covers a high-altitude plateau, cut through with trails and peppered with cliffs and waterfalls. Rising to 1316m, Thailand's second national park is always cool at its highest reaches (average year-round temperature 20°C), where its flora is a mix of pine forest and savannah. Various forest animals, including elephants, Asian jackals, Asiatic black bears, sambar deer, serows and white-handed gibbons inhabit the 348-sq-km park.

There's a small visitor centre at the base of the mountain, but almost everything else is up top. The main trail scaling Phu Kradueng is 5.5km long and takes about three to four hours to climb. It's strenuous, but not too challenging (unless it's wet) since there are steps at most of the steep parts. The hike is quite scenic and there are rest stops with food vendors about every kilometre. Once on top, it's another 3km to the main visitor centre. You can hire porters to carry your gear balanced on bamboo poles (15B per kilogram).

The 5.5km trail that passes six waterfalls in a forested valley, is the most beautiful destination; even after November, when the water has largely dried up. There are also many

cliff-top viewpoints, some ideal for sunrises and sunsets, scattered around the mountain.

Spending the night atop Phu Kradueng is a rite of passage for many students, so the park gets unbelievably crowded during school holidays (especially the Christmas-New Year period and from March to May). The park is closed during the rainy season (June to September) because the path to the top becomes too difficult to climb.

Sleeping & Eating

Atop the mountain there's space for 5000 people to **camp** (per person with own tent 30B, 3-/6-person tent hire 225/450B), a variety of large **bungalows** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; bungalows 900-3600B) and many open-air eateries serving the usual stir-fry dishes. If you're arriving late, there's also camping and bungalows at the bottom and some resorts outside the entrance.

Getting There & Away

Buses between Loei (50B, 1½ hours) and Khon Kaen (75B, two hours) stop in Phu Kradueng town where *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* (20B per person, charters 200B) take people to the base of the mountain, 10km away.

BUENG KAN PROVINCE

Thailand's newest province officially split off from Nong Khai in 2011. It's remote and often lovely territory, and though most people travelling along the Mekong out of Nong Khai head west, there are some real rewards for bucking the trend and heading east, including one of Thailand's most amazing temples and best homestay programs.

Bueng Kan

บึงกาฬ

Little Bueng Kan is growing fast, but it's the rubber industry (40% of the province's land is now rubber-tree plantation) driving the boom rather than its new capital-city status. The only thing that qualifies as an attraction is the **Thai-Lao Market** that takes place along the Mekong on Tuesday and Friday mornings. Some of the products, such as herbs and mushrooms, sold by the Lao traders are gathered in the forest. It's also interesting to take a gander at the river during the dry season since it recedes far from Bueng Kan and reaches one of its narrowest points along the Thai-Lao border.

BORDER CROSSING: BUENG KAN TO PAKSAN

Although it's very rarely done, you can cross the border here to Paksan, but only if you already have your Lao visa (see p770 for details). The boat costs 60B per person and goes when there are eight passengers.

Not surprisingly, most travellers only stop long enough to catch connecting transport to Wat Phu Tok. If you do decide to stay, the Mekong-facing **Maenam Hotel** (☎0 4249 1051; 107 Th Chansin; r 350-400B; ๙๙๙) is the best located place in town. It's due for some TLC (some rooms are better than others, so ask to see several), but the rooms are large and have lots of little extras. Some fancier hotels were under construction on the highway when we last visited. Just about all the restaurants on Th Chansin set up tables along the riverside promenade, but there are many bugs here.

Buses to Nong Khai (100B, 2½ hours, six daily), Nakhon Phanom (130B, three hours, six daily) and Udon Thani (150B, 4½ hours, 12 daily) park near the old clock tower.

Ban Ahong

บ้านอาฮง

Ban Ahong is a pretty riverside village 20km before Bueng Kan. **Wat Ahong Silawat** (☀daylight hours), on its eastern edge, is built amid ruddy boulders at a river bend known as *Sàdeu Námkong* (the Mekong River's Navel) because of the large whirlpool that spins here June to September. A 7m-tall copy of Phitsanulok's Chinnarat Buddha gazes over the Mekong from the building south of the *bòht* and giant Mekong catfish (*Blah bèuk*) lurk in the fish pond, though they're rarely seen. It's presumed to be the deepest spot along the river and there are legends about *naga* living in underwater caves. In fact, *bāng fai pá yah nāhk* (*naga* fireballs; see the boxed text, p465) were first reported here and this is the only place where they appear in colours other than red.

The **Ahong Maekhong View Hotel** (☎08 6227 0465; r 500-800B; ๙) sits along the river on the temple grounds (all profits go to the temple) and does most of its business with tour groups, so it's likely you'll either find it booked out or you'll be the only guests. Each

of the 15 large rooms is well appointed and has a balcony, and the serene location makes this a great place to stay. The abbot, wanting to promote a peaceful atmosphere, requested that the rooms have no TVs. Another overnight option is the village's **homestay** (☎08 0755 0661; per person 200B, meals 100B), though there's barely any English spoken.

Buses between Nong Khai (100B, 2½ hours, six daily) and Bueng Kan can drop you at the temple.

Wat Phu Tok

วัดพุทธทศ

With its network of rickety staircases and walkways built in, on and around a giant sandstone outcrop, **Wat Phu Tok** (Isolated Mountain Temple; ☀6am-5pm, closed 10-16 April) is one of the region's wonders. The precarious paths lead past shrines and *gù-dī* that are scattered around the mountain on cliffs and in caves and provide fabulous views over the surrounding countryside. A final scramble up roots and rocks takes you to the forest on the summit, which is considered the 7th level. If you hustle and take all the short cuts you can be up and down in about an hour, but we advise against it: this is a climb that should be savoured. The quiet isolation entices monks and *māa chee* (nuns) from all over Thailand to come meditate, so be quiet and respectful as you explore.

This forest temple used to be the domain of the famous meditation master Luang Pu Juan, a disciple of Luang Pu Man (see p488). He died in a plane crash in 1980 along with several other highly revered forest monks who were flying to Bangkok for Queen Sirikit's birthday celebration. A marble *chedi* containing Luang Pu Juan's belongings, some bone relics and fantastic exterior sculptures sits below the mountain amid a gorgeous garden.

Visitors who impress the monks by expressing some knowledge of Buddhism and meditation are permitted to stay the night in single-sex dorms at the base of the mountain.

i Getting There & Away

Túk-túk in Bueng Kan can be hired for the trip to Wat Phu Tok for 800B for the return journey plus a few hours waiting time. It's cheaper to take a bus from Bueng Kan to Ban Siwilai (20B, 45 minutes), where túk-túk drivers will do the trip for 300B to 400B. If you catch an early bus to Bueng Kan, Wat Phu Tok can be visited as a day trip from Nong Khai, although there's no

need to backtrack since buses from Siwilai go to Udon Thani (140B, four hours).

If you're driving or pedalling, continue past Bueng Kan for 27km until you reach Chaiyapon, then turn right at Rte 3024, the road signed for Chet Si, and Tham Phra waterfalls. (These are in the Phu Wua Wildlife Reserve and make worthy detours, as much for the weird rocky landscape as the cascades. There's only water mid-May through December.) After 17.5km make a right and continue 4km more.

Ban Kham Pia

บ้านขามเปีย

Isan is flush with village homestay programs that let you delve deep into rural life; however most are aimed at Thai tour groups. But, thanks to the help of Open Mind Projects (p39) and English-speaking village-head Khun Bunleud, **Ban Kham Pia** (☎0 4241 3578, 08 7861 0601; www.thailandwildelephanttrekking.com; r 200B) really knows how to welcome *fà-ràng* (meals 50B to 90B).

Another great thing about this homestay is that it's within walking distance of the 186-sq-km **Phu Wua Wildlife Reserve**, so you can add some superb treks (including sleeping in a cave) to your trip. The forest is flush with waterfalls and home to about three-dozen elephants. They're sometimes encountered on day walks from the village during the rainy season and seen almost daily from January to April during overnight stays in the 'treehouses' (not for the faint-hearted). These are in the midst of a forest clearing where monks bring sugarcane to discourage the elephants from raiding farm fields. It's about an hour's drive from the village. The standard guide fee in and around the village is 300B per day and motorcycles cost 200B per day.

Ban Kham Pia is 190km east of Nong Khai. Buses between Nong Khai (140B, 3½ hours) and Nakhon Phanom (130B, three hours) will drop you at Ban Don Chik, 3km away.

NAKHON PHANOM PROVINCE

Lao and Vietnamese influences are strong in Nakhon Phanom, a province bordered by the Mekong and full of highly revered temples. Though just about every person you see tending their fields is ethnically Thai, many wear conical Vietnamese-style straw hats. It's a region of subtleties rather than can't-miss attractions, but there are plenty

of fine river views and interesting historic sites, and the colossal Wat Phra That Phanom is an enchanting talisman of Isan culture.

Nakhon Phanom

นครพนม

POP 31,700

Nakhon Phanom means 'City of Mountains', but the undulating sugarloaf peaks all lie across the river in Laos, so you'll be admiring rather than climbing them. The views are stunning, though, especially during a hazy sunrise. Nothing else in the peaceful, clean and proud city is quite as appealing as the distant row of hills, though there's plenty more to see and do for those who've come all the way out here. Most Thai visitors make some time to shop for silver at the shops near the pier.

Nakhon Phanom's temples have a distinctive style. This was once an important town in the Lan Xang Empire, and after that Thai kings sent their best artisans to create new buildings. Later a vivid French influence crossed the Mekong and jumped into the mix.

👁 Sights & Activities

Ban Na Chok

HISTORIC SITE

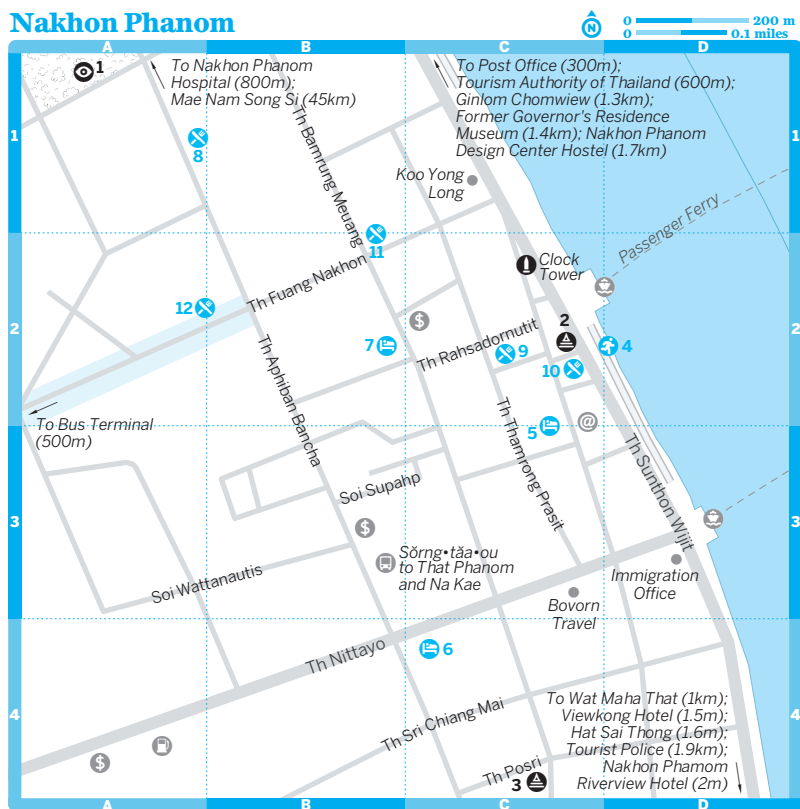
(บ้านนาจอก) The Vietnamese community in Ban Na Chok, about 3.5km west of town, has restored **Uncle Ho's House** (☎0 4252 2430; admission 50B; ☀daylight hours), the simple wooden house where Ho Chi Minh stayed at times (1928–9) while planning his resistance movement. There are a few more Ho Chi Minh displays, some labelled in English, a bit to the northwest at the **community centre** (☎08 0315 4630; admission free; ☀8am–5pm). There's a celebration of his birthday here every 19 May.

