

Thailand

Northern Thailand (Chapter)

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Coverage includes: Lamphun Province, Lamphun, Around Lamphun, Lampang Province, Lampang, Around Lampang, Chiang Rai Province, Chiang Rai, Around Chiang Rai, Mae Salong (Santikhiri), Mae Sai, Around Mae Sai, Chiang Saen, Around Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong, Phayao Province, Phayao, Phrae Province, Around Phrae, Nan Province, Nan, Around Nan, Phitsanulok Province, Phitsanulok, Around Phitsanulok, Sukhothai, Around Sukhothai, Kamphaeng Phet Province, Kamphaeng Phet, Tak Province, Mae Sot, Mae Sot to Um Phang, Um Phang & Around, Mae Sot to Mae Sariang, Mae Hong Son Province, Mae Hong Son, Around Mae Hong Son, Pai and Soppong.

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Northern Thailand

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Why Go?

Northern Thailand's 'mountainous' reputation may cause residents of Montana or Nepal to chuckle, but it's the fertile river valleys between these glorified hills that served as the birthplace of much of what is associated with Thai culture. The mountains may not be large, but their impact and significance are immense.

Not surprisingly, these old hills are the ideal destination for a unique Thai experience. Exploring a Buddhist temple in Phrae, taking part in a homestay in rural Sukhothai, or sampling a dish at Lampang's evening market - northern Thailand's cultural attractions are generally low-key but are eminently rewarding. And for those seeking something more vigorous, the region's rugged geography ensures that there is also ample opportunity for more active pursuits such as rafting in Nan, visiting a national park in Phitsanulok or a road trip to Phayao.

When to Go

Northern Thailand is the place to head in winter (November to January), when daytime temperatures at the higher elevations are a relatively comfortable 20°C to 23°C and nighttime temperatures can, in some places, dip perilously close to freezing.

From March to May, the hottest time of year, daytime temperatures climb close to 40°C and smoke from slash-and-burn agriculture can fill the skies. The rainy season, June to October, should generally be avoided if you plan to do any trekking.

History

Northern Thailand's history has been characterised by the shifting powers of various independent principalities. One of the most significant early cultural influences in the north was the Mon kingdom of Hariphunchai (modern Lamphun), which held sway from the late 8th century until the 13th century. Hariphunchai art and Buddha images are particularly distinctive, and many good examples can be found at the Hariphunchai National Museum in Lamphun.

The Thais, who are thought to have migrated down from China since around the 7th century, united various principalities in the 13th century – this resulted in the creation of Sukhothai and the taking of Hariphunchai from the Mon. In 1238 Sukhothai declared itself an independent kingdom under King Si Intharathit and quickly expanded its sphere of influence. Because of this, and the influence the kingdom had on modern Thai art and culture, Sukhothai is considered by Thais to be the first true Thai kingdom. In 1296 King Mengrai established Chiang Mai after conquering Hariphunchai.

Later, Chiang Mai, in an alliance with Sukhothai in the 14th and 15th centuries, became a part of the larger kingdom of Lan Na Thai (Million Thai Rice Fields), popularly referred to as Lanna. This extended as far south as Kamphaeng Phet and as far

north as Luang Prabang in Laos. The golden age of Lanna was in the 15th century. For a short time the Sukhothai capital was moved to Phitsanulok (1448–86), and Chiang Mai became an important religious and cultural centre. However, many Thai alliances declined in the 16th century. This weakness led to the Burmese capturing Chiang Mai in 1556 and their control of Lanna lasted for the next two centuries. The Thais regrouped after the Burmese took Ayuthaya in 1767, and under King Kawila, Chiang Mai was recaptured in 1774 and the Burmese were pushed north.

In the late 19th century Rama V of Bangkok made efforts to integrate the northern region with the centre to ward off the colonial threat. The completion of the northern railway to Chiang Mai in 1921 strengthened those links until the northern provinces finally became part of the kingdom of Siam in this early period of the 20th century.

Language

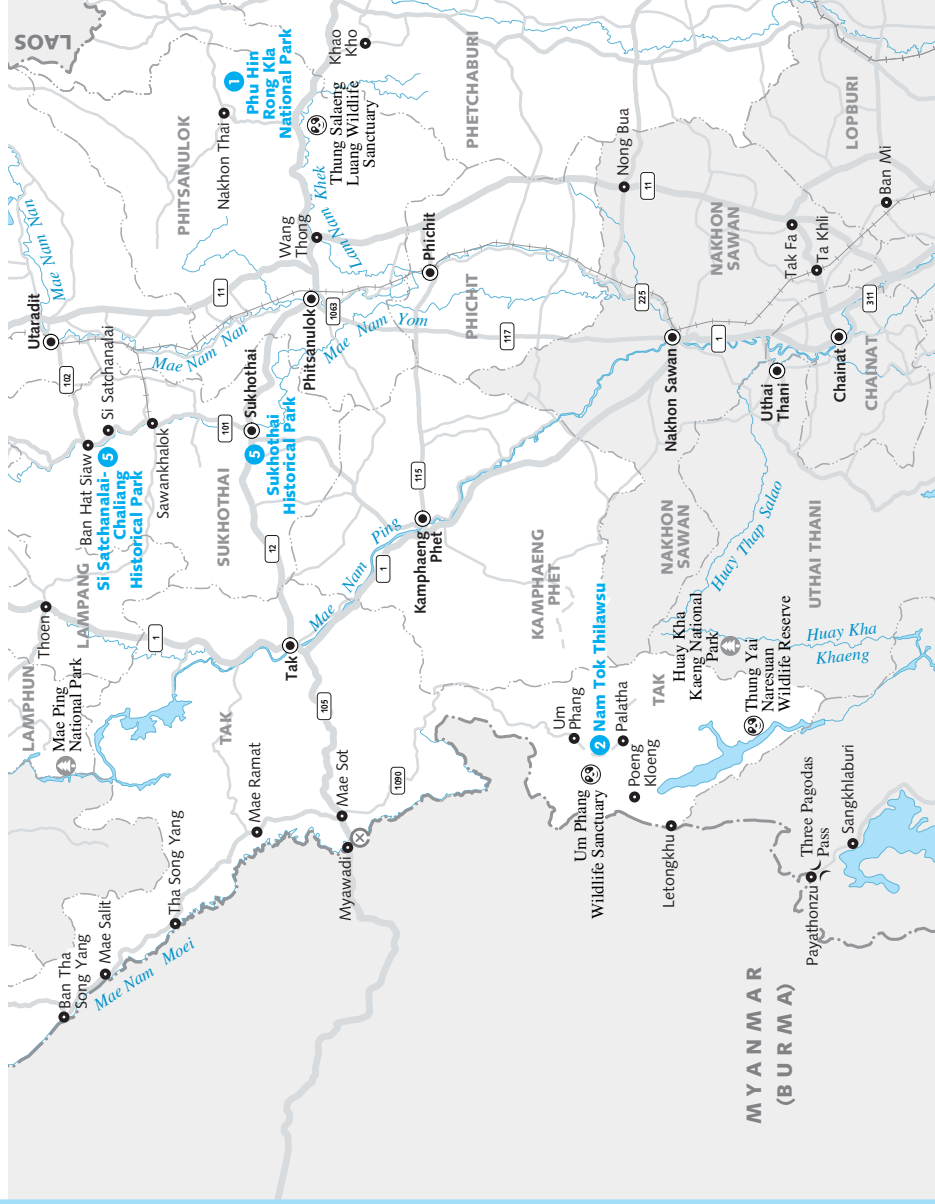
Thailand's regional dialects vary greatly and can even be unintelligible to native speakers of Thai not familiar with the vernacular being spoken. *Gǎm méuang*, the northern Thai dialect, is no exception and, in addition to an entirely different set of tones to master, possesses a wealth of vocabulary specific to the north. The northern dialect also has a slower rhythm than Thailand's three other

SPEAKING NORTHERN

Northerners used to take offence when outsiders tried speaking *gǎm méuang* to them, an attitude that dates back to a time when central Thais considered northerners to be very backward, and made fun of their dialect. Nowadays most northerners are proud of their native language and there was even a popular Bangkok-based TV series in which many characters spoke the northern dialect.

To help you win some smiles from the locals, we've provided a brief lexicon of the local lingo.

» <i>Óo gǎm méuang bòr jǎhng</i>	I can't speak northern Thai
» <i>A yǎng gór?</i>	What did you say?
» <i>An née tów dai?</i>	How much is this?
» <i>Mee kôw nêung bòr?</i>	Do you have sticky rice?
» <i>Lám dáa đáa</i>	Delicious
» <i>Máan lá</i>	Yes/That's right
» <i>Bòr máan</i>	No
» <i>Sow</i>	20
» <i>Gàht</i>	Market
» <i>Jôw</i>	(A polite word used by women; equivalent to the central Thai <i>ka</i>)
» <i>Bàht só! Nòrng née ngáhm kànhàt!</i>	Hey, you're really cute!



4 Getting off the beaten path to the little-visited but atmospheric northern cities such as **Phayao** (p334) or **Phrae** (p336)

5 Cycling around the awesome ruins of Thailand's 'golden age' at **Sukhothai** (p355) and **Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Parks** (p363)

6 Renting a vehicle and driving the legendary **Mae Hong Son Loop** (p380) or the extraordinary route from **Chiang Khong to Phayao** (p334)

main dialects, an attribute reflected in the relaxed, easygoing manner of the people who speak it.

Northern Thai also has its own writing system, based on an old Mon script that was originally used only for Buddhist scripture. The script became so popular during the Lanna period that it was exported for use by the Thai Lü in China, the Khün in the eastern Shan State and other Thai-Kadai-speaking groups living between Lanna and China. Although few northerners nowadays can read the northern Thai script – often referred to as ‘Lanna script’ – it is occasionally used in signage to add a northern Thai cultural flavour.

For some useful northern Thai words and phrases, see the boxed text, p295.

LAMPHUN PROVINCE

Lamphun

ลำพูน

POP 14,000

Essentially a culture stop for Chiang Mai sightseers, this provincial capital sits quietly along the banks of the Mae Kuang, a tributary of the Mae Ping, without much fanfare regarding its superlative as one of Thailand's oldest cities. The old fortress wall and ancient temples are surviving examples of Lamphun's former life as the northernmost outpost of the ancient Mon Dvaravati kingdom then known as Hariphunchai (AD 750–1281). For a period, the city was ruled by Chama Thewi, a Mon queen who has earned legendary status among Thailand's constellation of historic rulers.

The 26km ride between Chiang Mai and Lamphun is one of the city's primary attractions. It's along a beautiful country road, stretches of which are canopied by tall dipterocarp trees.

NORTHERN SLEEPING PRICE RANGES

We list high-season rack rates in this book. See the boxed text, p106 for more details on the different sleeping categories used in this book.

- » **Budget** under 600B
- » **Midrange** 600B to 1500B
- » **Top End** more than 1500B

Sights

Wat Phra That Hariphunchai

TEMPLE

(วัดพระธาตุหริภุญชัย; Th Inthayongyot; admission 20B) This Buddhist temple enjoys an exalted status because it dates back to the Mon period, having been built on the site of Queen Chama Thewi's palace in 1044 (1108 or 1157 according to some datings). It lay derelict until Khru Ba Sriwichai, a famous northern Thai monk, made renovations in the 1930s. It boasts some interesting architecture, a couple of fine Buddha images and two old *chedi* (stupas) in the original Hariphunchai style. The tallest of the ancient *chedi*, Chedi Suwan, is a narrow brick spire dating from 1418 that sits 21m high. The newer *chedi*, 46m-high Phra Maha That Chedi, is regarded as a textbook example of 15th-century Lanna architecture with its square pedestal rising to a rounded bell shape.

Behind the temple is **Kad Khua Moong Tha Sing**, a small souvenir market on a covered bridge selling local OTOP (One Tambon, One Product) items such as dried *lam yai* (longan) and silk.

Hariphunchai National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติหริภุญไชย; Th Inthayongyot; admission 100B; ☎9am–4pm Wed–Sun) Across the street from Wat Phra That Hariphunchai is the informative Hariphunchai National Museum. Run by the national Fine Arts Department, this museum has a collection of Mon and Lanna artefacts and Buddhas from the Dvaravati kingdom, as well as a stone inscription gallery with Mon and Thai Lanna scripts. The curator's passion for the museum and Lamphun's heritage is infectious. There is a small bookshop with some English titles.

Wat Chama Thewi

TEMPLE

(วัดจามเทวี) A more unusual Hariphunchai *chedi* can be seen at Wat Chama Thewi (popularly called Wat Kukut) and dates to around the 13th century. Known as Chedi Suwan Chang Kot, it has been restored many times since then, so it is now a mixture of several schools of architecture but is widely regarded as one of the most recent examples of Dvaravati architecture. Each side of the *chedi* has five rows of three Buddha figures, diminishing in size on each higher level. The standing Buddhas, although made recently, are in Dvaravati style.

The temple is about 1.5km from Wat Phra That Hariphunchai; you can take a motor-cycle taxi (20B) from in front of the museum.

Festivals

Songkran

WATER FESTIVAL

In mid-April, this is a milder, more traditional affair in Lamphun should Chiang Mai's water fight be too wet and wild.

Lam Yai Festival

LONGAN FESTIVAL

During the second week of August, Lamphun hosts the annual festival spotlighting its primary agricultural product. The festival features floats made of fruit and, of course, a Miss Lam Yai contest.

Sleeping & Eating

You're unlikely to stay overnight as Lamphun is so close to Chiang Mai. But in a pinch, try the very capable **Lamphun Will** (☎0 5353 4865; Th Chama Thewi; r 1200-1750B; ♿, ♿, ♿), opposite Wat Chama Thewi.

Noodle and Rice Shops

NOODLES \$

(Th Inthayongyot) There is a string of decent noodle shops south of Wat Phra That on the main street.

TRANSPORT IN THE NORTH

Public Transport

Going by train is the most comfortable way to get up north, although there's only one northern line and it is comparatively quite slow. For those in a hurry, there are now airports in almost every provincial capital in northern Thailand. Just about everywhere in the region is accessible by bus or minivan, except to the communities along the Myanmar (Burma) border where the *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (pick-up truck, also spelt *sǎwnghthǎew*) is typically the transport of choice.

Car & Motorcycle

Car and motorcycle rental are available at most urban centres. If you don't know how to ride a motorcycle, it's easy to learn and you'll be glad you did.

One of the increasingly popular ways of exploring northern Thailand is from the saddle of a rented motorcycle. Despite the obvious risks of driving in Thailand, motorcycle touring is one of the best ways to explore the countryside at your own pace, and provides the opportunity to leave the beaten track at any moment.

Unless you're specifically intending to go off-road or plan on crossing unpaved roads during the wet season, it's highly unlikely you'll need one of the large dirt bikes you'll see for rent in Chiang Mai. The automatic transmission 110cc to 150cc scooterlike motorcycles found across Thailand are fast and powerful enough for most roads. If you want something a bit larger and more comfortable on those long straight-ways, an alternative is the 200cc Honda Phantom, a Thai-made chopper wannabe.

Rental prices in Chiang Mai start at about 150B per day for a 125cc Honda Wave/Dream, all the way to 1200B per day for a Honda CB1000. For general renting information and safety considerations, see p773.

A good introduction to motorcycle touring in northern Thailand is the 100km Samoen loop, which can be tackled in half a day. The route extends north from Chiang Mai and follows Rtes 107, 1096 and 1269, passing through excellent scenery and ample curves, and providing a taste of what a longer ride up north will be like. The 470km Chiang Rai loop, which passes through scenic Fang and Tha Ton along Rtes 107, 1089 and 118, is another popular ride that can be broken up with a stay in Chiang Rai. The classic northern route is the Mae Hong Son loop (see the boxed text, p380), a 950km ride that begins in Chiang Mai and takes in Rte 1095's 1864 curves with possible stays in Pai, Mae Hong Son and Mae Sariang, before looping back to Chiang Mai via Rte 108. A lesser known but equally fun ride is to follow Rtes 1155 and 1093 from Chiang Khong in Chiang Rai Province to the little-visited city of Phayao, a day trip that passes through some of the most dramatic mountain scenery in the country.

The best source of information on motorcycle travelling in the north, not to mention publishers of a series of terrific motorcycle touring-based maps, is **Golden Triangle Rider** (GT Rider; www.gt-rider.com). Their website includes heaps of information on renting bikes (including recommended hire shops in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai) and bike insurance, plus a variety of suggested tours with maps and an interactive forum.

i Getting There & Away

Blue *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* and white buses to Lamphun (20B, every 30 minutes) leave Chiang Mai from a stop on Th Praisani in front of Talat Warorot and from another stop on the east side of the river on Th Chiang Mai-Lamphun, just south of the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT). Transport also leaves from Chiang Mai's Chang Pheuek terminal. Both can drop you off on Th Inthayongyot at the stop in front of the national museum and Wat Phra That Hariphunchai.

Purple minibuses (20B, every 20 minutes from 6am to 5pm) and blue *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (15B) return to Chiang Mai from the stop in front of the national museum or from the city's bus terminal on Th Sanam.

Around Lamphun

DOI KHUN TAN NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติดอยขุนตาด

This 225-sq-km **national park** (๒0 5354 6335; admission 200B) straddles the mountains between Lamphun and Lampang Provinces. It ranges in elevation from 350m at the bamboo forest lowlands to 1363m at the pine-studded summit of Doi Khun Tan. Wildflowers, including orchids, ginger and lilies, are abundant. At the park headquarters there are maps of well-marked trails that range from short walks around the headquarters' vicinity to trails covering the mountain's four peaks; there's also a trail to **Nam Tok Tat Moei** (7km round trip). Intersecting the mountain slopes is Thailand's longest train tunnel (1352m), which opened in 1921 after six years of manual labour by thousands of Lao workers (several of whom are said to have been killed by tigers).

Bungalows (๒0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; bungalows 1500-2700B) are available near the park headquarters. There is a restaurant by the bungalows. The park is very popular on cool-season weekends.

The main access to the park is from the Khun Tan train station. To check timetables and prices for other destinations call the **State Railway of Thailand** (๒nationwide call centre 1690; www.railway.co.th) or look at its website. Once at the Khun Tan station, cross the tracks and follow a steep, marked path 1.3km to the park headquarters. By car take the Chiang Mai-Lampang highway to the Mae Tha turn-off then follow the signs along a steep unpaved road for 18km.

LAMPANG PROVINCE

Lampang

ลำปาง

POP 59,000

Boasting lumbering elephants, the elegant mansions of former lumber barons and impressive (and in many cases, lumber-based) Lanna-era temples, Lampang seems to unite every northern Thai cliché – but in a good way. Despite all this, the city sees relatively few visitors, giving it more of an 'undiscovered' feel than some of the more touristed destinations in the north.

History

Although Lampang Province was inhabited as far back as the 7th century in the Dvaravati period, legend has it that Lampang city was founded by the son of Hariphunchai's Queen Chama Thewi, and played an important part in the history of the Hariphunchai Kingdom (8th to 13th centuries).

Like Chiang Mai, Phrae and other older northern cities, modern Lampang was built as a walled rectangle alongside a river (in this case Mae Wang). At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century Lampang, along with nearby Phrae, became an important centre for the domestic and international teak trade. A large British-owned timber company brought in Burmese supervisors familiar with the teak industry in Burma to train Burmese and Thai loggers in the area. These well-paid supervisors, along with independent Burmese teak merchants who plied their trade in Lampang, sponsored the construction of more than a dozen temples in the city, a legacy that lives on in several of Lampang's most impressive wáts.

i Sights

Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao

TEMPLE

(วัดพระแก้วดอนเต้า; admission 20B; ☉6am-6pm) From 1436 to 1468, this wát was among four in northern Thailand to previously house the Emerald Buddha (now in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew). The main *chedi* shows Hariphunchai influence, while the adjacent *mon-dòp* (the small square, spired building in a wát) was built in 1909. The *mon-dòp*, decorated with glass mosaic in typical Burmese style, contains a Mandalay-style Buddha image. A display of Lanna artefacts (mostly religious paraphernalia and woodwork) can be viewed in the wát's **Lanna Museum** (admission by donation; ☉7am-6pm).

Adjacent to the temple complex, pretty **Wat Suchadaram** dates back to 1809 and is named after Mae Suchada, the central figure in a local legend.

Wat Pongsanuk Tai

TEMPLE

(วัดปงสนุกใต้; Th Pongsnook; admission free; ☉5.30am-8.30pm) Despite having lost much of its character in a recent renovation, the *mon-dōp* at Wat Pongsanuk is still one of the few remaining local examples of original Lanna-style temple architecture, which emphasised open-sided wooden buildings. To get an idea of what it was like previously, look at the carved wooden gateway at the entrance to the north stairway.

There are a couple of informal museums on the temple grounds showing local artefacts, but with little English explanation.

Baan Sao Nak

MUSEUM

(บ้านसानัก; 85 Th Radwattana; admission 50B; ☉10am-5pm) In the old Wiang Neua (North City) section of town, Baan Sao Nak was built in 1895 in the traditional Lanna style. A huge teak house supported by 116 square teak pillars, it was once owned by a local *kun-ying* (a title equivalent to 'Lady' in England); it now serves as a local museum. The entire house is furnished with Burmese and Thai antiques, but structure itself and its manicured garden are particularly magnificent.

Wat Chedi Sao

TEMPLE

(วัดเจดีย์ขาว; admission free; Th Pratum) Located about 6km north of town, via Th Pamaikhet, this temple is named for the *sow* (northern Thai for 20) whitewashed Lanna-style *chedi* on its grounds. But the *wát's* real treasure is a solid-gold, 15th-century seated Buddha on display in a glassed-in **pavilion** (☉8am-5pm), built over a square pond. The image is said to contain a piece of the Buddha's skull in its head and an ancient Pali-inscribed golden

palm leaf in its chest; precious stones decorate the image's hairline and robe. A farmer reportedly found the figure next to the ruins of nearby Wat Khu Kao in 1983. Monks stationed at Wat Chedi Sao make and sell herbal medicines; the popular *yah mòrng* is similar to tiger balm.

Wat Si Rong Meuang & Wat Si Chum

TEMPLES

(วัดศรีรองเมือง/วัดศรีชุม) Wat Si Rong Meuang, on Th Thakhrao Noi, and Wat Si Chum, on Th Thipawan, were built in the late 19th century by Burmese artisans. The temple buildings are constructed in the Burmese 'layered' style, with tin roofs gabled by intricate woodcarvings.



Activities

Horse Carts

GUIDED TOUR

Lampang is known throughout Thailand as Meuang Rot Mah (Horse Cart City) because it's the only town in Thailand where horse carts are still found, although nowadays they are exclusively used for tourists. You can't miss the brightly coloured carts that drip with nylon flowers, and are handled by Stetson-wearing drivers. A 15-minute horse-cart tour around town costs 150B; for 200B you can get a half-hour tour that goes along the Mae Wang. For 300B a one-hour tour stops at Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao and Wat Si Rong Meuang. Horse carts can be found near the larger hotels and just east of the market on Th Boonyawat.

Samakhom Samunphrai Phak Neua

MESSAGE

(no roman-script sign; ☎08 9758 2396; 149 Th Pratum; message per hr 300B, sauna 150B; ☉8am-7.30pm) Next to Wat Hua Khuang in the Wiang Neua area, accessible via Th Pamaikhet, this rustic place offers traditional northern-Thai

USE YOUR MELON

Diminutive Wat Suchadaram, at Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao, is said to be located on the former melon patch (*dorn dôw*) of Mae (Mother) Suchada, a pious local woman. It is said that during a time of famine, a monk appeared and was given an unusually shaped melon by Mae Suchada. Upon opening the melon, the monk found a large green gem inside, and with the help of Mae Suchada, as well as the divine intervention of Indra, the gem was shaped into a Buddha image.

Villagers suspected the collaboration between the monk and Mae Suchada of being a bit too friendly, and in a fit of rage, beheaded Suchada. Upon realising their mistake later (the beheading led to yet another famine), a temple was built in the woman's honour. Today, the emerald Buddha image is held at Wat Phra That Lampang Luang.

Lampang

📍 Sights

- 1 Baan Sao Nak F2
- 2 Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao & Wat
Suechadaram G1
- 3 Wat Pongsanuk Tai D2

🏠 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 4 Thai Massage Shops E2

🛏 Sleeping

- 5 Akhamsiri Home G1
- 6 Asia Lampang Hotel C4
- 7 Pin Hotel D3
- 8 Riverside Guest House C3
- 9 R-Lampang C3
- 10 Tip Inn Guest House D3
- 11 Ton Nam Guest House C3
- 12 TT&T Back Packers Guesthouse F2

🍴 Eating

- 13 Aroy One Baht D3

- 14 Evening Market E2
- 15 Grandma's Café C3
- 16 Khawng Kin Ban Haw D1
- 17 Khun Manee E1
- 18 Krua 312 C3
- 19 Pamong D3
- 20 Riverside Bar & Restaurant C3
- 21 Vegetarian Food E2

🍷 Drinking

- 22 Gibbon C3
- Relax Bar & Restaurant (see 20)

🛍 Shopping

- 23 Cultural Street F1
- 24 Walking Street D3

📍 Information

- Sanuksabai (see 7)
- 25 Tourist Information Office B3

massage and herbal saunas. A motorcycle taxi ride here should cost about 20B.

Thai Massage Shops

MASSAGE

(Th Talad Gao; ☎8am-9pm) Several places at the far eastern end of Th Talad Gao offer Thai massage for about 150B per hour.

🛏 Sleeping



Riverside Guest

House

GUEST HOUSE \$\$\$

(☎0 5422 7005; www.theriverside-lampang.com; 286 Th Talad Gao; r 350-900B, ste 1800B; 🍷🍴📺) Although still within budget range, this leafy compound of refurbished wooden houses is by far the most pleasant place to stay in Lampang. Try to score one of the two upstairs rooms in the main structure that feature vast balconies overlooking the Mae Wang, or the huge two-room suite. Shaded tables for chatting or eating abound, and motorcycle rental and other tourist amenities are available.

Wienglakor Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5431 6430-5; www.wienglakor.com; 138/35 Th Phahonyothin; r incl breakfast 1000-1700B, ste incl breakfast 3000B; 🍷🍴📺) If you're going to go upscale, this is Lampang's best choice. The lobby is tastefully decorated in a teak and northern Thai temple theme, a design that continues into the rooms. Deluxe rooms feature an added sitting area and walk-in clo-

et, and the hotel's attractive outdoor dining area with carp pond is a nice touch.

Pin Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5422 1509; 8 Th Suandawg; r incl breakfast 600-900B, ste incl breakfast 1300-1800B; 🍷🍴📺) Spotless, spacious and secluded, the rooms here come decked out with cable TV, minibar and large bathrooms. A travel agent is attached who books domestic and international flights. A solid midrange choice.

R-Lampang

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 5422 5278; www.r-lampang.com; Th Talad Gao; r 350-1000B; 🍷🍴📺) Cute is the underlying aesthetic at these two wooden houses by the Mae Nam Wang. Wind through brightly coloured halls decked with teddy bears to emerge at spacious air-con rooms and rather tight fan-cooled, shared-bathroom budget rooms. An attached shop sells light eats, drinks and souvenirs.

Akhamsiri Home

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5422 8791; www.akhamsirihome.com; 54/1 Th Pahmaikhet; r 450B; 🍷🍴📺) The tagline here ought to be 'Midrange amenities at a budget price'. The large cool rooms are located in a tidy residential compound and all have TV, fridge and a garden/balcony. There's an attached cafe and motorcycles and bicycles are available for hire.

NORTHERN NOSH

Much like the language, Thailand's food seems to take a slightly different form every time you cross a provincial border. The cuisine of Thailand's northern provinces is no exception and is indicative of the region's seasonal and relatively cool climate, not to mention a love for pork, veggies and all things deep-fried. Traditionally, the residents of Thailand's north ate almost exclusively *kôw nêe-o*, sticky rice, known in the local dialect as *kôw nêung*. Coconut milk rarely makes its way into the northern kitchen, and northern Thai cuisine is probably the least spicy of Thailand's regional schools of cooking, often relying on bitter or bitter/hot flavours instead.

Paradoxically (and unfortunately), it can be quite difficult to find authentic local food outside of Chiang Mai and the other large cities in northern Thailand. There are relatively few restaurants serving northern-style dishes, and the vast majority of authentic local food is sold from stalls in 'to go' bags. However, if you manage to come across a local restaurant, some must-try dishes include:

- » *Gaang hang-lair* – Burmese in origin (*hang* is a corruption of the Burmese *hin*, meaning curry), this rich pork curry is often seen at festivals and ceremonies.
- » *Kâap mǎo* – deep-fried pork crackling is a common – and delicious – side dish in northern Thailand.
- » *Kôw gân jîn* – banana leaf packets of rice mixed with blood that are steamed and served with garlic oil.

Lampang Wiengtong Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 5422 5801/2; www.lampangwiengthonghotel.com; 138/109 Th Phahonyothin; r incl breakfast 700-1500B, ste incl breakfast 2500-3200B; ④⑤⑥⑦) Not surprisingly, Lampang's largest hotel also boasts some of the largest rooms we've seen anywhere. The budget rooms, on the other hand, are cramped and have the tiniest bathtubs we've seen outside of Tokyo.

Asia Lampang Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 5422 7844; www.asialampang.com; 229 Th Boonyawat; r incl breakfast 550-850B; ④⑤⑥) The cheaper rooms on the ground floor are starkly plain and a bit dark, but for a tiny bit more go up a couple of floors where the wood-panelled rooms represent decent value.

Ton Nam Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5422 1175; wannaka_123@hotmail.com; 175/2 Th Talad Gao; r 500B; ④⑤) This old wooden house unites four cosy rooms, all with air-con and private bathroom.

Tip Inn Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5422 1821; 143 Th Talad Gao; r fan/air-con 450/350B; ④⑤⑥) Tip Inn is a homey alternative to the city's overwhelmingly characterless budget hotels. It's also the only accommodation to be located smack-dab in the middle of historic Th Talad Gao.

TT&T Back Packers

Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5422 1303; 82 Th Pa Mai; r 200-400B; ④⑤) Bathrooms are shared here, but this is made up for by the riverfront location and expansive chill-out areas downstairs.



Eating

For a relatively small town, Lampang boasts a pretty strong repertoire of restaurants, ranging from northern Thai to Western fare, and a few things in between.

Self-caterers or those interested in local eats will want to check out Lampang's **evening market** (Th Ratsada; ☎4-8pm) where steaming baskets of sticky rice and dozens of sides to dip it in are on daily display.

Aroy One Baht

THAI \$

(cnr Th Suandawg & Th Thipchang; mains 15-40B; ☎4pm-midnight) Some nights it can seem like just about everybody in Lampang has gathered at this rambling wooden house, and understandably so: the food is tasty and embarrassingly cheap, the service lightning fast, and the setting in a wooden house-cum-balcony-cum-garden heaps of fun.

Papong

NORTHERN THAI \$

(125 Th Talad Gao; mains 30-40B; ☎lunch & dinner) Be sure to stop by this popular local haunt serving *kà-nôm jeen* (fresh rice noodles topped with various curries). You can't miss

- » *Kôw soy* – this popular curry-based noodle dish is most likely Burmese in origin, and was probably introduced to northern Thailand by travelling Chinese merchants.
- » *Kà-nôm jeen nám ngé-e-o* – fresh rice noodles served with a spaghetti-like pork- and tomato-based broth.
- » *Lâhp kô-a* – literally ‘fried lâhp’, this dish takes the famous Thai minced-meat ‘salad’ and fries it with a mixture of local bitter/hot dried spices and herbs.
- » *Lôo* – raw blood mixed with a curry paste and served over deep-fried intestines and crispy noodles – the most hardcore northern dish of all.
- » *Năam* – fermented raw pork, a sour delicacy that tastes much better than it sounds.
- » *Nám prik nôm* – green chillies, shallots and garlic that are grilled then mashed into a paste served with sticky rice, parboiled veggies and deep-fried pork crackling.
- » *Nám prik ôrng* – a chilli dip of Shan origin made from tomatoes and minced pork – a northern Thai bolognese of sorts.
- » *Sâi ôo-a* – a grilled pork sausage supplemented with copious fresh herbs.
- » *Đam sôm oh* – the northern Thai version of *sôm-đam* substitutes pomelo for green papaya.
- » *Đôm yam* – the northern Thai version of this Thai staple is flavoured with some of the same bitter/spicy dried spices featured in *lâhp kô-a*.

it (simply look for a row of bubbling curries in earthenware pots), and ordering is a snap (simply point to whatever looks good). Auntie Pong’s speciality is *kà-nôm jeen nám ngé-e-o*, a delicious northern-style broth of pork and tomato.

Riverside Bar & Restaurant

INTERNATIONAL-THAI \$\$

(328 Th Thipchang; mains 80-210B; ☺lunch & dinner) This wooden shack that appears to be on the verge of tumbling into the Mae Wang is extremely popular with visiting and resident foreigners. Live music, a full bar and an expansive menu of local and Western dishes bring in the crowds. You’d be wise to plan your visit around the homemade pizza nights (Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday).

Khawng Kin Ban Haw

NORTHERN THAI \$\$

(no roman-script sign; 72 Th Jama Thewi; mains 50-110B; ☺lunch & dinner) Located just outside the centre of town but worth the trip, this local favourite is most popular after dark when a bottle of whiskey is regarded as a typical side dish. This is a good place to try northern Thai staples such as *gaang kaa gòp* (a herb-laden soup with frog) or *lâhp kô-a* (*lâhp* that has been stir-fried with local spices).

Grandma’s Café

THAI \$

(361 Th Thipchang; mains 30-70B; ☺10am-6pm) Well-worn teak chairs and doily window

shades suggest grandma’s influence, but we doubt she had any role in the slate greys and minimalist feel of this trendy coffee shop. Regardless, stop by for decent java and a menu of rice dishes that rarely exceeds the 50B barrier.

Krua 312

THAI \$

(Th Thipchang; mains 45-80B; ☺lunch & dinner) Set in a charming wooden shophouse and surrounded by black-and-white pictures of Lampang and the king, this tiny, simple restaurant serves foreigner-friendly curries, noodle and rice dishes.

Vegetarian Food

VEGETARIAN-THAI \$

(Th Talad Gao; mains 25-35B; ☺8am-6pm Mon-Sat; ☑) A wide selection of Thai-style veggie dishes is served at this shophouse restaurant.



Drinking

The strip of Th Thipchang near Riverside Bar & Restaurant is Lampang’s nightlife district, and includes a few friendly open-air restaurant/pubs such as **Relax Bar & Restaurant** (Th Thipchang; ☺6pm-midnight) and the curiously named **Gibbon** (Th Thipchang; ☺7pm-midnight).



Shopping

Walking Street

MARKET

Perhaps wanting to emulate the success of Chiang Mai’s street markets, Lampang now

DON'T MISS

KHUN MANEE

Lampang is known for its addictive *kôw daan*, deep-fried rice cakes drizzled with palm sugar, the making of which can be observed at this homey **factory** (no roman-script sign; 35 Th Ratsada) off Th Ratsada – look for the yellow arrow.

has its own along the charming Th Talad Gao (also known as Kat Korng Ta). Dotted with old shophouses showcasing English, Chinese and Burmese architectural styles, the street is closed to traffic on Saturday and Sunday from 4pm to 10pm and fills up with souvenir, handicraft and food stalls. A similar **Cultural Street** is also held on Th Wang Nuea from 6am to 9am on Sunday and 6pm to 9pm on Friday.

i Information

There are many banks with ATMs along Th Boonyawat, including Siam City Bank and Krung Thai Bank.

M@cnet (Th Chatchai; per hr 15B; ☺9am-10pm) Internet access.

Post office (Th Prisnee; ☺8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat)

Sauksabai (8 Th Suandawg; ☺8am-5pm Mon-Sat) Next door to Pin Hotel, this agency can arrange air tickets, saving you the trouble of a trip to the airport.

Tourism Authority of Thailand office (TAT; ☑nationwide call centre 1672, Lampang 0 5423 7229; Th Thakhras Noi; ☺10am-4pm Mon-Sat) The helpful folks here can provide a decent map of the area and details about local sights and activities.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Lampang's airport is about 1.5km from the centre of town, at the east end of Asia 1 Hwy. *Sôrng-tâa-ou* from the airport to downtown cost 50B.

Bangkok Airways (☑nationwide call centre 1771, Lampang 0 5482 1522; www.bangkokair.com; Lampang airport) conducts flights between Lampang and Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport (2405B, one hour, once daily), and Lampang and Sukhothai (1915B, 30 minutes, once daily).

Bus

The bus terminal in Lampang is nearly 2km from the centre of town, at the corner of Asia

1 Hwy and Th Chantarasurin – 20B by shared *sôrng-tâa-ou*. Minivans also depart from here, including frequent departures to Phrae (85B, two hours) from 7am to 4.30pm.

DESTINATION	FARE (B)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bangkok	347-625	9	frequent departures 7.30-11.30am & 6.30-9pm
Chiang Mai	67-134	2	every hr 8am-8.30pm
Chiang Rai	143	3½	3.30pm, 6.30pm & 9.30pm
Mae Sot	181-232	4	every hr 9am-midnight
Nan	150-300	4	every hr 9am-midnight
Phitsanulok	193	4½	every hr 5am-7pm
Phrae	78-157	2	every hr 9am-midnight
Sukhothai	162	3½	every hr 5am-7pm

Train

Lampang's historic **train station** (☑0 5421 7024; Th Phahonyothin) dates back to 1916 and is a fair hike from most accommodation. Major destinations from Lampang include Bangkok (256B to 1272B, 12 hours, six times daily) and Chiang Mai (23B to 50B, three hours, six times daily). To check timetables and prices for other destinations call the **State Railway of Thailand** (☑nationwide call centre 1690; www.railway.co.th) or look at its website.

Around Lampang

WAT PHRA THAT LAMPANG LUANG

วัดพระธาตุลำปางหลวง
This ancient **Buddhist temple compound** (admission free) houses several interesting religious structures, including what is arguably the most beautiful wooden Lanna temple in northern Thailand, the open-sided **Wihan Luang**. Dating back to 1476, and thought to be the oldest-standing wooden structure in the country, the impressive

wi-hähn (large hall in a Thai temple, usually open to laity) features a triple-tiered wooden roof supported by immense teak pillars and early-19th-century *jataka* murals (stories of the Buddha's previous lives) painted on wooden panels around the inside upper perimeter. A huge, gilded *mon-dòp* in the back of the *wi-hähn* contains a Buddha image cast in 1563.

The small and simple **Wihan Ton Kaew**, to the north of the main *wi-hähn*, was built in 1476, while the tall Lanna-style *chedi* behind the main *wi-hähn*, raised in 1449 and restored in 1496, is 45m high.

The *wi-hähn* to the north of the *chedi*, **Wihan Nam Taem**, was built in the early 16th century and, amazingly, still contains traces of the original murals, making them among the oldest in the country.

Wihan Phra Phut, which is south of the main *chedi*, dates back to the 13th century and is the oldest structure in the compound.

Unfortunately, only men are allowed to see a camera obscura image of the *wi-hähn* and *chedi* in the **Haw Phra Phutthaabt**, a small white building behind the *chedi*. The image is projected (upside down) onto a white cloth, and clearly depicts the colours of the structures.

The lintel over the entrance to the compound features an impressive dragon relief – once common in northern Thai temples but rarely seen these days. This gate supposedly dates to the 15th century.

In the arboretum outside the southern gate of the wát, there are now three **museums**. One displays mostly festival paraphernalia and some Buddha figures. Another, called 'House of the Emerald Buddha', contains a miscellany of coins, banknotes, Buddha figures, silver betel-nut cases, lacquerware and other ethnographic artefacts, along with three small, heavily gold-leafed Buddhas placed on an altar behind an enormous repoussé silver bowl. The third, a fine, small museum, features shelves of Buddha figures, lacquered boxes, manuscripts and ceramics, all well labelled in Thai and English.

Wat Phra That Lampang Luang is 18km southwest of Lampang in Ko Kha. To get there by public transport from Lampang, flag an eastbound *sòrng-táa-ou* (20B) on Th Boonyawat. From the Ko Kha *sòrng-táa-ou* stop, it's a 3km chartered motorcycle taxi ride to the temple (40B). A *sòrng-táa-ou* from Lampang's bus station will make the trip for 350B.

If you're driving or cycling from Lampang, head south on the Asia 1 Hwy and take the Ko Kha exit, then follow the road over a bridge and bear right. Follow the signs and continue for 3km over another bridge until you see the temple on the left.

THAI ELEPHANT CONSERVATION CENTER & AROUND ศูนย์อนุรักษ์ช้างไทย
Located in Amphoe Hang Chat, 33km from Lampang, this **elephant centre** (TECC; ☎0 5424 7876; www.thailelephant.org; child/adult incl shuttle bus 40/80B; ☺elephant bathing 9.45am & 1.15pm, public shows 10am, 11am & 1.30pm) promotes the role of the Asian elephant in ecotourism, and also provides medical treatment and care for sick elephants from all over Thailand. For more information on the plight of Thailand's elephants, see the boxed text, p38.

The elephant show at this 122-hectare centre is less touristy and more educational than most, focusing on how elephants work with logs, as well as the usual painting of pictures and playing oversized xylophones. There is an exhibit on the history and culture of elephants, an elephant art gallery, an elephant graveyard, and oh yes, **elephant rides** (10/30/60min 50/400/800B, ☺8am-3.30pm) through the surrounding forest.

For those keen on delving deeper into pachyderm culture, the TECC's **Mahout Training School** (☎0 5424 7875; www.thailelephant.org;

WORTH A TRIP

WAT LAI HIN

วัดไหล่หิน

If you're visiting Wat Phra That Lampang Luang and you've got your own transport, you might also consider a visit to beautiful **Wat Lai Hin** (admission free), also near Ko Kha. Built by artists from Chiang Tung, Myanmar, the tiny temple is one of the most characteristically Lanna temples around, and was an influence on the design of the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi hotel in Chiang Mai, not to mention a set for the 2001 Thai blockbuster, *Suriyothai*. There's an interesting **folk museum** on the grounds that the monks can unlock for you.

If coming from Ko Kha, the temple is located about 6km down a road that turns off 1km before reaching Wat Phra That Lampang Luang.

1/2/3/6/10/30 days 3500/5800/8500/20,000/35,000/100,000B) offers an array of scholarships ranging in duration from one day to one month, all with the aim of making you a bona-fide *kwahn cháhng* (elephant caretaker) or mahout. The popular one-day course involves learning a few simple commands for leading an elephant, experimenting with dung paper, riding an elephant in the jungle and a tour of the elephant hospital. A more involved three-day, two-night homestay program includes all meals, a night's lodging in a well-equipped wood-and-bamboo bungalow and another night at a jungle camp, plus a general introduction to elephant care and training.

Accommodation at the centre is available in the form of activity-packed homestays with mahouts in basic huts, or in bungalows at the centre's **Chang Thai Resort** (bungalows 1-/2-bedroom 1000/1500B). There are three restaurants on the centre grounds.

All proceeds from the entrance fee and souvenir shops go to the elephant hospital on-site, which cares for old, abandoned and sick elephants from all over Thailand, as well as working for the preservation of elephants by various research and breeding programs.

Nearby, but not affiliated with the TECC, is the **FAE's Elephant Hospital** (Friends of the Asian Elephant; ☎08 1914 6113; www.elephant-soraida.com; ☉8am-5pm), which claims to be the first of its kind in the world. Although visitors are appreciated and provided for, keep in mind that this is a functioning medical facility, and there are no guided tours and certainly no elephant art. Donations are greatly appreciated. In June 2008 the centre reached another first when it successfully provided an elephant with a prosthetic leg.

Both facilities can be reached by Chiang Mai-bound bus or *sǒrng-tāa-ou* (26B, 40 minutes) from Lampang's main bus terminal. Let the driver know where you are headed and get off at the Km 37 marker. The centre is 1.5km from the highway, and shuttle buses will take you inside. Alternatively, you can charter a blue *sǒrng-tāa-ou* for 600B at Lampang's bus terminal.

If you have your own transport, on the way to the elephant camp, 25km from Lampang, is the **Thung Kwian market**. Very popular with Thais, this market is a crash course in northern Thai food and handicrafts, offering everything from *rót dào-an* (deep-fried worms, a northern speciality), to the distinctive rooster bowls made in Lampang.

CHIANG RAI PROVINCE

Chiang Rai, Thailand's northernmost province, has a bit of everything: the mountains in the far east of the province are among the most dramatic in the country, the lowland Mekong River floodplains to the northeast are not unlike those one would find much further south in Isan, and the province shares borders with Myanmar and Laos, allowing relatively easy access to China.

In terms of people, it's also among Thailand's most ethnically diverse provinces, and is home to a significant minority of hill tribes, Shan and other Tai groups, and relatively recent Chinese immigrants.

Chiang Rai

เชียงใหม่

POP 62,000

Chiang Rai Province has such a diversity of attractions that its capital city is often overlooked. If you take the time to know it, Chiang Rai is a small but delightful city with a relaxed atmosphere, good value accommodation and some tasty eats. It's also the logical base from which to plan excursions to the more remote corners of the province.

Founded by Phaya Mengrai in 1262 as part of the Lao-Thai Lanna kingdom, Chiang Rai didn't become a Siamese territory until 1786, then a province in 1910.

Sights

Oub Kham Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์ขามคำ; www.oubkhammuseum.com; 81/1 Military Front Rd; adult/child 300/200B; ☉8am-6pm) This privately owned museum houses an impressive collection of paraphernalia from virtually every corner of the former Lanna kingdom. The items, some of which truly are one of a kind, range from a monkey bone food taster used by Lanna royalty to an impressive carved throne from Chiang Tung, Myanmar. Guided tours (available in English) are obligatory, and include a walk through a gilded artificial cave holding several Buddha statues, complete with disco lights and fake torches! The grounds of the museum are equally kitschy, and include a huge golden *naga* (mythical serpentlike being with magical powers) statue and countless waterfalls and fountains. Truly an equal parts bizarre and enlightening experience.

The Oub Kham Museum is 2km outside of the centre town and can be a bit tricky to

find; túk-túks (pronounced *dúk dúk*) will go here for about 50B.

Hilltribe Museum & Education Center

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์และศูนย์การศึกษาชาวเขา; www.pdacr.org; 3rd fl, 620/25 Th Thanalai; admission 50B; ☺9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) This museum and handicrafts centre is a good place to visit before undertaking any hill-tribe trek. The centre, run by the nonprofit Population & Community Development Association (PDA), is underwhelming in its visual presentation, but contains a wealth of information on Thailand's various tribes and the issues that surround them. A visit begins with a 20-minute slide show on Thailand's hill tribes, and exhibits include typical clothing for six major tribes, examples of bamboo usage, folk implements and other anthropological objects. The curator is passionate about his museum, and will talk about the different hill tribes, their histories, recent trends and the community projects that the museum helps fund. The PDA also runs highly recommended treks.

Wat Phra Kaew

TEMPLE

(วัดพระแก้ว; admission free) Originally called Wat Pa Yia (Bamboo Forest Monastery) in the local dialect, this is the city's most revered Buddhist temple. Legend has it that in 1434 lightning struck the temple's octagonal *chedi*, which fell apart to reveal the Phra Kaew Morakot, or Emerald Buddha (actually made of jade). After a long journey that included a long stopover in Vientiane, Laos (see the boxed text, p58), this national talisman is now ensconced in the temple of the same name in Bangkok.

In 1990 Chiang Rai commissioned a Chinese artist to sculpt a new image from Canadian jade. Named the Phra Yok Chiang Rai (Chiang Rai Jade Buddha), it was intentionally a very close but not exact replica of the Phra Kaew Morakot in Bangkok, with dimensions of 48.3cm across the base and 65.9cm in height, just 0.1cm shorter than the original. The image is housed in the impressive **Haw Phra Yoke**, the walls of which are decorated with beautiful modern murals, some depicting the journey of the original Phra Kaew Morakot, as well as the elaborate ceremony that saw the current image arrive at its new home in Chiang Rai.

The main prayer hall is a medium-sized, well-preserved wooden structure. The *chedi* behind it dates from the late 14th century

and is in typical Lanna style. The adjacent two-storey wooden building is a **museum** (admission free; ☺9am-5pm) housing various Lanna artefacts.

Tham Tu Pu & Buddha Cave

TEMPLE

(ถ้ำคู้ถ้ำพระ) If you follow Th Winitchaikul across the bridge to the northern side of Mae Nam Kok, you'll come to a turn-off for both Tham Tu Pu and the Buddha Cave. Follow the road 1km, then turn off onto a dirt path 200m to the base of a limestone cliff where there is a steep set of stairs leading to a main chamber holding a dusty Buddha statue; this is Tham Tu Pu. Continue along the same road for 3km more and you'll reach Buddha Cave, a cavern by the Mae Nam Kok containing a tiny but active Buddhist temple, a lone monk and several cats. The temple was one of several destinations on a visit to the region by King Rama V in the early 20th century.

Neither attraction is particularly amazing on its own, but the surrounding country is beautiful and would make an ideal destination for a lazy bike ride. Bikes can be rented at Fat Free.

Wat Phra Singh

TEMPLE

(วัดพระสิงห์; Th Singhaclai; admission free) Housing yet another copy of a famous Buddha image, this temple was built in the late 14th century during the reign of Chiang Rai's King Mahaphrom. A sister temple to Chiang Mai's Wat Phra Singh, its original buildings are typical northern Thai-style wood structures with low, sweeping roofs. The impressive wooden doors are thought to have been carved by local artists. The main *wi-hähn* houses a copy of Chiang Mai's Phra Singh Buddha.

Wat Jet Yot

TEMPLE

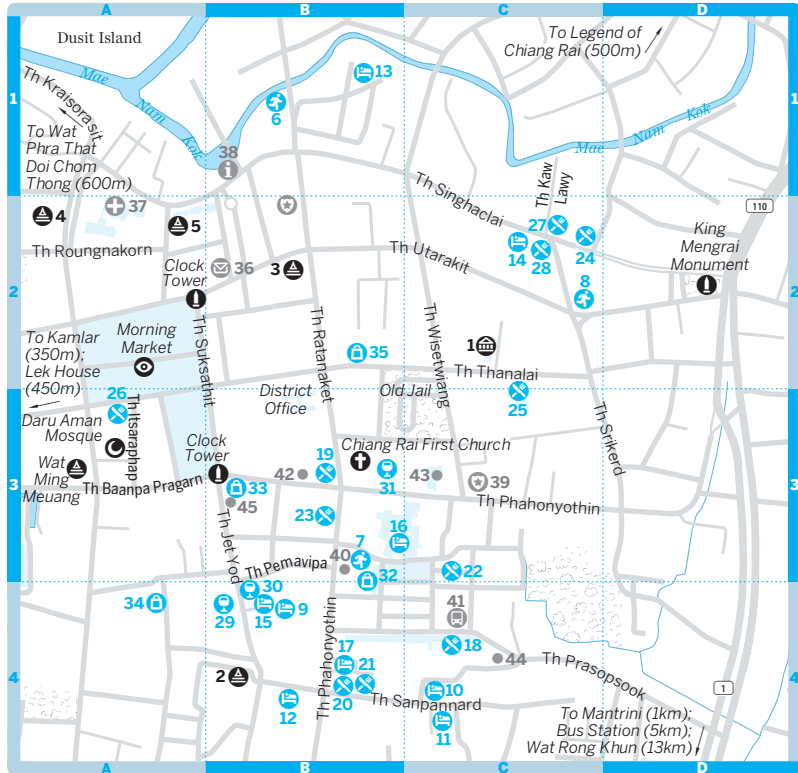
(วัดเจ็ดยอด; Th Jet Yod; admission free) The seven-spined *chedi* at Wat Jet Yot is similar to that of its Chiang Mai namesake, but without stucco ornamentation. Of more aesthetic interest is the wooden ceiling of the front veranda of the main *wi-hähn*, which features a unique Thai astrological fresco.

Wat Klang Wiang

TEMPLE

(วัดกลางเวียง; cnr Th Ratanaket & Th Utrakit; admission free) This Buddhist temple appears thoroughly modern, but dates back at least 500 years. Extensive remodelling in the early 1990s has left several structures in the temple with a unique 'modern Lanna' style, but the elegant *hōr drai* (manuscript depository) appears to retain its original form.

Chiang Rai



Wat Phra That Doi Chom Thong TEMPLE (วัดพระธาตุจ๋อจอมทอง; admission free) The Buddhist hilltop Wat Phra That Doi Chom Thong has partial views of the river and gets an occasional river breeze. The Lanna-style *chedi* here most likely dates from the 14th to 16th centuries, and may cover an earlier Mon *chedi* inside. King Mengrai, Chiang Rai's founder, first surveyed the site for the city from this peak. It's located just west of town on Th Kraisorasit.

**Activities****Trekking**

Nearly every guest house and hotel in Chiang Rai offers trekking trips, typically in the Doi Tung, Doi Mae Salong and Chiang Khong areas. Many of the local travel agencies merely act as brokers for guides associated with one of the local guest houses, so it may be cheaper to book directly through a guest house. As elsewhere in northern

Thailand, you're more assured of a quality experience if you use a TAT-licensed guide.

Trek pricing depends on the number of days and participants, and the type of activities. Rates at the places below range from 2500B to 4300B per person for two people for a two-night trek. Generally everything from accommodation to transport and food is included in this price.

For details on rules and taboos when visiting a hill-tribe village, see p36.

The following agencies have a reputation for operating responsible treks and cultural tours, and in some cases profits from the treks go directly to community-development projects.

Mirror Foundation

TREKKING

(☎ 0 5373 7616; www.themirrorfoundation.org; 106 Moo 1, Ban Huay Khom, Tambon Mae Yao) Although its rates are higher than others', trekking with this nonprofit NGO helps support the training of its local guides. Treks range

Chiang Rai

📍 Sights

- 1 Hilltribe Museum & Education Center..... C2
- 2 Wat Jet Yot B4
- 3 Wat Klang Wiang..... B2
- 4 Wat Phra Kaew..... A2
- 5 Wat Phra Singh A2

🏠 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 6 Akha Hill House..... B1
- 7 Eagle Adventure..... B3
- 8 Jao Nang Studio..... C2
- PDA Tours & Travel (see 1)

🛏 Sleeping

- 9 Baan Bua Guest House..... B4
- 10 Baan Warabordee..... C4
- 11 Diamond Park Inn C4
- 12 Jansom House B4
- 13 Jitaree Guest House..... B1
- 14 Moon & Sun Hotel..... C2
- 15 Orchids Guest House B4
- 16 The North..... B3
- 17 Wiang Inn B4

🍴 Eating

- 18 BaanChivitMai Bakery..... C4
- 19 Doi Chaang B3
- 20 Muang Thong B4
- 21 Nam Ngaiw Paa Nuan B4
- 22 Night Market..... C3
- 23 Old Dutch..... B3

- 24 Pangkhon Coffee..... C2
- 25 Phu-Lae..... C3
- 26 Rosprasoet..... A3
- 27 Somkhuan Khao Soi..... C2
- 28 Wawee Coffee..... C2

🍷 Drinking

- 29 Cat Bar B4
- 30 Easy House..... B4
- 31 Golden Triangle Inn B3

🛍 Shopping

- 32 Centre Point Night Bazaar B3
- 33 Fair Trade Shop B3
- 34 Orn's Bookshop..... A4
- 35 Walking Street B2

📄 Information

- 36 Main Post Office B2
- 37 Overbrook Hospital..... A2
- 38 Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) Office B1
- 39 Tourist Police C3

🚗 Transport

- 40 Air Agent..... B3
- Budget Rent-A-Car (see 31)
- 41 Bus Terminal..... C4
- 42 Fat Free..... B3
- 43 North Wheels C3
- 44 Sombat Tour..... C4
- 45 ST Motorcycle..... B3

from one to three days, and traverse the Akha, Karen and Lahu villages of Mae Yao, north of Chiang Rai.

PDA Tours & Travel

TREKKING

(☎0 5374 0088; www.pda.or.th/chiangrai/package_tour.htm; 3rd fl, 620/25 Th Thanalai, Hilltribe Museum & Education Center; ☀9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) One- to three-day treks are available through this NGO, the profits from which go back into community projects that include HIV/AIDS education, mobile health clinics, education scholarships and the establishment of village-owned banks.

Akha Hill House

TREKKING

(☎08 9997 5505; www.akhahill.com; Akha Hill House) This outfit does one- to seven-day treks. They begin with a long-tail boat up the river, before trekking to and around their Akha Hill House about 23km from Chiang Rai, at a height of 1500m. A portion of the

profits from the guest houses and their activities go into a local school. Inquiries can be made at Akha Hill House.

Dragon Sabaii Tours

TREKKING

(☎08 548 0884; www.thailandhilltribeholidays.com; Mae Sariang) Based in southern Mae Hong Son, this outfit also leads responsible treks and guided tours in Chiang Rai upon request. Refer to the website for details.

Eagle Adventure Tour

TREKKING

(☎08 7265 0527; www.thaieagletour.com; City Home, Th Phahonyothin) A Chiang Rai-based outfit offering the usual variety of treks and guided tours.

Smiling Albino

TREKKING, CYCLING

(www.smilingalbino.com) This long-standing company conducts several tours in Chiang Rai, the majority of which include trekking, cycling and motorbiking.

Other Activities

Suwanee

COOKERY COURSE

(☎08 4740 7119; www.chiangraicookingclass.com; lessons 950B; ☎9.30am-2pm) Suwanee offers nearly day-long cooking courses that involve a visit to a local market and instruction in cooking four dishes. Suwanee's house is about 3km outside of the city centre, but she can pick you up at most centrally located hotels and guest houses.

Boomerang Adventure Park

ROCK CLIMBING

(☎08 4173 2757; www.thailandrocks.com; rock climbing half/full day 500/900B; ☎10am-7pm) In addition to rock climbing, this outdoor facility also offers zip-lines, Frisbee golf and self-guided trekking. Call ahead on weekdays to ensure that staff are there. The park is 3km from Chiang Rai, between Tam Tu Pu and the Buddha Cave.

Kamlar

HERBAL SAUNA

(Th Thanalai; herbal sauna per half hour 100B, Thai massage per hour 150B; ☎9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 1-6pm Sun) Traditional Thai herbal sauna and Thai massage are available at this wooden house. Kamlar is near the corner of Th Thanalai and Th Baanpa Pragarn.

Jao Nang Studio

PORTRAIT STUDIO

(645/7 Th Utarakit; ☎10am-7pm) Dress up like a member of Lanna royalty and have your portrait taken for posterity – a must-do activity for Thai visitors to Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Has a huge array of costumes and backdrops.

Sleeping

Chiang Rai has a good selection of accommodation, and prices seemed to have climbed little in the last couple of years, making the town good value. The two main areas for accommodation are in the centre, clustered around Th Jet Yod and off Th Phahonyothin.

Legend of Chiang Rai

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5391 0400; www.thelegend-chiangrai.com; 124/15 Moo 21, Th Kohloy; r 3900-5900B, villa 8100B; ☎@☎) One of the few hotels in town to take advantage of a river location, this upscale resort feels like a traditional Lanna village. Rooms feel romantic and luxuriously understated with furniture in calming creams and rattan. Each has a pleasant outdoor sitting area, frosted glass for increased privacy and a cool, outdoorlike bathroom with an oversized shower; villas have a small private pool. The riverside infinity pool and spa are the icing

on the comfort-filled cake. The resort is about 500m north of Th Singhaclai.

Ben Guesthouse

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5371 6775; www.benguesthousechiangrai.com; 351/10 Soi 4, Th Sankhongnoi; r 250-850B, ste 1500-3000B; ☎@☎) The bland name and distance from the centre of town may not work in its favour, but if you can get past these, Ben is one of the best budget places we've encountered in the north. The absolutely spotless compound has a bit of everything, from fan-cooled cheapies to immense suites, not to mention an entire house (12,000B). It's 1.2km from the centre of town, at the end of Soi 4 on Th Sankhongnoi (the street is called Th Sathanpayabarn where it intersects with Th Phahonyothin) – a 60B tük-tük ride.

Baan Warabordee

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5375 4488; baanwarabordee@hotmail.com; 59/1 Th Sanpannard; r 600-800B; ☎@☎) A delightful small hotel has been made from this modern three-storey Thai villa. Rooms are cool and come decked out in dark woods and light cloths. The owners are friendly and can help with local advice.

Jansom House

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5371 4552; 897/2 Th Jet Yod; r incl breakfast 450-500B; ☎@☎) This three-storey hotel offers spotless, spacious rooms set around a small courtyard filled with plants. You normally wouldn't expect frills at this price, but amazingly the rooms here are equipped with cable TV, well-designed bathrooms and tiled floors. An excellent value.

Moon & Sun Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5371 9279; www.moonandsun-hotel.com; 632 Th Singhaclai; r 500-800B, ste 1100B; ☎@☎) Bright and sparkling clean, this little hotel offers large modern rooms. Some come with four-poster beds, while all come with desk, cable TV and refrigerator. Suites have a separate, spacious sitting area.

Mantrini

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5360 1555; www.mantrini.com; 292 Moo 13, Robwiang on the Superhighway; r incl breakfast 2650-3190B, ste incl breakfast 9600B; ☎@☎) This is the place to stay if design is your most important consideration. A highlight is the two 'Sweet Rooms', which are decked out in a faux-Victorian motif that somehow successfully combines an African mask and a rocking horse. The hotel is about 1km outside the city centre near Central Plaza, but operates a shuttle downtown.

Diamond Park Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 5375 4960; www.diamondparkinn.com; 74/6 Moo 18, Th Sanpannard; r incl breakfast 1100B, ste incl breakfast 1400-1500B; 🍷@🍷) Aggressive marketing strategy aside ("When ever you are at Chiang Rai. Stay at The Diamond Park Inn"), this new hotel is a terrific midrange choice. Rooms are large and attractive, with modern furniture and beds on an elevated platform. The more expensive rooms have tubs, wide balconies, and are big enough to feel slightly empty.

Le Meridien Chiang Rai Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 5360 3333; www.limeridien.com; 221/2 Moo 20, Th Kwaewai; r 7500-8000B, ste 15,500-22,250B; 🍷@🍷) Chiang Rai's newest upscale digs is about 2km outside of the city centre on a beautiful stretch of the Mae Nam Kok. Rooms are immense and decked out in greys, whites and blacks, and the compound includes two restaurants and an infinity pool, in addition to the usual amenities of a hotel with these prices.

Golden Triangle Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 5371 1339; www.goldentriangleinn.com; 590 Th Phahonyothin; s/d incl breakfast 700/800B; 🍷) Resembling an expansive Thai home (including the occasional lived-in untidiness this can involve), the 31 rooms here have tile or wood floors and wooden furniture. The compound includes a restaurant, a Budget car-rental office and an efficient travel agency. It's a popular place so book in advance.

Wiang Inn

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 5371 1533; www.wianginn.com; 893 Th Phahonyothin; r incl breakfast 2826-3226B, ste incl breakfast 7062-11,770B; 🍷@🍷) The large, modern lobby sets the stage for this centrally located, business-class hotel. Despite the hotel's 30-plus years, the rooms are well maintained and have a few Thai decorative touches.

Lek House

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 5371 1550; lekhousehotel@live.co.uk; cnr Th Ratyotha & Th Baanpa Pragarn; r incl breakfast 350-550B, ste incl breakfast 1350B; 🍷@🍷) This purple compound is home to a handful of tight but attractive air-con rooms, although there's little separating the bathrooms. The fan-cooled rooms are much simpler, and everybody gets to use the inviting pool. Lek House is near the corner of Th Ratyotha (the continuation of Th Thanalai) and Th Baanpa Pragarn.

The North

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 5371 9873; www.thenorth.co.th; 612/100-101 Sirikon Market; r with fan/air-con 350/450B;

🍷@🍷) Located steps away from the bus station, this hotel has provided the drab market area with a bit of colour. The 18 rooms here combine both Thai and modern design, and the more expensive ones open to inviting chill-out areas.

Baan Bua Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 5371 8880; www.baanbuaguesthouse.com; 879/2 Th Jet Yod; r 300-500B; 🍷@🍷) This quiet guest house consists of a strip of 17 bright green rooms surrounding an inviting garden. Rooms are simple, but clean and cosy.

Orchids Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 5371 8361; www.orchidsguesthouse.com; 1012/3 Th Jet Yod; r 400B; 🍷@🍷) This collection of spotless rooms in a residential compound is a good budget catch. Various services are available here, including internet and airport transfer (250B).

Baan Rub Aroon**Guesthouse**

GUEST HOUSE \$\$\$

(☎ 0 5371 1827; www.baanrubaroon.net; 893 Th Ngam Meuang; dm 300B, r 550-850B; 🍷@🍷)

The rooms in this handsome villa may not be as nice as the exterior suggests, and all share bathrooms, but if you're looking for a quiet homey stay, this is the place.

Buffalo Hill Guesthouse

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Pankled Villa; ☎ 0 5371 7552; www.pankledvilla.com; Th Prachasanti; bungalows incl breakfast 600-700B; 🍷) Finding Chiang Rai city life too hectic? Then head to this wooded compound of rustic bungalows. Buffalo Hill is about 1km down Th Prachasanti, at the southern end of Th Phahonyothin.

Jitaree Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 5371 9348; Soi Flat Tamruat; r 200B; 🍷) Cool fan rooms in an apartmentlike complex. Jitaree is in the tiny backpacker enclave off Th Singhaclai, near the new bridge.

**Eating**

The night market has a decent collection of food stalls offering snacks and meals, from deep-fried won tons to fresh fish. Choose a dish and sit at the nearby tables, or step inside one of several restaurants on and off Th Phahonyothin by the night market.

**Lung Eed Local Food**

NORTHERN THAI \$

(Th Watpranorn; mains 30-60B; ☎ 11.45am-9pm Mon-Sat) To eat like an authentic local (!), look no further than this rustic but delicious northern-style food shack. There's an English-language menu on the wall, but don't miss

the sublime *lâhp gàì*, minced chicken fried with herbs and topped with crispy deep-fried shallots and garlic. The restaurant is on Th Watpranorn near the intersection with the Superhighway.

Nam Ngaiw Paa Nuan

VIETNAMESE-THAI \$

(Vietnamese Restaurant; Th Sanpannard; mains 10-100B; ☺9am-5pm) This somewhat concealed place serves a unique mix of Vietnamese and northern Thai dishes. Tasty food, friendly service and a barnlike atmosphere make us wish they were open for dinner as well.

Paa Suk

NORTHERN THAI \$

(noroman-scriptsign; Th Sankhongnoi; mains 10-25B; ☺8am-3pm Mon-Sat) This immensely popular third-generation restaurant specialises in the local dish *kà-nôm jeen nám ngêe-o*, a thin broth of pork or beef and tomatoes served over fresh rice noodles. The restaurant is between Soi 4 and Soi 5 of Th Sankhongnoi (the street is called Th Sathanpayabarn where it intersects with Th Phahonyothin); look for the yellow sign.

Phu-Lae

NORTHERN THAI \$\$

(673/1Th Thanalai; mains 80-320B; ☺lunch&dinner; ☹) This air-conditioned restaurant is exceedingly popular with Thai tourists for its tasty, but slightly gentrified northern Thai fare. Recommended local dishes include the *gaang hang-lair*, pork belly in a rich Burmese-style curry, here served with pickled garlic, and *sâi ò-a*, herb-packed sausages.

Old Dutch

DUTCH-INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(541 Th Phahonyothin; mains 150-300B; ☹) This cosy, foreigner-friendly restaurant is a good choice if you're tired of rice. There's a variety of well-done Dutch and other Western-style dishes, as well as a good attached bakery.

Somkuan Khao Soi

NORTHERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Singhaclai; mains 25B; ☺8am-3pm Mon-Fri) Friendly Mr Somkuan serves a tasty bowl of *kôw soy*, a northern Thai curry noodle dish, from a basic street stall under two giant trees.

Muang Thong

CHINESE-THAI \$

(cnr Th Sanpannard & Th Phahonyothin; mains 20-90B; ☺24hr) Comfort food for Thais and travellers alike: this long-standing open-air place serves the usual repertoire of tasty, salty, spicy Chinese-Thai dishes.

Rosprasoe

MUSLIM-THAI \$

(Th Itsaraphap; mains 25-50B; ☺7am-8pm) This Thai-Muslim restaurant next to the mosque on Th Itsaraphap dishes up delicious Thai-Muslim favourites, including *kôw mòk gàì*, the Thai version of chicken *biryani*.



Drinking & Entertainment

Th Jet Yot is Chiang Rai's drinking strip. Standouts include **Cat Bar** (1013/1 Th Jet Yod; ☺5pm-1am), which has a pool table and live music, and **Easy House** (cnr Th Jet Yod & Th Pernavipat; ☺11am-midnight), with a friendly, open-air vibe.



Shopping

Walking Street

MARKET

(Th Thanalai; ☺4-10pm Sat) If you're around on a Saturday evening be sure not to miss the open-air Walking Street, an expansive street market focusing on all things Chiang Rai, from handicrafts to local dishes. The market spans Th Thanalai from the Hilltribe Museum to the morning market.

Fair Trade Shop

HANDICRAFTS

(www.ttcrafts.co.th; 528/8 Th Baanpa Pragarn; ☺9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Bright hill-tribe cloths and knick-knacks are available at this shop, the profits of which go to various development projects.

Night Bazaar

MARKET

(☺6-11pm) Adjacent to the bus station off Th Phahonyothin is Chiang Rai's night market. On a much smaller scale than Chiang Mai's, it is nevertheless a decent place to find an assortment of handicrafts.

Orn's Bookshop

BOOKSHOP

(off Soi 1, Th Jet Yod; ☺8am-8pm) The superb collection of books here spans many languages.



Information

Emergency

Tourist police (☑ nationwide call centre 1155, Chiang Rai 0 5374 0249; Th Phahonyothin; ☺24hr) English is spoken and police are on stand-by 24 hours a day.

Internet Access

Internet access is readily available around town and costs around 30B per hour. It's especially abundant around the night market. Most internet places offer international call services.

Easy Fly (Th Phahonyothin; ☺8.30am-9pm) Across from Wiang Inn, this place has several computers.

CAFE CULTURE, CHIANG RAI STYLE

For such a relatively small town, Chiang Rai has an abundance of high-quality, Western-style cafes. This is largely due to the fact that many of Thailand's best coffee beans are grown in the more remote corners of the province. Some of the more interesting choices include the following:

BaanChivitMai Bakery (www.baanchivitmai.com; Th Prasopsook; ☺7am-9pm Mon-Sat; ☼@☎) In addition to a very well-prepared cup of local joe, you can snack on amazingly authentic Swedish-style sweets at this popular bakery. Profits go to BaanChivitMai, an organisation that runs homes and education projects for vulnerable, orphaned or AIDS-affected children.

Doi Chaang (542/2 Th Ratanaket; ☺7am-11pm; ☼@☎) Doi Chaang is the leading brand among Chiang Rai coffees, and its beans are now sold as far abroad as Canada and Europe.

Wawee Coffee (cnr Th Singhaclai & Th Srikerd; ☺7am-9pm; ☼@☎) Another local brand done well, this expansive, modern cafe serves a variety of creative coffee drinks using Chiang Rai beans.

Pangkhn Coffee (Th Singhaclai; ☺7am-7pm; ☎) Tiny coffee bar serving local beans.

Medical Services

Overbrook Hospital (☎0 5371 1366; www.overbrookhospital.com; Th Singhaclai) English is spoken in this modern hospital.

Money

There is an abundance of banks with foreign exchange and ATMs on both Th Phahonyothin and Th Thanalai.

Post

Main post office (Th Utarakit; ☺8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun) South of Wat Phra Singh.

Tourist Information

Tourism Authority of Thailand office (TAT; ☎nationwide call centre 1672, Chiang Rai 0 5374 4674; tatchrai@tat.or.th; Th Singhaclai; ☺8.30am-4.30pm) English is limited, but staff here do their best to give advice, and can provide a small selection of maps and brochures.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Chiang Rai airport (☎0 5379 8000) is approximately 8km north of the city. Taxis run into town from the airport for 200B. Out to the airport you can get a taxi or túk-túk for approximately 250B. The terminal has restaurants, a money exchange, a post office and several car-rental booths.

In town, **Air Agent** (☎0 5374 0445; 869/18 Th Phahonyothin; ☺8am-10pm) can book domestic and international flights in advance.

Bangkok's Don Muang Airport (1550B, 1¼ hours, twice daily) via **One-Two-Go** (Orient Thai; ☎nationwide call centre 1126; www.flyorientthai.com; Chiang Rai airport)

Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport (2164B to 3120B, 1¼ hours, six times daily) via **Air Asia** (☎nationwide call centre 02 515 9999, Chiang Rai 0 5379 3543; www.airasia.com; Chiang Rai airport) and **THAI** (☎nationwide call centre 02 356 1111; www.thaiair.com) City Centre (☎0 5371 1179; 870 Th Phahonyothin; ☺8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Airport Office (☎0 5379 8202; ☺8am-8pm)

Chiang Mai (1399B, 40 minutes, twice daily) via **Kan Air** (☎nationwide call centre 02 551 6111, Chiang Rai 0 5379 3339; www.kanairlines.com; Chiang Rai airport)

Boat

Another way to reach Chiang Rai is by boat on the Mae Nam Kok from Tha Ton (see p287).