Wat Okat

TEMPLE

(วัดโสภา; Th Sunthon Wijit; ☀daylight hours) Pre-dating the town, Wak Oka is home to Phra Taew and Phra Tiam, two sacred wooden Buddha images covered in gold that sit on the highest pedestal in the *wi-hähn*. The current Tiam (on the right) is a replica; the original was stolen in 2010, which shocked the city. The amazing mural is one of our favourites in Thailand – it's like a Thai *Where's Wally?*; try to find the backpackers – and shows the story of Phra Taew and Phra Tiam floating across the Mekong from Laos.

Nakhon Phanom



Nakhon Phanom

🕒 Sights

- 1 Chom Khong Park.....A1
- 2 Wat OkatC2
- 3 Wat Si ThepC4

🚢 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 4 Sunset Cruise.....D2

🛏 Sleeping

- 5 Grand HotelC3

- 6 SP Residence.....C4

- 7 Windsor HotelB2

🍴 Eating

- 8 Baa NangA1

- 9 Good Morning Vietnamese &

- Coffee.....C2

- 10 Indochina MarketC2

- 11 Luk TanB2

- 12 Night MarketA2

Wat Si Thep

(วัดศรีเทพประดิษฐาราม; Th Si Thep; ☀️daylight hours) This temple's *bòht* has a lot of flair. It's surrounded by statues of *têp* (angels) and has a colourful triptych on the back wall. The interior murals show the *jataka* around the upper portion and kings of the Chakri dynasty below. The French-colonial

TEMPLE

abbot's residence, built in 1921, won a preservation award.

🆓 Former Governor's Residence Museum

MUSEUM

(งานผู้ว่าราชการจังหวัดนครพนม (หลังเก่า); Th Sunthon Wjitt; ☀️10am-6pm Wed-Sun) This museum fills a beautifully restored 1925 mansion

with photos of old Nakhon Phanom, many labelled in English, while out the back are displays about the Illuminated Boat Procession (see below). If you've got questions about Nakhon Phanom, ask to speak with Bai-Tong, or find her at Luk Tan restaurant at night.

Sunset Cruise

BOAT TRIP

(per person 50B) The city runs this hour-long Mekong River cruise on *Thesaban 1*, which docks across from the Indochina Market. Snacks are served and, of course, there's karaoke.

Mekong Underwater World

AQUARIUM

(สถานที่จัดแสดงโลกของปลาแม่น้ำโขง; Rte 2033; admission 30B; ☎9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun) If you like fish, you'll like this aquarium housing Mekong River species, including *Blah bèuk* (giant Mekong catfish). It's 6km west of town along Hwy 22. *Sörng-tǎa-ou* to Na Kae (20B, 15 minutes) pass by.

Wat Maha That

TEMPLE

(วัดมหาธาตุ; Th Sunthon Wjitt; ☉daylight hours) The 24m-tall, gold-and-white Phra That Nakhon *chedi* here resembles the previous *chedi* built at That Phanom (see p485).

Chom Khong Park

PARK

(สวนหนองไขง; Th Ratchathan; admission free; ☎5am-8pm) This park used to be a prison and models of prisoners sit in some of the old cells. You can also climb the guard towers.

Hat Sai Thong

BEACH

(หาดทรายทอง) From February to April, a sandbar that boosters call Golden Sand Beach, rises near the Viewkong Hotel. It's better as a place to watch fishermen than to swim.



Festivals & Events

Nakhon Phanom is famous for its **Illuminated Boat Procession** (Lái Reua Fai), a modern twist on the ancient tradition of sending rafts loaded with food, flowers and candles down the Mekong as offerings for the *naga* during **Ork Phansaa** (the end of Buddhist Lent). Today's giant bamboo rafts hold as many as 10,000 handmade lanterns, and some designers add animation to the scenes. Boat races, music competitions and other festivities run for a week, but the boats are launched only on the night of the full moon. That morning Phu Tai perform their 'peacock dance' in front of That Phanom (p485).

Sleeping

Windsor Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4251 1946; 272 Th Bamrung Meuang; r 250-400B; ☎@☎) Housed in a rather intimidating concrete block, the Windsor Hotel is nevertheless superclean, and if you can ignore the decades of age, it's a good choice. Wi-fi reaches the 1st-floor rooms and mountain views are available at the top.

Nakhon Phanom Design Center Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(NDC; ☎08 5668 1780; Th Goobahtwai; dm incl breakfast & bicycle hire 350B; ☎☎) A local architect has converted this old shophouse near the Mekong into an office-cafe-hostel. It has just two rooms and four beds, but lots of character.

iHotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 4254 3355; Th That Phanom; r 590-1000B; ☎@☎) The stylish 'i' mixes good mattresses, 'power showers', a backyard garden and attentive staff. On the downside, it's 5km south of town.

Viewkong Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 4251 3564; www.viewkonghotel.com; Th Sunthon Wjitt; r 550-900B, ste 2500B; ☎@☎) The town's former chart-topping hotel has less pizzazz and more wear than the current champ (the Nakhon Phanom Riverview), but it's priced better and feels less cold. There's a pleasant terrace overlooking the river and it has karaoke, massage and all the other things Thai travellers can't live without. River-view rooms cost a bit extra, but are definitely worth it.

Nakhon Phanom Riverview Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 4252 2333; www.nakhonphanomriverviewhotel.com; Th That Phanom; r 1050-1680B, ste 3150-10,500B; ☎@☎☎) Though it's also showing its age and the wi-fi doesn't yet reach beyond the lobby, the Riverview has rooms with a river view and there's a lovely swimming pool. At times it drops rates to 600B.

SP Residence

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4251 3500; 193/1 Th Nittayo; r 450-800B; ☎@) Plain but modern, the rooms here are less institutional than the exterior and hallways would lead you to believe.

Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4251 3788; 210 Th Si Thep; r 200-390B; ☎) 'Grand' it ain't, and the menagerie

of animal statues in the lobby can't hide how old and spartan it is, but it's pretty clean and good for the price. The cheapest rooms on the 4th floor provide hot water and a peek at the mountains.

Eating

After dinner, head to one of the laid-back, attractive bars that fill historic shophouses near the clock tower.

Indochina Market THAI \$
(Th Sunthon Wijit; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) The balcony fronting the food court has choice seats that frame the mountain views.

Ginlom Chomwiew THAI \$
(no Roman-script sign; Th Sunthon Wijit; dishes 50-240B; ☺dinner) The name of this garden spot across from the river, 'Relax and Enjoy the View', sums it up well. As for the food, do what most locals do and order some Mekong River fish such as *Bläh johk sähm rót* (soldier river barb fish with three flavours).

Luk Tan INTERNATIONAL, THAI \$
(83 Th Bamrung Meuang; dishes 29-240B; ☺lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This quirky little spot does Thai-style steaks and *fa-ràng* favourites such as pizza and some of the best mashed potatoes in Thailand.

Night Market THAI \$
(Th Fuang Nakhon; ☺4-9pm) Large and diverse, but few places to sit.

Good Morning Vietnamese & Coffee VIETNAMESE \$
(165 Th Thamrong Prasit; dishes 30-100B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) This little corner shop has modernised with bright colours and a coffee bar, but it still serves the same family recipes, including *nām neu-ang* (assemble-it-yourself pork spring rolls) and

spicy Thai salads, that it has through four generations.

Baa Nang NORTHEASTERN THAI \$
(no sign; Th Aphiban Bancha; dishes 30-150B; ☺breakfast & lunch) This simple corrugated-roof shack across from Anuban Nakhon Phanom school attracts the masses for *gài yähng*, *söm-dam* and other down-home Isan food.

Information

Bangkok Bank (Tesco-Lotus, Th Nittayo; ☺10am-8pm) Has cash-only foreign exchange, but is open long hours.

Crab Technology (Th Si Thep; internet per hr 15B; ☺8am-10pm)

Immigration (☎0 4251 1235; Th Sunthon Wijit; ☺8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) For visa extensions.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☎0 4251 3490; tatphnom@tat.or.th; Th Sunthon Wijit; ☺8.30am-4.30pm) Covers Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon and Mukdahan Provinces.

Getting There & Away

Air

Nok Air (☎0 2900 9955; www.nokair.com) flies daily to/from Bangkok's Don Muang Airport (one way 2600B). Agencies such as **Bovorn Travel** (☎0 4251 2494; Th Nittayo; ☺8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am to 1pm Sat & Sun) sell tickets. An airport shuttle drops passengers at any in-town hotel for 120B per person.

Bus

Nakhon Phanom's **bus terminal** (☎0 4251 3444; Th Fuang Nakhon) is west of the town centre. From here buses head to Nong Khai (210B, 6½ hours, six daily); Udon Thani (155B to 195B, four to five hours, every 45 minutes until 3.50pm) via Sakon Nakhon (65B to 85B, 1½ hours); Ubon Ratchathani (116B to 209B, 4½ hours, nine daily) via Mukdahan (52B to 88B, 2½

THE BI-COLOURED RIVER

แม่น้ำสองสี

If you're driving along Rte 212, take a short break at **Mae Nam Song Si**, 45km from Nakhon Phanom, where the muddy brown Mekong River meets the greenish water of Mae Nam Songkhram. The line between the two is very clear, especially when it's windy or rainy. And don't be swayed by any locals you meet along the way who tell you there's no such place in Nakhon Phanom, that you must be thinking of Mae Nam Song Si (p440) in Ubon Ratchathani. Just turn at the sign for 'The Bi-Coloured River'. This northern merger may be much less famous, but it's still pretty cool.

Suan Ahahn Paknam (no roman-script sign; ☎08 1974 4227; dishes 30-290B; ☺lunch & dinner) is a superb little restaurant on a shaky wooden deck right at the confluence. The same family has opened a shiny new **guest house** (r 400B; ☎@) a few doors down.

hours) and That Phanom (27B to 47B, one hour). Most Bangkok (450B to 592B, 11 to 12 hours) buses depart between 7am to 8am and 4.30pm to 7pm. VIP service is offered by **999 VIP** (☎0 4251 1403) for 823B.

Sǒng-tǎa-ou to That Phanom (35B, 90 minutes, every 15 minutes until 3.30pm) park near Kasikornbank.

i Getting Around

Túk-túk drivers quote 20B to 30B per person from the bus station to most places in town and 200B for the round trip to Ban Na Chok.

Nakhon Phanom's sparse traffic makes it a good place for biking. **Koo Yong Long** (☎0 4251 1118; 363 Th Sunthon Wijit; per hr/day 10/70B; ☎8am-5pm) hires bikes.