For boats heading upriver, go to **CR Pier** (☎0 5375 0009), 2km northwest of town, via Th Kraisorasit. Passenger boats embark daily at 10.30am with stops in Ban Ruammit (80B, one hour) and Tha Ton (350B, four hours), otherwise you can charter an entire boat to Ban Ruammit for 700B or all the way to Tha Ton for 3800B at the pier.

A túk-túk to CR Pier should cost about 50B.

i Getting Around

A túk-túk ride anywhere within central Chiang Rai should cost around 40B. Shared *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* cost 20B per person.

BUSES & MINIVANS IN CHIANG RAI

Buses bound for destinations within Chiang Rai Province, as well as slow fan-cooled buses bound for Chiang Mai, Lampang, Nan and Phayao, depart from the bus station in the centre of town.

To Bangkok, **Sombat Tour** (☎0 5371 4971; Th Prasopsook; ☀6am-7pm) has an office across from the inter-provincial bus terminal, but only VIP buses can be boarded here; all other Bangkok-bound buses depart from the new terminal.

DESTINATION	FARE (B)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Ban Huay Khrai (for Doi Tung)	23	½	every 20min 6am-8pm
Ban Pasang (for Doi Mae Salong)	20	½	every 20min 6am-4pm
Chiang Khong	65	2½	every hour 5.20am-5.45pm
Chiang Mai	142	7	every 45min 6.30am-noon
Chiang Saen	32	1½	every 20min 6.20am-6.30pm
Lampang	102	5	every 45min 6.30am-noon
Mae Sai	39	1½	every 20min 6am-8pm
Nan	164	6	9.30am
Phayao	44	2	every 30min 9.30am-3.10pm

If you're heading beyond Chiang Rai (or are in a hurry), you'll have to go to the **new bus station** (☎0 5377 3989), 5km south of town on Hwy 1. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* linking it and the old station run from 5am to 9pm (10B, 20 minutes). Minivans also depart from here, including departures for Phayao (68B, 1½ hours, every 45 minutes from 6am to 7.30pm) and Phrae (150B, four hours, every 45 minutes from 6am to 5pm).

DESTINATION	FARE (B)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bangkok	448-716	11-12	every hr 7-11.30am & 6.30-9pm
Chiang Mai	142-263	3-7	every hr 6.30am-5.45pm
Kamphaeng Phet	280	7	7am, 8.30am, 1pm
Khon Kaen	316-553	11-12	9am, 10.15am, every 2hr 2pm-9pm
Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)	473-710	12-13	6.15am, 11.30am, 1.30pm, 3.30pm, 5pm, 7pm
Lampang	102-286	4-5	every hr 6am-3.45pm
Mae Sai	26-84	1-1½	every 15min 6am-6pm
Mae Sot	354-455	12	7.45am, 8.15am
Phayao	44-141	1½-2	every hr 6am-7.30pm
Phrae	148-244	4	every hr 6am-7.30pm
Phitsanulok	249-374	6-7	every hr 6am-7.30pm
Sukhothai	223-244	8	7.30am, 8.30am, 10.30am, 2.30pm

Bicycle rental can be arranged at **Fat Free** (☎0 5375 2532; 542/2 Th Baanpa Pragarn; per day 80-450B; ☀8.30am-6pm). Motorcycles can be hired at **ST Motorcycle** (☎0 5371 3652; 1025/34-35 Th Jet Yod; per day 150-1000B;

☀8am-8pm) – they take good care of their bikes. Many guest houses also rent out motorcycles and bikes.

The following car rental companies have offices in Chiang Rai.

Avis Rent-A-Car (☎0 5379 3827; www.avisthailand.com; Chiang Rai airport; ☎8am-6pm)

Budget Rent-A-Car (☎0 5374 0442/3; www.budget.co.th; 590 Th Phahonyothin; ☎8am-6pm) At Golden Triangle Inn.

National Car Rental (☎0 5379 3683; Chiang Rai airport; ☎8am-6pm)

North Wheels (☎0 5374 0585; www.northwheels.com; 591 Th Phahonyothin; ☎8am-6pm)

Thai Rent A Car (☎0 5379 3393; www.thairentacar.com; Chiang Rai airport; ☎7am-6pm)

Around Chiang Rai

WAT RONG KHUN

วัดร่องขุ่น

About 13km south of Chiang Rai is the unusual and popular **Wat Rong Khun** ('White Wat'; admission free). Whereas most temples have centuries of history, this one's construction began in 1997 by noted Thai painter-turned-architect Chalermchai Kositpipat.

Seen from a distance, the temple appears to be made of glittering porcelain; a closer look reveals that the look is due to a combination of whitewash and clear-mirrored chips. Walk over a bridge and sculpture of reaching arms (symbolising desire) to enter the sanctity of the wát where instead of the traditional Buddha life scenarios, the artist has painted contemporary scenes representing *samsara* (the realm of rebirth and delusion). Images such as a plane smashing into the Twin Towers and, oddly enough, Keanu Reeves as Neo from *The Matrix*, dominate the one finished wall of this work in progress. If you like what you see, an adjacent gallery sells reproductions of Chalermchai Kositpipat's rather New Age-looking works.

To get to the temple, hop on one of the regular buses that run from Chiang Rai to Chiang Mai or Phayao and ask to get off at Wat Rong Khun (20B).

Mae Salong (Santikhiri)

แม่ฮ่องสอน (สันติคีรี)

POP 20,000

For a taste of China without crossing any international borders, head to this atmospheric village perched on the back hills of Chiang Rai. Although Mae Salong is now

thoroughly on the beaten track, its hilltop setting, Chinese residents, and abundance of hill tribes and tea plantations converge in a unique destination not unlike a small town in southern China's Yunnan Province. It's a great place to kick back for a couple of days, and the surrounding area is ripe for exploration.

👁 Sights

Markets

A tiny but quite interesting **morning market** convenes from 6am to 8am at the T-intersection near Shin Sane Guest House. The market attracts town residents and tribespeople from the surrounding districts. An **all-day market** forms at the southern end of town, and unites vendors selling hill-tribe handicrafts, shops selling tea and a few basic restaurants.

Temples

To soak up the great views from **Wat Santikhiri** go past the market and ascend 718 steps (or drive if you have a car). The wát is of the Mahayana tradition and Chinese in style.

Past the Khumnaiphol Resort and further up the hill is a **viewpoint** with some teashops, and a famous Kuomintang (KMT) general's **tomb**. It is sometimes guarded by a soldier who will describe (in Thai or Yunnanese) the history of the KMT in the area. In the same vein and south of the turn-off to the tomb is the **Chinese Martyr's Memorial Museum**, an elaborate Chinese-style building that is more memorial than museum.

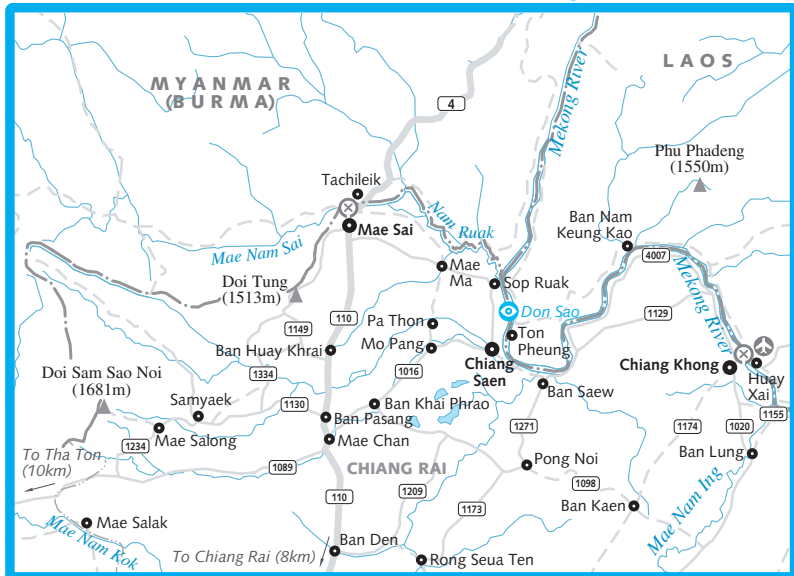
🚶 Activities

Trekking

Shin Sane Guest House and Little Home Guesthouse have free maps showing approximate trekking routes to Akha, Lisu, Mien, Lahu and Shan villages in the area. Nearby Akha and Lisu villages are less than half a day's walk away.

The best hikes are north of Mae Salong between Ban Thoet Thai and the Myanmar border. Ask first about political conditions before heading off in this direction; Shan and Wa armies competing for control over this section of the Thailand-Myanmar border do occasionally clash in the area. A steady trade in methamphetamine and, to a lesser extent, heroin, flows across the border via several conduit villages.

Golden Triangle & Around



Shin Sane Guest House arranges four-hour **horseback treks** to four nearby villages for 500B for about three or four hours.

Sleeping

Since the road from Mae Salong to Tha Ton opened, fewer visitors are opting to stay overnight in Mae Salong. The resulting surplus of accommodation often makes prices negotiable, except during the high season (November to January).

IN TOWN

All accommodation is located on, or just off, the main road.

Little Home Guesthouse GUEST HOUSE \$\$
(☎ 5376 5389; www.maesalonglittlehome.com; r/bungalows 300/800B; @☎) Located near the market intersection, this delightful wooden house holds a few basic but cosy rooms and large and tidy bungalows out back. An attached restaurant does local dishes. The owner is extremely friendly and has put together one of the more accurate maps of the area.

Baan Hom Muen Li HOTEL \$\$
(Boutique Hotel; ☎ 08 4045 8031; osmanhouse@hotmail.com; r incl breakfast 1000-1500B) Located in the middle of town, across from Sweet

Maesalong, this new place consists of five rooms artfully decked out in modern and classic Chinese themes. Go for the upstairs rooms that have huge windows with views over the surrounding tea plantations.

Saeng Aroon Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎ 5376 5029; r 300B; @☎) Next to the teashop of the same name, this new hotel has friendly staff, spacious tiled-floor rooms and great views of the hills. The cheaper rooms share spick-and-span hot-water bathrooms.

Shin Sane Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎ 5376 5026; www.maesalong-shinsane.blogspot.com; r 50-100B, bungalows 200-300B; @☎) The rooms at Mae Salong's first hotel are bare but spacious with shared bathrooms, while the bungalows are much more comfortable and have private bathrooms and cable TV. It's located near the morning market intersection.

OUTSIDE OF TOWN
Phu Chaisai Resort & Spa HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 5391 0500; www.phu-chaisai.com; r incl breakfast 4000-11,720B; @☎☎☎) Approximately 7km from Pasang on a remote bamboo-covered hilltop, this resort is an exceptional place to stay in the area. The rustic adobe/

bamboo duplex bungalows fittingly lack TV, but have amazing views of the surrounding mountains, and a host of activities including spa treatment, massage, yoga, day hikes and swimming should keep you occupied.

Maesalong Mountain Home HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎08 4611 9508; www.maesalongmountainhome.com; bungalows 800-2500B; 📶) Down a dirt road 1km east of the town centre (look for the orange sign), this boutique hotel is a great choice if you've got your own wheels. The nine bungalows here are in the middle of a working farm and are bright and airy, with enviable balconies and huge bathrooms. Another bonus is its location near a tea farm with gigantic teapot and lion statues – a bizarre but fun photo op.

Maesalong Flower Hills Resort HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎0 5376 5496; www.maesalongflowerhills.com; r incl breakfast 1800B, bungalows incl breakfast 2300-7000B; 📶📶📶) Located 2km east of the town centre, you can't miss this monument to flower-based landscaping. There's a variety of rooms and bungalows, and the huge

pool and larger bungalows make this a great choice for families.

Eating

The very Chinese breakfast of *Bánh-tôrng-gõh* (deep-fried fingers of dough) and hot soybean milk at the morning market is an inspiring way to start the day.

In fact, many Thai tourists come to Mae Salong simply to eat Yunnanese dishes such as *màn-tôh* (steamed Chinese buns) served with braised pork leg and pickled vegetables, or black chicken braised with Chinese-style herbs. Homemade wheat and egg noodles are another speciality of Mae Salong, and are served with a local broth that combines pork and a spicy chilli paste. They're available at several places in town.

Countless teahouses sell locally grown teas (mostly oolong and jasmine) and offer complimentary tastings.

Sue Hai

CHINESE \$

(mains 60-150B; ☺7am-9pm) This very simple family-run teashop-cum-Yunnanese place has

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Mae Salong was originally settled by the 93rd Regiment of the Kuomintang (KMT), who had fled to Myanmar from China after the 1949 Chinese revolution. The renegades were forced to leave Myanmar in 1961 when the Yangon government decided it wouldn't allow the KMT to remain legally in northern Myanmar. Crossing into northern Thailand with their pony caravans, the ex-soldiers and their families settled into mountain villages and re-created a society like the one they'd left behind in Yunnan.

After the Thai government granted the KMT refugee status in the 1960s, efforts were made to incorporate the Yunnanese KMT and their families into the Thai nation. Until the late 1980s they didn't have much success. Many ex-KMT persisted in involving themselves in the Golden Triangle opium trade in a three-way partnership with alleged opium warlord Khun Sa and the Shan United Army (SUA). Because of the rough, mountainous terrain and lack of sealed roads, the outside world was rather cut off from the goings-on in Mae Salong, so the Yunnanese were able to ignore attempts by the Thai authorities to suppress opium activity and tame the region.

Infamous Khun Sa made his home in nearby Ban Hin Taek (now Ban Thoet Thai) until the early 1980s when he was finally routed by the Thai military. Khun Sa's retreat to Myanmar seemed to signal a change in local attitudes and the Thai government finally began making progress in its pacification of Mae Salong and the surrounding area.

In a further effort to separate the area from its old image as an opium fiefdom, the Thai government officially changed the name of the village from Mae Salong to Santikhiri (Hill of Peace). Until the 1980s packhorses were used to move goods up the mountain to Mae Salong, but today the 36km road from Pasang is paved and well travelled. But despite the advances in infrastructure, the town is unlike any other in Thailand. The Yunnanese dialect of Chinese still remains the lingua franca, residents tend to watch Chinese, rather than Thai, TV, and you'll find more Chinese than Thai food.

In an attempt to quash opium activity, and the more recent threat of *yah bâh* (methamphetamine) trafficking, the Thai government has created crop-substitution programs to encourage hill tribes to cultivate tea, coffee, corn and fruit trees.

an English-language menu of local specialties including local mushroom fried with soy sauce, or the delicious air-dried pork fried with fresh chilli. They also do filling and tasty bowls of homemade noodles. It's roughly in the middle of town.

Nong Im Phochana CHINESE \$
(mains 60-150B; ☺lunch & dinner) Located directly across from Khumnaiphol Resort at the southern end of town, the menu at this open-air restaurant emphasises dishes using local veggies.

Sweet Maesalong CAFE \$
(mains 45-185B; ☺8.30am-6pm) If you require a considerably higher degree of caffeine than the local tea leaves can offer, stop by this cosy modern cafe with an extensive menu of coffee drinks using local beans. Surprisingly sophisticated baked goods and dishes are also available. Sweet Maesalong is roughly in the middle of town.

Mae Salong Villa CHINESE \$
(mains 60-150B; ☺lunch & dinner) With dishes such as duck smoked over tea leaves, the restaurant at this hotel, located east of the town centre, is said to do the most authentic Yunnanese food in town.

i Information

There is an ATM at the Thai Military Bank opposite Khumnaiphol Resort, at the southern end of town. An **internet cafe** (per hr 20B; ☺9am-11pm) can be found next door.

i Getting There & Away

Mae Salong is accessible via two routes. The original road, Rte 1130, winds west from Ban Pasang. Newer Rte 1234 approaches from the south, allowing easier access from Chiang Mai. The older route is more spectacular.

To get to Mae Salong by bus, take a Mae Sai-bound bus from Chiang Rai to Ban Pasang (20B, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes from 6am to 4pm). From Ban Pasang, blue *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* head up the mountain to Mae Salong (60B, one hour, 7am to 5pm). To get back to Ban Pasang, *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* park near the 7-Eleven. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* stop running at around 5pm but you can charter one in either direction for about 500B.

You can also reach Mae Salong by road from Tha Ton (see p287). Yellow *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* bound for Tha Ton stop near Little Home Guesthouse at 8.20am, 10.20am, 12.20pm and 1.50pm (60B, one hour).

Mae Sai

เมืองสาม

POP 22,000

At first glance, Thailand's northernmost town, Mae Sai, appears to be little more than a large open-air market. But the city serves as a convenient base for exploring the Golden Triangle, Doi Tung and Mae Salong, and its position across from Myanmar also makes it a stepping-off point for those wishing to explore some of the more remote parts of Shan State.

Because occasional fighting within Myanmar or disputes between the Thai and Myanmar governments can lead to the border being closed temporarily, it's always a good idea to check the current situation before travelling to Mae Sai.

i Sights & Activities

Wat Phra That Doi Wao TEMPLE
(วัดพระธาตุดอยงาว) Take the steps up the hill near the border to Wat Phra That Doi Wao, west of the main street, for superb views over Mae Sai and Myanmar. This wát was reportedly constructed in memory of a couple of thousand Burmese soldiers who died fighting the KMT here in 1965 (you'll hear differing stories around town, including a version wherein the KMT are the heroes).

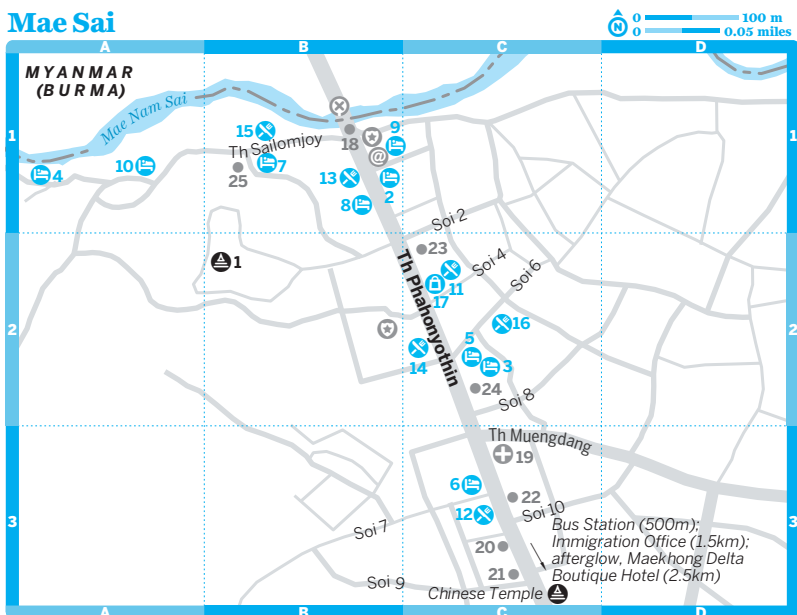
i Sleeping

Khanthongkham Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎0 5373 4222; www.kthotel.com; 7 Th Phahonyothin; r 800-950B, ste 1300-1650B; ☺@☺) This hotel features huge rooms that have been tastefully decorated in light woods and brown textiles. Suites are exceptionally vast, and like all rooms, have flat-screen TVs and truly user-friendly bathrooms. A downside is that many rooms don't have windows.

Maesai Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎0 5373 2021; 688 Th Wiengpangkam; bungalows r 200-600B; ☺) Located at the end of the narrow lane that stretches behind Mai Sai Riverside Resort, this collection of A-frame bungalows ranges from simple rooms with shared cold water showers to bungalows on the river with terraces and private bathrooms. There is a riverside restaurant on-site serving Thai and Western dishes.

Maekhong Delta Boutique Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎053642517; www.maekhonghtel.com; 230/5-6Th Phahonyothin; r incl breakfast 1200-3500B; ☺@☺) It's an odd name, considering that the Me-

Mae Sai



Mae Sai

🗺️ Sights

- 1 Wat Phra That Doi Wao B2

🏠 Sleeping

- 2 Khanthongkham Hotel B1
 3 Little Bear C2
 4 Maesai Guest House A1
 5 Maesai Hotel C2
 6 Piyaporn Place Hotel C3
 7 S-House Hotel B1
 8 Top North Hotel B1
 9 Wang Thong Hotel B1
 10 Yeusun Guesthouse A1

🍴 Eating

- 11 Bismillah Halal Food C2
 12 Kik Kok Restaurant C3
 13 Night Market B1
 14 Snack and Drink Vendors C2
 15 Sukhothai Cuisine B1

- 16 Ying Ping Yunnan Restaurant C2

🛒 Shopping

- 17 Gem Market C2

📄 Information

- 18 Immigration B1
 19 Overbrook Clinic C3

🚗 Transport

- 20 Chok-Roong Tawee Tour C3
 Motorcycle Taxis to Bus Station ..(see 17)
 21 Pornchai C3
 22 Sǒng•tǎa•ou to Ban Huay
 Khrai C3
 23 Sǒng•tǎa•ou to Bus Station C2
 24 Sǒng•tǎa•ou to Sop Ruak &
 Chiang Saen C2
 25 Toom Motorbike B1

kong delta is way down in Vietnam. Odder still that the rooms here are somehow reminiscent of a ski lodge. Regardless, they're both cosy and comfortable, albeit nearly 4km from the centre of town.

Wang Thong Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎️ 0 5373 3389-95; www.wangthong-maesai.com; 299 Th Phahonyothin; r/ste incl breakfast 900/2500B; 🍽️ @ 🚗 🚶) The nine-storey Wang Thong is a comfortable business hotel, minutes from the border crossing. The rooms are

nothing special, but they're spacious and the hotel has a pub, disco and popular restaurant. Discounts available in the low season.

Piyaporn Place Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 5373 4511-3; www.piyaporn-place.com; 77/1 Th Phahonyothin; r/stc incl breakfast 800/1800B; 🍷@🍷) On the main road by Soi 7, this seven-storey business hotel is good value. The large, contemporary-styled rooms have wooden floors, a small sofa and the usual four-/five-star amenities like bathroom, cable TV and minibar.

afterglow

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 5373 4188; www.afterglowhostel.com; 139/5 Th Phahonyothin; r 690-990B; 🍷🍷) This place calls itself a hostel, but the dorms were not yet finished when we visited. Nonetheless, boasting a ground-floor cafe and rooms with a minimalist feel, it's probably the hippest place to stay in Mae Sai. Located about 4km from the border, across from Maekhong Delta Boutique Hotel.

Top North Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 5373 1955; topnorth_hotel@hotmail.com; 306 Th Phahonyothin; r 400-700B; 🍷@🍷)

BORDER CROSSING: MAE SAI TO TACHILEIK

Mae Sai, located opposite the Burmese town of Tachileik, is a legal crossing point for foreign tourists. Yet as with all of Myanmar's land crossings, there are several caveats involved and the following information is liable to change, so check the situation locally before you travel.

In general, it's very straightforward to cross to Tachileik for the day and slightly more complicated to get a two-week visa and permission to visit Kengtung, a quiet but interesting outpost of Tai culture 160km north of Tachileik.

The Thai immigration office is just before the bridge and is officially open from 7am to 6.30pm. After taking care of the usual formalities, cross the bridge and head to the Myanmar immigration office. Here you pay 500B and your picture is taken for a temporary ID card that allows you to stay in town for the day; your passport will be kept at the office. On your return to Thailand, the Thai immigration office will give you a new 15-day visa (see p766).

There is little to do in **Tachileik** apart from sample Burmese food and shop – the prices are about the same as on the Thai side and everyone accepts baht. There's an interesting morning market and it can be fun to hang about in the teashops.

If you'd like to stay longer or visit Kengtung, proceed directly to the adjacent tourist information office. There you'll need three photos, \$10 and 50B to process a border pass valid for 14 days; your passport will be kept at the border. It's also obligatory to hire a guide for the duration of your stay. Guides cost 1000B per day (400B of this goes to Myanmar Travels & Tours, a state-run travel agency), and if you haven't already arranged for a Kengtung-based guide to meet you at the border, you'll be assigned one by MTT and will also have to pay for your guide's food and accommodation during your stay. Recommended Kengtung-based guides include **Sai Leng** (☎+95 9490 31470; sairoctor.htunleng@gmail.com), **Freddie** (Sai Yot; ☎+95 9490 31934; yotkham@gmail.com) and **Paul** (Sai Lon; ☎+95 9490 30464, +95 842 2812).

Kengtung (called Chiang Tung by the Thais and usually spelt Kyaingtong by the Burmese) is a sleepy but historic capital for the Shan State's Khün culture. The Khün speak a northern Thai language related to Shan and Thai Lü, and use a writing script similar to the ancient Lanna script. Built around a small lake and dotted with ageing **Buddhist temples** and crumbling British **colonial architecture**, it's a much more scenic town than Tachileik and one of the most interesting towns in Myanmar's entire Shan State.

Places to stay include the **Princess Hotel** (☎+95 842 1319; kengtung@mail4u.com.mm; s/d \$30/50; 🍷), or the budget-oriented but inconveniently located **Harry's Trekking House** (☎+95 842 1418; 132 Mai Yang Rd; r \$7-20).

Buses bound for Kengtung (K10,000, five hours) depart from Tachileik's dusty bus station, 2km and a 10B *sōrng-tāa-ou* ride or a 40B motorcycle taxi ride from the border, at about 8am and noon. Alternatively, you can charter a taxi for about 2500B, or if you're willing to wait, get a front/back seat in a share taxi for K15,000/10,000.

For more info on Kengtung, see Lonely Planet's *Myanmar (Burma)* guidebook.

A brief walk to the bridge to Myanmar, this older hotel has spacious rooms and friendly staff. Stick with the rooms at the back of the building to avoid street noise.

Yeesun Guesthouse HOTEL \$
(☎0 5373 3455; www.yeesunguesthouse.com; 816/13 Th Sailomjoy; r 400B; ❸❹) This four-storey family-run hotel has great value if rather characterless rooms with comfortable furniture and beds.

S-House Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎0 5373 3811; www.s-house-hotel-maesai.com; 384 Th Sailomjoy; r with fan/air-con 500/600B; ❸) At the end of the covered part of Th Sailomjoy, away from the border crossing, this hotel has spacious rooms with balconies overlooking the hills.

Maesai Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎0 5373 1462; 125/5 Th Phahonyothin; r with fan/air-con 250/450B) Located in a green building just off Th Phahonyothin, the rooms with fan here are decent value and have beds on an elevated concrete pedestal. The more expensive air-conditioned rooms have flimsy beds and cheap furniture.

Little Bear HOTEL \$
(☎0 5364 0933; off Soi 6, Th Phahonyothin; r 280-480B; ❸❹❺) The basic but tidy rooms here are given life by the attached bar/cafe lobby.

Eating

An expansive **night market** (☉5-11pm) unfolds every evening along Th Phahonyothin. During the day, several **snack and drink vendors** (Th Phahonyothin) can be found in front of the police station.

Bismillah Halal Food MUSLIM-THAI \$
(Soi 4, Th Phahonyothin; mains 25-40B; ☉6am-6pm) Run by Burmese Muslims, this tiny restaurant does an excellent *biryani*, not to mention virtually everything else Muslim, from roti to samosa.

Sukhothai Cuisine NOODLES \$
(399/9 Th Sailomjoy; mains 30-40B; ☉7am-4pm) This open-air restaurant serves the namesake noodles from Sukhothai, as well as satay and a few other basic dishes. A picture menu shows the varieties of noodles available, and the pictures on the wall are of the owner's daughter.

Ying Ping Yunnan Restaurant CHINESE \$\$
(Soi 6, Th Phahonyothin; mains 100-350B; ☉11am-10pm; ❸) For a special night out, head to this banquet-style Chinese restaurant. The menu here features a variety of exotic-sounding dishes you're unlikely to find elsewhere, as well as humble Yunnan-style noodle soup.

Kik Kok Restaurant THAI \$
(Th Phahonyothin; mains 30-120B; ☉6am-8pm; ❹) This restaurant prepares a huge selection of Thai dishes, including several vegetarian options, and has an English menu.

Shopping

Commerce is ubiquitous in Mae Sai, although most of the offerings are of little interest to Western travellers. One popular commodity is gems, and dealers from as far away as Chanthaburi frequent the small gem market that is opposite the police station. A walk down Soi 4 will reveal several open-air gem dealers diligently counting hundreds of tiny semiprecious stones on the side of the street.

Information

There are several banks with ATM near the border.

Immigration Main Office (☎0 5373 1008; Rte 110; ☉8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri); Border (☉7am-6.30pm) There's a main office about 3km from the border near Soi 17 and another at the entrance to the border bridge.

Internet cafe (per hr 40B) Behind the Wang Thong Hotel by its car park.

Overbrook Clinic (☎0 5373 4422; 20/7 Th Phahonyothin; ☉8am-5pm) Connected to the modern hospital in Chiang Rai, this small clinic on the main road has doctors who can speak English.

Tourist police (☎115) With a booth in front of the border crossing before immigration.

Getting There & Away

On the main Th Phahonyothin road, by Soi 8, is a sign saying 'bus stop'. From here *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* stop in Sop Ruak (45B, every 40 minutes, 8am to 1pm), terminating in Chiang Saen (50B). *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to Ban Huay Khrai (Doi Tung) park by Soi 10 (25B, 6.30am to 5pm).

Mae Sai's government **bus station** (☎0 5371 1224; Rte 110) is 1.5km from the border; getting there from the border involves a 15B shared *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* ride from the corner of Th Phahonyothin and Soi 2 or a 40B motorcycle taxi ride from the stand at the corner of Th Phahonyothin and Soi 4. If you're headed to Bangkok, you can

avoid going all the way to the bus station by buying your tickets at **Chok-Roong Tawee Tour** (no roman-script sign; ☎0 5364 0123; near cnr Th Phahonyothin & Soi 9; ☉8am-5.30pm) – it's next door to the motorcycle dealership.

Destinations from Mae Sai:

Bangkok (483B to 966B, 13 hours, frequent departures from 4pm to 5.45pm)

Chiang Mai (165B to 320B, five hours, five departures from 6.45am to 3.30pm)

Chiang Rai (39B, 1½ hours, every 20 minutes from 5.45am to 8pm)

Fang (81B, three hours, 7am)

Mae Sot (388B to 499B, 12 hours, 6.15am and 6.45am)

Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) (507B to 760B, 15 hours, six departures)

Tha Ton (61B, two hours, 7am)

Getting Around

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou around town are 15B shared.

Motorcycle taxis cost 20B to 40B.

Motorcycles can be rented at **Pornchai** (☎0 5373 1136; 4/7 Th Phahonyothin; per day 250-300B; ☉8am-5pm) and at **Toom Motorbike** (☎08 2106 8131; Th Sailomjoy; per day 200B; ☉9am-5pm).

Around Mae Sai

DOI TUNG & AROUND

ดอยตุง

About halfway between Mae Chan and Mae Sai on Rte 110 is the turn-off (west) for Doi Tung. The name means 'Flag Peak', from the northern Thai word for flag (*đung*). King Achutarat of Chiang Saen ordered a giant flag to be flown from the peak to mark the spot where two *chedi* were constructed in AD 911; the *chedi* are still there, a pilgrimage site for Thai, Shan and Chinese Buddhists.

But the main attraction at Doi Tung is getting there. The 'easy' way is via Rte 1149, which is mostly paved to the peak of Doi Tung. But it's winding, steep and narrow, so if you're driving or riding a motorcycle, take it slowly.

Sights

Doi Tung Royal Villa

HISTORICAL BUILDING

(☎0 5376 7011; www.doitung.org; admission 70B; ☉6.30am-5pm) On the theory that local hill tribes would be so honoured by a royal presence that they would stop cultivating opium, the late Princess Mother (the king's mother) built the Doi Tung Royal Villa, a summer palace on the slopes of Doi Tung near Pa Kluay Reservoir, which is now open

to the public as a museum. The royal initiative also provided education on new agricultural methods to stop slash and burn practices. Opium has now been replaced by crops such as coffee, macadamia nuts and various fruits. The rest of the property, including the **Mae Fah Luang Garden** and **Mae Fah Luang Arboretum** (admission 70B; ☉7am-5pm), is also open to the public. There is also a top-end hotel, a restaurant, coffee kiosk and a Doi Tung craft shop up here. Near the parking lot, the **Doi Tung Bazaar** is a small open-air market with local agricultural products, prepared food and hill-tribe handicrafts. This entire complex is popular with bus tour groups.

Wat Phra That Doi Tung

TEMPLE

At the peak, 1800m above sea level, Wat Phra That Doi Tung is built around the twin Lanna-style *chedi*. The *chedi* were renovated by Chiang Mai monk Khruba Siwichai, famous for his prodigious building projects, early in the 20th century. Pilgrims bang on the usual row of temple bells to gain merit. Although the wát isn't that impressive, the forested setting will make the trip worthwhile. From the walled edge of the temple you can get an aerial view of the snaky road you've just climbed. A walking path next to the wát leads to a spring and there are other short walking trails in the vicinity.

A bit below the peak is the smaller **Wat Noi Doi Tung**, where food and beverages are available from vendors.

Sleeping & Eating

If you want to spend the night, try **Ban Ton Nam 31** (☎0 5376 7003; www.doitung.org; Doi Tung Development Project, Mae Fah Luang District; r incl breakfast 2500-3000B; ☉☎). It consists of 46 comfortable rooms that formerly served as the living quarters of the Princess Mother's staff. The more expensive rooms have better views. A self-service **restaurant** (dishes 80-250B; ☉7am-9pm) offers meals made with local produce, and there's also a Doi Tung cafe.

Getting There & Away

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou from Mae Sai (25B) go to Ban Huay Khrai, the turn-off for Doi Tung. From there *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* are available to Doi Tung (60B, one hour).

Alternatively, if you've got your own wheels, you can travel between Doi Tung and Mae Sai along the even more challenging, 24km, sealed but narrow Rte 1149. From Doi Tung Royal Villa

simply follow the signs to Wat Phra That Doi Tung. The road hugs the Thai–Burma border behind the large limestone mountains you may have seen from Rte 110, and emerges at Soi 7 in Mae Sai. There are at least three military checkpoints along the way, so be sure to bring ID.

If you want to do a full loop from Mae Sai, ride/drive via Rte 110 south of Mae Sai, then Rte 1149 up to Doi Tung. Once you've had a look around the summit, return to Mae Sai via aforementioned roads; this means you'll be travelling downhill much of the way.

If you're coming from Mae Salong, Rte 1334 weaves from steep hills to a lush valley, before climbing again to Rte 1149 and Doi Tung. The road is fully sealed and in good shape, although it can be quite steep and windy in parts.

Chiang Saen

เชียงใหม่

POP 11,000

The dictionary definition of a sleepy river town, Chiang Saen was the site of a Thai kingdom thought to date back to as early as the 7th century. Scattered throughout the modern town are the ruins of the former empire – surviving architecture includes several *chedi*, Buddha images, *wi-hahn* pillars and earthen city ramparts. Chiang Saen later became loosely affiliated with various northern Thai kingdoms, as well as 18th-century Myanmar, and never became a Siamese possession until the 1880s.

Today huge river barges from China moor at Chiang Saen, carrying fruit, engine parts and all manner of other imports, keeping the old China-Siam trade route open. Despite this trade, and despite commercialisation of the nearby Sop Ruak, the town hasn't changed too much over the last decade, and because of this is a pleasanter base than the latter.

Only locals are allowed to cross the Mekong River into the Lao town of Ton Pheung, but foreigners who already hold a Chinese visa can use the town as a base for river trips to Jinghong in China's Yunnan Province.

👁 Sights & Activities

Wat Phra That Pha Ngao

TEMPLE

(วัดพระธาตุผาเงา; admission free) Located 3km south of town in the village of Sop Kham, this Buddhist temple complex contains a large prayer hall built to cover a partially excavated Chiang Saen-era Buddha statue. The walls of the brick building are partially covered by stucco relief murals that have been painted, giving the surface the impres-

sion of polished wood or copper. There is a beautiful golden teak *hór drai*, and a steep road leads to a hilltop pagoda and temple with views over the area and the Mae Nam Khong.

Wat Chedi Luang

TEMPLE

(วัดเจดีย์หลวง; admission free) Behind the museum to the east are the ruins of the Buddhist Wat Chedi Luang, which features an 18m octagonal *chedi* in the classic Chiang Saen or Lanna style. Archaeologists argue about its exact construction date but agree it dates to some time between the 12th and 14th centuries.

Wat Pa Sak

TEMPLE

(วัดป่าสัก; admission free) About 200m from the **Pratu Chiang Saen** (the historic main gateway to the town's western flank) are the remains of Wat Pa Sak, where the ruins of seven monuments are visible in a **historical park** (admission 50B). The main mid-14th-century *chedi* combines elements of the Hariphunchai and Sukhothai styles with a possible Bagan influence, and still holds a great deal of attractive stucco relief work.

Wat Phra That Chom Kitti & Wat Chom Chang

TEMPLE

(วัดพระธาตุจอมกิติ; admission free) The remains of Wat Phra That Chom Kitti and Wat Chom Chang can be found about 2.5km north of Wat Pa Sak on a hilltop. The round *chedi* of Wat Phra That Chom Kitti is thought to have been constructed before the founding of the kingdom. The smaller *chedi* below it belonged to Wat Chom Chang. There is nothing much to see at these *chedi*, but there is a good view of Chiang Saen and the river.

Wat Pha Khao Pan

TEMPLE

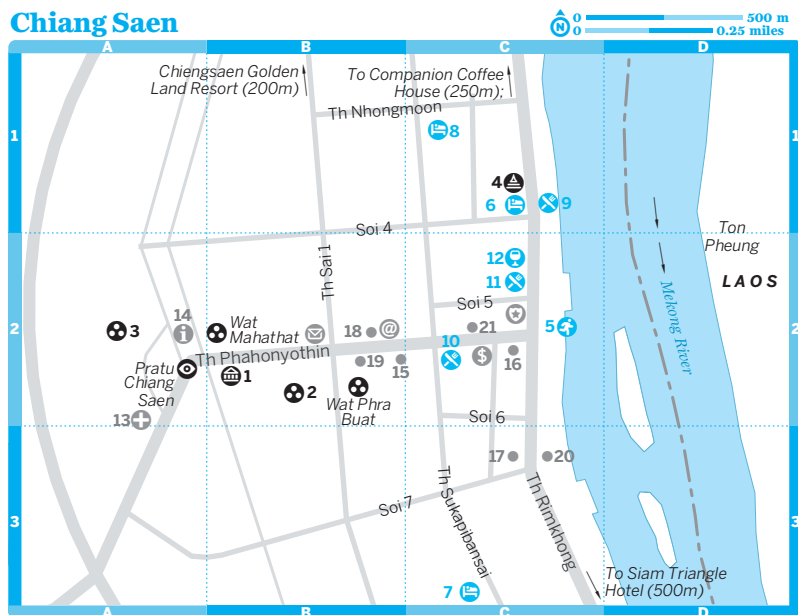
(วัดผาขาวปาน; admission free) Inside the grounds of Wat Pha Khao Pan, a living wát near the river, stands a magnificent Lanna-period *chedi*. The large, square base contains Lanna-style walking Buddhas in niches on all four sides. The Buddha facing east is sculpted in the *mudra* ('calling for rain') pose, with both hands held pointing down at the image's sides – a pose common in Laos but not so common in Thailand.

Chiang Saen National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติเชียงใหม่; 702 Th Phahonyothin; admission 100B; ☎8.30am–4.30pm Wed–Sun) Near the town entrance, this museum is a

Chiang Saen



Chiang Saen

📍 Sights

- 1 Chiang Saen National Museum B2
- 2 Wat Chedi Luang B2
- 3 Wat Pa Sak A2
- 4 Wat Pha Khao Pan C1

🚣 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 5 Boats to Sop Ruak & Chiang Khong C2

🏠 Sleeping

- 6 Chiang Saen Guest House C1
- 7 Chiang Saen River Hill Hotel C3
- 8 Sa Nae Charn Guest House C1

🍴 Eating

- 9 Evening Food Vendors C1
- 10 Food Stalls C2
- 11 Kiaw Siang Hai C2

🍷 Drinking

- 12 2 be 1 C2

🏥 Information

- 13 Chiang Saen Hospital A2
- 14 Visitors Centre A2

🚗 Transport

- 15 Angpao Chaingsaen Tour B2
- 16 Bus Stop C2
- 17 Chiang Saen Tour and Travel C3
- 18 Motorcycle Rental B2
- 19 Sombat Tour B2
- 20 Sǒng•tǎa•ou to Chiang Khong C3
- 21 Sǒng•tǎa•ou to Sop Ruak & Mae Sai C2

great source of local information considering its relatively small size.

Mekong River Trips

RIVER CRUISE

Five-passenger speedboats leave from the waterfront jet to Sop Ruak (per boat one way/return 500/600B, one hour), or all the

way to Chiang Khong (per boat one way/return 2000/2500B, 1½ hours).

It's also possible to take a passenger boat to Jinghong, in China's Yunnan Province. For details, see the boxed text, p329.

Sleeping

Chiang Saen lacks quality accommodation, particularly of the upscale type. If you require a higher level of service and standards, then your best bet is to base yourself in nearby Sop Ruak.

Viang Yonok

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 5365 0444; www.viangyonok.com; Chiang Saen Lake; bungalows incl breakfast 2000-2400B; 🍷🍴📺) The emphasis at this well-manicured compound of seven bungalows is activities, and if a swimming pool, weight room, bicycles, kayaks and birdwatching aren't enough, well, you're a pretty tough customer. The only downsides we noticed were the stuffy furniture and distance from town. Viang Yonok is approximately 5km west of Chiang Saen along the road that leads to Mae Chan. The hotel sign isn't clear; take the turn-off about 1km after the Esso station.

Chiang Saen River Hill Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 5365 0826; www.chiangsaenriverhill.net; 714 Th Sukapibansai; r incl breakfast 1200B; 🍷) Although the pink exterior and floor tiles don't exactly complement the northern-Thai furnishing touches, this is still probably the best place in town. Rooms are large, and equipped with TV, fridge and a small area for relaxing.

Chiangsaen Golden Land Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 5365 1100; www.chengsanresort.com; 663 Th Sai 1; r incl breakfast 800B, bungalows incl breakfast 1200-2000B; 🍷📺) At this resort hotel you can choose from large well-equipped rooms in a two-storey building or several attractive wooden bungalows surrounding a garden and a covered swimming pool. There is another branch with 10 similarly priced bungalows in the village of Sop Kham, 3km south along the Mekong.

Siam Triangle Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 5365 1115; www.siamtriangle.com; 267 Th Rimkhong; r/ste incl breakfast 2500-4500/8000B; 🍷🍴📺) Chiang Saen's newest and biggest hotel lacks atmosphere, but the gigantic suites, with river-view Jacuzzi tubs, laptop and free laundry are pretty good value. The hotel is just outside Chiang Saen, about 500m south of the former city wall.

Chiang Saen Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎ 5365 0196; 45/2 Th Rimkhong; r 150-650B, bungalows 200B; 🍷📺) In a handy location opposite the river and night stalls, this long-

running place has basic but good-value rooms and A-frame bungalows. Conveniently located within walking distance of both the river and 'downtown' Chiang Saen.

Sa Nae Charn Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎ 5365 1138; 641 Th Nhongmoon; r 200-500B; 🍷) Run by an elderly Singaporean gentleman, the rooms here start basic, but increasingly include amenities such as TV and air-con as you pay more.



Eating & Drinking

Cheap noodle and rice dishes are available at food stalls in and near the market on the river road and along the main road through town from the highway, near the bus stop. Evening food vendors set up at the latter location and stay open till around midnight.

Jinda's Kitchen

NORTHERN THAI \$

(Rte 1290; mains 20-130B; ☺8am-4pm) This cosy roadside restaurant has been serving up local dishes for more than 50 years. Try the famous northern noodle dishes *kôw soy* or *kâ-nôm jeen nám ngêe-o*, or choose a curry or homemade sausage from the English-language menu. Jinda's Kitchen is roughly halfway between Chiang Saen and Sop Ruak.

Kiaw Siang Hai

CHINESE \$\$

(no roman-script sign; 44 Th Rimkhong; mains 50-200B; ☺8am-8pm) Serving the workers of Chinese boats that dock at Chiang Saen, this authentic Chinese restaurant prepares a huge menu of dishes in addition to the namesake noodle and wonton dishes. Try the spicy Szechuan-style fried tofu, or one of the Chinese herbal soups. The restaurant can be located by the giant ceramic jars out front.

Evening Food Vendors

THAI \$

(Th Rimkhong; mains 30-60B; ☺4-11pm) During the dry months these vendors sell sticky rice, green papaya salad, grilled chicken, dried squid and other fun foods for people to eat while sitting on mats along the riverbank in front of Chiang Saen Guest House – a very pleasant way to spend an evening. Local specialities include fish or chicken barbecued inside thick joints of bamboo, eaten with sticky rice and *sôm-dam* (green papaya salad).

2 be 1

BAR

(Th Rimkhong; ☺6pm-1am) By the river, this funky bar with inside and outside seating has colourful lamps and plays house music.

i Information

Chiang Saen Hospital (☎ 0 5377 7017-7035) This government hospital is just south of Wat Pa Sak. Staff speak little English.

Companion Coffee House (Th Rimkhong; ☎ 8am-7pm; ☎) This coffee shop also has a computer and wi-fi. Located north of town near Soi 2.

Internet (Th Phahonyothin; per hr 20B; ☎ 10am-8pm) There are two internet shops, located across from each other, a block east of Wat Chedi Luang.

Post office (Th Phahonyothin) Located roughly across from Wat Chedi Luang.

Siam Commercial Bank (Th Phahonyothin) On the main street leading from the highway to the Mekong River. Has an ATM and currency exchange.

Visitors centre (☎ 0 5377 7084; Th Phahonyothin; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Has a good relief display showing the major ruin sites as well as photos of various *chedi* before, during and after restoration.

i Getting There & Away

Blue *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* that travel to Sop Ruak (20B) and Mae Sai (50B) wait at a stall at the eastern end of Th Phahonyothin from 7.20am to noon. The green *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* bound for Chiang Khong (100B) park at a stall on Th Rimkhong, south of the riverside immigration office, from 7.30am to noon. After noon it's only possible to charter the entire vehicle, which costs between 800B and 1000B.

Chiang Saen has no proper bus terminal, rather there is a covered bus shelter at the eastern end of Th Phahonyothin where buses pick up and drop off passengers. From this stop there are frequent buses to Chiang Rai (37B, 1½ hours, 5.30am to 5pm) and two daily departures to Chiang Mai (2nd class air-con/1st class 165/212B, five hours, 7.15am and 9am).

To Bangkok, **Sombat Tour** (☎ 08 1595 4616; Th Phahonyothin) offers approximately 12 seats in a daily VIP bus (920B, 12 hours, 5pm), departing from a small office adjacent to Krung Thai Bank.

i Getting Around

Motorbike taxi and *sǎhm-lór* will do short trips around town for 20B. They congregate near and across from the bus stop.

A good way to see the Chiang Saen area is on two wheels. Mountain bikes and motorcycles can be rented at **motorcycle rental** (☎ 08 9429 5798; 247/1 Th Phahonyothin; ☎ 9am-5pm) and **Angpao Chiangsaen Tour** (☎ 0 5365 0143; www.angpaochiangsaentour.com; Th Phahonyothin; ☎ 9am-8pm). The latter can also provide

a vehicle with driver, and conducts a variety of local tours.

Around Chiang Saen

SOP RUAK

สามพราน

The borders of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos meet at Sop Ruak, the official 'centre' of the Golden Triangle, at the confluence of Nam Ruak and the Mekong River.

In historical terms, 'Golden Triangle' actually refers to a much larger geographic area, stretching thousands of square kilometres into Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, within which the opium trade was prevalent. Nevertheless, hoteliers and tour operators have been quick to cash in on the name by referring to the tiny village of Sop Ruak as 'the Golden Triangle', conjuring up images of illicit adventure, exotic border areas and opium caravans.

But that's all history, and today the only caravan you're likely to see is the endless parade of huge buses carrying package tourists. The opium is now fully relegated to museums, and even the once-beautiful natural setting has largely been obscured by ATMs, countless stalls selling tourist tat, and the loud announcements from the various temples.

On the good side, the two opium-related museums, the House of Opium and Hall of Opium, are both worth a visit, and a boat trip is an enjoyable way to pass an hour. But the only reason to consider a stay here is if you've already booked a room in one of the area's outstanding luxury hotels.

👁 Sights & Activities

Hall of Opium

MUSEUM

(หอฝิ่น; admission 200B; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Tue-Sun) One kilometre north of Sop Ruak on a plot of about 40 hectares opposite the Anantara Golden Triangle Resort & Spa, the Mah Fah Luang Foundation has established the 5600-sq-metre Hall of Opium. The goal of this impressive facility is to become the world's leading exhibit and research facility for the study of opiate use around the world. The multimedia exhibition includes a fascinating history of opium, and examines the effects of abuse on individuals and society. Well balanced and worth seeing.

House of Opium

MUSEUM

(บ้านฝิ่น; www.houseofopium.com; admission 50B; ☎ 7am-7pm) This small museum with historical displays pertaining to opium culture is

DAY BOAT TO JINGHONG

Although it was once possible to travel by cargo ship from Chiang Saen to Jinghong in China, now it's only permitted via passenger boat through **Maekhong Delta Travel** (☎0 5364 2517; www.maekhongtravel.com; Maekhong Delta Boutique Hotel, 230/5-6 Th Phahonyothin, Mae Sai; one way 820 yuan/3500B; ☀9am-5pm) in Mae Sai.

The trip from Chiang Saen to Jinghong takes 15 hours when conditions are good. During drier months (typically March to May) boats don't run, as rocks and shallows can hamper the way. Boats usually depart from Chiang Saen on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 5am, but this is not set in stone and it's important to call ahead before you make plans.

To do this trip you must already have your visa for China – several guest houses in town can arrange this for you, but it's quicker to arrange from Chiang Mai or Bangkok. If you already have a visa, tickets can be arranged at most local guest houses and hotels, or through **Chiang Saen Tour and Travel** (☎0 5377 7051; chiangsaen2004@yahoo.com; 64 Th Rimkhong; ☀8am-6pm).

worth a peek. Exhibits include all the various implements used in the planting, harvest, use and trade of the *Papaver somniferum* resin, including pipes, weights, scales and so on, plus photos and maps with labels in English. The museum is at the southeastern end of Sop Ruak, virtually across from Phra Chiang Saen Si Phaendin.

Phra Chiang Saen Si Phaendin MONUMENT (พระเชียงแสนสี่แผ่นดิน; admission free; ☀7am-9pm) The first sight you'll inevitably see in Sop Ruak is Phra Chiang Saen Si Phaendin, a giant Buddha statue financed by a Thai-Chinese foundation. The statue straddles a boat-like platform, and visitors here are encouraged to donate by rolling coins from an elevated platform behind the statue.

Wat Prathat Pukhao TEMPLE (วัดพระธาตุภูขาว; admission free) Next to the House of Opium are some steps up to the Buddhist Wat Prathat Pukhao, from where you get the best viewpoint of the Mekong meeting of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand.

Mekong River Cruises RIVER CRUISE (1hr cruise max 5 people per boat 400B) Local long-tail boat trips can be arranged through several local agents or at the various piers. The typical trip involves a circuit around a large island and upriver for a view of the Burmese casino hotel.

You can also arrange to stop off at a Lao village on the large river island of **Don Sao**, roughly halfway between Sop Ruak and Chiang Saen. The Lao immigration booth here is happy to allow day visitors onto the island without a Lao visa. A 20B arrival tax is collected from each visitor. There's not a lot to

see, but there's an official post office where you can mail letters or postcards with a Laos PDR postmark, a few shops selling T-shirts and Lao handicrafts, and the Sala Beer Lao, where you can quaff Beer Lao and munch on Lao snacks.

Sleeping & Eating

The only reason to stay in or around Sop Ruak is to take advantage of some of northern Thailand's best upscale lodgings. Those on a budget are advised to go to Chiang Saen. There are several tourist-oriented restaurants overlooking the Mekong River.

Four Seasons Tented Camp HOTEL \$\$\$ (☎0 5391 0200; www.fourseasons.com; minimum 3-night stay 225,450-255,450B; 🍷🍷🍷) If you can fit it into your schedule (and budget), this safari-inspired 'tented camp' resort is among the most truly unique accommodation experiences in Thailand. Located at a secluded spot of riverside jungle outside Sop Ruak, a brief boat ride is necessary to reach the vast compound of 15 hillside tents. The tents are luxurious and decked out in colonial-era safari paraphernalia, the focus of which is an incredibly inviting copper and resin bathtub. There's no TV or iPod dock, rather guests are encouraged to take in the natural setting (tip: tent 15 looks over an elephant bathing area) and take part in daily activities, which range from mahout training to spa treatment. A minimum stay of at least three nights is required, and the fee covers every aspect of the stay, from airport pick-up to food and drink.

Anantara Golden Triangle Resort & Spa

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 5378 4084; www.anantara.com; r/ste incl breakfast 16,500/18000B; 🏠@📶🚶) This award-winning resort takes up a large patch of beautifully landscaped ground directly opposite the Hall of Opium. The rooms combine Thai and international themes, and all have balconies looking over the Mekong. A Jacuzzi, squash and tennis courts, gym, sauna and spa round out the luxury amenities. Special attractions include the King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament and one- to three-day mahout-training packages.

📍 Getting There & Away

There are frequent *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* to Chiang Saen (20B, every 20 minutes from 7am to noon) and Mae Sai (45B, every 40 minutes from 8am to 1pm), both of which can be flagged down along the main strip. It's an easy bicycle ride of 9km from Chiang Saen to Sop Ruak.

Chiang Khong

เชียงใหม่

POP 12,000

More remote yet livelier than its neighbour Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong is historically an important market town for local hill tribes and for trade with northern Laos. At one time the city was part of a small *meuang* (city-state) called Juon, founded in AD 701 by King Mahathai. Over the centuries Juon paid tribute to Chiang Rai, then Chiang Saen and finally Nan before being occupied by the Siamese in the 1880s. The territory of Chiang Khong extended all the way to Yunnan Province in China until the French turned much of the Mekong River's northern bank into French Indochina in 1893.

Today the riverside town is a popular travellers' gateway into Laos (see the boxed text, p333). From Huay Xai, on the opposite side of the Mekong, it's a two-day slow boat trip to Luang Prabang. And for those who have set their sights even further, Huay Xai is only an eight-hour bus ride from Boten, a legal border crossing to and from China.

🛏 Sleeping

The vast majority of accommodation in Chiang Khong is geared towards the budget market.

Rai Saeng Arun

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 5391 8255; www.raisaengarun.com; 2 Moo 3, Ban Phakub; bungalows incl breakfast 3000-3750B;

🏠📶) Located 22km from Chiang Khong on Rte 4007, which leads to Chiang Saen, this resort brings together 14 bungalows in an attractive, natural setting. Some are perched on a hillside, while others are near stream-bordered rice fields, and three are at the edge of the Mekong River. All are stylish and comfortable, feature balconies and open-air showers, and are connected by bridged walkways over rice fields. The restaurant looks over the Mekong and serves dishes using vegetables and herbs from the resort's organic farm. Considerable discounts are available during the low season.

Baanrimaling

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 5379 1613; maleewan_th@yahoo.com; 99/2 Moo 3; dm 100-120B, r 150-450B; 🏠📶) The rooms here are pretty run-of-the-mill for this price range, and the location isn't exactly ideal, but the homelike atmosphere and gentle service may have you staying a bit longer than you planned. Great river views certainly don't hurt, and extras like free wi-fi, free bicycle use, free delivery to the pier, and Thai cooking lessons seal the deal.

Namkhong Riverside Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 5379 1796; www.namkhongriverside.com; 174-176 Th Sai Klang; r incl breakfast 800-1200B; 🏠@📶) This modern three-storey hotel holds heaps of clean, neat rooms, most with private balconies overlooking the river. The cheaper rooms are at ground level, and all rooms suffer from the noise pollution of nightly karaoke parties.

Portside Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 5365 5238; portsidehotel@hotmail.com; 546 Th Sai Klang; r with fan/air-con 300/500B; 🏠@📶) This good-value hotel features two floors of tidy but slightly cramped rooms. There are no river views, but a communal rooftop area makes up for this.

Chiang Khong Green Inn

HOTEL \$

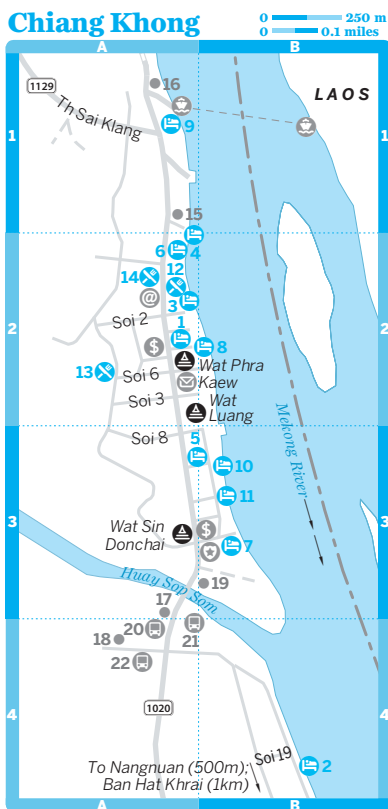
(☎ 5379 1009; www.chiangkhong-greeninn.com; 89/4 Th Sai Klang; r with fan/air-con 200/580B; 🏠@📶) The cheaper rooms in this new backpacker place are tight and share bathrooms, but the rooms with air-con are large and have TVs. All guests have free access to computers and wi-fi.

Chiang Khong Teak Garden

Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 5379 2008; www.chiangkhongteakgarden.com; 666 Th Sai Klang; r 1500-1800B; 🏠@📶) The



new duplex bungalows at Chiang Khong's newest, most expensive digs are well outfitted and cosy, if lacking in atmosphere. The price depends on garden or river view.

PP Home GUEST HOUSE \$
(Baan Pak Pon; ☎ 0 5365 5092; baanpakpon@hotmail.co.th; r 350-600B; 🍷🍷🍷) One of a dwindling number of accommodation places still owned by locals, this attractive wooden house features large rooms with wood panelling, each with a private balcony looking over the river, and a couple of new rooms in an adjacent cement add-on.

Chiangkhong River View Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 5379 1375; www.chiangkhong.com/riverviewhotel.htm; 141 Moo 12; r 500B; 🍷🍷) At the southern end of town, this tall building holds several virtually identical tiny rooms, all with air-con, TV and fridge. Locally owned, and good value.

Chiang Khong

Sleeping

- 1 Baan-Fai Guest House A2
- 2 Baanrimtaling B4
- 3 Ban Tammila A2
- 4 Boom House A2
- 5 Chiang Khong Green Inn A3
- 6 Chiang Khong Teak Garden Hotel A2
- 7 Chiangkhong River View Hotel B3
- 8 Namkhong Riverside Hotel B2
- 9 Portside Hotel A1
- 10 PP Home B3
- 11 Rimnaum Guest House B3

Eating

- 12 Bamboo Mexican House A2
- 13 Khao Soi Pa Orn A2
- 14 Lomtawan A2
Rim Nam (see 11)

Information

- 15 Easy Trip A1
- 16 Immigration Office A1
- 17 Market A3
- 18 Market A4
- 19 Market B3

Transport

- 20 Buses to Bangkok A4
- 21 Buses to Chiang Mai & Chiang Rai A4
- 22 Söng-tāa-ou to Chiang Saen A4

Rimnaum Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 5365 5680; suti_ja@hotmail.com; 166 Moo 12; r with fan/air-con 350/500B; 🍷🍷) This riverside place unites 20 identical, but spacious and clean rooms.

Baan-Fai Guest House GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 0 5379 1394; 108 Th Sai Klang; r 100-200B; 🍷) Located in an attractive wooden Thai home, the rooms don't quite live up to the exterior, but they're clean and represent a decent choice if funds are running low.

Ban Tammila HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 5379 1234; baantammila@hotmail.com; 113 Th Sai Klang; r & bungalows 350-650B; 🍷🍷) Although the exterior looks a bit ragged, the stylish rooms and bungalows here are neat and decorated in warm colours.

Boom House HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 5365 5136; www.boomhouseressort.com; 406/1 Th Sai Klang; dm 100B, r 250-400B; 🍷🍷) This multilevel place has a variety of plain

MEKONG'S GIANT CATFISH

The Mekong River stretch that passes Chiang Khong is an important habitat for the *blah bèuk* (giant Mekong catfish, *Pangasianodon gigas* to ichthyologists), among the largest freshwater fish in the world. A *blah bèuk* takes at least six and possibly 12 years (no one's really sure) to reach full size, when it will measure 2m to 3m in length and weigh up to 300kg. Although the adult fish have only been found in certain stretches of the Mekong River, it's thought that the fish originate in Qinghai Province (where the Mekong originates) in northern China and swim all the way to the middle Mekong, where they spend much of their adult lives.

In Thailand and Laos the mild-tasting flesh is revered as a delicacy and the fish are taken between late April and June when the river depth is just 3m to 4m and the fish are swimming upriver. Ban Hat Khrai, 1.5km from Chiang Khong, is famous as being one of the few places where *blah bèuk* are still occasionally caught. Before netting them, Thai and Lao fishermen hold a special annual ceremony to propitiate Chao Mae Pla Beuk, a female deity thought to preside over the giant catfish. Among the rituals comprising the ceremony are chicken sacrifices performed aboard the fishing boats. After the ceremony is completed, fishing teams draw lots to see who casts the first net, and then take turns casting.

In recent years only a few catfish have been captured in a typical season (some years have resulted in no catches at all). The catfish hunters' guild is limited to natives of Ban Hat Khrai, and the fishermen sell the meat on the spot for up to 500B or more per kilo (a single fish can bring 100,000B in Bangkok); most of it ends up in Bangkok, since local restaurants in Huay Xai and Chiang Khong can't afford such prices.

Although the *blah bèuk* is on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) list of endangered species, there is some debate as to just how endangered it is. Because of the danger of extinction, in 1983 Thailand's Inland Fisheries Department developed a program to breed the fish in captivity. Every time a female was caught, it was kept alive until a male was netted, then the eggs were removed (by massaging the female's ovaries) and put into a pan; the male was then milked for sperm and the eggs fertilised in the pan. The program was largely unsuccessful until 2001 when 70,000 hatchlings survived. The fish were distributed to fishery centres elsewhere in the country, some of which have had moderate success breeding the fish, mostly in ponds in the central Thai province of Suphanburi. Because of this, *blah bèuk* is again being seen on menus around the country.

At the moment the greatest threats to the wild Mekong catfish's survival are the planned construction of 11 dams across the Mekong River, a potential obstacle to the fish's migration, and the blasting of Mekong River rapids in China, which is robbing the fish of important breeding grounds.

but tidy rooms, the more expensive of which have air-con, TV and fridge.



Eating & Drinking

Khao Soi Pa Orn

NORTHERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Soi 6; mains 15-30B; ☺8am-4pm) You may think you know *kôw soy*, the famous northern curry noodle soup, but the version served in Chiang Khong forgoes the coconut milk and replaces it with a rich minced pork and tomato mixture. There's no English-language sign here; look for the gigantic highway pillar at the eastern end of Soi 6.

Nanguan

THAI \$\$

(Ban Hat Khrai; mains 30-150B; ☺8am-9pm) The menu here boasts that the restaurant is 'At the first great catfish's reproduction place', but it isn't all about sexy locality; they also do some tasty food. Freshwater fish from the Mekong is the emphasis here, and it's prepared in a variety of ways, as the extensive English-language menu describes.

Bamboo Mexican House

INTERNATIONAL \$

(Th Sai Klang; mains 30-180B; ☺7am-8pm) Run by the manager of a now-defunct guest house, the chef of this tiny restaurant/bakery learned to make Mexican dishes from her American and Mexican guests. To be

honest, though, we never got past the delicious homemade breads and cakes. Opens early, and boxed lunches can be assembled for the boat ride to Luang Prabang.

Rim Nam

THAI \$\$

(mains 30-120B; ☺11am-9pm) Part of Rimnaum Guest House is this simple indoor-outdoor restaurant that overlooks the Mekong. The bilingual menu is much shorter than the Thai menu; *yam* (spicy salads) are the house specialities, but the kitchen can whip up almost anything.

Lomtawan

THAI \$\$

(354 Th Sai Klang; mains 60-180B; ☺lunch & dinner) If you don't require river views, this cosy, candlelit home is a great dinner option. The English-language menu is extensive and includes daring options such as green curry with salmon. Stay late, and the soundtrack becomes live and the place gradually transforms into an intimate bar.

i Information

A handful of banks have branches in town with ATMs and foreign-exchange services.

Easy Trip (☎0 5365 5174, 0 86997 7246; www.discoverylaos.com; Th Sai Klang; ☺9am-7pm) This professional travel agency organises boats

and buses to Laos, as well as minibuses to Chiang Mai (250B) and Pai (450B). Flights in Thailand and to Laos can be booked here. Many guest houses in Chiang Khong offer similar services.

Internet (Th Sai Klang; per hr 30B; ☺10am-10pm) On the main street roughly across from Bamboo Mexican House.

i Getting There & Away

Chiang Khong has no official bus terminal; buses pick up and drop off passengers at various points near the market, south of the centre of town. Arrive at the bus stop at least 30 minutes early or buy tickets in advance from the office or from Easy Trip. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* bound for Chiang Saen (100B, frequent departures from 7.30am to noon) also depart from this area.

Bangkok (493B to 888B, 14 hours, frequent departures from 3.05pm to 4.10pm)

Chiang Mai (211B to 272B, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes from 4.30am to 3.45pm)

Chiang Rai (65B, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes from 4.30am to 3.45pm)

Phayao (111B to 142B, three hours, every 30 minutes from 4.30am to 3.45pm)

i Getting Around

A *sǎhm-lǒr* from the bus station to Tha Reua Bak, the border crossing to Laos, costs 30B.

BORDER CROSSING: CHIANG KHONG TO HUAY XAI

Long-tail boats to Huay Xai, Laos (30B), leave frequently from Tha Reua Bak, a pier at the northern end of Chiang Khong, from 8am to 6pm. A vehicle ferry also crosses a few times daily (except Sundays) between the main Thai immigration point and the slowboat landing in Huay Xai costing 500B for motorcycles, 1000B for cars (or 1500B on the 5pm sailing).

Foreigners can purchase a 30-day visa for Laos upon arrival in Huay Xai for US\$30 to US\$42, depending on nationality. There is an extra US\$1 charge after 4pm and on weekends, and if you don't have a passport-style mugshot they'll charge 40B extra. On your return to Thailand, immigration will stamp your passport with a new 15-day visa (see p766).

Once on the Lao side you can continue by road to Luang Nam Tha and Udomxai, or by boat down the Mekong River to Luang Prabang. If you're bound for the capital, **Lao Airlines** (☎+856 211 026, +856 211 494; www.laoairlines.com) has flights from Huay Xai to Vientiane three times a week for US\$94.

If time is on your side, the daily slow boat (900B, 10am) to Luang Prabang takes two days, including a night in the village of Pak Beng. Avoid the noisy fast boats (1450B, six to seven hours) that ply the Huay Xai to Luang Prabang route, as there have been reports of bad accidents. Booking tickets through an agent such as Easy Trip (p333) costs slightly more, but they arrange tickets for you, provide transport from your guest house and across the Mekong River, and provide a boxed lunch for the boat ride.

If you already hold a Chinese visa, it's now also possible to go more or less directly to China from Chiang Khong. After obtaining a 30-day Laos visa-on-arrival in Huay Xai, simply board one of the buses that go directly to the Xishuangbanna town of Mengla (110,000K, eight hours, 8.30am daily) or Jinghong (150,000K, 10 hours, 7.30am Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) via the Lao border town of Boten.

PHAYAO PROVINCE

Phayao

POP 20,000

เขตเมือง

Few people, including many Thais, are aware of this quiet but attractive northern city. Perhaps in an overzealous effort to remedy this, a tourist brochure we came across described Phayao as ‘The Vienna of South East Asia’. Although this is just *slightly* stretching the truth, Phayao is certainly one of the more pleasant towns in northern Thailand. Its setting on Kwan Phayao, a vast wetland, gives the town a back-to-nature feel that’s utterly lacking in most Thai cities, and the tree-lined streets, temples and old wooden houses of ‘downtown’ Phayao provide a pleasing old-school Thai touch.

The little-visited town is the perfect place to break up your journey to/from Chiang Rai, or as a bookend to our suggested driving trip from Chiang Khong.

Sights & Activities

Kwan Phayao

WETLANDS

(กวานพะย่าย) This vast body of water is the largest swamp in northern Thailand, and is

a symbol of Phayao. Although naturally occurring, the water level is artificially controlled, otherwise the wetlands would tend to go dry outside of the wet season. Framed by mountains, the swamp is in fact more scenic than the name suggests, and is the setting for what must be among the most beautiful sunsets in Thailand. Rowing crews can be seen practising in the evenings, and there’s a pier at the southern end of Th Chai Kwan where there are **boat rides** (20B) to what remains of **Wat Tiloke Aram**, a submerged 500-year-old temple. There are ambitious plans to rebuild the temple, one of many submerged religious structures in Kwan Phayao. In addition to lost Buddhist artefacts, there are at least 50 types of fish native to these waters, and there’s a small **fish breeding area** where for 5B you can feed the fish.

Wat Sri Khom Kham

TEMPLE

(วัดศรีโคมคำ) Phayao’s most important temple is thought to date back to 1491, but its present structure was finished in 1923. The immense prayer hall holds the Phra Jao Ton Luang, the largest Chiang Saen-era Buddha statue in the country. Standing 18m high, legend has it that the construction of the statue took more than 30 years. It’s not the

WORTH A TRIP

THE LONG WAY TO PHAYAO

If you’re in Chiang Khong and happen to have your own wheels, we have an excellent suggestion for a drive. Rtes 1155 and 1093 are among Thailand’s most dramatic land routes, hugging steep mountainsides along the Thai–Lao border and passing waterfalls, incredible vistas and national parks. If you need a destination you can continue all the way to Phayao, a little-visited province and town with ample accommodation and good food.

From Chiang Khong, the trip is as straightforward as heading south on Rte 1020 and following the signs to **Phu Chi Fa**, a national park near the Lao border. For Thailand, the signs are surprisingly clear, but a good companion is the Golden Triangle Rider’s *Golden Triangle* map.

At the mountaintop village of Doi Pha Tang, consider a quick detour to **Pratu Siam**, at 1653m one of Thailand’s most impressive viewpoints. There is basic lodging and food here.

Rte 1093 narrows and becomes markedly less populated as you approach Phu Chi Fa, a mountaintop that offers high-altitude views into Laos. There are a few different ways to approach the peak, the most popular being via Ban Rom Fah Thai. There is a variety of accommodation and some basic restaurants on either side of Phu Chi Fa.

Upon passing Phu Chi Fa, stay on Rte 1093 and follow the signs to **Ban Huak**. This is a picturesque village in Phayao Province, 2km from the Lao border. There’s a border market on the 10th and 30th of every month, homestay-style accommodation in the town, and nearby **Nam Tok Phu Sang** is a unique waterfall of thermally heated water.

From Ban Huak, follow signs to Chiang Kham, then take Rte 1021 to Chun, from where it’s a straight shot to Phayao (via Dok Kham Tai), itself another worthwhile destination.

If you do the drive in one go, allow at least six hours, including stops for taking photos, coffee and a meal.

most beautiful or well-proportioned Buddha image in Thailand, but it certainly is impressive. The ordination hall that is elevated over Kwan Phayao features graceful modern wall paintings. Also on the grounds of the wát is a Buddhist sculpture garden, which includes gory, larger-than-life depictions of Buddhist hell.

Next door to the temple is the **Phayao Cultural Exhibition Hall** (Th Phahonyothin; admission 40B; ☎8.30am-4.30pm), a two-storey museum packed with artefacts and a good amount of information on local history and culture in English. Standout items include a unique 'black' Buddha statue, and a fossil of two embracing crabs labelled 'Wonder Lover'. The temple and museum are about 2km from the northern end of Th Chaykawan.

Wat Li TEMPLE
(วัดลี) Just off Rte 1 opposite the turn-off to Phayao, Wat Li features a small **museum** (admission by donation; ☎9am-3pm) with a decent variety of items from the previous Chiang Saen eras.

Wat Phra That Jom Thong TEMPLE
(วัดพระธาตุจอมทอง) This is an attractive *chedi* on a wooded hilltop 3km from the centre of town.

Sleeping

Huean Phak Jum Jai GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎0 548 2659; 37/5-6 Th Phrasart; r 600B; 🍷🍴) Of the handful of hotel-like places near Kwan Phayao calling themselves homestays, this one is the nicest. Rooms are spacious and clean and decked out in handsome wood. The sign says 'Home Stay & Guest House' and it's just off Th Chaykawan, a short walk from the waterfront.