Renu Nakhon

เรณูนคร

Renu Nakhon is a Phu Tai village known for cotton weaving, though few people in the town proper work their looms anymore. It's better to visit a nearby village, if you want to see cloth being made. The finished products, along with silk and cotton from Laos and elsewhere in Thailand, are sold in the big **handicrafts market** on the grounds of **Wat Phra That Renu Nakhon** (☉daylight hours) as well as at a string of nearby shops. The temple's 35m-tall *tâht* closely resembles the previous *chedi* built in That Phanom and is considered very holy. Tour groups sometimes arrange Phu Tai folk dances on the stage outside the market.

The turn-off to Renu Nakhon is 8km north of That Phanom, and then it's another 7km west on Rte 2031. There's no public transport. Túk-túk drivers in That Phanom ask 300B round trip (200B for just one person) with a little waiting time for you to look at the *tâht* and do some shopping, but the final price depends on your bargaining skills. You might save a little travelling up to the junction and bargaining with a túk-túk driver there.

That Phanom

ชาติพนม

Towering over this small, peaceful town, the spire of the colossal *chedi* at Wat Phra That Phanom is one of the region's most emblematic symbols and one of the great flagpoles of Isan identity. In comparison, the town itself, divided neatly in two with the older half next to the river, is rather forgettable.

BORDER CROSSING: NAKHON PHANOM TO THA KHAEK

The **Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge 3**, north of the city, was due to open as this book went to press. Passenger ferries will continue to link Nakhon Phanom to Tha Khaek in Laos, but they will be for locals only. Buses to Tha Khaek (70B) run between 7am and 6pm and all immigration formalities are handled at the bridge during the crossing.

i Sights

Wat Phra That Phanom

TEMPLE

(วัดพระธาตุพนม; Th Chayangkun; ☉5am-8pm) This temple is a potent and beautiful place; even if you're feeling templed-out, you'll likely be impressed. At its hub is a *tâht*, more impressive than any in present-day Laos and highly revered by Buddhists from both countries. Many people believe that visiting seven times will bring them prosperity and happiness so it's something of a pilgrimage site.

The *tâht* is 53.6m high, and a five-tiered, 16kg gold umbrella laden with precious gems adds 4m more to the top. Many Thais believe that the Lord Buddha travelled to Thailand and directed that one of his breast-bone relics be enshrined in a *chedi* to be built on this very site: and so it was in 535 BC, eight years after his death. Historians date the first construction, a short stupa (there's a replica of how it may have looked in a pond in front of the temple), to around the 9th century AD and modifications have been routine since then. In 1690 it was raised to 47m and you'll find replicas of this *tâht* all over Isan. The current design went up in 1941, but it toppled during heavy rains in 1975 and was rebuilt in 1978.

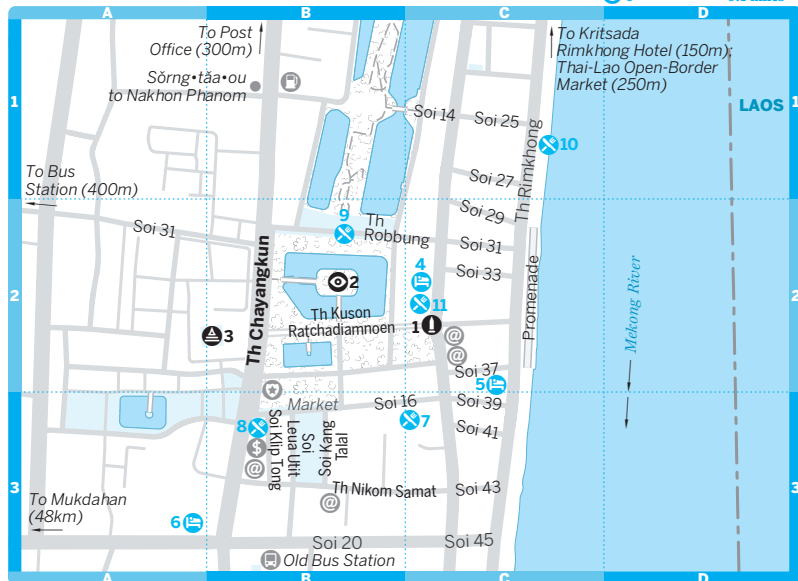
Behind the surrounding cloister is a shady little park with a giant drum and to the north sits a 30m-long century-old long-boat carved from a single tree. The nearby **museum** (admission free; ☉8.30am-4pm) tells the legend (not the history) of the *tâht* and also displays a hodgepodge collection of pottery, gongs, US presidential commemorative coins and more.

Kuson Ratchadagon Street

HISTORIC SITE

(ถนนกุศลรัชดากร) Standing high on the road in front of Phra That Phanom is an **arch**

That Phanom



That Phanom

📍 Sights

- 1 Arch C2
 2 Replica of Original Satoob B2
 3 Wat Phra That Phanom B2

🏠 Sleeping

- 4 Chaivon Hotel C2
 5 Saengthong Rimkhong Guesthouse C2

- 6 Thatphanom Place A3

🍴 Eating

- 7 Baan 117 C3
 8 Krua Kitty B3
 9 Night Market B2
 10 Riverside Restaurants C1
 11 That's Good C2

that symbolically connects the *tâht* to the Mekong River. The block of French-Indochinese architecture between the arch and the river is reminiscent of old Saigon and a couple of the interiors are nearly museum-quality timeless. A few shops sell Vietnamese foods.

Thai-Lao Open-Border Market

MARKET (ตลาดชายแดนไทย-ลาว; ☀️7am-2pm Mon & Thu) Hundreds of Lao cross the river to shop and sell at this biweekly market. It's mostly the same tat found in other Thai markets, but a few of the Lao traders in front of the temple sell roots, honey, bats and other forest products.

🌟 Festivals

During the **That Phanom Festival** in late January or early February, visitors descend from all over Thailand and Laos to make merit and pay respect to the *tâht*. The streets fill with market stalls, many top *môr lam* troupes perform and the town hardly sleeps for nine days.

🏠 Sleeping

During the That Phanom Festival rates soar and rooms are booked out well in advance. A new hotel at the riverfront promenade that was under construction when we visited looked promising.

Kritsada Rimkhong Hotel HOTEL \$
 (☎08 1262 4111; www.ksdrimkhong-resort.com; 90 Th Rimkhong; r 350-500B; 🍷@🍷) Rooms range from plain to very attractive, but all are comfy. Its restaurant uses some of the organic veggies grown on the riverbank below. If the friendly English-speaking owner is around when you call, he'll pick you up at the bus station for free.

Thatphanom Place HOTEL \$\$
 (☎0 4253 2148; thatphanomplace@gmail.com; Th Chayangkun; r 590B; 🍷🍷) This lovely new (opened 2010) hotel has the best rooms in town, each featuring a unique design. If only it was near the river rather than the highway.

Saengthong Rimkhong Hotel HOTEL \$
 (☎0 4254 1397; 507 Th Rimkhong; r 300-600B; 🍷🍷) This so-so place has a mix of so-so older rooms – at this price they should have hot-water showers, but they don't – and decent newer rooms. It won't excite you, but it won't let you down either.

Chaivon Hotel HOTEL \$
 (☎0 4254 1391; 38 Th Phanom Phanarak; r 200-300B; 🍷) This green wooden hotel is pretty shabby and definitely not for everyone, but some people may enjoy a night here as it's a genuine historic relic.



Eating & Drinking

That Phanom's **Night Market** (🕒4-10pm) has a good variety of food, but few places to sit. Also, come nightfall, lots of small **riverside restaurants** (Th Rimkhong) perched on stilts and ablaze in fairy lights open their doors north of the promenade. For the most part, the biggest difference between them is the volume of the karaoke machine, so have a wander and pick your place.

Krua Kitty THAI \$\$
 (419 Soi 16; dishes 40-350B; 🍷dinner) For something almost fancy, try this open-fronted place that's popular with local bigwigs. There are classic album covers on the wall and a large menu with some dishes labelled in English.

Baan 117 CAFE \$
 (117 Soi 16; organic coffee 40B; 🍷breakfast, lunch & dinner) The welcoming husband-and-wife team, casual setting and quality beans conspire to make this the top spot in town for a cup of joe.

That's Good THAI \$
 (37 Th Phanom Phanarak; dishes 50-100B; 🍷dinner) This bar feels like a coffee shop and looks like a grandma's living room, and by That Phanom standards, that makes it quite hip. There isn't a full menu, but there are Thai salads and fried snacks.

Getting There & Away

From That Phanom's new bus station, inconveniently located west of town (a *túk-túk* to the river should cost 30B), there are services to Ubon Ratchathani (95B to 167B, 4½ hours, hourly) via Mukdahan (26B to 45B, one hour), Udon Thani (102B to 184B, four hours, five daily) via Sakon Nakhon (35B to 65B, 1¼ hours, 10 daily) and Nakhon Phanom (27B to 47B, one hour, five daily). For Nakhon Phanom you can also take one of the frequent *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (35B, 90 minutes, every 15 minutes until 3.30pm) that park north of the *tǎht*. There are a few morning buses to Bangkok (400B to 801B, 10 to 11 hours), but most depart between 5pm and 7pm and one Bangkok-bound company remains at the old bus station in town.

There's an immigration office in town, but it's only for Lao visitors on market day: nobody else is allowed to cross the river here.

SAKON NAKHON PROVINCE

Many famous forest temples sit deep in the Phu Phan mountain range that runs across Sakon Nakhon Province, and among Sakon Nakhon's famous sons are several of the most highly revered monks in Thai history, including Luang Pu (Ajahn) Man Bhuridatto, who was born in Ubon Ratchathani but died here, and his student, Luang Pu (Ajahn) Fan Ajaro. Both were ascetic *tú-dong* monks who attained high levels of proficiency in *vipassana* meditation and are widely recognised among Thais as having been *arahants* (fully enlightened beings).

Sakon Nakhon

สกลนคร

POP 68,000

Workaday Sakon Nakhon is primarily an agricultural market town and Th Ratpattana is chock-a-block with shops selling farm equipment. Although the city centre is the usual concrete mess, quiet neighbourhoods on the fringes are full of old wooden houses, and this is where you'll find the town's main attractions.

Sights

Wat Pa Sutthawat

TEMPLE

(วัดป่าสุทธาวาส; ☀️ daylight hours) The grounds of Wat Pa Sutthawat, on the southwestern outskirts of town, are essentially a shrine to two of Thailand's best-known monks. Most famous of all is Luang Pu (Ajahn) Man Bhuridatto, who helped found the temple but didn't live here until just before his death in 1949. The final resting place of Ajahn Man's personal effects, the **Ajahn Man Museum**, looks a bit like a modern Christian church, with arches and etched-glass windows. A bronze image of Ajahn Man sits on a pedestal at the back and relics that remained after his cremation are in a glass box in front.

Luang Pu (Ajahn) Lui Chanthasaro, who died in 1989, was one of Ajahn Man's most famous students, and King Rama IX designed the *chedi* that holds the **Ajahn Lui Museum**. Ajahn Lui is represented in lifelike wax.

Both museums showcase all the monks' worldly possessions, as well as photographs and descriptions of their lives; Ajahn Man's displays, signed in English, provide a good sense of a monk's life.

Wat Phra That Choeng Chum

TEMPLE

(วัดพระธาตุเชิงชุม; Th Reuang Sawat; ☀️ daylight hours) The most visible highlight at Wat Phra That Choeng Chum is the 24m-high Lao-style *chedi*, which was erected in the 17th century over a smaller 11th-century Khmer *prang* and is now topped by a solid-gold umbrella. The name means 'Stupa of the Gathering of the Footprints Temple' because it was built above four Buddha footprints, which many Thais believe were left by the four incarnations of the Lord Buddha. *Lôok ní-mít* (spherical ordination-precinct markers that look like cannonballs and are buried under the regular boundary markers that surround most *bôht*) are lined up in the back.