Gateway Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎0 5441 1333; 7/36 Soi 2, Th Pratu Khlong; r incl breakfast 1000-1200B, ste incl breakfast 2500B; 🍷🍴🍷) Despite being the city's most up-market hotel, the rooms here are a bit on the tired side, although the 'sea view' rooms on the upper floors do boast great views of Kwan Phayao. It's next door to the bus terminal.

Tharn Thong Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎0 5443 1302; 56-59 Th Donsanam; d 170-300B; 🍷🍴) Stark fan-cooled rooms are available in the main building, while more comfortable air-con rooms can be found in the

complex behind it. It's near the town's police station.

Wattana Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎0 5443 1203; 69 Th Donsanam; fan/air-con 150/280B; 🍷) Next to the Tharn Thong, Wattana offers a nearly identical package, but the rooms aren't quite as tidy as its neighbour's.

Eating & Drinking

For such a small town, Phayao has an amazing abundance of food, much of it quite good. During the day, dozens of vendors sell similar repertoires of grilled fish and papaya salad along the northern end of Th Chaykawan. Kaat Boran, a largely food-based night market, sets up every evening from 6pm to 10pm around the King Ngam Muang monument. Another extensive **night market** (Th Rob Wiang) convenes along the north side of Th Rob Wiang every evening.

There are literally dozens of lakefront restaurants along Kwan Phayao, beginning at Th Thakawan and extending all the way to the public park.

Chue Chan THAI \$\$
(Th Chaykawan; dishes 80-240B; ☎lunch & dinner; 🍷) This place has received the most acclaim from the various Thai food authorities. The lengthy menu, which has both pictures and English, spans dishes you won't find elsewhere, such as stuffed pig leg or sour fish fried with egg. The restaurant is the tallest building on the busy restaurant stretch of Th Chaykawan.

Khao Soi Saeng Phian NORTHERN THAI \$
(no roman-script sign; Th Thakawan; dishes 25-40B; ☎9am-3pm) One of the better bowls of *kôw soy* in this neck of the north is available at this family-run restaurant, a block from the waterfront. *Kà-nôm jeen nám ngêe-o* and various other noodle dishes are also available. Fans of northern-style noodles will be happy to know that there are at least four other shops boasting similar menus within a block radius of the intersection of Th Thakawan and Th Rajchawong.

Information

There are several banks along Th Donsanam, near the town's morning market, many with ATM and exchange services.

Internet@Cafe (Th Pratu Khlong; per hr 20B; ☎10am-10pm) Other shops offering internet access dot Th Donsanam.

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

i Getting There & Away

Phayao's bus station, at the northern end of Th Chaykawan, is quite busy, primarily because the city lies on the main north-south highway. Because of this, if you're bound for Bangkok, it's possible to hop on one of the 40 or so buses that pass through the station from points further north.

There are also minivans to Chiang Rai (62B, one hour) and Phrae (98B, two hours), both departing approximately every hour from 7am to 7pm.

Destinations from Phayao include:

Bangkok (400B to 801B, 11 hours, frequent departures from 8.45am to 9.30am and 7.45pm to 8pm)

Chiang Mai (115B to 230B, three hours, every hour from 7.30am to 5.30pm)

Chiang Rai (62B to 99B, two hours, every 40 minutes from 7am to 5pm)

Nan (123B, four hours, 1.30pm)

PHRAE PROVINCE

Phrae is a rural, mountainous province most often associated with teak. Despite a nationwide ban on logging, there's not a whole lot of the hardwood left, and the little that does exist is under threat.

Phrae

POP 18,000

Walking around the old city of Phrae one is struck by similarities with the historical Lao city of Luang Prabang: ample greenery, traditional wood buildings and scenic temples dominate the scenery, and monks form a significant part of the traffic. The city's residents must be among the friendliest folks in Thailand, and Phrae's location on the banks of the Mae Nam Yom and its ancient wall invite comparisons with Chiang Mai. Despite all this, Phrae is a little-visited city and a great destination for those who require little more than a few low-key attractions, good local food and cheery company.

👁 Sights

Wat Luang

(วัดหลวง) This is the oldest wát in Phrae, probably dating from the founding of the city in the 12th or 13th century. **Phra That Luang Chang Kham**, the large octagonal Lanna-

style *chedi*, sits on a square base with elephants supporting it on all four sides. As is sometimes seen in Phrae and Nan, the *chedi* is occasionally swathed in Thai Lü fabric.

The verandah of the main *wi-hähn* is in the classic Luang Prabang-Lan Xang style but has unfortunately been bricked in with laterite. Opposite the front of the *wi-hähn* is **Pratu Khong**, part of the city's original entrance gate. No longer used as a gate, it now contains a statue of Chao Pu, an early Lanna ruler.

Also on the temple grounds is a **museum** displaying temple antiques, ceramics and religious art dating from the Lanna, Nan, Bago and Mon periods. A 16th-century, Phrae-made sitting Buddha on the 2nd floor is particularly exquisite. There are also some 19th-century photos with English labels on display, including some gruesome shots of a beheading. The museum is usually open weekends only, but the monks will sometimes open it on weekdays on request.

Vongburi House

MUSEUM

(บ้านวงศ์บุรี; 50 Th Kham Leu; admission 30B; ☎9am-5pm) The two-storey teak house of the last prince of Phrae has been converted into a private museum. It was constructed between 1897 and 1907 for Luang Phongphibun and his wife Chao Sunantha, who once held a profitable teak concession in the city. Elaborate carvings on gables, eaves, balconies and above doors and windows are in good condition. Inside, many of the house's 20 rooms display late-19th-century teak antiques, documents (including early-20th-century slave concessions), photos and other artefacts from the bygone teak-dynasty era. Most are labelled in English as well as Thai.

Wat Phra Non

TEMPLE

(วัดพระนอน) Located west of Wat Luang is a 300-year-old wát named after its highly revered reclining *prá non* (reclining Buddha image). The *bòht* (central sanctuary) was built around 200 years ago and has an impressive roof with a separate, two-tiered portico and gilded, carved, wooden facade with Ramayana scenes. The *wi-hähn* behind the *bòht* contains the Buddha image, swathed in Thai Lü cloth with bead and foil decoration.

Wat Jom Sawan

TEMPLE

(วัดจอมสวรรค์) Outside the old city on Th Ban Mai, this Buddhist temple was built by local Shan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and shows Shan and Burmese influences throughout. An adjacent copper-crowned

THE DANCING TIGER

Kaeng Sua Ten (Dancing Tiger Rapids) are a series of rocky outcrops along the Mae Nam Yom, in Phrae's Song district. Part of Mae Yom National Park, the rapids are wild and beautiful, and are also the site of one of the more long-standing environmental conflicts in Thailand.

Since the early 1980s, the Thai government has repeatedly announced plans to build a dam across the Mae Nam Yom at Kaeng Sua Ten. Villagers in Tambon Sa-lab, the closest settlement to Kaeng Sua Ten, have vocally, and occasionally violently, objected to the plan. They claim that the dam would irrevocably alter their traditional lifestyle, forcing an estimated 2700 families to move away from their homes, and flood 3200 hectares of land, some of which includes Thailand's last remaining natural stands of golden teak.

Many elsewhere in Phrae and northern Thailand would like to see the dam built, as it is claimed that it will help control rampant flooding of the Mae Yom during the wet season and manage water during frequent droughts. Politicians in Bangkok say that the dam will provide additional power for the country and irrigation for farmers in provinces south of Phrae. And perhaps most significantly, dam building has been an important part of the king's rural development policy for several decades, and as recently as 1995 the monarch publicly pushed for the dam to be built.

In reality, the government's reasons for proposing the dam have inconsistently fluctuated between a need for power and irrigation, relying on whichever argument is more popular at the time. At one point the World Bank declined to fund the project, stating that the government's environmental impact assessment was incomplete. And many opponents have pointed out that the proposed site for the dam lies directly on a fault line.

In 2008 Samak Sundaravej became one of the more recent prime ministers to revive plans to build the dam. When confronted with concerns of the dam's potential environmental impact, Samak claimed that there were no teak trees and only 'three stupid peacocks' left in the area (the comments were made on World Environment Day, and Samak also claimed that the dam would reduce the effects of global warming). Villagers in Sa-lab reacted to the comments by burning an effigy of Samak and 'ordaining' several golden teak trees near Kaeng Sua Ten with orange monastic robes, a method of environmental protest that makes the trees 'sacred' and thus less likely to be cut down.

As recent as 2010 there has been talk of reviving the project, but for now plans are at a stalemate, largely the result of political instability rather than any change in government policy. What is certain is that plans to build a dam at Kaeng Sua Ten have caused many to question the concept of development in Thailand, and will continue to embody the struggle between poor rural Thais, who have little say in the development of their own environment, and the often authoritarian rule of the Bangkok-based central Thai government.

chedi has lost most of its stucco to reveal the artful brickwork beneath. Since a recent renovation, Wat Jom Sawan is more of a museum piece than a functioning temple.

Wat Phra Baht Ming Meuang TEMPLE
(วัดพระบาทมิ่งเมือง) Across from the post office within the old city, Wat Phra Baht Ming Meuang combines two formerly separate temple compounds (one of which contains a **museum** that is sporadically open), a Buddhist school, an old *chedi*, an unusual octagonal drum tower made entirely of teak and the highly revered Phra Kosai, which closely resembles the Phra Chinnarat in Phitsanulok.

Baan Praturbjai MUSEUM
(บ้านประตูปัจฉา; admission 40B; ☎8am-5pm) On the outskirts of the town is Baan Praturbjai (Impressive House), a large northern Thai-style teak house that was built using more than 130 teak logs, each over 300 years old. Opened in 1985, the house took four years to build, using timber taken from nine old rural houses. The interior pillars are ornately carved. The house is also filled with souvenir vendors and is rather tackily decorated, so don't take the moniker 'impressive' too seriously.

Praturbjai House is somewhat difficult to find; your best bet is to exit at the west gate of the former city wall and follow the signs,

Phrae



Phrae

Sights

- 1 Vongburi House A1
 2 Wat Jom Sawan C1
 3 Wat Luang A1
 4 Wat Phra Baht Ming Meuang B1
 5 Wat Phra Non A1

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 6 Phrae Adventure A1

Sleeping

- 7 Bua Khao B2
 8 Maeyom Palace Hotel C1
 9 Nakhon Phrae Hotel B2
 10 Nakhon Phrae Tower B2
 11 Paradorn Hotel C1
 12 Priwan's Homestay B1
 13 Thep Vong Place C2

Eating

- 14 Khao Soi Nok Noy B1
 15 Night Market B2
 16 Nok Bin B2
 17 Pan Jai B1
 18 Sod Cheon C1

Shopping

- 19 Maw Hawm Anian B2

Information

- 20 Loving Hut B2
 21 Phrae Hospital C2

Transport

- 22 Bus Terminal C1
 23 Sörng·tāa·ou to Wat Phra That
 Cho Hae C2

turning right after the school. A sähm·lör here should cost about 60B.



Activities

Trekking & Rafting

Phrae has a burgeoning outdoor scene, largely revolving around the Mae Yom National Park and Kaeng Sua Ten areas.

Phrae Adventure

TREKKING

(☎08 1033 9317; wa_divers@hotmail.com; 2 person min, per person per day 1000B; ☀8am-8pm) Wa and his team lead a variety of trekking expeditions, ranging from one to seven days in Phrae's Mae Yom National Park, as well as rafting trips in Nan.

Sleeping

Phoomthai Garden

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5462 7359; www.phoomthaitravel.com; 31 Th Sasiboot; r incl breakfast 900-1500B, bungalows incl breakfast 1500B; ♿@☎) Although it's a bit of a hike from the old town, this boutique hotel is the best all-around choice in town. The rooms are modern and comfortable, and all have balconies overlooking the hotel's attractive garden. There are even a few wooden bungalows with huge bathrooms and inviting tubs. The hotel is about 300m south of the old walls on Th Sasiboot.

Bua Khao

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5451 1372; 8 Soi 1, Th Charoen Meuang; r 350-600B; ♿@☎) Tucked just off the main road, this

teak monstrosity has mostly small rooms, but heaps of character. Service is great and there's an inviting communal area (involving even more wood) on the ground floor.

Paradorn Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5451 1177; www.phraeparadorn.ob.tc; 177 Th Yantarakitkoon; r incl breakfast 360-650B, ste incl breakfast 800B; 🍷🍷🍷) Probably the best budget option in town, you can't miss this place with its Burmese-style facade. The fan-cooled rooms have private balconies, and all rates include a simple breakfast. The hotel is on both sides of Th Yantarakitkoon, and there's also a museum dedicated to the Free Thai movement.

Maeyom Palace Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5452 1028-34; wccphrae@hotmail.com; 181/6 Th Yantarakitkoon; r incl breakfast 1600-2000B, ste incl breakfast 3500-4000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Opposite the bus terminal, Phrae's top-end option has all the modern amenities: carpeted rooms with cable TV, sofa and minibar, and the city's only hotel pool. Discounts of up to 30% are typical in the low season.

Thep Vong Place

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5452 1985; www.thepvongplace.com; 346/2 Th Charoen Meuang; r 350-500B; 🍷🍷🍷) The large rooms here are outfitted with fittingly large TVs and fridges – the more expensive rooms pack in even more furniture. Thep Vong Place is in the tiny side street labelled Charoenmeuang Alley.

Priwan's Homestay

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 1764 8447; 1 Th Weera; s/d 150/200B; 🍷) This enterprising local language teacher has opened up her vast wooden house to foreign guests. The six rooms are simply furnished and share a bathroom and a rambling vegetarian restaurant.

Nakhon Phrae Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5451 1122; nkphrae@phrae.ksc.co.th; 69 Th Rasdamnern; r 290-400B; 🍷🍷🍷) Being the closest accommodation to the old city has made this large hotel the most popular, but not necessarily the best budget option. Rooms definitely look their age and have tiny bathrooms, but are mostly clean and comfortable.

Nakhon Phrae Tower

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5452 1321; nakornphrae@yahoo.com; 3 Th Meuang Hit; r incl breakfast 550-650B, ste incl breakfast 1800-2500B; 🍷🍷🍷) A large business-class hotel, this sister to the Nakhon Phrae lies a bit further from the old city.

🍴 Eating & Drinking

A small but fun night market convenes just outside the Pratu Chai (Victory Gate) intersection every evening. The vendor in front of the Chinese shrine makes tasty *sôm-dam*, tiny but tasty bowls of *kà-nôm jeen nôm ngêe-o* and dishes of *kôw sôm*, a northern dish of rice cooked with tomatoes.

There are several restaurants serving local dishes along Rte 1022 as one approaches Wat Phra That Cho Hae.

Pan Jai

NORTHERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; 2 Th Weera; mains 20-40B; ☎7am-4pm) This open-air place combines everything we like in a restaurant; delicious local eats, attractive setting, good service and low prices. The emphasis is on *kà-nôm jeen*, fresh rice noodles served with various curries and herbs, but there are a couple of different kinds of noodle soups, a variety of rice dishes and more. Everything's on display, so simply point to whatever looks tastiest.

Sod Cheon

CHINESE-THAI \$

(Th Yantarakitkoon; mains 30-90B; ☎11am-4am) On the crossroads, 50m north of the Maeyom Palace Hotel, is this simple but very popular Chinese/Thai restaurant. Choose from the big pots of Chinese-style soups or go for your usual Thai dishes. Good for late-night eats.

Loving Hut

VEGETARIAN \$

(Th Charoen Meuang; mains 25-55B; ☎10am-8.30pm; 🍷) At the entrance to the old town, this bright yellow place has a thick English-language menu of Thai-style veggie dishes.

Khao Soi Nok Noy

NORTHERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Weera; dishes 25-55B; ☎10am-3pm) Just *kôw soy* – served with chicken, beef or pork – is served in this garden restaurant.



Shopping

Phrae is known for the distinctive *sêua môh hóm*, the indigo-dyed cotton farmer's shirt seen all over northern Thailand. The cloth is made in Ban Thung Hong, just outside of the city.

Maw Hawm Anian

CLOTHING

(no roman-script sign; 36 Th Charoen Meuang; ☎7am-8.30pm) A good place to buy *môh hóm* in town, about 60m from the south-eastern gate (Pratu Chai) into the old city.

i Information

Government Savings Bank (Th Rong Saw; ☎8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) The ATM is next to the police station.

Krung Thai Bank (Th Charoen Meuang; ☎8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Foreign-exchange service and ATM.

Internet cafe (Soi 1, Th Charoen Meuang; per hr 15B; ☎10am-10pm) An internet/online games shop on the same soi as Bua Khao hotel.

Nok Bin (24 Th Wichairacha; ☎10am-6pm) Khun Kung, a local journalist, and her husband have created a cheery cafe that also functions as an informal information centre for visitors. The couple prints a tourist map of Phrae that is updated regularly and can also arrange bicycle or motorcycle rental.

Phrae Hospital (☎0 5452 2444) Just east of Th Chaw Hae, southeast of town.

Post office (Th Charoen Meuang; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat)

i Getting There & Away

Air

Solar Air (☎nationwide call centre 02 535 2455; www.solarair.co.th; Phrae airport) flies to Bangkok's Don Muang Airport every Monday and Friday, and the reverse on Sunday and Friday (2790B, 1½ hours).

Bus & Minivan

Unlike most cities in Thailand, Phrae's bus terminal is conveniently within walking distance of a few accommodation choices. There are also frequent minivans to Lampang (85B, two hours, 7am to 5pm) and Nan (78B, two hours, 6am to 6.15pm).

Bus destinations include:

Bangkok (318B to 636B, eight hours, frequent departures from 9.15am to noon and 6.30pm to 10.30pm)

Chiang Mai (137B to 274B, four hours, every hour from 6am to 5pm)

Chiang Rai (114B to 320B, four hours, frequent departures from 7am to 4pm)

Lampang (76B to 157B, two hours, every hour from 6am to 5pm)

Mae Sai (152B to 349B, five hours, frequent departures from 7am to 4pm)

Nan (58B to 162B, two hours, every hour from 7am to 8.30pm)

Phayao (70B to 196B, two hours, frequent departures from 7am to 4pm)

Train

Den Chai train station (☎0 5461 3260) is 23km from Phrae. There are frequent blue *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* between Phrae's bus station and Den Chai (40B) from 6am to 5.30pm.

Major destinations from Den Chai station include Bangkok (155B to 1291B, nine to 11 hours, eight times daily) and Chiang Mai (72B to 549B, four to six hours, seven times daily). For other destinations call the **State Railway of Thailand** (☎nationwide call centre 1690; www.railway.co.th) or look at its website.

i Getting Around

A *sǎhm-lór* anywhere in the old town costs 30B. Motorcycle taxis are available at the bus terminal; a trip from here to Pratu Chai should cost around 40B.

Around Phrae

WAT PHRA THAT CHO HAE

วัดพระธาตุช่อแฮ

On a hill about 9km southeast of town off Rte 1022, this **wát** (admission free) is famous for its 33m-high gilded *chedi*. Cho Hae is the name of the cloth that worshippers wrap around the *chedi* – it's a type of satin thought to have originated in Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna, literally '12,000 Rice Fields' in northern Thai), China. Like Chiang Mai's Wat Doi Suthep, this is an important pilgrimage site for Thais living in the north. Tiered *naga* stairs lead to the temple compound.

The interior of the *bóht* is rather tackerily decorated with a gilded wooden ceiling, rococo pillars and walls with lotus-bud mosaics. The **Phra Jao Than Jai** Buddha image here, which is similar in appearance to the Phra Chinnarat in Phitsanulok, is reputed to impart fertility to women who make offerings to it.

The scenery along the road leading to the wát is picturesque and there is also an abundance of restaurants serving local dishes. *Sǎrng-tǎa-ou* between Phrae and Phra That Cho Hae (20B) depart from near Talat Phrae Preeda, on Th Chaw Hae, from 6am to 4.30pm; outside of these hours a *sǎrng-tǎa-ou* can be chartered for 400B.

PHAE MEUANG PHI

แพะเมืองผี

The name **Phae Meuang Phi** (admission free) means 'Ghost-Land'; a reference to this strange geological phenomenon approximately 18km northeast of Phrae off Rte 101. Erosion has created bizarre pillars of soil and rock that look like giant fungi. The area has been made a provincial park; a few walking trails and viewpoints are recent additions. There are picnic pavilions in the park and food vendors selling *gàì yǎhng* (grilled,

spiced chicken), *sôm-dam* and sticky rice near the entrance.

Getting to Phae Meuang Phi by public transport is complicated; you can charter a *sörng-tāa-ou* for about 600B or talk to Khun Kung at Nok Bin (p340) for alternatives.

NAN PROVINCE

Tucked into Thailand's northeastern corner, Nan is a remote province to be explored for its natural beauty. Nan's unique ethnic groups are another highlight and differ significantly from those in other northern provinces. Outside the Mae Nam Nan valley, the predominant hill tribes are Mien, with smaller numbers of Hmong, and dispersed throughout Nan are four lesser-known groups seldom seen outside this province: the Thai Lü, Mrabri, Htin and Khamu.

It's now also possible for foreign travellers to cross into Laos at the village of Ban Huay Kon, 140km north of Nan (see p348).

Nan



POP 20,000

Due to its remote location, Nan is not the kind of destination most travellers are going to stumble upon. And its largely featureless downtown isn't going to inspire many postcards home. But if you've taken the time to get here, you'll be rewarded by a city rich in both culture and history. Many of Nan's residents are Thai Lü, the ancestors of immigrants from Xishuangbanna, in southern China. This cultural legacy is seen in the city's art and architecture, particularly in its exquisite temples. A Lanna influence on the town can also be seen in the remains of the old city wall and several early wát.

History

For centuries Nan was an isolated, independent kingdom with few ties to the outside world. Ample evidence of prehistoric habitation exists, but it wasn't until several

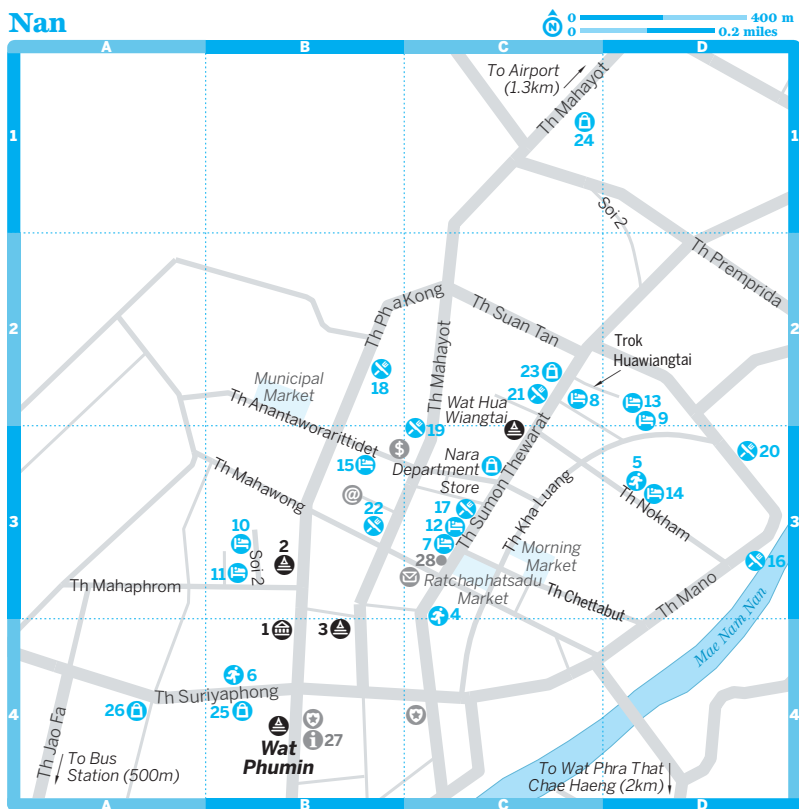
THE MURALS OF WAT PHUMIN

Wat Phumin is northern Thailand's Sistine Chapel, and the images on its walls are now found on everything from knick-knacks at Chiang Mai's night bazaar to postcards sold in Bangkok. However, despite the happy scenes depicted, the murals were executed during a period that saw the end of Nan as a semi-independent kingdom. This resulted in several examples of political and social commentary manifesting themselves in the murals – a rarity in Thai religious art.

The murals commissioned by Jao Suliyaphong, the last king of Nan, include the *Khadhana Jataka*, a relatively obscure story of one of the Buddha's lives that, according to Thai historian David K Wyatt in his excellent book, *Reading Thai Murals*, has never been illustrated elsewhere in the Buddhist world. The story, which is on the left side of the temple's northern wall, depicts an orphan in search of his parents. Wyatt argues that this particular tale was chosen as a metaphor for the kingdom of Nan, which also had been abandoned by a succession of 'parents', the Thai kingdoms of Sukhothai, Chiang Mai and Ayuthaya. At roughly the same time as the murals were painted, Nan was fully incorporated into Siam by King Rama V, and much of its territory was allotted to France. Apparent discontent with this decision can be seen in a scene on the west wall that shows two male monkeys attempting to copulate against a background that, not coincidentally according to Wyatt, resembles the French flag.

The murals are also valuable purely for their artistic beauty, something that is even more remarkable if one steps back and considers the limited palette of colours that the artist, Thit Buaphan, had to work with. The paintings are also fascinating for their fly-on-the-wall depictions of local life in Nan during the end of the 19th century. A depiction of three members of a hill tribe on the west wall includes such details as a man's immense goitre and a barking dog, suggesting this group's place as outsiders. Multiple depictions of a man wearing a feminine shawl, often seen performing traditionally female-only duties, are among the earliest depictions of a *gà-teu-i* (transsexual). And in what must be one of the art world's most superfluous cameos, the artist painted himself on the west wall, flirting with a woman. Considering that the murals took Thit Buaphan more than 20 years to complete, we'll allow him this excess.

Nan



small *meuang* consolidated to form Nanthaburi in the mid-14th century that the city became a power to contend with. Towards the end of the 14th century Nan became one of the nine northern Thai-Lao principalities that comprised Lan Na Thai. The city-state flourished throughout the 15th century under the name Chiang Klang (Middle City), a reference to its position approximately midway between Chiang Mai (New City) and Chiang Thong (Golden City, which is today's Luang Prabang). The Burmese took control of the kingdom in 1558 and transferred many of the inhabitants to Burma as slaves; the city was all but abandoned until western Thailand was wrested from the Burmese in 1786. The local dynasty then regained local sovereignty and it remained semi-autonomous until 1931, when Nan finally (and reluctantly) accepted full Bangkok sponsorship.

Sights

Wat Phumin

(วัดพุมินทร์; admission free) Nan's most famous Buddhist temple is celebrated for its exquisite murals that were executed during the late 19th century by a Thai Lü artist called Thit Buaphan. For an insight into the historical significance of the murals, see the boxed text, p341.

The exterior of the temple takes the form of a cruciform *bòht* that was constructed in 1596 and restored during the reign of Chao Anantavorapitthidet (1867–74). The *bòht* exemplifies the work of Thai Lü architects, and the ornate altar sitting in the centre of the *bòht* has four sides, with four Sukhothai-style sitting Buddhas in *mahn wí-chai* ('victory over Mara' – with one hand touching the ground) posture, facing in each direction.

TEMPLE

Nan

📍 Top Sights

Wat Phumin B4

📍 Sights

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Nan National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติน่าน; Th Pha Kong; admission 100B; ☎9am-4pm) Housed in the 1903-vintage palace of Nan's last two feudal lords, this museum first opened its doors in 1973. In terms of collection and content, it's one of the country's better provincial museums, and has English labels for most items.

The ground floor has ethnological exhibits covering the various ethnic groups found in the province. Among the items on display are silverwork, textiles, folk utensils and tribal costumes. On the 2nd floor are exhibits on Nan history, archaeology, local architecture, royal regalia, weapons, ceramics and religious art. Of the latter, the museum's collection of Buddha images includes some rare Lanna styles as well as the floppy-eared local styles. Also on display on the 2nd floor is a rare 'black' elephant tusk said to have been presented to a Nan lord over 300 years ago by the Khün ruler of Chiang Tung (Kengtung).

Wat Phra That Chae Haeng

TEMPLE

(วัดพระธาตุแช่แห้ง; admission free) Two kilometers past the bridge that spans Mae Nam Nan, heading southeast out of town, this Buddhist temple dating from 1355 is the most sacred wát in Nan Province. It's set in

a square, walled enclosure on top of a hill with a view of Nan and the valley. The Thai Lü-influenced *bòht* features a triple-tiered roof with carved wooden eaves and dragon reliefs over the doors. A gilded Lanna-style *chedi* sits on a large square base next to the *bòht*; visit late in the day and the structure practically glows in the afternoon light.

Wat Phra That Chang Kham

TEMPLE

(วัดพระธาตุช้างค้ำ; admission free; Th Mahayot) This is the second-most important temple in the city after Wat Phra That Chae Haeng. The founding date is unknown, but the main *wi-hähn*, reconstructed in 1458, has a huge seated Buddha image and faint murals that have been partially recovered. (Sometime in the mid-20th century an abbot reportedly ordered the murals to be whitewashed because he thought they were distracting worshippers from concentrating on his sermons!)

Also in the *wi-hähn* is a set of Lanna-period scrolls inscribed (in Lanna script) not only with the usual Buddhist scriptures but with the history, law and astrology of the time. A *tam-mâht* (a 'dhamma seat' used by monks when teaching) sits to one side.

The *chedi* behind the *wi-hähn* dates to the 14th century, probably around the same time as the temple was founded. It features elephant supports similar to those seen in Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai.

Next to the *chedi* is a small, undistinguished *bòht* from the same era. Wat Chang Kham's current abbot tells an interesting story involving the *bòht* and a Buddha image that was once kept inside. According to the abbot, in 1955 art historian AB Griswold offered to purchase the 145cm-tall Buddha inside the small *bòht*. The image appeared to be a crude Sukhothai-style walking Buddha moulded of plaster. After agreeing to pay the abbot 25,000B for the image, Griswold began removing the image from the *bòht* – but as he did it fell and the plaster around the statue broke away to reveal an original Sukhothai Buddha of pure gold underneath. Needless to say, the abbot made Griswold give it back, much to the latter's chagrin. Did Griswold suspect what lay beneath the plaster? The abbot refuses to say. The image is now kept behind a glass partition in the *hòr drai* (Tripitaka library) adjacent to the *wi-hähn*, the largest of its type in Thailand.

Wat Hua Khuang

TEMPLE

(วัดหัวช้าง; admission free) Located diagonally opposite Wat Phra That Chang Kham, this temple features a distinctive Lanna/Lan Xang-style *chedi* with four Buddha niches, an attractive wooden *hòr drai* and a noteworthy *bòht* with a Luang Prabang-style carved wooden veranda. Inside is a carved wooden ceiling and a huge *naga* altar. The temple's founding date is unknown, but stylistic cues suggest this may be one of the city's oldest wát.

Activities

Trekking & Rafting

Nan has nothing like the organised trekking industry found in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, and most visitors, particularly Thais, opt to float rather than walk. White-water rafting along Mae Nam Wa, in northern Nan, is only possible when the water level is high (September to December), and is said to be best during the early part of the rainy season. The rapids span from levels I to IV, and pass through intact jungle and remote villages.

Nan Adventure Tour

RAFTING

(☎08 6701 4777; Th Nokham; 2 days & 1 night per person 3500B, 3 days & 2 nights per person from 4500B) Run by the amicable Mr Boy, this

outfit conducts from two- to three-day, all-inclusive, rafting and/or kayaking trips.

Nan Touring

RAFTING

(☎08 1961 7711; www.nantouring.com; Th Suriyaphong; 3 days & 2 nights per person 5500B) This outfit offers a variety of rafting trips for groups of at least five people.

Other Activities

Nan Seeing Tour

CYCLING TOURS

(☎0 81472 4131; www.nanseeingtour.com; Nan Coffee, Th Sumon Thewarat; 4 person min, 2 days & 1 night per person 1850B, 3 days & 2 nights per person 3850B) This locally run start-up conducts two-wheeled expeditions in and around Nan. A three-day package starts with mountain bikes in Nan city and finishes with dirt bikes in the countryside. Prices are all-inclusive, and Nan Coffee functions as the office.

Fhu Travel

TREKKING

(☎0 5471 0636, 08 1287 7209; www.fhutrail.com; 453/4 Th Sumon Thewarat; 2-person min, per person 'soft' trek 1 day 1600B, 2 days & 1 night 2800B, 3 days & 2 nights 3700B) Offers treks to Mabri, Hmong, Mien, Thai Lü and Htin villages, and can also arrange elephant trekking, rafting and kayaking trips and city tours. The operators have been leading tours for more than 20 years.

Sleeping



Pukha Nanfa Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5477 1111; www.pukhananfahotel.com; 369 Th Sumon Thewarat; r 2500-4600B; ☎☎☎) A recent ownership change has transformed the formerly forgettable Nan Fah Hotel into a charming boutique hotel. Rooms are cosy and classy, with aged wood accentuated by touches such as local cloth, handicrafts and art. Old adverts and pictures add to the old-world feel, and to top it off, the place is conveniently located and has capable staff.

Fah Place

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5471 0222; 237/8 Th Sumon Thewarat; r 400-500B; ☎☎) This new family-run hotel is by far the best deal in town, if not in this part of northern Thailand. The huge rooms have been decorated with attractive teak furniture, including the kind of puffy inviting beds you'd normally find at places that charge 10 times this much. Bathrooms are also big enough to get lost in, and like the rooms, are outfitted with attractive tiles. The same people also run the similar **Sukkasem**

Hotel (☎ 0 5471 0222; 119-121 Th Anantaworarit-tidet; r 400-800B; 🏠🚶)

Nan Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎ 08 1288 8484; 57/15 Th Mahaphrom; r 250-400B; 🏠🚶) In a quiet residential area a short walk from most of Nan's famous temples, this long-standing and well-maintained place has spotless spacious rooms, half of which have private hot-water bathrooms. There's a nearby cafe run by the same people with homemade baked goods and other eats. Nan Guest House is at the end of Soi 2, just off Th Mahaphrom.

Srinual Lodge HOTEL \$\$
(no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 5471 0174; 40 Th Nokham; r/ste 400/1300B; 🏠🚶) This two-storey brick structure holds 25 rooms decked out in *faux rustique* style with logs, bamboo and local textiles. Despite the design theme, the rooms look comfortable and are about as close as you'll get to sleeping near the Mae Nam Nan.

Nan Boutique Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 5477 5532; www.nanboutiquehotel.com; Th Kha Luang; r 1400-2800B; 🏠🚶) This super tidy suburban-feeling compound lacks the character of some of Nan's other choices, but makes up for this with some of the city's most modern and well-equipped rooms.

Dhevaraj Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 0 5471 0078; www.dhevarajhotel.com; 466 Th Sumon Thewarat; r incl breakfast 900-1500B, ste incl breakfast 3500B; 🏠🚶🚶) Not all the rooms here live up to the retro-yet-tidy exterior, with some of the cheaper ones feeling somewhat aged and musty. It's OK value, though, and conveniently located.

Phai Luang Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎ 08 1594 2062; Th Mahaphrom; r 250-550B; 🏠🚶) The rooms in this old wooden house are pretty bare, but the place has heaps of old-school character and is ideal for those who favour atmosphere over comfort.

Amazing Guest House GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 0 5471 0893; 23/7 Th Rat Amnuay/Suntisuk; r 150-450B; 🏠🚶) Rooms in the main building have wooden floors, clean beds and shared hot-water showers. Rooms in concrete rooms out the back have private bathrooms. Amazing is about 1km north of town. After heading north on Th Mahayot, turn left on Th Prem-pracharat then another left on Th Rat Amnuay, which is also labelled as Th Suntisuk.

SP Guest House HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 5477 4897; www.fornan.com/spguesthouse.html; Trok Huawiangtai; r 400-700B; 🏠🚶) This place boasts a homey feel, with 14 mostly spacious rooms equipped with cheap but bright furnishings.

Numchock Guest House GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎ 08 1998 1855; 37 Th Rat Amnuay/Suntisuk; fan/air-con 200/350B; 🏠🚶) Located across from Amazing Guest House, another local family has turned part of its tidy residential compound into an inviting guest house.

🍴 Eating & Drinking

Despite its other charms, Nan has one of the least inspiring dining scenes in northern Thailand.

The town's **night market** (Th Pha Kong; ☎ 5-11pm) provides a few decent food stall offerings.

Pu Som Restaurant NORTHERN THAI \$
(no roman-script sign; 203/1 Th Mano; mains 30-70B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Like a misplaced Texas barnhouse, this popular local restaurant is decked out in cowboy hats, cow skulls, gun holsters, and a plethora of images of the Marlboro Man. Fittingly, the emphasis here is on beef, served in the local style as *lâhp*, or as *nêu-a nêung*, steamed over herbs and served with an incredibly delicious galangal dip.

Yota Vegetarian Restaurant VEGETARIAN THAI \$
(Th Mahawong; mains 10-35B; ☎ 7am-3pm; 🚶) Run by the friendliest lady in town who will not let you leave hungry, this is perhaps the best deal in Nan. It's popular and once the food is gone after lunch, that's it for the day.

Som Tam Thawt THAI \$
(no roman-script sign; Th Sumon Thewarat; mains 15-30B; ☎ 10am-9pm) This tiny restaurant is known for its *sôm-dam tôrt*, deep-fried *sôm-dam*. It's an equal parts crunchy and refreshing snack. They also do great fruit smoothies and other basic dishes.

Goodview Nan THAI \$
(203/1 Th Mano; dishes 35-150B; ☎ 11am-midnight) One of the few places in town to take advantage of the views over the Mae Nam Nan, this place works equally well as a dinner date locale or a riverside pub. There's an English-language menu and at night, a live music soundtrack.

Pizza Da Dario

ITALIAN-THAI \$

(Th Mahayot; pizza 100-160B; ☺lunch & dinner; ☹) This Italian restaurant does pizza and pasta, as well as other Western treats and Thai dishes.

Nan Coffee

CAFE \$

(Th Sumon Thewarat; coffee drinks 25-35B; ☺7.30am-7pm) This conveniently located cafe does good coffee drinks and light meals. There are also a few souvenirs for sale and the restaurant is also the unofficial headquarters for Nan Seeing Tour.

Shopping

Nan is one of the best places in northern Thailand to pick up some souvenirs, and good buys include local textiles, especially the Thai Lü weaving styles. Typical Thai Lü fabrics feature red and black designs on white cotton in floral, geometric and animal designs. A favourite is the *lai nám lăi* (flowing-water design) that shows stepped patterns representing streams, rivers and waterfalls. Local Hmong appliqué and Mien embroidery are of excellent quality. Htin grass-and-bamboo baskets and mats are worth a look, too.

Kad-Nan

MARKET

(www.kad-nan.com; Th Mahayot; ☺10am-10pm) This open-air market is Nan's answer to Bangkok's Chatuchak Weekend Market. Here you'll find shops selling local knick-knacks, art, clothing, restaurants (including one selling Greek food), coffee shops and bars. The market is technically open from 10am, but evening, when most shops and restaurants are open and live music gives the place a fairlike atmosphere, is the best time to visit.

Amnoug Porn & Jangtrakoon

HANDICRAFTS

(Th Sumon Thewarat; ☺8am-7pm) These adjacent shops sell a variety of local goods with an emphasis on textiles and clothing.

OTOP

HANDICRAFTS

(Th Suriyaphong; ☺8am-7pm) The showroom of this government-funded development initiative has everything from local snacks to silverware.

Peera

TEXTILES

(26 Th Suriyaphong; ☺8am-7pm) A short walk from Wat Phumin, this place offers high-quality local textiles, mostly women's skirts and blouses.

Nan Silver

SILVER

(430/1 Th Sumon Thewarat; ☺7.30am-7pm) This small but classy shop sells a huge variety of locally designed and produced silver items.

Information

Kan Internet (Th Mahayot; per hr 15B; ☺9am-10pm) Other places offering internet services are available around town for about 20B per hour.

Main post office (Th Mahawong; ☺8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun) In the centre of town.

Phunan Holiday (☎0 5477 2018; 494 Th Sumon Thewarat; ☺9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) This cheery travel agency can arrange plane tickets, as well as other local services, from trekking to hiring a car and driver.

Siam Commercial Bank (Th Anantaworarit-tidet) ATM and foreign-exchange service. There are also multiple ATMs near Pukha Nanfa Hotel.

Tourist Information Centre (☎0 5475 1169; Th Pha Kong; ☺8.30am-4.30pm) Opposite Wat Phumin, this helpful information centre is hidden behind vendors and coffee shops.

Getting There & Away**Air**

Taxis from the airport to town run from about 100B per person; contact **Mr Klay** (☎08 6188 0079).

Destinations from Nan include:

Bangkok's Don Muang Airport (1690B, one hour 20 minutes, one to two times daily) via **Nok Air** (☎nationwide call centre 1318, Nan 0 5477 1308; www.nokair.co.th; Nan airport) and **Solar Air** (☎nationwide call centre 02 535 2455; www.solarair.co.th; Nan airport)

Chiang Mai (990B, 45 minutes, twice daily) via **Kan Air** (☎nationwide call centre 02 551 6111, Nan 0 5477 1308; www.kanairlines.com; Nan airport) and **Nok Mini** (☎nationwide call centre 0 5328 0444; www.nokmini.com; Nan airport)

Bus

From Nan all buses, minivans and *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* leave from the bus station at the southwestern edge of town. A motorcycle taxi from the station to the centre of town costs 25B.

If you're connecting to the train station at Den Chai in Phrae, you can hop on any bus bound for Chiang Mai or Bangkok.

Bangkok (424B to 773B, 10 to 11 hours, frequent departures from 8am to 10am and 6.10pm to 7.45pm)

Chiang Mai (223B to 412B, five hours, frequent departures from 7.30am to 10.30pm)

Chiang Rai (176B, five hours, 9am)

Lampang (120B, four hours, frequent departures from 7.30am to 10.30pm)

Phayao (123B, three hours, 1.30pm)

Phrae (85B, two hours, frequent departures from 7.30am to 10.30pm)

i Getting Around

Sāhm-lór around town cost 20B to 30B.

Several businesses, including Amazing Guest House, Fah Place, **Oversea Shop** (☎0 5471 0258; 488 Th Sumon Thewarat; bicycles per day 80B, motorcycles per day 200B; ☀8.30am-5.30pm) and Nan Guest House rent out bikes for about 50B per day and motorcycles from about 180B to 300B per day.

Around Nan

THAM PHAH TUP FOREST RESERVE

ถ้ำผาตูบ

This limestone **cave complex** is about 10km north of Nan and is part of a relatively new wildlife reserve. Some 17 caves have been counted, of which nine are easily located by means of established (but unmarked) trails.

From Nan you can catch a bus or *sōrng-tāa-ou* bound for Pua or Thung Chang; it will stop at the turn-off to the caves for 30B. The vehicles leave from the bus station.

NAN RIVERSIDE GALLERY หอศิลป์ริมน่าน
Twenty kilometres north of Nan on Rte 1080, this private **art gallery** (www.nanartgallery.com; Km 20, Rte 1080; admission 20B; ☀9am-5pm Thu-Tue) exhibits contemporary Nan-influenced art in a peaceful setting. Established in 2004 by Nan artist Winai Prabipoo, the two-storey building holds the more interesting temporary exhibitions downstairs – sculpture, ceramics and drawings – as well as a permanent painting collection upstairs – which seems to be mainly inspired by the Wat Phumin murals. The unusual building is a light-filled converted rice barn with an arrow-shaped turret. The shop and cafe have seats right on the Mae Nam Nan and the beautiful manicured gardens are nice to wander around. From Nan, take any northbound bus or *sōrng-tāa-ou* (30B) to the gallery.

WAT NONG BUA

วัดหนองบัว

The neat and tidy Thai Lü village of Nong Bua, near the town of Tha Wang Pha, approximately 30km north of Nan, is famous for Lü-style **Wat Nong Bua** (admission free). Featuring a typical two-tiered roof and

carved wooden portico, the *wi-hāhn* design is simple yet striking – note the carved *naga* heads at the roof corners. Inside the *wi-hāhn* are some noteworthy *jataka* murals thought to have been painted by Thit Buaphan, the same mural artist whose work can be seen at Wat Phumin. Be sure to leave a donation at the altar for the temple's upkeep and restoration.

There is a model Thai Lü house directly behind the wāt where weaving is done and you can buy attractive local textiles.

To get there, northbound buses and *sōrng-tāa-ou* (35B) to Tha Wang Pha leave from the bus terminal. Get off at Samyak Longbom, a three-way intersection before Tha Wang Pha, and walk west to a bridge over Mae Nam Nan and turn left. Continue until you reach another small bridge, after which Wat Nong Bua will be on your right. It's a long 3km from the highway to the wāt.

DOI PHU KHA NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติดอยภูคา

This **national park** (☎0 5470 1000; admission 200B) is centred on 2000m-high Doi Phu Kha, the province's highest peak, in Amphoe Pua and Amphoe Bo Kleua in northeastern Nan Province (about 75km from Nan). There are several Htin, Mien, Hmong and Thai Lü **villages** in the park and vicinity, as well as a couple of **caves** and **waterfalls**, and endless opportunities for forest **walks**. The park headquarters has a basic map and staff can arrange a local guide for walks or more extended excursions around the area, as well as rafting on the Nam Wa. The park is often cold in the cool season and especially wet in the wet season.

The park offers a variety of **bungalows** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; 2-7 people 300-2500B), and there is a nearby restaurant and basic shop.

To reach the national park by public transport you must first take a bus or *sōrng-tāa-ou* north of Nan to Pua (50B). Get off at the 7-Eleven then cross the highway to board one of the three daily *sōrng-tāa-ou* (50B, 30 minutes) that depart at 7.30am, 9.30am and 11.30am.

BAN BO LUANG

บ้านบ่อหลวง

Ban Bo Luang (also known as Ban Bo Kleua, or Salt Well Village) is a picturesque Htin village southeast of Doi Phu Kha National Park where the long-standing occupation has been the extraction of salt from local salt wells. It's

easy to find the main community salt wells, more or less in the centre of the village.

If you have your own transport, the village is a good base for exploring the nearby national parks, Doi Phu Kha and **Khun Nan National Park** (☎08 4483 7240; admission free). The latter is located a few kilometres north of Ban Bo Luang, and has a 2km walk from the visitor centre that ends in a viewpoint looking over local villages and nearby Laos.

There is a handful of places to stay in Ban Bor Luang. The best of these, **Boklua View** (☎08 1809 6392; www.bokluaview.com; Ban Bo Luang; r & bungalows incl breakfast 1850B; 🍽️🚶🏠), is an attractive and well-run hillside resort overlooking the village and the Nam Mang that runs through it. The resort has its own garden and serves good food (be sure to try Chef Toun's chicken deep-fried with northern Thai spices). If Boklua View is full or beyond your budget, just downhill **Oon Ai Mang** (no roman-script sign; ☎08 1374 7994; Ban Bo Luang; bungalows incl breakfast 500-650B) has some very basic tents and bamboo bungalows with shared bathrooms at the edge of the Nam Mang. There are some similar 'homestay' set-ups outside of the town.

There are a few small restaurants serving basic dishes in Ban Bo Luang.

To reach Ban Bo Luang from Nan, take a bus or *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* north of Nan to Pua

(50B). Get off at the 7-Eleven, cross the highway to take the *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* that terminates in the village (80B, one hour), departing at 7.30am, 9.30am and 11.30am.

PHITSANULOK PROVINCE

Phitsanulok

พิจิตร โลก

POP 84,000

Phitsanulok sees relatively few independent travellers, but a fair amount of package tourists, perhaps because the city is a convenient base from which to explore the attractions of historical Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet. Due to large parts of the town being burned down by a massive fire in 1957, Phitsanulok's architecture is pretty nondescript. Yet this vibrant and extremely friendly city boasts some interesting sites and museums, chief of which is Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, which contains one of Thailand's most revered Buddha images.

Those willing to forge their own path can also use the city as a base to visit the nearby national parks and wildlife sanctuaries of Thung Salaeng Luang and Phu Hin Rong Kla, the former strategic headquarters of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).

BORDER CROSSING: BAN HUAY KON TO MUANG NGEUN

Located 140km north of Nan, Ban Huay Kon is a very quiet village in the mountains near the Lao border. There's a fun **border market** on Saturday mornings, but most will come here because of the town's recent status as an international border crossing to Laos – it's allegedly only 35km to the Lao town of Hongsa, 152km to Luang Prabang (90km by boat), 295km to the Chinese town of Mengla and 406km to Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam.

After passing the **Thai immigration booth** (☎0 5469 3530; ☉8am-5pm), foreigners can purchase a 30-day visa for Laos for US\$30 to US\$42, depending on nationality. There is an extra US\$1 or 50B charge after 4pm and on weekends. You can then proceed 2.5km to the Lao village of Muang Ngeun, where you could stay at the **Phouxay Guesthouse** (☎020-214 2826; Nan-Hongsa Rd; r 50,000K), or if you're heading onward, to the tiny **'Passenger Car Station'** (☎020-245 0145, 020-244 4130) beside the market, from where *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* leave for Hongsa (40,000K, 1½ hours) between 2pm and 4pm, and to Pak Kaen (35,000K, one hour) at around 7.30am and 2pm arriving in time for the Mekong slowboats to Huay Xai and Pak Beng respectively.

To get to Ban Huay Kon, there are three daily minivans (100B, three hours) from Den Chai, in Phrae, pulling into Nan at around 5am, 8am and 9am. The only other option is to hop on a bus from Nan to Pon (105B, 2½ hours), which departs every 30 minutes from 6am to 6pm. From Pon you'll need to transfer to one of two daily *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* that go the remaining 30km to Ban Huay Kon (100B, one hour) at 9.30am and noon. In the opposite direction, minivans leave Ban Huay Kon at 10am, 1pm and 2.30pm.

There's basic bungalow-style accommodation between Ban Huay Kon and the border. Ask in the village for details.

FOLK MUSEUM, BUDDHA-CASTING FOUNDRY & BIRD GARDEN

A nationally acclaimed expert on Thai folkways, a former military cartographer and Buddha statue caster, and apparent bird aficionado, Sergeant Major Thawee Buranakhet has taken from his diverse experiences and interests to create three very worthwhile attractions in Phitsanulok.

The **Sergeant Major Thawee Folk Museum** (26/43 Th Wisut Kasat; adult/child 50/20B; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) displays a remarkable collection of tools, textiles and photographs from Phitsanulok Province. This fascinating museum is spread throughout five traditional-style Thai buildings with well-groomed gardens, and the displays are all accompanied by informative and legible English descriptions. Those interested in cooking will find much of interest in the display of a traditional Thai kitchen and the various traps used to catch game. Male visitors will be undoubtedly disturbed by a display that describes traditional bull castration – a process that apparently involves no sharp tools.

Across the street and also belonging to Dr Thawee is a small **Buddha Casting Foundry** (admission free; ☎8am-5pm) where bronze Buddha images of all sizes are cast. Visitors are welcome to watch and there are even detailed photo exhibits demonstrating the lost-wax method of metal casting. Some of the larger images take a year or more to complete. There is a small gift shop at the foundry where you can purchase bronze images of various sizes.

In addition to the bronze foundry, there is also a display of fighting cocks, which are bred and sold all over the country. (The official English name for this part of the facility is 'The Centre of Conservative Folk Cock'.)

Attached to the foundry is Dr Thawee's latest project, **Garden Birds of Thailand** (adult/child 50/20B; ☎8.30am-5pm). This collection of aviaries contains indigenous Thai birds including some endangered species, such as the very pretty pink-chested jamu fruit-dove, and the prehistoric-looking helmeted hornbill. Unfortunately, the cages are generally rather small and don't reflect the birds' natural environments.

The museums are south of Phitsanulok on Th Wisut Kasat; a túk-túk here should cost about 60B.

👁 Sights

Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat TEMPLE

(วัดพระศรีรัตนมหาธาตุ; admission free; ☎6am-9pm) The full name of this temple is Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, but the locals call it Wat Phra Si or Wat Yai. The main *wi-hahn* appears small from the outside, but houses the Phra Phuttha Chinnarat, one of Thailand's most revered and copied Buddha images. This famous bronze statue is probably second in importance only to the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew.

The story goes that construction of this wát was commissioned under the reign of King Li Thai in 1357. When it was completed, King Li Thai wanted it to contain three high-quality bronze images, so he sent for well-known sculptors from Si Satchanalai, Chiang Saen and Hariphunchai (Lamphun), as well as five Brahman priests. The first two castings worked well, but the third required three attempts before it was decreed the best of all. Legend has it that a white-robed sage appeared from nowhere to assist in the

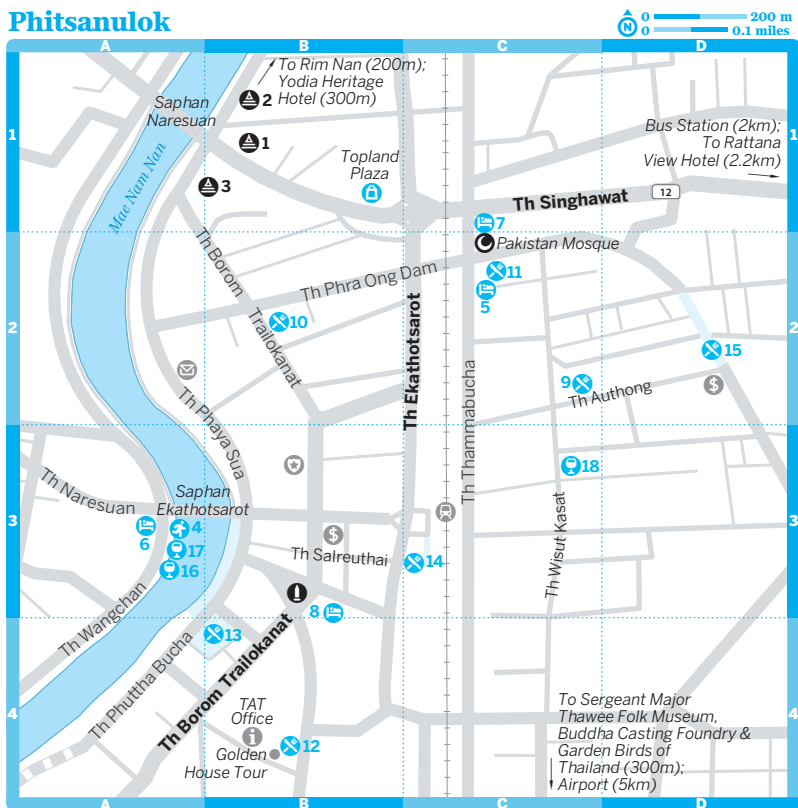
final casting, then disappeared. This last image was named the Chinnarat (Victorious King) Buddha and it became the centrepiece in the *wi-hahn*. The other two images, Phra Chinnasi and Phra Si Satsada, were later moved to the royal temple of Wat Bowonniwet in Bangkok.

The image was cast in the late Sukhothai style, but what makes it strikingly unique is the flamelike halo around the head and torso that turns up at the bottom to become dragon-serpent heads on either side of the image. The head of this Buddha is a little wider than standard Sukhothai, giving the statue a very solid feel.

Another sanctuary to one side has been converted into a free **museum** (☎9am-5.30pm Wed-Sun), displaying antique Buddha images, ceramics and other historic artefacts.

Despite the holiness of the temple, endless loud broadcasts asking for donations, Thai musicians, a strip of vendors hawking everything from herbs to lottery tickets, several ATM machines and hundreds of visitors

Phitsanulok



all contribute to a relentlessly hectic atmosphere. Come early (ideally before 7am) if you're looking for quiet contemplation or simply wish to take photos, and regardless of the time be sure to dress appropriately – no shorts or sleeveless tops.

Near Wat Yai, on the same side of the river, is another temple of the same period – **Wat Nang Phaya**.

Wat Ratburana

TEMPLE

(วัดราชมุนี; admission free; ☺6am-8.30pm) Across the street from Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, Wat Ratburana draws fewer visitors but in some ways is more interesting than its famous neighbour. In addition to a *wi-hahn* with a 700-year-old gold Buddha, an *ubosòt* chapel with beautiful murals thought to date back to the mid-19th century, and two *hōr drai*, the temple is also home to a few quirky attractions that offer a fascinating insight into the practices of Thai Buddhism.

The most obvious of these is a large wooden boat decked with garlands that originally served to transport King Rama V on an official visit to Phitsanulok. Today the boat is thought to grant wishes to those who make an offering and crawl under its entire length three or nine times. Next to the *wi-hahn* is a sacred tree with ladders on either side that visitors climb up, leave an offering, then ring a bell and descend, again repeating the action a total of three or nine times. And directly adjacent to the tree is an immense gong that, when rubbed the right way, creates a unique ringing sound. Near each of these attractions you'll find somebody stationed who, in addition to selling the coins, incense and flowers used in offerings, will also instruct visitors in exactly how to conduct each particular ritual, including how many times to pass, what to offer, and what prayer to say.

Phitsanulok

Sights

- 1 Wat Nang Phaya B1
- 2 Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat..... B1
- 3 Wat Ratburana..... B1

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 4 Phae Hatha Thai Massage..... A3

Sleeping

- 5 Golden Grand Hotel..... C2
- 6 Grand Riverside Hotel..... A3
- 7 Kraisaeng Place C1
- 8 Lithai Guest House..... B3

Eating

- 9 Ban Mai..... C2
- 10 Daeng..... B2
- 11 Fah-Ke-Rah C2
- 12 Jaroen Tham..... B4
- 13 Night Bazaar B4
- 14 Night Market..... C3
- 15 Night Market..... D2

Drinking

- 16 Calito..... A3
- 17 Sabai Boat..... A3
- 18 Wood Stock..... C3
- Wow! (see 17)



Activities

Phae Hatha Thai Massage

MESSAGE

(Th Wangchan; massage per hr with fan/air-con 150/180B; ☺10am-9pm) Relaxation takes an entirely new form at this Thai massage centre housed on a floating raft.



Sleeping

Lithai Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5521 9626; 73/105 Th Phayalithai; r incl breakfast 250-460B; 🏠☺) This place is so clean it gleams. The light-filled 60 or so rooms don't have much character but they are excellent value. Most have large private bathrooms with hot water, cable TV, plentiful furniture and a fridge. Rates include breakfast and free bottled water. There is an air ticket agent, coffee shop and restaurant on site.

Golden Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5521 0234; www.goldengrandhotel.com; 66 Th Thammabucha; r incl breakfast 690-850B; 🏠☺) Mint green went out of style a long time ago, but this is about the only fault we can find with the Golden Grand. The rooms are so tidy we're wondering if they've ever even been slept in, and friendly staff and great views of the city from the upper floors are even more incentive to stay here.

Yodia Heritage Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 1613 8496; www.yodiaheritage.com; 89/1 Th Phuttha Bucha; r incl breakfast 2950B, ste incl breakfast 4200-8900B; 🏠☺) This new boutique hotel takes the crown as Phitsanulok's most upscale accommodation. Located along a quiet stretch of the Mae Nam Nan, suites are huge, and feature similarly large tubs and a semi-private swimming pool.

Rattana View Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5522 1999; 847 Th Mitrphap; r incl breakfast 450-1400B; 🏠☺) A block east of the main bus station, this hotel is an attractive choice. The handsome rooms exude a crisp, clean feel, and all include wide balconies. There's a restaurant on the ground floor and a spa is located in the Anway Building directly in front of the hotel.

Kraisaeng Place

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5521 0509; 45 Th Thammabucha; r 350-450B; 🏠☺) Appearing more like a small apartment building than a hotel, the well-equipped rooms here are a good bargain. Be sure to look at the double rooms, which for only a bit more are gigantic and feature an additional seating area. Be prepared for a fair bit of traffic noise.

Grand Riverside Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5524 8333; www.tgrhotel.com; cnr Th Naresuan & Th Wangchan; r incl breakfast 1600-1800B, ste incl breakfast 3000B; 🏠☺) Overlooking the Mae Nam Nan from its west bank, this towering business hotel offers all the amenities you'd expect in a relatively new, top-end hotel. Deluxe rooms offer an additional sitting area and river views.



Eating

Phitsanulok takes its cuisine seriously. The city is particularly obsessive about night markets, and there are no fewer than three dotted in various locations around town. The most well known, Phitsanulok's **Night Bazaar** (mains 40-80B; ☺5pm-3am), focuses mainly on clothing, but a few riverfront restaurants specialise in *pàk bâng loy fáh* (literally 'floating-in-the-sky morning glory

vine'), where the cook fires up a batch of *pàk búng* in the wok and then flings it through the air to a waiting server who catches it on a plate. If you're lucky, you'll be here when a tour group is trying to catch the flying vegetables, but is actually dropping *pàk búng* all over the place. Another **night market** (mains 20-40B; ☎5pm-midnight) lines either side of Th Phra Ong Dam north of Th Authong, and there's a very busy **night market** (mains 20-60B; ☎4-8pm) just south of the train station that features mostly takeaway items including *kôw nêe-o hôr*, tiny banana-leaf parcels of sticky rice with various toppings; there are two vendors opposite each other near the Th Ekahotsarot entrance to the market.

Another dish associated with Phitsanulok is *gôay-dêe-o hây kâh* (literally meaning, 'legs-hanging' noodles). The name comes from the way customers sit on the floor facing the river, with their legs dangling below. **Rim Nan** (no roman-script sign; 5/4 Th Phaya Sua; mains 20-35B; ☎9am-4pm), north of Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, is one of a few similar restaurants along Th Phutta Bucha that offer noodles and 'alternative' seating.



Ban Mai

THAI \$\$

(93/30 Th Authong; mains 60-150B; ☎11am-2pm & 5-10pm; ☎) Dinner at this local favourite is like a meal at your grandparents': opinionated conversation resounds, frumpy furniture abounds, and an overfed Siamese cat appears to rule the dining room. Don't

expect home cooking though; Ban Mai specialises in unusual but perfectly executed dishes that aren't easily found elsewhere, like the *gaang pêt Bêt yâhng*, a curry of smoked duck, or *yam dà-krâi*, lemongrass 'salad'.

Fah-Ke-Rah

MUSLIM-THAI \$

(786 Th Phra Ong Dam; mains 5-20B; ☎6am-2pm) There are several Thai-Muslim cafes near the mosque on Th Phra Ong Dam, and this is a popular one. Thick *roh-dee* (crispy dough 'pancakes') is served up with *gaang mât-sà-màn* (Muslim curry), fresh yoghurt is made daily and the *roh-dee gaang* (*roh-dee* served with a small bowl of curry) is a steal at 20B.

Daeng

VIETNAMESE-THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Borom Trailokanat; dishes 40-120B; ☎lunch & dinner; ☎) Across from Pailyn Hotel (the English-language sign says 'Food & Drink'), this small shop is part of a popular chain of Thai/Vietnamese food that originated in Nong Khai. Be sure to order the restaurant's signature dish, *nâm neu-ang*, grilled pork balls served with fresh herbs and rice paper sheets to wrap it all up in.

Jaroen Tham

VEGETARIAN-THAI \$

(Vegetarian Food; Th Sithamatraipidok; dishes 15-20B; ☎8am-3pm; ☎) Around the corner from the TAT office, this simple place serves a choice of vegetarian dishes paired with husky brown rice.

PHITSANULOK'S BUSES & MINIVANS

Transport options out of Phitsanulok are good as it's a junction for several bus routes. Phitsanulok's **bus station** (☎0 5521 2090) is 2km east of town on Hwy 12. Minivans also depart from the bus terminal, including frequent departures to Mae Sot (163B, four hours, 7am to 2.30pm).

DESTINATION	FARE (B)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bangkok	224-380	5	every hr 7.20am-midnight
Chiang Rai	249-320	5	every hr 8am-midnight
Mae Sai	280-456	6	every hr 5.30am-midnight
Nan	238	6	midnight, 2am
Phrae	150	4	midnight, 2am
Mae Sot	210	5	1am, 3am
Chiang Mai	211-317	6	every hr 8am-midnight
Lampang	155-265	4	every hr 8am-midnight
Sukhothai	28-50	1	every hr 5.40am-6pm
Kamphaeng Phet	53-74	3	every hr 5am-6pm



Drinking & Entertainment

A few floating pubs can be found along the strip of Th Wangchan directly in front of the Grand Riverside Hotel including **Sabai Boat** (no roman-script sign; Th Wangchan; dishes 40-140B; ☀11am-11pm) and **Wow!** (Th Wangchan; dishes 50-150B; ☀5pm-midnight), both proffering food as well as drink.

Wood Stock

BAR

(148/22-23 Th Wisut Kasat; dishes 35-70B; ☀5pm-midnight) Wood Stock combines funky '60s and '70s-era furniture, live music, and a brief and cheap menu of *gàp glâam* (Thai-style nibbles).

Calito

BAR

(☎08 1953 2629; 84/1 Th Wangchan; dishes 70-100B; ☀6pm-midnight) Located on firm ground, Calito has an extensive menu of Thai eats and cold draught beer.



Information

Shops offering internet access dot the streets around the train station, near Topland Plaza and on the western bank of the river near Saphan Ekathotsarot. Several banks in town offer foreign-exchange services and ATMs. There are also several ATMs inside the Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat compound.

Golden House Tour (☎0 5525 9973; 55/37-38 Th Borom Trailokanat; ☀7am-7pm Mon-Sat) This experienced travel agency can book airline tickets and arrange ground transport in and around Phitsanulok.

Krung Thai Bank (35 Th Naresuan; ☀until 8pm) An after-hours exchange window.

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

Tourism Authority of Thailand office (TAT; ☎nationwide call centre 1672, Phitsanulok 0 5525 2742; tatphlok@tat.or.th; 209/7-8 Th Borom Trailokanat; ☀8.30am-4.30pm) Off Th Borom Trailokanat, with helpful staff who hand out free maps of the town and a walking-tour sheet.

Tourist police (☎1155; Th Ekathotsarot)



Getting There & Away

Air

Phitsanulok's **airport** (☎0 5530 1002) is 5km south of town. Golden House Tour has a board at the airport indicating its minivan service from the airport to hotels (200B per person). Tùk-tùk go to the airport from town for 150B.

Nok Air (☎nationwide call centre 1318; www.nokair.co.th; Phitsanulok airport) operates

flights between Phitsanulok and Bangkok's Don Muang airport (1290B, 50 minutes, twice daily).

Train

Phitsanulok's train station is within walking distance of accommodation and offers a left-luggage service. The station is a significant train terminal, and virtually every northbound and southbound train stops here; major destinations from Phitsanulok include Bangkok (80B to 1164B, five to seven hours, 11 times daily) and Chiang Mai (143B to 1145B, seven to nine hours, six times daily). To check the most up-to-date timetables and prices in advance call the **State Railway of Thailand** (☎free 24hr hotline 1690; www.railway.co.th) or look at its website.



Getting Around

Rides on the town's Darth Vaderlike *sàhm-lór* start at about 60B. Outside the train station there's a sign indicating tük-tük prices for different destinations around town.

Budget (☎0 5530 1020; www.budget.co.th) has a car-rental office at the airport that charges from 1500B per day.

Around Phitsanulok

PHU HIN RONG KLA NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูหินร่องกล้า

Between 1967 and 1982, the mountain that is known as **Phu Hin Rong Kla** (☎0 5523 3527; admission 200B; ☀8.30am-5pm) served as the strategic headquarters for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and its tactical arm, the People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT). The remote, easily defended summit was perfect for an insurgent army. China's Yunnan Province is only 300km away and it was here that CPT cadres received their training in revolutionary tactics. (This was until the 1979 split between the Chinese and Vietnamese communists, when the CPT sided with Vietnam.)

For nearly 20 years the area around Phu Hin Rong Kla served as a battlefield for Thai troops and the communists. In 1972 the Thai government launched an unsuccessful major offensive against the PLAT. The CPT camp at Phu Hin Rong Kla became especially active after the Thai military killed hundreds of students in Bangkok during the October 1976 student-worker uprising. Many students subsequently fled here to join the CPT, setting up a hospital and a school of political and military tactics. By 1978 the PLAT ranks here had swelled to 4000. In 1980 and 1981 the Thai armed forces tried again and were

able to recapture some parts of CPT territory. But the decisive blow to the CPT came in 1982, when the government declared an amnesty for all the students who had joined the communists after 1976. The departure of most of the students broke the spine of the movement, which had become dependent on their membership. A final military push in late 1982 resulted in the surrender of the PLAT, and Phu Hin Rong Kla was declared a national park in 1984.

Sights & Activities

The park covers about 307 sq km of rugged mountains and forest, much of it covered by rocks and wildflowers. The elevation at park headquarters is about 1000m, so the area is refreshingly cool even in the hot season. The main attractions don't tend to stray too far from the main road through the park and include the remains of the CPT stronghold – a rustic meeting hall, the school of political and military tactics – and the CPT admin-

istration building. Across the road from the school is a water wheel designed by exiled engineering students.

Phu Hin Rong Kla can become quite crowded on weekends and holidays; schedule a more peaceful visit for midweek.

Pha Chu Thong

HISTORICAL SITE

A 1km trail leads to Pha Chu Thong (Flag Raising Cliff, sometimes called Red Flag Cliff), where the communists would raise the red flag to announce a military victory. Also in this area is an **air-raid shelter**, a **look-out** and the remains of the main **CPT headquarters** – the most inaccessible point in the territory before a road was constructed by the Thai government. The buildings in the park are made out of wood and bamboo and have no plumbing or electricity – a testament to how primitive the living conditions were.

There is a small **museum** at the park headquarters that displays relics from CPT days, although there's not a whole lot of Eng-

WORTH A TRIP

THE GREEN ROUTE

Rte 12 between Phitsanulok and Lom Sak is known as the 'Green Route', and runs along the scenic, rapid-studded Lam Nam Khek. Off this route are waterfalls, resorts, and the Phu Hin Rong Kla and Thung Salaeng Luang National Parks.

The Phitsanulok TAT office distributes a map of the attractions along this 130km stretch of road. You may want to bypass the first two waterfalls, **Nam Tok Sakhunothayan** (at the Km 33 marker) and **Kaeng Song** (at the Km 45 marker), which on weekends can be overwhelmed with visitors. The third, **Kaeng Sopha** at the Km 72 marker, is a larger area of small falls and rapids where you can walk from rock formation to rock formation – there are more or fewer rocks depending on the rains. When there's enough water (typically from September to November) any of the resorts along this section can organise **white-water rafting** trips on the Lam Nam Khek.

Further east along the road is the 1262-sq-km **Thung Salaeng Luang National Park** (☎0 5526 8019; admission 200B; ☀8am-5pm), one of Thailand's largest and most important wildlife sanctuaries. The entrance is at the Km 80 marker, where the park headquarters here has information on walks and accommodation.

If you have your own wheels, you can turn south at the Km 100 marker onto Rte 2196 and head for **Khao Kho** (Khow Khor), another mountain lair used by the CPT during the 1970s.

If you've made the side trip to Khao Kho you can choose either to return to the Phitsanulok-Lom Sak highway, or take Rte 2258, off Rte 2196, until it terminates at Rte 203. On Rte 203 you can continue north to Lom Sak or south to Phetchabun.

Resort-style accommodation can be found along most of the Green Route, with budget accommodation clumping near Kaeng Song, around Km 45, and at the various **national parks** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; tent site 30B, 2-8 person tent 150-600B, bungalows 300-5000B). Several restaurants are located on the banks of the Nam Khek, most taking full advantage of the views and breezes.

For more freedom it's best to do this route with your own wheels. Buses between Phitsanulok and Lom Sak cost 50B for ordinary and 70B for air-con, each way. During daylight hours it's possible to flag down another bus to continue your journey, but after 4pm it gets a little chancy.

lish explanation. At the end of the road into the park is a small **White Hmong village**.

Walking Trails

WALKING

If you're not interested in the history of Phu Hin Rong Kla, there are **waterfalls, hiking trails** and **scenic views**, as well as some interesting rock formations – jutting boulders called **Lan Hin Pum**, and an area of deep rocky crevices where PLAT troops would hide during air raids, called **Lan Hin Taek**. Ask at the **visitor centre** (☎8.30am-4.30pm) for maps.

Sleeping & Eating

Golden House Tour, near the TAT office in Phitsanulok, can help book accommodation.

Thailand's Royal Forest Department

CAMPING GROUND \$\$

(☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th; 2-8 person tent 150-600B, bungalows 300-2100B) Bungalows for three to 15 people, in three different zones of the park, must be booked in advance via this organisation. You can also pitch a tent or rent one, and rent sleeping bags (60B). Near the camping ground and bungalows are restaurants and food vendors. The best are Duang Jai Cafeteria – try its famous carrot *sôm-dam* – and Rang Thong.

Getting There & Away

The park headquarters is about 125km from Phitsanulok. To get here, first take an early bus to Nakhon Thai (46B to 97B, two hours, every hour from 5am to 6pm). From there you can charter a *sôrng-tâa-ou* to the park (800B) from near the market. From Phitsanulok, Golden House Tour charges 1700B for car and driver; petrol is extra. This is a delightful trip if you're on a motorcycle since there's not much traffic along the way, but a strong engine is necessary to conquer the hills to Phu Hin Rong Kla.