Also on the grounds are a Lan Xang-era *bôht*, an enormous wooden bell and an octagonal *hôr drai* that now houses a little **museum**: If you want to look inside, ask a monk to get the key. The top of the western gate resembles the wax castles carved for Ork Phansaa (see opposite).

Wat Phra That Narai Cheng Weng

TEMPLE

(วัดพระธาตุนารายณ์เจงเวง) About 5km west of town at Ban That is a 10th- to 11th-century Khmer *prang* (named Phra That Nawaeng, a contraction of the words Narai Cheng Weng) in the early Bapuan style. Originally part of a Khmer-Hindu complex, the five-level

sandstone *prang* is missing much of its top, but still features several lintels including a reclining Vishnu over its northern portico and a dancing Shiva over its eastern one. It's not very impressive or evocative, but it's the most complete Khmer ruin in the province.

To get here by public transport take *sŏrng-tăa-ou* 3 (10B) from near the market or catch it heading north on Th Ratpattana. Get off at Ban That Market and walk 500m south.

Nong Han

LAKE

(หนองหาน) Rimming the eastern and northern edges of town is 123-sq-km Nong Han, Isan's largest natural lake, which is well known among Thais due to the legend (see boxed text, opposite) surrounding it. Fishermen, who tie up their boats just east of Srinakarin Park, will take you out sightseeing, including a stop to visit the abandoned temple on **Ko Don Sawan** (Paradise Island), the lake's largest island. The going rate is around 800B. Don't copy the fishermen and swim in the lake: it's infested with liver flukes, which can cause a nasty infection known as opisthorchiasis.

The nearby Fishery Station has an **aquarium** (Th Sai Sawang; admission free; ☀️ 9am-3pm) with fish from the lake as well as the Mekong River and Mae Nam Songkhram.

Festivals

Ork Phansaa, the end of the Buddhist lent (late October or early November), is fervently celebrated in Sakon. The main activity is a parade featuring **wax castles**, which are then put on display in Ming Meuang Field. They can also be seen at each of the city's temples for about a month after the event.

Sleeping

Dusit Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎️ 0 4271 1198; www.dusitsakhon.com, in Thai; Th Yuwaphattana; r 400-710B, ste 1900B; 🍷🍷🍷) This reborn old-timer has the loveliest lobby and cheeriest staff in town. The more you pay the more atmosphere you get, but each price category offers good value. The restaurant is good and the owner, Fiat, is a great source of local info.

LP Mansion

HOTEL \$

(no Roman-script sign; ☎️ 0 4271 5356; Th Prem Prida; r 250-400B; 🍷🍷🍷) LP is cheap, but not a cheapskate. Even the cheapest rooms get free coffee, Oreos and a minifridge. Rates at its older sister sleeper around the corner start at 200B.

NH The Elegant Hotel

(☎ 0 4271 3338; Th Robmuang; s/d 650/700B; 🍷🍷🍷) Smart sums it up better than elegant, but that's really beside the point. What matters is that these well-appointed rooms are rock solid for the price, which includes

HOTEL \$\$

breakfast *and* dinner. Its biggest drawback is the noncentral location.

U-Hotel

(☎ 0 4274 3033; Hwy 22; r 690-1590B; 🍷🍷🍷) A clever design and some subtle artistic flair make this new (opened in 2010) place

HOTEL \$\$

THE LEGEND OF THE LAKE AMARALAK (PIM) KHAMHONG

Phya Khom was the ruler of Ekthita city. He had a beautiful daughter named Nang Ai whose beauty was known by everyone in every land. Prince Phadaeng of Phaphong city came to visit Nang Ai secretly, and they fell in love immediately. They spent a night together and promised that they would be rightfully married soon.

In the sixth lunar month, Phya Khom arranged a rocket-shooting contest and invited people from the surrounding lands to participate. Whoever's rocket went the highest would be rewarded with treasure and his daughter's hand in marriage. Prince Phadaeng was not invited; however, he came with a great rocket anyway knowing that he must win in order to marry Nang Ai. At the contest, Phya Khom's rocket failed to fire, as did Phadaeng's. In anger Phya Khom broke his promise and gave nothing to the winner. Phadaeng then went back to his own city with great disappointment.

While the contest was taking place, the *naga* Phangkhi, son of Suttho Naga, ruler of the underground land called Muang Badan, came in disguise to witness the beauty of Nang Ai and fell deeply in love with her.

After he returned home, he was unable to eat and sleep; so, despite his father's objection, he went back again. This time he disguised himself as a white squirrel and hid in a tree near Nang Ai's window. Once Nang Ai saw the white squirrel she wanted to have it, so she ordered a soldier to catch it for her. Unable to do so, the soldier eventually killed the squirrel with a poisoned arrow. As Phangkhi was dying he made a wish: 'May my meat be very delicious and enough to feed everyone in the city'. His wish came true and all the townspeople, except the widows who had no official duties, got a share of his meat.

When Phangkhi's followers, who witnessed his death, returned to Muang Badan and reported the news, Suttho Naga was so angry that he called in tens of thousands of soldiers to destroy Phya Khom's city. They headed off instantly to Ekthita.

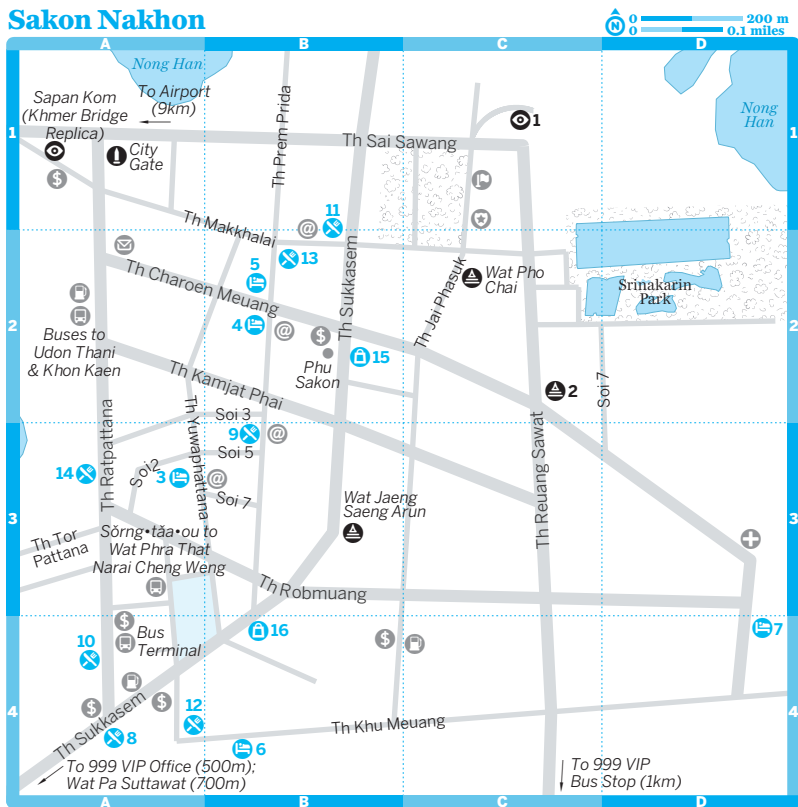
Meanwhile, Phadaeng was so lovesick that he couldn't stay in his own city any longer and rode his horse back to see Nang Ai. When the two met again, she gave him a very warm welcome and offered him food cooked with squirrel meat. Phadaeng refused to eat and told Nang Ai that the squirrel was Phangkhi in disguise and that whoever ate his meat would die and their city would be destroyed.

Suttho Naga's army arrived at Ekthita by nightfall. The destruction they inflicted was so severe that the foundation of the city started to collapse. Phadaeng told Nang Ai to take the kingdom's rings, gong and drum and they fled on his horse. When Suttho Naga learned Nang Ai had run away, he began to follow her. The earth sank wherever he passed. Thinking that Suttho Naga was following the rings, gong and drum, Nang Ai threw them away but the *naga* still followed. When the horse grew tired, Suttho Naga caught up with them and grabbed Nang Ai with his tail and carried her down to Muang Badan.

The battle had caused the whole area to sink and it became a huge lake, called Nong Han. The widows who did not eat the squirrel meat were safe and the land on which their houses stood did not sink, leaving it a small island that has been called Don Hang Mai (Widow's Island) ever since.

Phadaeng returned to Phaphong, but could not bear the sadness from the loss of Nang Ai. He chose to die in order to continue to fight for her. After his death, he became a ghost leader and his army fought the *naga* in Muang Badan. The fight lasted so long that the god Indra had to come down to stop it. Ever since, Nang Ai has been waiting for Indra to decide who should be her husband.

Sakon Nakhon



worth considering by those with their own wheels. It's 5km outside town on the way to Udon Thani, across from Rajabhat University.

MJ The Majestic

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 4273 3771; Th Khu Meuang; r 800-1440B, ste 3440B; 🍴📺📶) The cheapest rooms at Sakon's most expensive hotel are bigger than Dusit and Elegant, but not better. It's worth considering, however, if you want the full gamut of night-time entertainment (cocktail lounge, massage, snooker, karaoke) that those quieter choices don't provide.

🍴 Eating & Drinking

The **Night Plaza** (Th Khu Meuang; ☎ 4-9pm), Sakon's biggest night market, has an excellent selection of food, but it's all bagged up for takeaway, so a much better option is the smaller **11 Brothers & Sisters Night Mar-**

ket (no roman-script sign; Th Sukkasem; ☎ 4-9pm) where all the vendors (now more than the original 11 siblings) are related.

TOP CHOICE Prachachuen

THAI \$

(382 Th Makkhalai; dishes 60-230B; ☎ dinner) This lovely, youthful place in an old wooden house is one of Sakon's trendiest restaurants, but it doesn't slack on the food. Whether it's the fried rice or *Blah chörn sá-mün-prai* (snake-head fish with herbs in chilli sauce with mango) it will be divine.

Mit Auppattam

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; 37 Th Sukkasem; dishes 30-180B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This traditional place is a popular breakfast stop (with great omelettes) but it also has a big menu of curries, steaks and more. The food is so good that word reached Princess Sirindhorn, who dropped in to dine in 2008. Unfortunately, nobody here speaks English.

Sakon Nakhon

Sights

- 1 Aquarium C1
2 Wat Phra That Choeng Chum C2

Sleeping

- 3 Dusit Hotel A3
4 LP Mansion (New) B2
5 LP Mansion (Old) B2
6 MJ The Majestic Hotel B4
7 NH The Elegant Hotel D4

Eating

- 8 11 Brothers & Sisters Night Market A4



- 9 Coffee.com B3
10 Green Corner A4
11 Mit Auppatam B1
12 Night Plaza A4
13 Prachachuen B2
14 Saban Ngaa A3

Shopping

- 15 Mann Craft B2
16 OTOP Center B4



Saban Ngaa

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

( Th Ratpattana; dishes 30-150B;  lunch & dinner) Famous for its Isan food (but also serving Thai and Chinese), this is a great place to try local dishes such as *gaang wai* (rat-tan curry), and vegetarians have the rare chance to eat *lahp wun sen* (spicy mung-bean noodles). The atmosphere is terrible but the food is terrific.


Green Corner

INTERNATIONAL, THAI \$\$

( Th Ratpattana; dishes 45-420B;  breakfast, lunch & dinner) The top spot for *fa-rang* food also offers Thai and Isan dishes, though many of the latter, like fried cica-das and ant's-egg omelettes, are no longer written in English on the menu.


Coffee.com

CAFE \$

(Th Prem Prida; espresso 35B;  lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) A cute little coffee shop.





Shopping

Mann Craft (1576 Th Sukkasem) has some beautiful fabrics and finished products dyed with indigo and other natural colorants. The **OTOP Center** (Th Sukkasem;  8.30am-5pm) also sells natural-dye fabrics plus maoberry and black-ginger wines.



Information




Most banks are found along Th Sukkasem and Th Ratpattana. Branches of Bangkok Bank at **Big C** (Th Jai Phasuk) and **Tesco-Lotus** (Th Makkhalai) shopping centres open 10am to 8pm daily, though they exchange cash only. There's an AEON ATM across from Big C.

Immigration ( 0 4271 5219; Th Jai Phasuk;  8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) For visa extensions.



Getting There & Away


Air

Nok Air ( 0 2900 9955; www.nokair.com) flies twice daily to/from Bangkok's Don Muang Airport (one way 2600B). **Phu Sakon** ( 0 4271 2259; 332/3 Th Sukkasem;  8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) sells tickets. There's an airport shuttle to town for 150B per person.

Bus

Sakon's centrally located **bus terminal** (Th Ratpattana) serves Ubon Ratchathani (117B to 211B, five hours, nine daily), That Phanom (35B to 63B, 1¼ hours, hourly), Nakhon Phanom (65B to 85B, 1½ hours, every half-hour), Udon Thani (100B to 130B, 3½ hours, every half-hour), Khon Kaen (155B, four hours, five daily) and Bangkok (360B to 463B, 11 hours, morning and early-evening departures only).

There are also buses to Udon Thani (102B, every half-hour) and Khon Kaen (155B, five daily) from the Esso petrol station north of the bus terminal.

There are VIP bus services to Bangkok (720B, 7.30pm and 7.45pm) with **999 VIP** ( 0 4271 2860) from a roadside stop on Th Reuang Sawat (across from Sakon Nakhon Pattana Supsa School) south of town, but you can buy tickets from its office on Th Sukkasem.

Phu Phan Mountains

Highway 213 south from Sakon Nakhon towards Kalasin crawls over the Phu Phan mountain range, which has some interesting sites on its slopes. And since buses bound for Kalasin, Mahasarakham and Khon Kaen follow this highway, reaching them is easy. Most of the road between Talat Klang Dong Sang Kaw and Somdet cuts through uninterrupted forest and is very beautiful.

PHU PHAN RAJANIWET PALACE

พระตำหนักภูพานราชนิเวศน์

The grounds of the **royal family's Isan home** (๒0 4271 1550; admission free; ☉8am-4pm), 14km south of the Sakon Nakhon, are open to the public when not in use. It's quite a modest residence compared to some of their other palaces, but the gardens are beautiful and peaceful. You can only walk around the main grounds, but cars can go to the elephant corral. Visitors are not permitted to wear shorts above the knees, short dresses or revealing tops. Buses cost 20B and take 20 minutes.

PHU PHAN NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูพาน

This **national park** (๒08 1263 5029; admission free) remains relatively undeveloped and isolated. It's no surprise that the area once provided cover for the Seri Thai resistance fighters in WWII and People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT) guerrillas in the 1970s. The former used **Tham Seri Thai** as an arsenal and mess hall. The 664-sq-km park is now a stomping ground for barking deer, monitor lizards, slow loris, many monks and a few elephants.

There are two main areas to visit. Near the visitor centre there are nice views at **Nang Mern Cliff** and you can climb down a further 1.5km to **Lan Sao Aee** plateau, which is even better for sunsets. **Nam Tok Kam Hom**, a stretch of four petite waterfalls, is 8.5km north of the visitor centre, at a wild bend in the road called **Khong Ping Ngu Curve** – named after the stacked shape snakes make when put on a skewer for grilling – that has Thailand's largest kilometre pillar. Water only runs from August to October. Between these two places, far from the highway, is the seldom-visited natural rock bridge, **Tang Pee Parn**.

Accommodation options include **camp-sites** (per person with own tent 30B, 2-/6-person tent hire 150/225B) and six four-person **bungalows** (๒0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; bungalows 500-2000B; ☹).

Buses to the visitor centre cost 25B and take 45 minutes.

TALAT KLANG DONG SANG KAW

ตลาดกลางดงสร้างค้อ

Twenty-five kilometres past the national park visitor centre, **Klang Dong Sang Kaw Market** stocks custard apples and other foods grown on local farms, but it's best known for products such as honey, insects, bird's nests (for good luck) and mushrooms

gathered in the surrounding forest. There are also locally produced whiskies and maoberry wines.

MUKDAHAN PROVINCE

Mukdahan

มุกดาหาร

POP 34,300

On the banks of the Mekong, directly opposite the Lao city of Savannakhet, Mukdahan is one of the region's more humdrum towns. The December 2006 opening of the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge 2 formalised Mukdahan's status as a regional trade hub by connecting Thailand and Vietnam by road and gave the economy a shot in the arm; though the city doesn't feel any different than it did before.

👁 Sights

Talat Inojin

MARKET

(Indochina Market; ☉8am-6pm) Other than the bridge, Mukdahan is best known for this riverside market, which stretches along and under the promenade. Most Thai tour groups on their way to Laos and Vietnam make a shopping stop for cheap food, clothing, assorted trinkets from China and Vietnam and silk and cotton fabrics made in Isan.

Hor Kaew Mukdahan

MUSEUM

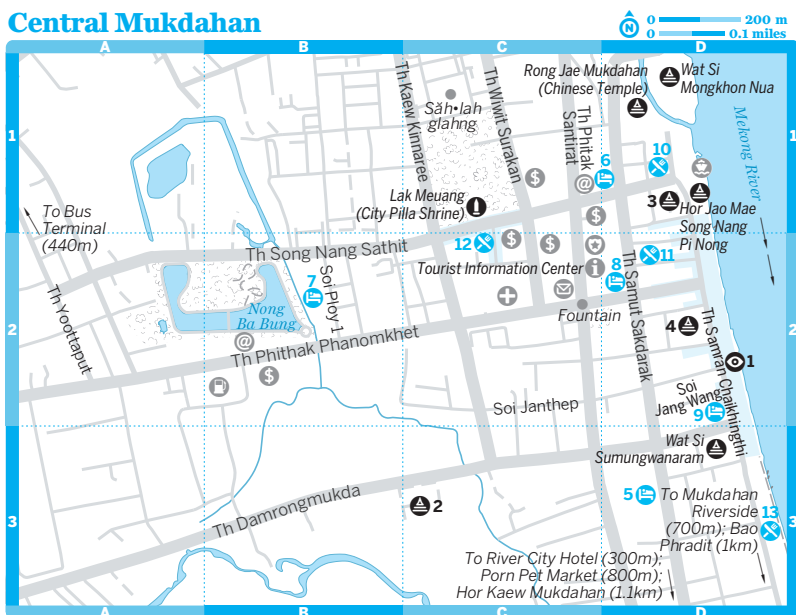
(หอแก้วมุกดาหาร; Th Samut Sakdarak; admission 20B; ☉8am-6pm) One of the most oddly out-of-place landmarks in all of Thailand, this 65m-tall tower was built for the 50th anniversary of King Rama IX's ascension to the throne. The nine-sided base has a good museum with displays (labelled in English) on the eight ethnic groups of the province. There are great views and a few more historical displays in 'The 360° of Pleasure in Mukdahan by the Mekong' room up at the 50m level. The ball on the top holds a locally revered Buddha image supposedly made of solid silver.

Phu Manorom

VIEWPOINT

(ภูมโนรมย์; ☉6am-7pm) You can get a more organic view of Laos and the Mekong from this mountain further south. There's a nice little garden and a small temple. Tourism officials try to promote sunrise-watching here, but odds are it'll be just you and the monks.

Central Mukdahan



NORTHEASTERN THAILAND MUKDAHAN

Central Mukdahan

🗺️ Sights

- 1 Talat Indojin D2
- 2 Wat Pa Silawiwet C3
- 3 Wat Si Mongkhon Tai D1
- 4 Wat Yod Kaeo Sivichai D2

🛏️ Sleeping

- 5 Ban Rim Suan D3
- 6 Huanam Hotel D1

- 7 Ploy Palace Hotel B2
- 8 Submukda Grand Hotel D2
- 9 The Riverside Hotel D2

🍴 Eating

- 10 Goodmook* D1
- 11 Kufad D2
- 12 Night Market C2
- 13 Wine Wild Why? D3

Wat Si Mongkhon Tai

TEMPLE

(วัดศรีมงคลใต้; Th Samran Chaikhongthi; ☀️daylight hours) According to one of the many legends associated with it, this temple's 2m-tall Phra Chao Ong Luang Buddha image is older than the city itself and was unearthed during Mukdahan's construction. The ceramic-encrusted northern gate was built as a gesture of friendship by the city's large Vietnamese community in 1954.

Wat Yod Kaeo Sivichai

TEMPLE

(วัดยอดแก้วศรีวิชัย; Th Samran Chaikhongthi; ☀️daylight hours) This temple stands out for having its enormous Buddha inside a glass-walled *wi-hāhn*, and not one, but

two small *chedi* modelled on Phra That Phanom.

Wat Pa Silawiwet

TEMPLE

(วัดป่าสลวิเวก; Th Damrongmukda; ☀️daylight hours) It's the hundred or so resident monkeys rather than anything religious that makes this forest temple on the edge of town worth a visit.

🌟 Festivals

Besides the ordinary activities, January's **Mukdahan Thai Tribal Festival**, held for a week in the field fronting the *sāh-lah glāhng*, features dancing and other cultural activities from Mukdahan's eight ethnic groups.

Sleeping

The Riverside Hotel, which was under construction during our last visit, bears a look simply for its riverside location north of Wat Sumungwararam.

Ban Rim Suan HOTEL \$
(no Roman-script sign; ☎ 4263 2980; Th Samut Sakdarak; r 330B; 📶📶📶) You can't call it lovely, but the owners have made some effort to liven things up here and that makes it the best budget deal in town: which is why it's almost always full by mid-afternoon. It's a tad south of the centre, but that makes it convenient for dinner and drinks along the river.

Submukda Grand Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎ 4263 3444; 72 Th Samut Sakdarak; r 400-500B; 📶📶) Erected at the same time as the bridge, this tower is losing its lustre, but still makes a good choice. And you can even squeeze out a river view from upper-floor balconies.

Huanum Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎ 4261 1137; Th Samut Sakdarak; r 150-350B; 📶📶📶) A friendly old-timer that's been spruced up recently, this is the first choice of most backpackers. The cheapest rooms have cold-water showers.

Ploy Palace Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 4263 1111; www.ploypalace.com; Soi Ploy 1; r 1050-1800B, ste 5500B; 📶📶📶) Rooms at this executive sleep-easy are dated, but are undergoing a slow-motion renovation: be sure to look at several before deciding. For something out of the ordinary, ask for the 8th- and 9th-floor rooms with beehives outside the windows.

River City Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 4261 5444; www.rivermuk.com; Th Samut Sakdarak; r incl breakfast from 750B; 📶📶📶) With a large new tower under construction, this place is poised to unseat Ploy Palace as the best hotel in Mukdahan.

Eating

Most downtown restaurants shut their doors early, but many out along Phitak Phanomkhet Street keep the woks sizzling late into the night.

TOP CHOICE **Bao Phradit** NORTHEASTERN THAI \$
(no roman-script sign; Th Samran Chaikhongthi; dishes 30-200B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📶) It's a bit of a trek south of the centre, but this is a real Isan restaurant with dishes

like *pàt pètmu/uu Bàh* (spicy stir-fried wild boar) and *gaang wái* (rattan curry). It's all served on a peaceful riverside deck. Though the English menu is a bit mysterious (it translates *yam*, Thai-style tangy salads, as 'review'), it's rare that a restaurant of this sort has any English at all.

TOP CHOICE **Wine Wild Why?** THAI \$
(Th Samran Chaikhongthi; dishes 40-150B; ☺lunch & dinner) Housed in an atmospheric wooden building next to the river, this relaxing spot has bags of character and serves delicious Thai and Isan food, though the wine list is history. The sociable owners, transplants from Bangkok, just add to the charm.

Night Market THAI-VIETNAMESE \$
(Th Song Nang Sathit; ☺4-9pm) Mukdahan's night market has all the Thai and Isan classics, but it's the Vietnamese vendors that set it apart. A few sell *bánh dach* (the vendors will tell you it's 'Vietnamese pizza'), which combines soft noodles, pork, spring onions and an optional egg served on a crispy cracker.

Goodmook* INTERNATIONAL-THAI \$
(414/1 Th Song Nang Sathit; dishes 60-380B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun; 📶) This fun place has all the ingredients of a travellers' cafe – a mix of Thai and Western food (from *dòm yam* to T-bone), free wi-fi, art on the walls – except a room full of travellers, though many of those who do stop in Mukdahan longer than needed to change buses do cosy up here at some point.

Mukdahan Riverside THAI \$
(103/4 Th Samran Chaikhongthi; dishes 45-180B; ☺lunch & dinner; 📶) This long-popular spot offers great views from a garden terrace and a mostly Thai menu (featuring Mekong river fish, of course) that we've never heard a bad word spoken about.

Kufad VIETNAMESE \$
(no roman-script sign; 36-37 Th Samut Sakdarak; dishes 30-130B; ☺breakfast & lunch) This simple Vietnamese cafe is rightly popular and a good choice for breakfast. The picture menu takes the guesswork out of ordering, but leaves you clueless on the prices.

Information

Huanam Hotel (Th Samut Sakdarak; per hr 20B; ☺6am-11pm) The most pleasant place to check your email.

Krung Thai Bank (Th Song Nong Satit; ☎10am-7pm) The only extended-hours bank downtown.

Tourism Information Center (☎0 4261 2992; Th Phitak Phanomkhet; ☎9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) The city tourism complex also has Thai massage and a crafts shop.

i Getting There & Away

Mukdahan's **bus terminal** (☎0 4263 0486) is on Rte 212, west of town. To get there from the centre catch a yellow *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (10B, 6am to 5pm) running west along Th Phitak Phanomkhet. There are buses to Nakhon Phanom (52B to 88B, 2½ hours, every half-hour) via That Phanom (26B to 45B, one hour), Khon Kaen (155B to 187B, 4½ hours, every half-hour), Ubon Ratchathani (75B to 135B, 3½ hours, every half-hour) and Yasothon (76B to 97B, two hours, eight daily). There are also vans to Yasothon (76B, two hours, every half-hour). A few Bangkok buses (390B to 502B, 10 hours) leave during the day, but most depart between 5pm and 8pm, including **999 VIP** (☎0 4261 1478), which departs at 8am, 8pm and 8.15pm (670B).

If you're driving to Ubon Ratchathani, Rte 212 will zip you there in about three hours, but if you can spare a whole day, take the Mekong-hugging back roads through a gorgeous stretch of rural Thailand.

i Getting Around

Taxi Mukdahan (☎0 4261 3666; ☎6am-mid-night) charges 50B for the first 10km and 10B per kilometre for the journey is longer.

Huanam Hotel and Goodmook* restaurant hire bikes for 100B per day.

Around Mukdahan

PHU PHA THOEP NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูผาเทิบ

Although little more than a speck of a reserve at just 48 sq km, hilly **Phu Pha Thoeep National Park** (☎0 4260 1753; admission 100B) has a host of beautiful attractions; most famously large mushroom-shaped rock formations. The main rock groups sits right behind the visitor centre and wildflowers bloom around them October through December. Besides the weird rocks there are several cliff-top viewpoints where pretty much only forest is visible around you. Also popular is **Nam Tok Phu Tham Phra**, a scenic waterfall (May to November only) with a grotto atop it holding hundreds of small Buddha images. It only takes a few hours on the well-marked trails to see all these sights. **Tham**

Fa Mue Daeng, a cave with 5000-year-old hand paintings, is an 8km drive from the main park area and then a 1.5km walk.

For accommodation, there's **camping** (per person with own tent 30B, 4-/6-person tent hire 300/600B) and a three-bedroom **bungalow** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; bungalows 1800B).

The park is 15km south of Mukdahan via Rte 2034. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (20B, 30 minutes, every half-hour) to Don Tan, departing from Porn Pet Market, 300m north of Hor Kaew Mukdahan, pass the turn-off to the park. Hitching the last 1.3km to the visitor centre isn't tough, or you can ask the *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* driver to detour off their route and take you; they will probably do it for 40B per person. Be back at the junction by 4pm to guarantee finding a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* back to town.

NORTH OF MUKDAHAN

Travelling north along the Mekong offers a lovely look at traditional Thai life and makes a fantastic bike trip. There's no single road to follow – hence the following distances may differ a bit from your trip – and the old village roads will occasionally deposit you on the new highway, but just turn left every chance you get to return to the river.

Leaving the city on Samranchaikong Rd you'll follow a long line of fish farms for about 6.5km before ducking under the 1.6km-long **Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge 2**. This is the widest reach of the Mekong along the Thai border, so this bridge stretches 400m more than Friendship Bridge 1 in Nong Khai.

You'll meet a **troop of monkeys** that resides alongside the road just before Wat Baan Sai Yai, 2.5km after the bridge.

After at least another 9km, where the greenish Mae Nam Chanot meets the muddy Mekong (you might see men unloading their fish traps here), is **Wat Mano Phirom**

BORDER CROSSING: MUKDAHAN TO SAVANNAKHET

This is the most direct route from Thailand to Vietnam. When taking the buses to Savannakhet, Laos (45B, 45 minutes, hourly 7.30am to 7pm) all border formalities for foreigners (see p770 for Lao visa details) are handled during the crossing. The boats to Savannakhet are now for Thai and Lao only.

(☀daylight hours), one of Mukdahan Province's oldest temples. The original *bòht*, now a *wi-hāhn*, was built in 1756 in Lan Xang style with an elaborately carved wooden facade and large painted eave brackets. It holds many ancient Buddha images, though the elephant tusk that had eight of them carved into it, has been stolen. (Theft of Buddha images is a growing problem in Thailand.) Tourism officials are trying to promote **Hat Mano Pirom**, the beach that emerges here in the dry season, and you can now dine in a thatched-roof shelter set right in the river.

Wat Srimahapo (☀daylight hours), sometimes called Wat Pho Si, is another 4.5km north in Ban Wan Yai. You'd never expect its tiny *bòht*, built in 1916, to be worth a look, but inside, elaborately carved beams hold up the tin roof and interesting naive murals cover the walls. The monks' residence is French-colonial style.

After a further 7.5km you'll pass the modern, glass-walled **Our Lady of the Martyrs of Thailand Shrine** (☀8am-5pm, Mass at 7am Sun), locally called Wat Song Khon and often incorrectly described as the largest church in Southeast Asia. It was built in 1995 to commemorate seven Thai Catholics killed by the police in 1940 for refusing to renounce their faith. Wax sculptures of the martyrs and their ashes lie under glass at the back.

Three and a half kilometres after the church is **Kaeng Kabao**, a stretch of rocky shore and islets emerging during the dry season. A variety of restaurants have set up on and along the river here, making this a good place to refuel before heading back to Mukdahan, or continuing on for another 17km to That Phanom.

AMPHOE NONG SUNG อําเภอหนองสูง

Whether you want to learn about a little-known culture or just want to dip your toes into village life, Nong Sung District in Mukdahan's far west is a great place to do it. Mukdahan Province has a large Phu Tai population. Of all Isan's minority groups, the Phu Tai have clung closest to their culture. Most villagers here still don traditional duds for festivals and funerals and their children do the same at school on Thursdays. The Phu Tai dialect dominates, so even if you speak fluent Thai or Isan, expect some verbal trip-ups here.

A few towns, including the weaving village of Ban Phu, 6km south of Nong Sung

town on Rte 2370, have **homestay programs** (☎08 5003 7894; per person incl meals 600B) that let you join in daily life, however English is very rare.

 **Thai House-Isaan** (☎08 7065 4635; www.thaihouse-isaan.com; r incl breakfast 700-1500B; ☹@☹), the easier option, is owned by a friendly Australian. It's 15km west of Nong Sung on Rte 2042. Day tours around the region cost from 900B per person (minimum two) or you can hire a bicycle (120B per day) or motorcycle (200B per day) and see things by yourself. The rooms are comfortable and well appointed, especially the Thai-style 'chalet', and the mostly organic menu covers both Thai and *fa-ràng* tastes. If you want, you can join Noi in the kitchen for a cooking lesson. Day guests are welcome.

Buses between Mukdahan and Khon Kaen can drop you in Ban Kham Pok (from Mukdahan 50B, 70 minutes, every half-hour).

YASOTHON & ROI ET PROVINCES

Yasothon and Roi Et, two of Thailand's most rural provinces, have little of interest to fast-track travellers, but they do show a side of Thailand that few people (including other Thais) ever see.

People looking to nose deeper into Isan culture will want to take a peek at Phra That Kong Khao Noi and purchase some pillows in Ban Si Than in Yasothon Province. Yasothon city saves all its gusto for the annual Rocket Festival, which completes a trifecta of Isan icons. Roi Et Province, whose capital city is the far more pleasant of the two, has a few enormous off-beat attractions, including a serious contender for Thailand's strangest temple.

Yasothon

ยโสธร

POP 23,000

Yasothon has little to offer visitors outside the official whizz-bang period of mid-May and neither looks nor acts like a capital city. In fact, it barely feels like a city at all.

Sights

Yasothon has two cute little attractions that aren't worth a special trip but shouldn't be missed if you're in the area.

The heart of the **Ban Singha Tha** neighbourhood, 300m off the main road, west of Kasikornbank, is a treasure trove of classic French Indochinese shophouses, many with lovely artistic flourishes that are evidence of Yasothon's former wealth. They were built for Chinese merchants by Vietnamese labourers almost a century ago at what was then Yasothon's port, and with their historic value recently recognised, restoration work has begun.

The centrepiece of **Wat Mahathat** (Th Wariratchadet; ☺daylight hours) is a highly venerated Lao-style *chedi* said to date from AD 695 and to enshrine holy relics of Phra Anan (Ananda), the Buddha's personal attendant monk. Much more interesting, however, is the gorgeous little *hōr drai* (a building for storing the Tripitaka Buddhist scriptures), dating to the 1830s and restored in 2008, which sits on stilts in a pond to protect the sacred scripts from termites. If you ask a monk, he'll get the keys and let you look inside.



Festivals

Rocket Festivals (Bun Bāng Fai) are held across Isan in May and June to tell Phaya Thaen, a pre-Buddhist rain god, that it's time for him to send rain; but no place celebrates as fervently as Yasothon, where the largest rockets, are 3m long and, according to the rocket-makers we talked to, packed with 500kg of gunpowder. The three-day event, held on the second weekend of May, features traditional local dances, parades, rocket contests and a lot of bawdry, drunken revelry.



Sleeping

Green Park HOTEL \$
(☎0 4571 4700; Th Wariratchadet; r incl breakfast 600-800B, f 1500-2500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Though it lacks the panache of JP Emerald, we consider this much newer place the best lodging in Yasothon. You can use the adjacent health club for free. It's 1km east of the centre on the way to Mukdahan.

Baan Singha Tha Homestay HOMESTAY \$
(☎08 2482 6084; r per person 300B) Five families in the historic Ban Singha Tha neighbourhood now offer rooms in their homes.

JP Emerald Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎0 4572 4848; www.jpemeraldhotel.com; Th Prapa; r 450B, incl breakfast 600-1650B; 🍷🍷🍷) Yasothon's only full-service three-star hotel.

The rooms won't excite you, but they do keep up on maintenance pretty well here. Night-time diversions include snooker, coyote dancers and a disco. It's at the Roi Et end of town.

In Town Hotel HOTEL \$
(no Roman-script sign; ☎0 4571 3007; 614 Th Jangsanit; r 220-380B; 🍷🍷) This place, on the main road, is far enough south that it almost loses the rights to its name, but for Yasothon it's far better than the budget average. The Warotohn Hotel next door is even cheaper.

Yasothon Orchid Garden HOTEL \$
(no Roman-script sign; ☎0 4572 1000; www.orchid-garden-hotel.com; Th Prachasamphan; r 400-450B; 🍷🍷) In the city centre, this is a plain but reasonable budget option with big rooms.



Eating

Rim Chi Riverside THAI \$
(no Roman-script sign; dishes 30-250B; ☺lunch & dinner) Enjoy superb Isan and Thai food and bucolic Chi River views from either the tree-filled terrace or your own thatched-roof raft. This is an English-free zone, but you can't go wrong ordering *sôm-dam* or *Blah chōrn lui sōo-an* (fried striped snake-head fish 'run through the garden'). It's 900m west of Krung Thai Bank.

Night Market THAI \$
(Th Wariratchadet; ☺4pm-midnight) East of Wat Mahathat, this is as good a place as any to sample Yasothon's famous dessert, *kà-nom wāhn lōrt chōrng* (rice noodles made with pandan served in coconut milk).



Getting There & Away

Yasothon's **bus terminal** (☎0 4571 4500) is north of the city on the bypass road. A motorcycle taxi to the centre costs 50B. The main destinations are Ubun Ratchathani (66B to 85B, 1½ hours, every half-hour), Khorat (158B to 205B, four hours, every half-hour) and Khon Kaen (113B to 146B, 3½ hours, every half-hour) via Roi Et (48B to 61B, one hour). Vans are the best way to Mukdahan (76B, two hours, every half-hour). Bangkok (320B to 385B, eight to nine hours) buses leave about hourly during the day but most depart from 7pm to 10pm. There are **999 VIP buses** (☎0 4571 2965) to Bangkok (VIP 599B, 8.30pm), which stop at its downtown office by the clock tower.

Around Yasothon

PHRA THAT KONG KHAO

NOI

พระธาตุก่องข้าวน้อย

A rather sinister myth surrounds the **Small Sticky Rice Basket Stupa** (☀daylight hours), a brick-and-stucco *chedi* dating from the late Ayuthaya period 5km outside town towards Ubon Ratchathani. According to one legend – which is taught to school children as an example of why it's important to keep your emotions in check – a young, ravenously hungry farmer who had toiled all morning in the hot sun murdered his mother here when she brought his lunch to the fields late and in a small sticky-rice basket. The farmer, eating his lunch over his mother's dead body, realised that there was actually more sticky rice than he could manage to eat. To atone for his misdeed, he built this *chedi*.

Or perhaps not. Others say it was built by people who were travelling to Phra That Phanom to enshrine gold and gems, but got to Ban Tat Thong and learned they were too late; so they built this *chedi* instead. Some locals combine the myths and say that the repentant son was unable to build a *chedi* of his own and so joined forces with the pilgrims and they built it together.

Further complicating matters, most Yasothonians claim the real Small Rice Basket Stupa is a little further north at Ban Sadao village (7km east of Yasothon on Rte 202) in the back of **Wat Tung Sadao**. All that remains is the base; when the original tumbled over shortly after the redeemed son's death, locals built another petite *chedi* next to it. When we asked a monk here why Thai tourists visit the other *chedi*, he simply answered, 'Gahn meuang' (It's politics).

BAN SI THAN

บ้านศรีฐาน

Residents of Ban Si Than can't leave their work behind when they go to sleep: this is a pillow-making village. All around the village (and most of those villages surrounding it) you'll see people sewing, stuffing or selling *mörn kít* (pillows decorated with diamond-*kít* patterns). The most famous style is a stiff triangle-shaped pillow used as an arm support while sitting on the floor. Most foreigners call these *mörn kwähn* (axe pillow), an old name that most Thais are no longer familiar with; *mörn sähm læam* (triangle pillow) is the common moniker nowadays. They couldn't possibly meet demand without using machine-made fabric, but the stuffing and some of the sewing is still

done by hand. Prices here are far lower than you'll pay elsewhere in Thailand, and this is also one of the few places you can buy them unstuffed (*yang mät säi nün*; literally 'no kapok inserted'), which makes the big ones viable as souvenirs.

If you want to see monkeys, have some one point you to **Don Ling**, 4km out of town at Ban Tao Hi.

If you want to stay here, Ban Si Than has a **homestay** (☎08 7258 1991; per person 100B, meals 50B) program. The village is 20km from Yasothon on Rte 202, then 2.5km south of Ban Nikom. Any Amnat Charoen-bound bus can drop you at the junction (20B to 25B, 45 minutes) where a motorcycle taxi will zip you in for 20B.

Roi Et

ร้อยเอ็ด

POP 36,000

There has been a settlement at this spot for at least 2800 years, making this one of Isan's oldest cities. At one point, legend says, it had 11 city gates, and in ancient writing '11' was expressed as '10-plus-1'. Somehow this morphed into the city's name, which means 'one hundred one'.

Except for extensive stretches of the old city moat, Roi Et's long history hasn't followed it into the 21st century. Still, the city retains a charm and sense of identity all its own. You can't call Roi Et sleepy, but, perhaps taking its cue from the walking Buddha on the island in the city-centre lake, it does seem to move to its own urban beat.

👁 Sights

Wat Burapha

TEMPLE

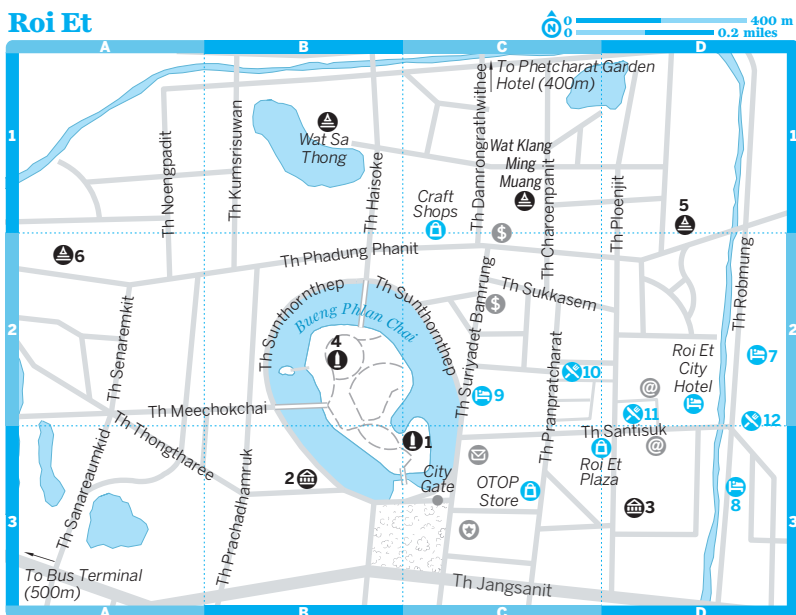
(วัดบูรพา; Th Phadung Phanit; ☀daylight hours) The enormous standing Buddha towering above Roi Et's squat skyline is **Phra Phuttha Ratana Mongkon Mahamuni** (Luang Po Yai for short), the main attraction at this temple. Despite being of little artistic significance, it's hard to ignore. Head to toe he stands 59.2m, and from the ground to the tip of the *üt-sà-nít* it's 67.8m.

Roi Et National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติร้อยเอ็ด; Th Ploenjit; admission 100B; ☀9am-4pm Wed-Sun) This interesting museum gives equal billing to ancient artefacts and Isan culture. The 3rd floor features silk weaving, including a display showing the materials used to produce natural-dye fabrics.

Roi Et



Roi Et

📍 Sights

- 1 Lak Meuang C3
 2 Roi Et Aquarium B3
 3 Roi Et National Museum D3
 4 Walking Buddha Statue B2
 5 Wat Burapha D1
 6 Wat Neua A2

🏠 Sleeping

- 7 Poon Petch Sportclub D2

- 8 Rohmintanin Park D3
 9 Saithip Hotel C2

🍴 Eating

- 10 Night Market C2
 11 Richi India Food D2
 12 White Elephant D2

Bueng Phlan Chai

(บึงพลายชัย) Walking paths criss-cross the attractive, shady island in Bueng Phlan Chai and attract the usual crowd of dotting couples, students, joggers and picnickers. The beloved **walking Buddha statue** is on the north side and the **lak meuang** (city pillar) is to the south.

Wat Neua

(วัดเหนือ; Th Phadung Phanit; ☀️daylight hours) This temple in the northern quarter of town has a peaceful ambience. It's known for its 1200-year-old brick *chedi* from the Dvaravati period, which has an unusual four-cornered bell-shaped form that's rare in Thailand. Also inside the central com-

PARK

pound are some old Dvaravati *sāir-mah* and a giant bodhi tree.

🆓 Roi Et Aquarium

AQUARIUM

(สถานแสดงพันธุ์สัตว์น้ำเทศบาลเมืองร้อยเอ็ด; Th Sunthornthep; ☀️8.30am-4.30pm Wed-Sun) This little aquarium with a walk-through tunnel houses fish found around Isan.

🏠 Sleeping

Phetcharat Garden Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎️ 0 4351 9000; www.petcharatgardenhotel.com; Th Chotchapluyuk; r incl breakfast 540-700B, ste 1740B; 🍷🍴) Some chic East-meets-West styling in the open-air lobby and an enormous swimming pool earn this attractive

place several gold stars. The cheaper rooms don't capture that atmosphere and there's visible wear and tear throughout, but Phetcharat Garden is still excellent value.

Rohmintanin Park HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 4351 6111; Th Robmuang; r incl breakfast 450-650B, ste 1200B; ๙@๙) This place can't quite qualify as fancy, but little decorative touches push it beyond the ordinary institutional feel so common in hotels of this price range.

Saithip Hotel HOTEL \$
(no Roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4351 1742; Th Suriyadet Bamrung; r 240-320B; ๙๙) The architect added a bit of decoration to the facade and some rooms have sit-down toilets, but this is otherwise your ordinary cold-water cheapie.

Poon Petch Sportclub HOTEL \$
(no Roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4351 6391; Th Robmuang; r 300-350B; ๙) Though it's looking rather sorry for itself on the outside, the rooms are better than expected and come with refrigerator and balconies.

Eating & Drinking

Roi Et's nightlife district, home to several large beer gardens, runs along Th Chotchaplaiyuk between the canal and the Phetcharat Garden Hotel. Some more low-key tables for a tittle sit on the west side of the lake.

White Elephant INTERNATIONAL, THAI \$
(Th Robmuang; dishes 60-390B; ☺dinner) This public place just across the old moat has a massive Thai menu, but the specialities are German, as is the owner.

Richi India Food INDIAN \$
(37/1 Th Santisuk; dishes 50-250B; ☺lunch & dinner; ๙☎) This colourful place looks more like a hair salon than a restaurant, and the food won't wow you, but with Indian cuisine being so rare in Isan, you take what you can get.

Night Market THAI \$
(☺3.30-11pm) By day, this big roof hosts Roi Et's municipal market, but at night it shifts gears to become the city's main night market.

Information

Banks are scattered around the centre, with several at the north end of Th Suriyadet Bamrung. There are several internet cafes near Roi Et Plaza department store.

Getting There & Away

Nok Air (☎ 0 2900 9955; www.nokair.com) has daily morning flights to/from Bangkok's Don Muang Airport with fares from under 2000B. The airport is 13km north of town.

Buses depart at least hourly from Roi Et's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4351 1466; Th Jangsanit) to Bangkok (293B to 585B, eight hours), Khon Kaen (73B to 94B, 2½ hours), Ubon Ratchathani (108B to 139B, three hours), and Surin (91B, 2½ hours). The bus terminal is 1km from the city centre. Túk-túk charge 40B to 50B to the lake.

Around Roi Et

WAT PA NON SAWAN วัดป่าโนนสวรรค์
Making Sala Kaew Ku (p461) feel like a Thomas Kinkadee creation, **Wat Pa Non Sawan** (admission free; ☺daylight hours) is home to hundreds of colourful sculptures ranging from merely peculiar to 'what-the...?!' Whether it's the immense dragons, *wàing* turtles, Hindu gods, gruesome scenes of hell or the lonely polar bear, this place is sure to make you think as well as smile, which is exactly the point of it all. Also note the use of pots in many of the sculptures, a theme chosen because this is a pottery-making region. With all this spectacle around, the Bollywood songs played over the loudspeakers seem perfectly normal.

Be sure to say *sà-wà-dee* to the octogenarian abbot who inspired it all. He lives and greets visitors on the ground floor of the tower; inside Hanuman's mouth.

The temple is 30km east of Roi Et and buses can drop you at Thung Khao Luang (25B, 30 minutes), where a motorcycle taxi for the last 8km will cost 60B.

PHRA MAHA CHEDI CHAI MONGKHON พระมหาเจดีย์ชัยมงคล

Far from finished, the **Phra Maha Chedi Chai Mongkhon** (admission free; ☺6.30am-6pm) is already a sight to behold. At its heart is a gleaming white *chedi* rising a symbolic 101m, making it one of the tallest in Thailand. It's encircled by a 101m-wide building and sits on 101 *râi* (16 hectares) of land. Inside is a riot of gold paint and mirrored tiles, and, depending on your tastes, it's either beautiful or gaudy; but either way you're sure to love it. The *chedi* sits atop a mountain that's sometimes called **Isan Buddhist Park**. Another 8km down the forest-clad road from the *chedi* is the **Northeast Botany in Literature Park**, a quiet botanical garden featuring plants mentioned in

important Thai stories. Two kilometres further on is **Pha Mok Mi Wai** cliff, which is a viewpoint for the sea of fog that forms most mornings during the cool season.

The *chedi* is 80km northwest of Roi Et city near Nong Phok. It's a pain to get there without your own wheels. From Roi Et take a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to Phon Thong (40B, one hour, every half-hour) and then catch one of the Khon Kaen-Amnat Charoen buses to *Brà-doo kong* (Kong Gate) in Ban Tha Saat (25B, 30 minutes, hourly). Then it's 5km uphill. Hitching is usually easy.

KU PHRA KOH NA

คูพระโคตนา

Fifty kilometres southeast of Roi Et town are the minor Khmer ruins of **Ku Phra Koh Na** (admission free; ☺daylight hours), an 11th-century Hindu shrine. The Baphuon-style temple comprises three brick *prang* facing east from a sandstone base surrounded by a sandstone-slab wall that once had four gates. The middle *prang* was replastered in 1928 and Buddha niches were added. The attached Buddha footprint shrine is fronted by original *naga* sculptures. The two other *prang* have been restored (though they still look like they might tumble any time) in their original forms. The northern *prang* has a reclining Phra Narai (Vishnu) lintel over the main door while the lintel above the northern false door of the other *prang* shows Kali.

The ruins themselves are neither impressive nor well restored, but it's interesting to see how they've been incorporated into the modern temple. And if that doesn't thrill you, spend your time watching the hundreds of monkeys living here.

Surin-bound buses from Roi Et can drop you off at Wat Ku (40B, one hour), as it's

known locally, which is 6km south of Suwannaphum on Rte 214.

SA KAEW PROVINCE

Not a part of Isan, either culturally or geographically, but also markedly distinct from the nearby coastal provinces, seldom-travelled Sa Kaew feels like a lost land. Many small Khmer ruins litter the sparsely populated countryside, but with Angkor Wat beckoning, none are worth the time or effort to reach.

Aranya Prathet

อรัญประเทศ

POP 15,800

The border town of Aranya Prathet (aka Aran) is known to Thais mostly for smuggling and gambling. (The casinos are over the border in Poipet.) For travellers, it's the busiest border crossing for trips to Angkor Wat and few actually stop here longer than needed to get their passport stamped. Though really, as border towns go, it's not that bad.

If you do spend a little time, **Talat Rong Kluea** (☺8am-8pm) is worth exploring. It's mainly thrift-store tat and cheap Chinese-made junk – for those seeking secondhand sunglasses and counterfeit Converse, it's the place to be – but the Rong Kluea experience isn't about what's being sold, it's about seeing the caravans of Cambodian traders pushing huge handcarts through a market so vast that many of the Thais coming here rent bikes (20B per day) and motorcycles (100B per three hours) to go shopping.

BORDER CROSSING: ARANYA PRATHET TO POIPEIT

The Cambodian border is open 7am to 8pm daily. There are many persistent scammers trying to get you to buy your Cambodia visa through them, but no matter what lies they tell you, there's absolutely no reason to get visas at the Cambodian consulate or anywhere else. Doing so costs more and takes longer. Don't even show your passport to anyone before Thai immigration and don't change money. Just make a beeline for the border.

After getting stamped out of Thailand follow the throng to Cambodian immigration: find the 'Visa on Arrival' sign if you don't have a visa already (see p770 for visa details). Weekday mornings you can finish everything in 10 to 20 minutes, but arrive after noon and it could take an hour or more. Weekends and holidays, when many Thais arrive to gamble and foreign workers do visa runs, are also very busy.

The best way to continue on to Siem Reap is by taxi. See Lonely Planet's *Cambodia* guide for information.

Sleeping & Eating

There are hotels at the border, but staying in town is much more pleasant.

Indochina Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 3723 2588; www.indochina-hotel.net; Th Thana-
navithe; r incl breakfast 900-1280B; 🏠📶🚰)
Better than anything you'd expect to find
in Aran, this quiet place north of the city is
built around a palm-lined swimming pool;
pool-view rooms are worth the extra 140B.

Mob Coffee

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 3723 1839; r 380B; 🏠📶) The bright,
clean rooms at this little place inside the
bus station – there aren't many buses, so
it's not noisy – are among the best value
in the city.

Market Motel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 3723 2302; www.aranyaprathethotel.com;
105/30-32 Th Ratuthit; r 250-700B; 🏠📶🚰)
Rooms here aren't as good as Mob's, but
the vibe is much better...and there's a
swimming pool.

A small **night market** (☺4pm-2am) rings a
little reservoir just east of the Market Motel.

Getting There & Around

Buses from Bangkok's 'Mo Chit' (207B, 4½
hours), 'Ekamai' (200B, four hours) and Su-
varnaphumi Airport (187B, three hours) bus
stations plus the vans from Victory Monument
(230B, four hours, every half-hour) go all the
way to the border, so there's no need to stop in
Aranya Prathet city. There's rumour of direct bus
service all the way to Siem Reap, but we think it's
unlikely to happen soon.

Two daily trains also make the run from
(5.55am and 1.05pm) and to (6.40am and
13.55pm) Bangkok's Hua Lamphong Station
(3rd class 48B, six hours) to the city, where
you'll either need to take a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (15B),
motorcycle taxi (60B) or *túk-túk* (80B) the final
6km to the border.

The through-service bus trips sold on Khao
San Rd and elsewhere in Thailand seem cheap
and convenient, but they haven't been nick-
named 'scam buses' for nothing. By using them
you're agreeing to let people hassle you and rip
you off. Read **Tales of Asia** (www.talesofasia.
com/cambodia-overland.htm) for the juicy
details.

Aran also has buses to Chantaburi (150B, four
hours, hourly) and Khorat (190B, four hours, six
daily) from the bus terminal, and Surin (137B to

176B, six hours, three daily) from a stop to the
north.

Sa Kaew

สระแก้ว

The provincial capital isn't much more than
an overgrown village that in and of itself
presents no compelling (or even trifling)
reason to stop. But a couple of little known
parks beyond the town beckon intrepid
travellers.

Khao Chakan is an isolated 240m-tall
mountain pocked with caves and inhabited
by a horde of greedy monkeys who follow
visitors waiting for handouts. One of the
caves, reached by a long staircase, pokes
straight through the heart of the mountain
like a keyhole while others release their
resident bats in a seemingly endless gush
starting at dusk. It's 17km south of town
on Rte 317 and, lucky for you, buses back
to Sa Kaew (20B, 30 minutes, hourly) pass
the mountain during the night; to be sure of
getting a ride, walk to the village and wait
for them there rather than at the entrance
to the park.

Running along the southern escarpment
of the Khorat Plateau, **Pang Sida National
Park** (☎ 0 3724 3775; admission 200B) is known
for waterfalls and butterflies. Some of both
can be seen at the visitor centre 27km north
of Sa Kaew. The waterfalls are most beau-
tiful August to October. Butterfly flocks are
impressive year-round, but are largest May
to July.

There's **camping** (per person with own tent
30B, 2-person tent hire 200B) and **bungalows**
(☎ 0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve;
bungalows 600-1200B; 🏠). In the morning,
sǒrng-tǎa-ou from Sa Kaew's market can
deliver you to the visitor centre (40B, one
hour), but there are none after 10am. A mo-
torcycle taxi from town should cost about
300B for a short visit and 1000B all day.

For those intending to sleep in Sa Kaew,
the **Travel Hotel** (no Roman-script sign; ☎ 0
3724 1024; Th Suwannasorn; r 380-550B; 🏠📶) is
an ugly building with adequate rooms in a
perfect location.

For transport information, see opposite:
virtually all vehicles leaving there pass
through Sa Kaew on the way to Bangkok,
minus about 45 minutes and 20% of the
price.

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