SUKHOTHAI PROVINCE

Sukhothai

สุโขทัย

POP 37,000

The Sukhothai (Rising of Happiness) Kingdom flourished from the mid-13th century to the late 14th century. This period is often viewed as the 'golden age' of Thai civilisation – the religious art and architecture of the era are considered to be the most classic of Thai styles. The remains of the kingdom, today known as the *meuang gòw* (old city), feature around 45 sq km of partially rebuilt

THE FIRST?

The establishment of Sukhothai in 1238 is often described as the formation of the first Thai kingdom. But the kingdom of Chiang Saen had already been established 500 years earlier, and at the time of Sukhothai's founding, other Thai kingdoms such as Lanna and Phayao also existed. Sukhothai's profound influence on the art, language, literature and religion of modern Thai society, not to mention the immense size of the kingdom at its peak in the early 13th century, are doubtlessly reasons for the proliferation of this convenient, but technically incorrect, historical fact.

ruins, which are one of the most visited ancient sites in Thailand.

Located 12km east of the historical park on the Mae Nam Yom, the market town of New Sukhothai is not particularly interesting. Yet its friendly and relaxed atmosphere, good transport links and attractive accommodation make it a good base from which to explore the old city ruins.

History

Sukhothai is typically regarded as the first capital of Siam, although this is not entirely accurate (see the boxed text above). The area was previously the site of a Khmer empire until 1238, when two Thai rulers, Pho Khun Pha Muang and Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao, decided to unite and form a new Thai kingdom.

Sukhothai's dynasty lasted 200 years and spanned nine kings. The most famous was King Ramkhamhaeng, who reigned from 1275 to 1317 and is credited with developing the first Thai script – his inscriptions are also considered the first Thai literature. Ramkhamhaeng eventually expanded his kingdom to include an area even larger than that of present-day Thailand. But a few kings later in 1438, Sukhothai was absorbed by Ayuthaya.

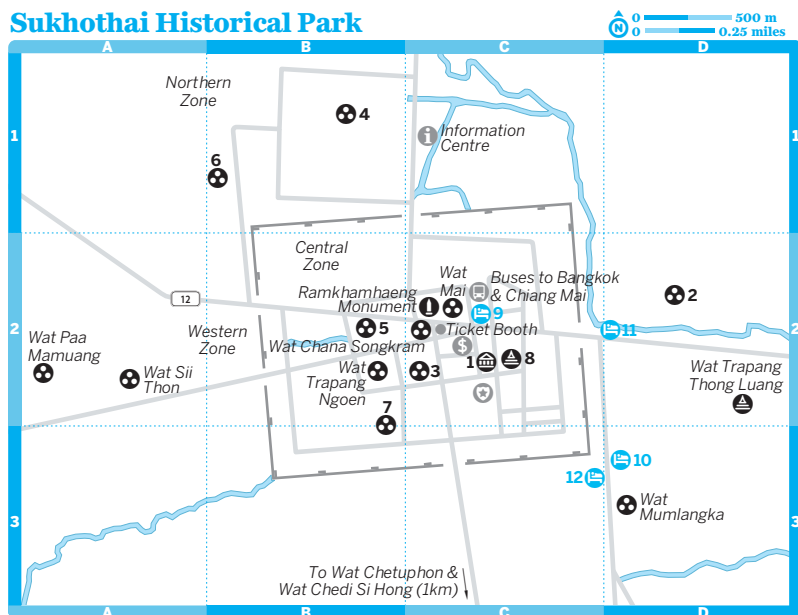
Sights

SUKHOTHAI HISTORICAL PARK

อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์สุโขทัย

The Sukhothai ruins are one of Thailand's most impressive World Heritage Sites. The park includes remains of 21 historical sites and four large ponds within the old walls,

Sukhothai Historical Park



Sukhothai Historical Park

📍 Sights

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| 1 Ramkhamhaeng National Museum..... | C2 |
| 2 Wat Chang Lom..... | D2 |
| 3 Wat Mahathat..... | C2 |
| 4 Wat Phra Phai Luang..... | B1 |
| 5 Wat Sa Si..... | B2 |
| 6 Wat Si Chum..... | B1 |
| 7 Wat Si Sawai..... | B2 |
| 8 Wat Trampang Thong..... | C2 |

🛏 Sleeping

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------|
| 9 Old City Guest House..... | C2 |
| 10 Orchid Hibiscus Guest House..... | D3 |
| 11 PinPao Guest House..... | D2 |
| Thai Thai..... | (see 10) |
| 12 Tharaburi Resort..... | C3 |
| Vitoun Guest House..... | (see 9) |

🍴 Eating

- | | |
|------------------|---------|
| Coffee Cup..... | (see 9) |
| Food Stalls..... | (see 9) |

with an additional 70 sites within a 5km radius.

The architecture of Sukhothai temples is most typified by the classic lotus-bud *chedi*, featuring a conical spire topping a square-sided structure on a three-tiered base. Some sites exhibit other rich architectural forms introduced and modified during the period, such as bell-shaped Sinhalese and double-tiered Srivijaya *chedi*.

Despite the popularity of the park, it's quite expansive, and solitary exploration is usually possible. Some of the most impressive ruins are outside the city walls, so a

bicycle or motorcycle is essential to fully appreciate everything.

The ruins are divided into five zones, the central, northern and eastern of which each has a separate 100B admission fee.

Central Zone

This is the historical park's main **zone** (Map p356; admission 100B, plus per bicycle/motorcycle/car 10/30/50B; ☎6.30am-8pm) and is home to what are arguably some of the park's most well-preserved and impressive ruins. An audio tour, available in English, Japanese and Thai, can be rented at the ticket booth for 150B.

Wat Mahathat

TEMPLE

(วัดมหาธาตุ; Map p356) Completed in the 13th century, the largest wát in Sukhothai is surrounded by brick walls (206m long and 200m wide) and a moat that is believed to represent the outer wall of the universe and the cosmic ocean. The *chedi* spires feature the famous lotus-bud motif, and some of the original stately Buddha figures still sit among the ruined columns of the old *wi-hähn*. There are 198 *chedi* within the monastery walls – a lot to explore in what many consider was once the spiritual and administrative centre of the old capital.

Ramkhamhaeng National**Museum**

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติรามคำแหง; Map p356; ☎0 5561 2167; admission 150B; ☀9am-4pm) A good starting point for exploring the historical park ruins is Ramkhamhaeng National Museum. A replica of the famous Ramkhamhaeng inscription, said to be the earliest example of Thai writing, is kept here among an impressive collection of Sukhothai artefacts.

Wat Si Sawai

TEMPLE

(วัดศรีสาวย; Map p356) Just south of Wat Mahathat, this Buddhist shrine (dating from the 12th and 13th centuries) features three Khmer-style towers and a picturesque moat. It was originally built by the Khmers as a Hindu temple.

Wat Sa Si

TEMPLE

(วัดสระศรี; Map p356) Also known as ‘Sacred Pond Monastery’, Wat Sa Si sits on an island west of the bronze monument of King Ramkhamhaeng (the third Sukhothai king). It’s a simple, classic Sukhothai-style wát containing a large Buddha, one *chedi* and the columns of the ruined *wi-hähn*.

Wat Trapang Thong

TEMPLE

(วัดตระพังทอง; Map p356) Next to the museum, this small, still-inhabited wát with its fine stucco reliefs is reached by a footbridge across the large lotus-filled pond that surrounds it. This reservoir, the original site of Thailand’s Loi Krathong festival, supplies the Sukhothai community with most of its water.

Northern Zone

This **zone** (Map p356; admission 100B, plus per bicycle/motorcycle/car 10/30/50B; ☀7.30am-5.30pm), 500m north of the old city walls, is easily reached by bicycle.

Wat Si Chum

TEMPLE

(วัดศรีชุม; Map p356) This wát is northwest of the old city and contains an impressive *mon-dòp* with a 15m, brick-and-stucco seated Buddha. This Buddha’s elegant, tapered fingers are much photographed. Archaeologists theorise that this image is the ‘Phra Atchana’ mentioned in the famous Ramkhamhaeng inscription. A passage in the *mon-dòp* wall that leads to the top has been blocked so that it’s no longer possible to view the *jataka* inscriptions that line the tunnel ceiling.

Wat Phra Phai Luang

TEMPLE

(วัดพระพายหลวง; Map p356) Outside the city walls in the northern zone, this somewhat isolated wát features three 12th-century Khmer-style towers, bigger than those at Wat Si Sawai. This may have been the centre of Sukhothai when it was ruled by the Khmers of Angkor prior to the 13th century.

Western Zone

This **zone** (Map p356; admission 100B, plus per bicycle/motorcycle/car 10/30/50B; ☀7.30am-5.30pm), at its furthest extent 2km west of the old city walls, is the most expansive, and in addition to Wat Saphan Hin, several mostly featureless ruins can be found. A bicycle or motorcycle is necessary to explore this zone.

Wat Saphan Hin

TEMPLE

(วัดสะพานหิน; Map p356) Located on the crest of a hill that rises about 200m above the plain, the name of the wát, which means ‘stone bridge’, is a reference to the slate path and staircase that leads up to the temple, which are still in place. The site is 3km west of the former city wall and gives a good view of the Sukhothai ruins to the southeast and the mountains to the north and south.

All that remains of the original temple are a few *chedi* and the ruined *wi-hähn*, consisting of two rows of laterite columns flanking a 12.5m-high standing Buddha image on a brick terrace.

Other Sites

A few more worthwhile sites lie just outside the more popular paid zones.

Wat Chang Lom

TEMPLE

(วัดช้างล้อม; Map p356) Off Hwy 12 in the east zone, Wat Chang Lom (Elephant Circled Monastery) is about 1km east of the main

DON'T MISS

SANGKALOK MUSEUM

This small but comprehensive **mu-seum** (off map p360; ☎0 5561 4333; 203/2 Mu 3, Th Muangkao; adult/child 100/50B; ☉8am-5pm) is an excellent introduction to ancient Sukhothai's most famous product and export, its ceramics. It displays an impressive collection of original 700-year-old Thai pottery found in the area, plus some pieces traded from Vietnam, Burma and China. The 2nd floor features examples of non-utilitarian pottery made as art, including some beautiful and rare ceramic Buddha statues.

park entrance. A large bell-shaped *chedi* is supported by 36 elephants sculpted into its base.

Wat Chetupon

TEMPLE

(วัดเชตุพน; off Map p356) Located 1.4km south of the city walls, this temple once held a four-sided *mon-dòp* featuring the four classic poses of the Buddha (sitting, reclining, standing and walking). The graceful lines of the walking Buddha can still be made out today.

Wat Chedi Si Hong

TEMPLE

(วัดเจดีย์สี่ห้อง; off Map p356) Directly across from Wat Chetupon, the main *chedi* here has retained much of its original stucco relief work, which shows still vivid depictions of elephants, lions and humans.



Activities

Cycling Sukhothai

BICYCLE TOURS

(off map p360; ☎0 5561 2519; www.cycling-sukhothai.com; half-/full day 600/750B, sunset tour 300B) Belgian cycling enthusiast Ronny Hanquart offers a variety of fun and educational bicycle tours of the area. A resident of Sukhothai for nearly 20 years, his rides follow themed itineraries such as the Dharma & Karma Tour, which includes a visit to bizarre **Wat Tawet**, a temple with statues depicting Buddhist hell, or the Historical Park Tour, which includes stops at lesser-seen wats and villages. Personalised itineraries can also be arranged.

Ronny is based near Sabaidee House, and he also offers free transport for people who are his customers.



Festivals

Loi Krathong

TRADITIONAL

Celebrated for five days in November in historical Sukhothai; the city is one of the most popular destinations in Thailand to celebrate the holiday. In addition to the magical floating lights, there are fireworks, folk-dance performances and a light-and-sound production.



Sleeping

Most accommodation is still in New Sukhothai, which is home to some of the best-value budget-level accommodation in northern Thailand. Clean, cheerful hotels and guest houses abound, with many places offering attractive bungalows, free pick-up from the bus station, free wi-fi and free use of bicycles.

There are an increasing number of options near the park, many of them in the upscale bracket. Prices tend to go up during the Loi Krathong festival.

NEW SUKHOTHAI



Ruean Thai Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p360; ☎0 5561 2444; www.ruean thaihotel.com; 181/20 Soi Pracha Ruammit; r 1200-3600B; ☎@☎) At first glance, you may mistake this eye-catching complex for a temple or museum. The rooms on the upper level are very Thai, and feature worn teak furnishings and heaps of character. Poolside rooms are slightly more modern, and there's a concrete building with simple air-con rooms out the back. Service is both friendly and flawless. Call for free pick-up from the bus station.

At Home Sukhothai

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p360; ☎0 5561 0172; www.athomesukhothai.com; 184/1 Th Vichien Chamnong; r incl breakfast 400-800B; ☎@☎) Located in the 50-year-old childhood home of the proprietor, the attractive structure could easily pass as a newborn after recent renovations. Combining original wooden furnishings with new, the results blend seamlessly, and the simple but comfortable rooms really do feel like home. There's a lotus pond out back, and virtually every other service, from food to Thai massage, in front.

Lotus Village

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p360; ☎0 5562 1484; www.lotus-village.com; 170 Th Ratchathani; r & bungalows incl breakfast 720-2850B; ☎@☎) Village is an apt label for

this peaceful compound of elevated wooden bungalows. Smaller rooms in an attractive wooden building are also available, and a Burmese/Indian design theme runs through the entire place. An on-site spa offers a variety of services.

Sila Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p360; ☎ 0 5562 0344; www.sila-resort@hotmail.com; 3/49 Th Kuhasuwan; r 400B, bungalows 500-1000B; 🍷@🍷) We couldn't help but think of Disneyland when we first encountered this villagelike compound of cosy wood bungalows, resortlike A-frames, clean rooms, a Thai villa and a restaurant. And like Disneyland, it comes together in a cheerful, colourful package, the only downside being that it's a fair hike from the centre of New Sukhothai.

Ananda

HOTEL \$\$\$

(off Map p360; ☎ 0 5562 2428-30; www.anandasukhothai.com; 10 Moo 4, Th Muangkao; r incl breakfast 2600-3300B, ste incl breakfast 5500B; 🍷@🍷) The label 'Museum Gallery Hotel' may cause some to wonder what actually goes on here, but this architecturally striking boutique hotel is straightforwardly attractive. Resem-

bling something of a suburban church with Sukhothai influences, the 32 rooms combine dark woods and earth-coloured silks, and the hotel also houses a spa and antique shop. Located about 2km outside the centre of town, Ananda is directly next door to the Sangkalok Museum.

Ban Thai

HOTEL \$

(Map p360; ☎ 0 5561 0163; banthai_guesthouse@yahoo.com; 38 Th Prawet Nakhon; r with shared bathroom 200B, bungalows 300-500B; 🍷@🍷) Centred around an inviting garden, this mish-mash of rooms and tiny bungalows is among the more popular budget places in town. None of the accommodation is particularly remarkable in itself, but the combination of friendly atmosphere and low prices culminate in a winner.

Sabaidee House

HOTEL \$

(off Map p360; ☎ 0 5561 6303; www.sabaideehouse.com; 81/7 Moo 1, Tambol Bankloury; r 200-600B; 🍷@🍷) Having graduated from homestay status, this cheery guest house has followed the route of much of Sukhothai's budget accommodation and boasts five attractive bungalows. Cheaper accommodation is still

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

RONNY HANQUART: MANAGER OF CYCLING SUKHOETHAI

Best Temple

Wat Mahathat (p357) and the majestic Buddha statue at Wat Si Chum (p357) are two temples you should not miss.

Best Museum

If you are visiting Si Satchanalai Historical Park (p363) then I recommend the excavated kilns along the Yom river (p364).

Best Time to Visit

Early in the morning is cooler and there are fewer visitors. After a siesta under one of the big trees in the park, you can continue till evening. Sukhothai is green during the monsoon (May to October) and nice and cool during the cool season (December to February).

Best Place to Escape the Crowds

The Western Zone (p357) is quite large and has a beautiful natural background. Few tourists go there.

Best Sunset

Wat Sa Si (p357) in the Central Zone is a good spot for sunset.

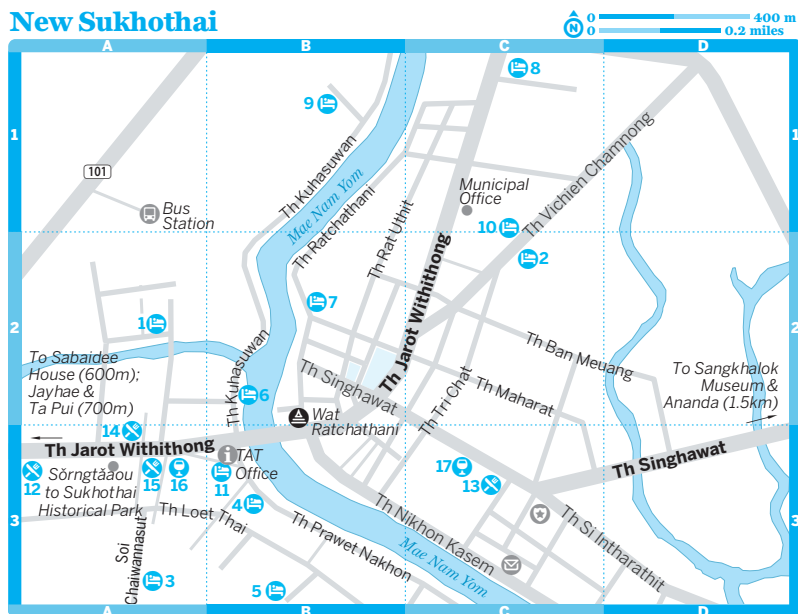
Secret Spot

Wat Tawet, where Buddhist and Hindu morals are explained through a display of about 200 statues, is an interesting place for people who like art and kitsch.

Best Non-Temple Activity

Why not go on a countryside tour by mountain bike? Paddy fields and villages – it's simple and beautiful.

New Sukhothai



New Sukhothai

Sleeping

- 1 4T Guesthouse.....A2
- 2 At Home Sukhothai.....C2
- 3 Baan Georges Hotel.....A3
- 4 Ban Thai.....B3
- 5 Hung Jeng.....B3
- 6 J&J Guesthouse.....B2
- 7 Lotus Village.....B2
- 8 Ruean Thai Hotel.....C1
- 9 Sila Resort.....B1
- 10 Sukhothai Guesthouse.....C1

- 11 TR Room & Bungalow.....B3

Eating

- 12 Chula.....A3
- 13 Dream Café.....C3
- 14 Night Market.....A3
- 15 Poo Restaurant.....A3

Drinking

- 16 Chopper Bar.....A3
- 17 Terrace & Trees.....C3

available in the main house, not to mention perks such as free bicycles and transport from the bus station. Sabaidee is 1.5km west of the Mae Nam Yom, on a side street about 200m before the intersection with Rte 101 – look for the sign.

Baan Georges Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p360; ☎08 6100 7651; www.baan-georges.com; 28/54 Soi Chaiwannasut; r incl breakfast 700-1500B; 🍷🍷🍷) The proprietors of the Poo Restaurant have opened their new three-storey villa to guests. Rooms are large and equipped with TV, fridge, air-con and rather hi-tech-looking bathrooms. Highlights in-

clude family rooms with bunk beds, a pool, and an open-air rooftop kitchen/dining room.

TR Room & Bungalow

HOTEL \$

(Map p360; ☎0 5561 1663; www.sukhothaibudgetguesthouse.com; 27/5 Th Prawet Nakhon; r 250-400B, bungalows 400B; 🍷🍷🍷) The rooms here are basic but extremely tidy, and there are five spacious bungalows out back for those needing leg room. A cosy terrace provides even more incentive. An excellent budget choice.

4T Guesthouse

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p360; ☎0 5561 4679; www.4tguesthouse.obtc; 122 Soi Mae Ramphan; r 300-400B, bunga-

lows 600-900B; 🍷🍷🍷) Hardly a leaf is out of place at this expansive resortlike guest house. A smorgasbord of bungalows and spacious rooms spans just about every budget, and the swimming pool makes the decision even easier.

Hung Jeng

GUEST HOUSE \$

(Map p360; ☎️ 0 5561 0585; hangjeng@hotmail.com; 44/10 Th Prawet Nakhon; r 150-350B; 🍷🍷🍷) A sign above the door here reads 'Welcome with open arms' and one gets the impression they really mean it. Maintained by an exceptionally lovely family, the rooms are in a rambling and colourful house and share toilets and balconies.

Sukhothai Guest House

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p360; ☎️ 0 5561 0453; www.sukhothaiguesthouse.com; 68 Th Vichien Chamnong; r 450-750B; 🍷🍷🍷) This long-running guest house has 12 bungalows with terraces packed into a shaded garden. The communal area is filled with an eclectic mix of bric-a-brac and the owners are friendly and conduct local tours.

J&J Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎️ 0 5562 0095; www.jjguest-house.com; 12 Th Kuhasuwan; bungalows with fan/air-con 500/600B; 🍷🍷🍷) Located in a tidy garden by the river, the eight bungalows here are new, cool and relatively spacious.

SUKHOTHAI HISTORICAL PARK

Orchid Hibiscus Guest House

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p356; ☎️ 0 5563 3284; orchid_hibiscus_guest_house@hotmail.com; 407/2 Rte 1272; r/bungalows 900/1300B; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) This collection of rooms and bungalows is set in relaxing, manicured grounds with a swimming pool as a centrepiece and the self-professed 'amazing breakfast' as a highlight. Rooms are spotless and fun, featuring various design details and accents. The guest house is on Rte 1272 about 500m off Rte 12 – the turn-off is between Km 48 and Km 49 markers.

Thai Thai

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p356; ☎️ 08 4932 1006; thai_thai_guesthouse@hotmail.com; Rte 1272; bungalows incl breakfast 1000-1200B; 🍷🍷🍷) Next door to Orchid Hibiscus, Thai Thai takes the form of 10 wooden bungalows in an attractive garden and fully outfitted with TV, fridge, hot water and air-con.

Vitoon Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(Map p356; ☎️ 0 5569 7045; www.vitoonguesthouse.com; 49 Moo 3; r with fan/air-con 300/600B; 🍷🍷)

One of only two budget options within walking distance of the old city, the fan rooms here are showing their age, but the air-con rooms, in a newer building, are spotless and represent a good deal.

PinPao Guest House

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p356; ☎️ 0 5563 3284; orchid_hibiscus_guest_house@hotmail.com; Hwy 12; r 900B; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) Affiliated with the Orchid Hibiscus Guest House, this is a large building with 10 of the most gaily coloured rooms we've seen anywhere, although many lack windows and can be rather dark. The guest house is on Rte 12, directly opposite the turn-off to Rte 1272.

Tharaburi Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p356; ☎️ 0 5569 7132; www.tharaburiresort.com; 321/3 Moo 3, Rte 1272; r incl breakfast 1200-4200B, ste 5000-6500B; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) This slightly overpriced boutique hotel features three main structures divided up into 20 individually styled rooms and suites. Some are themed (Moroccan, Japanese, Chinese) and this is done with fine antiques, lush silks and exquisite attention to detail. The cheaper rooms are simpler, the suites feel like a small home, and there are also two-floor family rooms.

Old City Guest House

HOTEL \$

(Map p356; ☎️ 0 5569 7515; 28/7 Moo 3; r 150-700B; 🍷🍷) This vast complex features heaps of rooms in a variety of styles and budgets, most with air-con and TV; ask to see a few before you make a decision.

🍴 Eating & Drinking

Sukhothai's signature dish is *gǎo-ay dǎe-o sǔ-kǎh-tai*, 'Sukhothai-style noodles', which feature a slightly sweet broth with different types of pork, ground peanuts and thinly sliced green beans. The dish is available at **Jayhae** (off Map p360; Th Jarot Withithong; dishes 25-40B; ☀️ 7am-4pm) and **Ta Pui** (off Map p360; Th Jarot Withithong; dishes 25-35B; ☀️ 7am-3pm), located across from each other on Th Jarot Withithong, about 1.3km west of the Mae Nam Yom.

Don't miss New Sukhothai's tiny **night market** (Map p360; Th Jarot Withithong). Most vendors here are accustomed to accommodating foreigners and even provide bilingual, written menus. Near the ticket kiosk in the historical park, there is a collection of food stalls (Map p356) and simple open-air restaurants.

BUSES & MINIVANS FROM SUKHOThAI

Sukhothai's **bus station** (☎0 5561 4529; Rte 101) is almost 1km northwest of the centre of town. There are frequent departures south to Bangkok, which also make stops in Phitsanulok, Kamphaeng Phet and Ayuthaya, and frequent departures north to Chiang Mai, with stops in Lampang.

There are also minivans to Mae Sot (130B, three hours, every two hours from 9.15am to 4.15pm) and frequent *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to Kamphaeng Phet (39B, two hours) during the day.

If you're going to the bus station and don't want to succumb to profit-seeking *túk-túk* drivers, simply hop on the *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* bound for Sukhothai Historical Park, which makes a stop at the bus station (20B, 10 minutes) from 6am to 5.30pm. Alternatively, if you're staying near the historical park, buses for Bangkok (262B to 380B, six hours, 9am and 8.20pm) and Chiang Mai (300B, five hours, frequent departures from 7.30am to 8.30pm) can be boarded near Vitoum Guesthouse.

DESTINATION	FARE (B)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bangkok	255-380	6-7	every 30min 7.50am-11pm
Chiang Mai	218	6	every 30min 7.15am-4.30pm
Chiang Rai	249	9	6.40am, 9am, 11.30am
Kamphaeng Phet	55-70	1½	7.50am-11pm
Khon Kaen	234	7	8.30am-4pm
Lampang	162	3	every 30min 7.15am-4.30pm
Nan	185	4	3pm, 4pm
Phitsanulok	28-39	1	every 30min 6am-6pm
Sawankhalok	19-27	1	every hr 6am-6pm
Si Satchanalai	46	1½	11am

Dream Café

(Map p360; 86/1 Th Singhawat; dishes 80-150B; ☺lunch & dinner; ☎) A meal at Dream Café is like dining in a museum or an antique shop. Eclectic but tasteful furnishings and knick-knackery abound, staff are equal parts competent and friendly, and most importantly of all, the food is good. The helpful menu lays down the basics of Thai food, explaining what to order and how to eat it. Try one of the well-executed *yam* (Thai-style 'salads'), or one of the dishes that feature freshwater fish, a local speciality.

Chula

(Map p360; Th Jarot Withithong; dishes 30-90B; ☺lunch & dinner) It has all the charm of an airport hangar, but the food at this local favourite is solid. Pick-and-choose from prepared dishes, or do the same with the raw ingredients displayed out front, which will be fried before your eyes.

Poo Restaurant

(Map p360; 24/3 Th Jarot Withithong; dishes 30-150B) Unfortunately named and deceptively simple, this restaurant offers a diverse menu

of breakfasts, hearty sandwiches, Belgian beers and even a few Thai dishes.

Coffee Cup

(Map p356; Moo 3, Old Sukhothai; dishes 30-150B; ☺7am-10pm) If you're staying in the old city or are an early riser, come here for breakfast; the coffee is strong and the bread is fresh.

Chopper Bar

(Map p360; Th Prawet Nakhon; ☺5pm-12.30am) Both travellers and locals congregate from dusk till hangover for food, drinks, live music and flirtation at this place, within spitting distance of Sukhothai's tiny guesthouse strip.

Terrace & Trees

(Map p360; Th Singhawat; ☺5pm-12.30am) Directly behind the Sawasdipong Hotel, this bar/restaurant features live music of varying quality and is one of the trendier places in town to put back a few.

Information

There are banks with ATMs scattered all around the central part of New Sukhothai, particularly

in the area west of the Mae Nam Yom, and now a few in Old Sukhothai as well. Internet is easy to find in New Sukhothai, and is available at many guest houses.

Police station (☎0 5561 1010) In New Sukhothai.

Post office (Th Nikhon Kasem, New Sukhothai; ☎8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun)

Sukhothai Hospital (☎0 5561 0280; Th Jarot Withithong, New Sukhothai)

Tourism Authority of Thailand office (TAT; ☎nationwide call centre 1672, Sukhothai 0 5561 6228; Th Jarot Withithong; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Near the bridge in New Sukhothai, this new office has a pretty good selection of maps and brochures.

Tourist police (Sukhothai Historical Park) Call 1155 for emergencies or go to the tourist police station opposite the Ramkhamhaeng museum.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Sukhothai's airport is 27km from town off Rte 1195, about 11km from Sawankhalok. There is a minivan service (180B) between the airport and new Sukhothai. **Bangkok Airways** (☎nationwide call centre 1771, Sukhothai 0 5564 7224; www.bangkokair.com; Sukhothai airport) operates flights to Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport (3480B, 80 minutes, twice daily) and Lampang (2115B, 30 minutes, once daily).

i Getting Around

A ride by *sāhm-lór* within New Sukhothai should cost no more than 40B. *Sōrng-tāa-ou* run frequently between New Sukhothai and Sukhothai Historical Park (20B, 30 minutes, 6am to 5.30pm), leaving from Th Jarot Withithong near Poo Restaurant, and making a stop at Sukhothai's bus station.

Transport from the bus terminal into the centre of New Sukhothai costs 60B in a chartered vehicle. Motorbike taxis charge 40B. If going directly to Old Sukhothai, *sōrng-tāa-ou* charge 180B and motorcycle taxis 150B.

The best way to get around the historical park is by bicycle, which can be rented at shops outside the park entrance for 30B per day. The park operates a tram service (80B, one hour, 8am to 5pm) through the central zone, although explanation is in Thai only.

Motorbikes can be rented starting at about 250B for 24 hours and are available at Poo Restaurant and nearly every guest house in New Sukhothai.

Around Sukhothai

SI SATCHANALAI-CHALIANG HISTORICAL PARK

อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์ศรีสัชนาลัย

Don't skip this portion of the Sukhothai site. With your imagination and sense of adventure you're sure to love this more rustic collection of truly impressive ruins.

Set among hills, the 13th- to 15th-century ruins of the old cities of Si Satchanalai and Chaliang, 50km north of Sukhothai, are in the same basic style as those in the Sukhothai Historical Park, but the setting is more peaceful. The park covers roughly 720 hectares and is surrounded by a 12m-wide moat. Chaliang, 1km southeast, is an older city site (dating to the 11th century), though its two temples date to the 14th century.

The nearby towns of Ban Hat Siaw and Sawankhalok are the main centres for the area.

Si Satchanalai

This **zone** (admission 100B, plus car 50B; ☎8am-4.30pm) contains the majority of ruins. An **information centre** (☎8.30am-5pm) at the park distributes free maps and has a small exhibit outlining the history and attractions. Bikes can be rented near the entrance gate (20B).

Wat Chāng Lom

TEMPLE

(วัดช้างล้อม) This fine temple, marking the centre of the old city of Si Satchanalai, has elephants surrounding a bell-shaped *chedi* that is somewhat better preserved than its counterpart in Sukhothai. An inscription states that the temple was built by King Ramkhamhaeng between 1285 and 1291.

Wat Khao Phanom Phloeng

TEMPLE

(วัดเขาพนมเพลิง) On the hill overlooking Wat Chāng Lom are the remains of Wat Khao Phanom Phloeng, including a *chedi*, a large seated Buddha and stone columns that once supported the roof of the *wi-hāhn*. From this hill you can make out the general design of the once-great city. The slightly higher hill west of Phanom Phloeng is capped



GOOD DEAL

An admission fee of 220B allows entry to Si Satchanalai, Wat Chao Chan (at Chaliang) and the Si Satchanalai Centre for Study & Preservation of Sangkalok Kilns.

by a large Sukhothai-style *chedi* – all that remains of Wat Khao Suwan Khiri.

Wat Chedi Jet Thaew

TEMPLE

(วัดเจดีย์เจ็ดแถว) Next to Wat Chang Lom, these ruins contain seven rows of *chedi*, the largest of which is a copy of one at Wat Mahathat in Sukhothai. An interesting brick-and-plaster *wi-hahn* features barred windows designed to look like lathed wood (an ancient Indian technique used all over Southeast Asia). A *prasat* (small ornate building with a cruciform ground plan and needlelike spire) and *chedi* are stacked on the roof.

Wat Nang Phaya

TEMPLE

(วัดนางพญา) South of Wat Chedi Jet Thaew, this *chedi* is Sinhalese in style and was built in the 15th or 16th century, a bit later than the other monuments at Si Satchanalai. Stucco reliefs on the large laterite *wi-hahn* in front of the *chedi* – now sheltered by a tin roof – date from the Ayuthaya period when Si Satchanalai was known as Sawankhalok. Goldsmiths in the district still craft a design known as *nahng pá-yah*, modelled after these reliefs.

Chaliang

This older **site** (Map p365), a short bike ride from Si Satchanalai, has two temples of note. Admission isn't always collected at Wat Chao Chan.

Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat

TEMPLE

(วัดพระศรีรัตนมหาธาตุ; admission 20B; ☀8am-5pm) These ruins consist of a large laterite *chedi* (dating back to 1448-88) between two *wi-hahn*. One of the *wi-hahn* holds a large seated Sukhothai Buddha image, a smaller standing image and a bas-relief of the famous walking Buddha, exemplary of the flowing,

boneless Sukhothai style. The other *wi-hahn* contains some less distinguished images.

Wat Chao Chan

TEMPLE

(วัดเจ้าจันทร์; admission 100B; ☀8am-5pm) These *wat* ruins are about 500m west of Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat. The central attraction is a large Khmer-style tower similar to later towers built in Lopburi and probably constructed during the reign of Khmer King Jayavarman VII (1181-1217). The tower has been restored and is in fairly good shape. The roofless *wi-hahn* on the right contains the laterite outlines of a large standing Buddha that has all but melted away from exposure and weathering.

Sawankhalok Kilns

At one time, more than 200 huge pottery **kilns** (admission free) lined the banks of Mae Nam Yom in the area around Si Satchanalai. In China – the biggest importer of Thai pottery during the Sukhothai and Ayuthaya periods – the pieces produced here came to be called 'Sangkalok', a mispronunciation of Sawankhalok. Ceramics are still made in the area, and a local ceramic artist even continues to fire his pieces in an underground wood-burning oven.

In addition to the centre, several barely recognisable kiln sites can be found along the road that runs north of Si Satchanalai.

Si Satchanalai Centre for Study &

Preservation of Sangkalok Kilns

MUSEUM

(ศูนย์ศึกษาและอนุรักษ์เตาสังคโลก; admission 100B; ☀9am-4pm) Located 5km northwest of the Si Satchanalai ruins, this centre has large excavated kilns and many intact pottery samples. The exhibits are interesting despite the lack of English labels.

Sleeping & Eating

There's very little accommodation or food near the park. If you have your own transport, a better alternative is to be based in Sawankhalok, 20km south of the park, or Ban Hat Siaw, about 9km south of the park.

Sukhothai Heritage Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

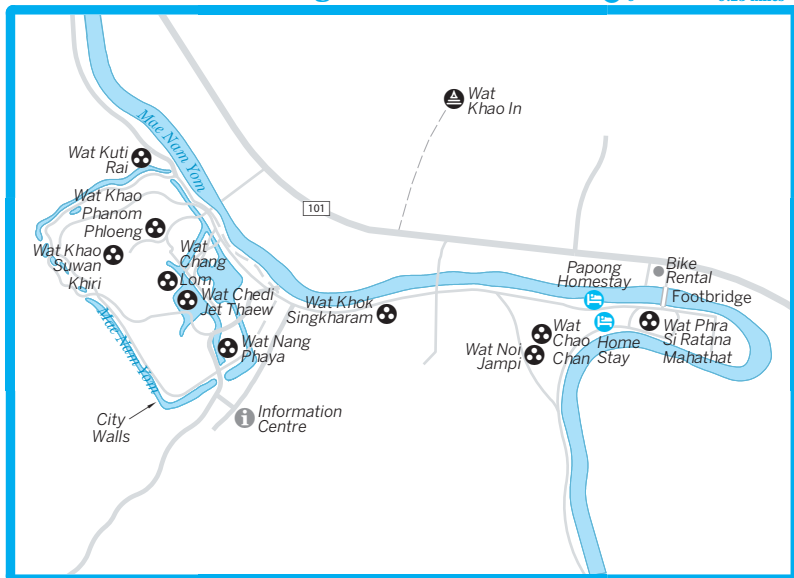
(☎0 5564 7564; www.sukhothaiheritage.com; 999 Moo 2, Sukhothai airport; r incl breakfast 4000-5900B, ste incl breakfast 11,600B; 🍷@☎) Owned by Bangkok Airways and near its airport approximately 32km from Si Satchanalai Historical Park, this resort is now the area's most upscale accommodation. A virtual continuation of the historical park, the low-lying brick and peak-roofed structures are interspersed by calming

WORTH A TRIP

SAWANWORANAYOK NATIONAL MUSEUM

In Sawankhalok town, near Wat Sawankhalom on the western river bank, this state-sponsored **museum** (☎0 5564 1571; 69 Th Phracharat, Sawankhalok; admission 50B; ☀9am-4pm) houses an impressive collection of 12th- to 15th-century artefacts. The ground floor focuses on the area's ceramic legacy, while the 2nd floor features several beautiful bronze and stone Sukhothai-era Buddha statues.

Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park



lotus-filled ponds, culminating in a templelike environment. The rooms take you back to the secular world with large flat-screen TVs and modern furniture.

Home Stay

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 1935 2835; r & bungalow 500B; Chaliang; 🚗🚲🚶) Located a minute's walk from Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat at Chaliang, the three rooms in this large house share bathrooms and are tidy and comfortable. There's also a poolside bungalow. The only thing lacking is food, which is best obtained near the entrance of the park, ideally before 6pm.

Papong Homestay

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 5563 1557, 08 7313 4782; r 500B; Chaliang; 🚗) Another locally run outfit near the historical park, the three rooms here include private bathrooms and are tidy and comfortable.

Si Satchanalai Hotel and Resort

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5567 2666; 247 Moo 2, Rte 101; r 200-500B, bungalows 1200B; 🚗) Resembling neither hotel nor resort, nonetheless this is virtually the only formal accommodation to be located relatively near the historical park. Rooms are featureless but tidy, and the expansive bungalows would be great for families. It's approximately 6km north of the park on the west side of Rte 101.

Mukda

HOTEL \$

(no roman-script sign; ☎0 5567 1024; Ban Hat Siaw; r 200-500B; 🚗) The pink bungalows here are basic, but work if you want to stay relatively close to the historical park. It's at the northern end of Ban Hat Siaw, just down the turn-off to Utaradit.

Saengsin Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5564 1259/1424; 2 Th Thetsaban Damri, Sawankhalok 3; s/d 220/360B; 🚗) Located 1km south of the train station on the main street that runs through Sawankhalok, this long-standing hotel has clean, comfortable rooms and a coffee shop. A couple of other options also line the main drag.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park is off Rte 101 between Sawankhalok and Ban Hat Siaw. From New Sukhothai, take a Si Satchanalai bus (46B, 1½ hours, 11am) or one of three buses to Chiang Rai (46B) at 6.40am, 9am and 11.30am, and ask to get off at 'meuang gòw' (old city). The last bus back to New Sukhothai leaves at 4.30pm.

From Sawankhalok, you can hop on just about any line from the town's roadside bus terminal (24B to 50B, frequent departures from 7am to 5pm).

TRAIN

Sawankhalok's original train station is one of the local sights. King Rama VI built a 60km railway spur from Ban Dara (a small town on the main northern trunk) to Sawankhalok just so that he could visit the ruins. Amazingly, there's a daily special express from Bangkok to Sawankhalok (482B, seven hours, 10.50am). The train heads back to Bangkok at 7.40pm, arriving in the city at 3.30am. You can also take this train to Phitsanulok (328B, 3½ hours, 5.55pm). It's a 'Sprinter' – 2nd class air-con and no sleepers. The fare includes dinner and breakfast.

i Getting Around

You can rent bicycles (per day 20B) from a shop at the gateway to Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat as well as near the food stalls at the entrance to the historical park.

KAMPHAENG PHET PROVINCE

Kamphaeng Phet

กำแพงเพชร

POP 30,000

Located halfway between Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Kamphaeng Phet literally means 'Diamond Wall', a reference to the apparent strength of this formerly walled city's protective barrier. This level of security was necessary, as the city previously helped to protect the Sukhothai and later Ayuthaya kingdoms against attacks from Burma or Lanna. Parts of the wall can still be seen today, and the impressive ruins of several religious structures also remain. The modern city stretches along a shallow section of the Mae Nam Ping and is one of Thailand's pleasanter provincial capitals.

WORTH A TRIP

BAN NA TON CHAN

Ban Na Ton Chan, a picturesque village in rural Sukhothai, has created a worthwhile and award-winning **homestay program** (☎08 9885 1639; <http://homestaynatonchan.blogspot.com>; per person 350B). Approximately 20 households participate in the program, and the fee includes breakfast and dinner (for lunch you can try *kôw bôep*, a local noodle dish), and involvement in local activities such as cooking, furniture making and weaving. The locals are keen to open their homes and share their knowledge, but it must be noted that the level of English ability among the villagers is low.

The village is 15km east of Rte 101, down a signed turn-off north of Ban Hat Siaw. A motorcycle taxi from near the 7-Eleven in Ban Hat Siaw will take people here for 150B, sâhm-lôr for 350B.

👁 Sights

Kamphaeng Phet Historical Park

HISTORICAL PARK

(อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์กำแพงเพชร; ☎0 5571 1921; admission 100-150B, motorbike/car 20/50B; ☀8am-5pm) A Unesco World Heritage Site, this park features the ruins of structures dating back to the 14th century, roughly the same time as the better-known kingdom of Sukhothai. Kamphaeng Phet's Buddhist monuments continued to be built until the Ayuthaya period, nearly 200 years later, and thus possess elements of both Sukhothai and Ayuthaya styles, resulting in a school of Buddhist art quite unlike anywhere else in Thailand.

The park has two distinct parts; an inclusive ticket (150B) allows entry to both areas. The **old city** (admission 100B) is surrounded by a wall (the 'Diamond Gate' of the city's name) and was formerly inhabited by monks of the *gamavasi* ('living in the community') sect. This area is dominated by **Wat Phra Kaew**, which used to be adjacent to the royal palace (now in ruins). It's not nearly as well restored as Sukhothai, but it's smaller, more intimate and less visited. Weather-corroded Buddha statues have assumed slender, porous forms that remind some visitors of the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti. About 100m southeast of Wat Phra Kaew is **Wat Phra That**, distinguished by a large round-based *chedi* surrounded by columns.

The majority of Kamphaeng Phet's ruins are found about 1.5km north of the city walls in an area previously home to monks of the *arani* ('living in forests') sect (admission 100B). An inclusive ticket purchased at the old city also allows entrance here, and there is an excellent **visitor centre** (☀8.30am-4.30pm) at the entrance. There are more

than 40 temple compounds in this area, including **Wat Phra Si Iriyabot**, which has the shattered remains of standing, sitting, walking and reclining Buddha images all sculpted in the classic Sukhothai style.

Northwest of here, **Wat Chang Rawp** (Elephant-Encircled Temple) is just that – a temple with an elephant-buttressed wall. Several other temple ruins – most of them not much more than flat brick foundations, with the occasional weather-worn Buddha image – can be found in the same general vicinity.

Wat Phra Borommathat

TEMPLE

(วัดพระบรมธาตุ; admission free) Across Mae Nam Ping are the neglected ruins of Wat Phra Borommathat, in an area that was settled long before Kamphaeng Phet's heyday, although visible remains are post-classical Sukhothai. The compound has a few small *chedi* and one large *chedi* of the late Sukhothai period which is now crowned with a Burmese-style umbrella added early in the 20th century.

Kamphaeng Phet National Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติกำแพงเพชร; ☎0 5571 1570; Th Pindamri; admission 100B; ☀9am-noon & 1-4pm Wed-Sun) The national museum has the usual survey of Thai art periods downstairs. Upstairs there is a collection of artefacts from the Kamphaeng Phet area including an immense Shiva statue that is the largest bronze Hindu sculpture in the country. The image was formerly located at the nearby **San Phra Isuan** (Shiva Shrine) until a tourist stole the idol's hands and head in 1886 (they were later returned). Today a replica stands in its place.

Phra Ruang Hot Springs

HOT SPRINGS

(บ่อน้ำร้อนพระร่วง; admission 30B; ☀8.30am-6pm) Located 20km outside Kamphaeng Phet along the road to Sukhothai, this complex of natural hot springs is the Thai version of a rural health retreat. The reputedly therapeutic hot waters have been diverged into seven private bathing rooms (50B), and there's also an outdoor foot pool and several places offering traditional Thai massage. There is no public transport to the hot springs, but transport can be arranged at Three J Guest House.

Kamphaeng Phet Regional Museum

MUSEUM

(พิพิธภัณฑสถานภูมิภาคกำแพงเพชร; ☎0 5572 2341; Th Pindamri; admission 10B; ☀9am-4pm) The regional museum is a series of Thai-style wooden

structures on stilts set among nicely landscaped grounds. There are three main buildings in the museum featuring displays ranging from history and prehistory to the various ethnic groups that inhabit the province.

Wat Khu Yang

TEMPLE

(วัดคูยาง; admission free) This Buddhist temple contains a handsome wooden *hōr drai* dating back to the 19th century.

Sleeping

Three J Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎0 5571 3129; www.threejguesthouse.com; 79 Th Rachavitee; r 250-700B; 🍷🍷🍷) This pleasant collection of bungalows in a pretty garden has a very hospitable and friendly host. Pathways lead to clean log bungalows with terraces. The cheapest ones share a clean bathroom and the more expensive have air-con. There's heaps of local information; bicycles and motorcycles are available for rent, and the owner can also arrange visits to his country resort near Klong Wang Chao.

Chakungrao Riverview

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5571 4900-8; www.chankungraoriverview.com; 149 Th Thesa; r incl breakfast 1000-1300B, ste incl breakfast 5000B; 🍷🍷🍷) Kamphaeng Phet's poshest digs has some nice rooms despite its unremarkable facade. Rooms are tastefully decked out in dark woods and forest green and feature balconies with river or city views. Suites are huge and available at a considerable discount.

Navarat

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5571 1211; 2 Soi Prapan; r 700-1100B; 🍷🍷) The '70s-era Navarat has undergone a recent renovation, which has erased some but not all signs of the hotel's true age. The 'new' rooms are slightly overpriced, but are clean and cosy, some boasting nice views.

Ko Chokchai Hotel

HOTEL \$

(no roman-script sign; ☎0 5571 1531; 19-43 Soi 8, Th Ratchadamnoen 1; r 260-320B; 🍷🍷🍷) This egg cartonlike building is a good budget choice with its smallish but tidy rooms. Popular with Thai businessmen, it's conveniently in the centre of the new town.

There are also several Thai-style riverside 'resorts' at Nakhon Chum, along the east bank of the Mae Nam Ping.

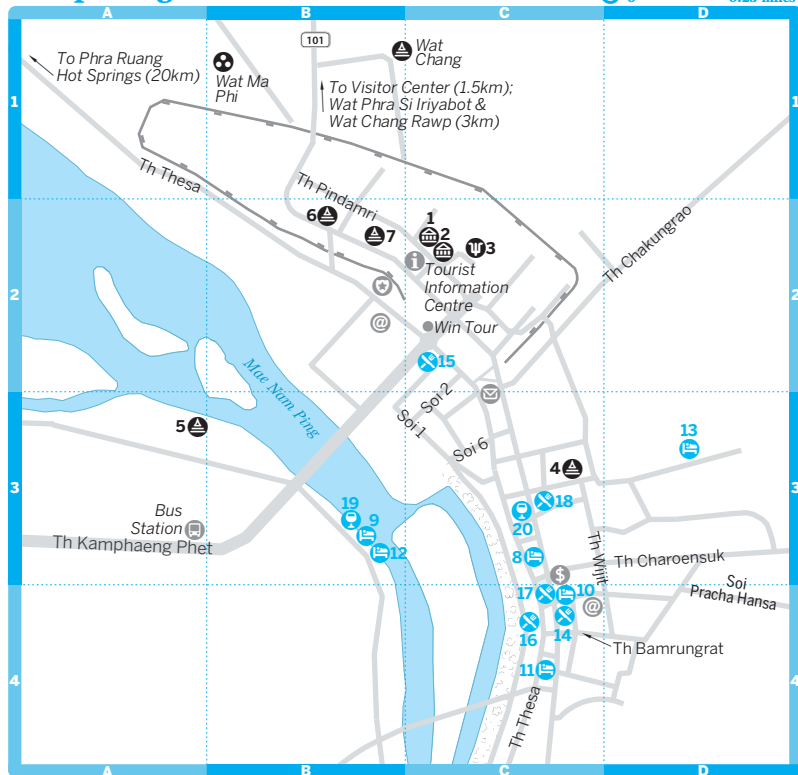
Grand View Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(no roman-script sign; ☎0 5572 1104; www.grandviewresortkpp.com; 34/4 Moo 2, Nakhon Chum; r incl breakfast 290-5000B; 🍷🍷) The

Kamphaeng Phet

0 500 m
0 0.25 miles



first one you'll come to on the left-hand side, it's similar to many others in quality and price.

Techno River Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(no roman-script sign; ☑ 0 5579 9800; 27/27 Moo 2, Nakhon Chum; r incl breakfast 450-2500B;

☎☎) This is the poshest of the lot, and offers a huge variety of clean, though generally characterless rooms.



Eating & Drinking

Kamphaeng Phet is definitely not a culinary destination, but there are a few mildly interesting offerings. A busy night market sets up every evening near the river just north of the Navarat Hotel.



Bamee Chakangrao

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 25-30B; ☎8.30am-3pm) Thin wheat and egg noodles (*bà-mèe*) are a speciality of Kam-

phaeng Phet, and this famous restaurant is one of the best places to try them. The noodles are made fresh every day behind the restaurant, and pork satay is also available.

Kamphaeng Phet Phochana

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; dishes 25-50B; ☎6am-lam) This popular place puts out just about every Thai fave from *pàt tai* to *kôw man gài* (Hainanese-style chicken rice). It's also a good place to try *chôw gôoay*, grass jelly, a product made in Kamphaeng Phet. There's no English-language sign, so look for the rainbow-coloured facade near the roundabout.

Piggy

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Ratchadamnoen; per person 70B; ☎dinner) *Môo gà-tá*, pork grilled over a hotpot, is one of the more popular dishes in these parts. Simply choose your ingredients from the buffet, then grill your meats, adding your veggies and other ingredients

Kamphaeng Phet

Sights

- Kamphaeng Phet National Museum C2
- Kamphaeng Phet Regional Museum C2
- San Phra Isuan C2
- Wat Khu Yang C3
- Wat Phra Borommathat A3
- Wat Phra Kaew B2
- Wat Phra That B2

Sleeping

- Chakungrao Riverview C3
- Grand View Resort B3
- Ko Chokchai Hotel C4

- Navarat C4
- Techno River Resort B3
- Three J Guest House D3

Eating

- Bamee Chakangrao C4
- Kamphaeng Phet Phochana C2
- Night Market C4
- Phayao Bakery C4
- Piggy C3

Drinking

- Mae Ping Riverside B3
- Rong Tiam C3

to the broth. There's no English sign, but Piggy is found on the corner and usually boasts several grilling customers.

Phayao Bakery

INTERNATIONAL-THAI \$

(Th Thesa; dishes 45-120B; ☎) It may look closed with its heavily tinted windows, but inside you'll find a casual, family-friendly atmosphere with real coffee, a variety of baked goods and ice cream. Air-conditioned, it's a great place to escape from the heat.

Mae Ping Riverside

RESTAURANT, BAR

(no roman-script sign; 50/1 Moo 2, Nakhon Chum; dishes 40-120B; ☎lunch & dinner) Offers draught beer, live music, decent eats and cool breezes. It's one of the first places along the road that parallels the river.

Rong Tiam

BAR

(no roman-script sign; Soi 9, Th Thesa 1; ☎5pm-1am) Live music (from 8.30pm), snacks and beer are available at this friendly pub located in a converted antique shophouse.

Information

Most of the major banks also have branches with ATMs along the main streets near the river and on Th Charoensuk. There are a couple of internet cafes in town on Th Thesa and Th Ratchadamnoen.

Main post office (Th Thesa) Just south of the old city.

Police station (☎0 5571 1199, emergency 1155)

Tourist Information Centre (☎8am-4.30pm) Across from the national museum; has some maps and pamphlets. There is another more history-focused centre at the group of ruins north of the city wall.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (☎0 5579 9844) is about 1km west of the Mae Nam Ping. From the same station, minivans run frequent departures to Mae Sot (140B, 2½ hours, 8am to 6pm) and *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* depart for Sukhothai (39B, two hours, every hour from 1pm to 8pm). If coming from Sukhothai or Phitsanulok get off in the old city or at the roundabout on Th Thesa to save getting a *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* back into town. You can also book tickets to Bangkok in advance and board buses near the traffic circle at **Win Tour** (☎0 5571 3971; Th Kamphaeng Phet).

DESTINATION	FARE (B)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bangkok	210-315	5	11.30am-1am
Chiang Rai	280	9	11.30am-1.30am
Chiang Mai	268-313	5	noon-1am
Mae Hong Son	468-838	11	8pm, 10pm, 11pm, midnight
Sukhothai	70	1	every hr 1-8pm
Phitsanulok	56-78	2½	every hr 5am-6pm

Getting Around

The least expensive way to get from the bus station into town is to hop on a red *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* (15B per person) to the roundabout across the river. From there take a *sǎhm-lór* anywhere in

town for 20B to 30B. Motorcycle taxis from the bus station to most hotels downtown cost 40B.

It is worth renting a bicycle or motorbike to explore areas outside of the old city – Three J Guest House has both for rent (per day bicycle/motorcycle 50/200B).

TAK PROVINCE

Tak is a wild and mountainous province. Its proximity to Myanmar has resulted in a complex history and unique cultural mix.

The majority of Tak is forested and mountainous and is an excellent destination for those wanting to trek. There are Hmong, Musoe (Lahu), Lisu and White and Red Karen settlements throughout the west and north. In the 1970s many of these mountains were a hotbed of communist guerrilla activity. Since the 1980s the former leader of the local CPT movement has been involved in resort-hotel development and most of Tak is open to outsiders, but the area still has an untamed feeling about it.

Western Tak in particular has always been in distinct contrast with other parts of Thailand because of strong Karen and Burmese cultural influences. The Thailand–Myanmar border districts of Mae Ramat, Tha Song Yang and Mae Sot are dotted with refugee camps, an outcome of fire fights between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Myanmar government.

Mae Sot

POP 120,569

แม่สอด

Despite its remote location and relatively small size, Mae Sot is among the most culturally diverse cities in Thailand. Walking down the streets of the town, you'll see a fascinating ethnic mixture: Burmese men in their *longyi* (sarongs), Hmong and Karen women in traditional hill-tribe dress, bearded Muslims, Thai army rangers and foreign NGO workers. Burmese and Karen are spoken more than Thai, shop signs along the streets are in Thai, Burmese and Chinese, and most of the temple architecture in Mae Sot is Burmese. Mae Sot has also become the most important jade and gem centre along the border, with most of the trade controlled by Chinese and Indian immigrants from Myanmar.

Although there aren't many formal sights in Mae Sot, and most tourists just come for a visa run, many end up staying longer than

expected. A vibrant market, several good restaurants and a fun nightlife scene have become attractions in their own right.

Sights & Activities

Border Market & Myawadi

MARKET

(ตลาดริมแม่น้ำเมย/เมียวดี) There is an expansive covered market alongside the Mae Nam Moei on the Thai side that legally sells a mixture of workaday Burmese goods and cheap Chinese electronics.

However, the real reason most come here is to cross to Myawadi in Myanmar (Burma) – when the border is open (p375). *Sōrng-tāa-ou* frequently go to the border (20B, frequent departures from 6.30am to 5.30pm), 5km west of Mae Sot: ask for Rim Moei (Edge of the Moei). The last *sōrng-tāa-ou* going back to Mae Sot leaves Rim Moei at 5.30pm.

Herbal Sauna

SAUNA

(admission 20B; ☺3-7pm) Wat Mani has separate herbal sauna facilities for men and women. The sauna is towards the back of the monastery grounds, past the monks' *gù-dì* (living quarters).

Cookery Course

COOKERY COURSE

(☎0 5554 6584; borderlineshop@yahoo.com; 674/14 Th Intharakhiri; lessons 1000B; ☺8.30am-noon & 1-4pm Tue-Sun) Held at Borderline shop, this course teaches Shan, Burmese and Karen dishes, and includes a trip to the market, food and drink preparation, a cookbook, and sharing the results in the adjoining cafe. Courses decrease in price with bigger groups.

Festivals & Events

Thai-boxing Competition

THAI BOXING

Around April, Thai and Burmese boxers meet for a competition, held somewhere outside town in the traditional style. Five-round matches are fought in a circular ring; the first four rounds last three minutes, the fifth has no time limit. With their hands bound in hemp, boxers fight till first blood or knockout. You'll have to ask around to find the changing venue for this annual slugfest.

Thai-Burmese Gem Fair

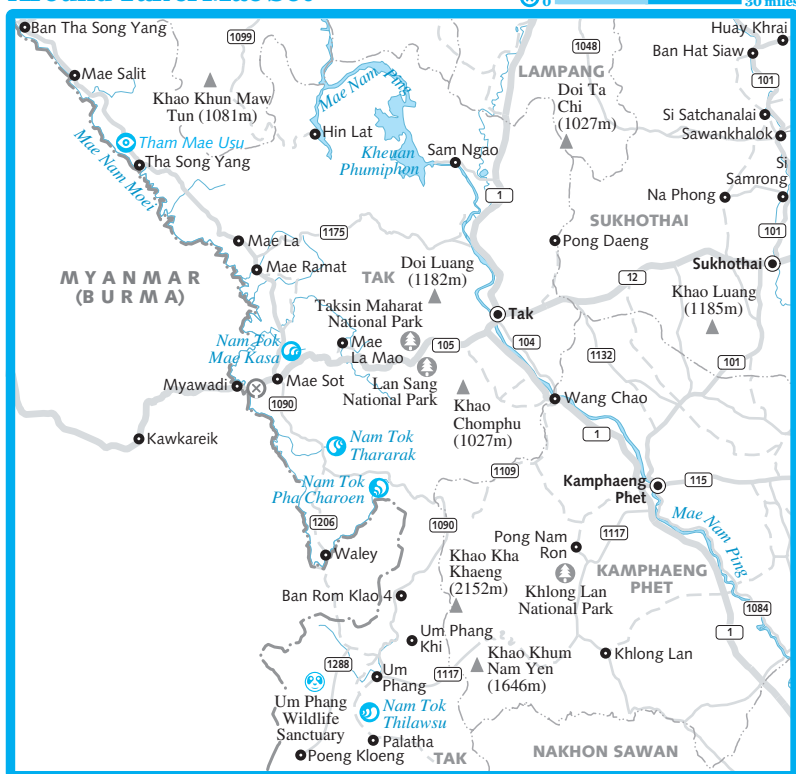
GEM FAIR

Held in April.

Sleeping

Many places in Mae Sot fit in the budget range and cater for NGO workers that are staying longer-term.

Around Tak & Mae Sot



Ban Thai Guest House

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 5553 1590; banthai_mth@hotmail.com; 740 Th Intharakhiri; r 250-800B; 🍷🍷🍷) This tiny neighbourhood of five converted Thai houses down a hibiscus-lined alley has spacious, very stylish wooden rooms with Thai-style furniture, axe lounging pillows and Thai textiles. Shared sitting areas have cable TV, DVDs and free wireless internet. There are bicycles and motorbikes to rent and a laundry service. The place is popular with long-stay NGO workers, so booking ahead is a good idea.

Rujira

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 5554 4969; rujira_tom@hotmail.com; 3/18 Th Buakjoon; r incl breakfast 350-1000B; 🍷🍷🍷) This great-value place has spacious, apartment-like rooms with lots of homey touches. There's also a pleasant communal feeling, with lots of shaded outdoor seating, a restaurant and a cute coffee shop. The only downside is that it's a long walk to the town centre.

Irawadee Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 5553 5430; www.irawadee.com; 758/1-2 Th Intharakhiri; r/ste incl breakfast 850/1800B; 🍷🍷🍷) This new brick monstrosity has rooms decked out in a Burmese – or is it an imperial Chinese – theme. Bathrooms are spacious with open-air showers. Gaudy, but fun and comfortable.

Bai Fern Guesthouse

HOTEL \$

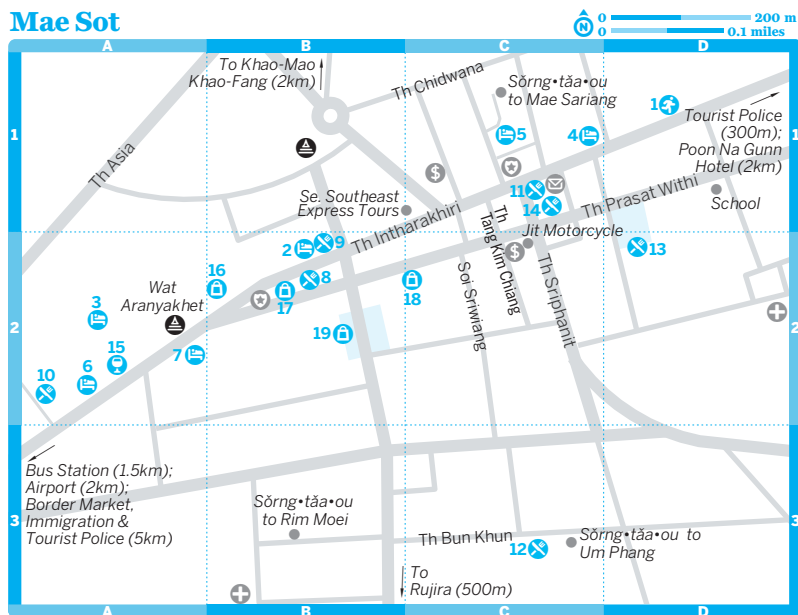
(☎ 0 5553 1349; www.bai-fern.com; 660 Th Intharakhiri; r 150-300B; 🍷🍷🍷) Set just off the road in a large house, the rooms here are tidy, but plain. All have well-equipped shared bathrooms. The service is very friendly with the use of a kitchen, fridge and wireless internet in the communal area.

Poon Na Gunn Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 5553 4732; www.poonnagunn.com; 10/3 Th Intharakhiri; r incl breakfast 780-975B; 🍷🍷) This is the kind of hotel you wish you could take with you everywhere; rooms are clean and

Mae Sot



Mae Sot

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Cookery Course (see 16)
- 1 Herbal Sauna D1

Sleeping

- 2 Bai Fern Guesthouse B2
- Ban Pruk Sa Guesthouse (see 2)
- 3 Ban Thai Guest House A2
- 4 DK Mae Sot Hotel C1
- 5 Green Guest House C1
- 6 Irawadee Resort A2
- 7 Phan Nu House A2

Eating

- 8 Aiya B2
- 9 Bai Fern B2

- 10 Casa Mia A2
- 11 Khrua Canadian C1
- 12 Lucky Tea Garden C3
- 13 Night Market D2
- 14 Phat Thai Mae Sot C1

Drinking

- 15 Mali Bar A2
- Water Bar (see 15)

Shopping

- 16 Borderline Shop B2
- 17 Fair Trade Shop B2
- 18 Gem Shops C2
- 19 Municipal Market B2

large and tastefully decked out with attractive furnishings, and include a small verandah. The hotel is about 2km east of town.

DK Mae Sot Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 5554 2648; 298/2 Th Intharakhiri; r with fan or air-con 250-450B; 🏠📶) If the beds, towels and sheets here were upgraded, it would be a fantastic budget deal. Until then the large

rooms in this long-standing three-storey hotel are average, but conveniently located.

Ban Pruk Sa Guesthouse

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5553 2656; www.banpruksa.com; 740 Th Intharakhiri; r 200-500B; 🏠📶) Opposite Ban Thai Guest House, this tidy villa unites a handful of unassuming but spacious and comfortable rooms.

Phan Nu House

HOTEL \$

(☎08 1972 4467; 563/3 Th Intharakhiri; r 250-500B; 🍴📺) This place consists of 19 large rooms in a residential compound just off the street. Most are equipped with air-con, TV, fridge and hot water, making them a good deal.

Green Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5553 3207; krit.sana@hotmail.com; 406/8 sub-soi off Th Intharakhiri; dm 100B, r 270-250B) Run by a teacher and her husband, this peaceful, friendly guest house offers a variety of good-sized rooms with TV and decent furniture. It's great value, centrally located and has a pretty garden.

 **Eating**

Mae Sot is a virtual culinary crossroads with a diversity of cuisines not seen in most other Thai towns. For a fun breakfast head to the area directly south of the mosque where several buzzing Muslim restaurants serve sweet tea, roti and *nanbya*, tandoor-style bread. The town's vibrant day market is the place to try Burmese dishes such as *mohinga*, the country's unofficial national dish, or Burmese-style curries served over rice. Mae Sot's night market features mostly Thai/Chinese-style dishes.

Khao-Mao Khao-Fang

THAI \$\$

(no roman-script sign; ☎0 5553 2483; 382 Moo 5, Mae Pa; mains 80-220B; 🍴lunch & dinner) Like dining in a gentrified jungle, this place, designed by a Thai botanist, replaces chandeliers with hanging vines, orchids and lots of running water. It also has one of the more interesting Thai menus you'll find anywhere, with dishes featuring local ingredients such as fish from the Mae Nam Moei or local herbs and veggies. Try one of the several delicious-sounding *yam* (Thai-style spicy salads), featuring ingredients ranging from white turmeric to local mushrooms. The restaurant is north of town between the Km 1 and Km 2 markers on the road to Mae Ramat.

Lucky Tea Garden

BURMESE \$

(Th Bun Khun; mains 10-50B; 🍴5.30am-9pm) For the authentic Burmese teashop experience without crossing over to Myawadi, visit this friendly cafe equipped with sweet tea, tasty snacks, and of course, bad Burmese pop music. Or come with an empty stomach and try one of the better *biryani* in town.

Phat Thai Mae Sot

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; Th Prasat Withi; mains 25-45B; 🍴noon-9pm) This cosy place serves *pàt tai* with a local twist: toppings of pork rind and barbecued pork. It's a bit tricky to find, so look for the wooden house with the old-school advertisements.

Casa Mia

INTERNATIONAL-THAI \$\$

(Th Don Kaew; mains 30-180B; 🍴7.30am-10pm) Tucked down a side street, this simple restaurant serves the cheapest homemade pasta dishes you'll find anywhere. And better yet, they're right tasty. They also do Thai and Burmese, and some exceptional desserts, including a wicked banoffee pie.

Aiya

BURMESE-THAI \$

(533 Th Intharakhiri; dishes 40-90B; 🍴lunch & dinner Tue-Sun; 🍴) Opposite Bai Fern Guest House, Aiya is a simple place that serves good Burmese food, which is particularly strong on vegetarian options.

Khrua Canadian

INTERNATIONAL-THAI \$\$

(3 Th Sripahanit; dishes 40-280B; 🍴7am-10pm; 📺) This is the place to go if you want to forget you're in Asia for one meal. Dave, the Canadian, brews his own coffee and also offers homemade bagels, deli meats and cheeses, in addition to a huge breakfast menu. The servings are large, the menu is varied, and when you finally remember you're in Thailand again, local information is also available.

Bai Fern

INTERNATIONAL-THAI \$\$

(☎0 5553 3343; Th Intharakhiri; dishes 45-300B; 🍴8am-10pm) The cosy, wood-furnished Bai Fern has a pleasant atmosphere and is popular all day long.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

Mae Sot has a lively nightlife that heats up at the weekends. The strip of Th Intharakhiri that runs west from Wat Aranyakhet is where a handful of open-air bars are located.

Mali Bar

BAR

(Th Intharakhiri; 🍴6pm-midnight) Staffed by Burmese and popular with the NGO set, this rather dark bar has a pool table and a world music soundtrack.

Water Bar

BAR

(Th Intharakhiri; 🍴5pm-midnight) More of a Thai scene, this place has open-air tables, draught beer, snacks and a big screen for the big game.

Shopping

Mae Sot is most famous for its gems trade, and is the most important jade and gem centre along the border. Check out the hustle and bustle among the glittering treasures in the gem shops along Th Prasat Withi, just east of the morning market. If looking to buy be prepared to bargain hard.

Municipal Market

MARKET

Mae Sot's municipal market is among the largest and most vibrant we've encountered anywhere in Thailand. In addition to the usual Thai wet market veggies and dry goods, there's heaps of exotic stuff from Myanmar, including Burmese bookshops, sticks of *thanaka* (the source of the yellow powder you see on most faces), bags of pickled tea leaves, bizarre cosmetics from across the border and velvet thong slippers from Mandalay. Unlike most markets in Thailand it doesn't require a 6am wake-up call. It's also a great place to try authentic Burmese food.

Borderline Shop

HANDICRAFTS

(www.borderlinecollective.org; 674/14 Th Intharakhiri; ☎10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) Selling arts and craft items made by refugee women, the profits of this shop go back into a women's collective and a child-assistance foundation. Upstairs a gallery sells paintings, and a cookery course and an outdoor 'tea garden' (☎9am-6pm Tue-Sun) are also here.

Fair Trade Shop

HANDICRAFTS

(www.weave-women.org; 656 Th Intharakhiri; ☎9am-5pm Mon-Sat) One of three branches in northern Thailand, this shop specialises in bright handcrafted cloth goods crafted by displaced women from Burma.

Information

Several centrally located banks have ATMs. There aren't many internet cafes in central Mae Sot, but a couple can be found along Th Intharakhiri, west of Se. Southeast Express Tours. There is no official tourist information office in Mae Sot, but Khrua Canadian is a good source of local information.

Immigration (☎0 5556 3000; ☎8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Located next to the Friendship Bridge, this office can do visa extensions.

Tourist police (☎1155; 738/1 Th Intharakhiri) Has an office east of the centre of town and at the market by the Friendship Bridge.

Getting There & Away

Air

Mae Sot's tiny airport is about 2km outside of town along the road to the Friendship Bridge. A motorcycle taxi to the airport costs 40B. The airline offices are located there, but tickets can be purchased from agents in town such as **Se. Southeast Express Tours** (522/3 Th Intharakhiri).

Destinations from Mae Sot:

Bangkok's Don Muang Airport (1890B to 2690B, 90 minutes, twice daily) via **Nok Air** (☎nationwide call centre 1318, Mae Sot 0 5556 3883; www.nokair.co.th; Mae Sot airport) and **Solar Air** (☎0 5556 3608; www.solarair.co.th; Mae Sot airport)

Chiang Mai (1899B, 50 minutes, three times weekly) via **Kan Air** (☎nationwide call centre 02 551 6111, Mae Sot 08 1585 4489; www.kanairlines.com; Mae Sot airport)

Bus & Minivan

All long-distance buses leave from the bus station 1.5km west of the town on Th Intharakhiri. Minivans bound for Phitsanulok (157B, four hours) and Sukhothai (125B, three hours) also depart from the bus station, with frequent departures from 7am to 2pm.

Bus destinations from Mae Sot:

Bangkok (307B to 613B, eight hours, frequent departures from 8am to 9.45pm)

Chiang Mai (253B to 326B, six hours, 6am and 8am)

Chiang Rai (379B to 488B, 10 hours, 6am and 8am)

Lampang (193B to 248B, four hours, 6am and 8am)

Mae Sai (416B to 535B, 12 hours, 6am and 8am)

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou

Sǒrng-tǎa-ou depart from various places around town. Orange *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* bound for Mae Sariang (200B, six hours, six departures from 6.20am to 12.20pm) depart from the old bus station near the centre of town, while blue *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to Um Phang (120B, four hours, every hour from 6.30am to 3.30pm) leave from an office on Th Bun Khun. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to Rim Moei (20B, 15 minutes, frequent departures from 6am to 5.30pm) also leave from a spot just west on Th Bun Khun.

Getting Around

Most of Mae Sot can be seen on foot. Motorcycle taxis and *sǎhm-lór* charge 20B for trips around town.

Several tourism-related business around town, including Bai Fern restaurant, rent out vehicles.

BORDER CROSSING: MAE SOT TO MYAWADI

Mae Sot is – at least when things are calm – a legal border crossing to Myanmar. Yet as with all of Myanmar's land crossings, the situation is volatile, and on our visit, the border was firmly shut due to fighting between the Myanmar Armed Forces and splinter groups of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). Yet even when the border is open, visits to Myanmar are restricted to a limited number of days within a limited area, and travelers are required to leave their passport at the border and are expected return the same way they came in.

If things change by the time you read this, immigration procedures are taken care of at the **Thai immigration booth** (☎0 5556 3000; ☉6.30am-6.30pm) at the Friendship Bridge. It takes a few minutes to finish all the paperwork to leave Thailand officially, and then you're free to walk across the arched 420m Friendship Bridge.

At the other end of the bridge is the **Myanmar immigration booth**, where you'll fill out permits for a one-day stay, pay a fee of US\$10 or 500B and leave your passport as a deposit. Then you're free to wander around Myawadi as long as you're back at the bridge by 5.30pm Myanmar time (which is a half-hour behind Thai time) to pick up your passport and check out with immigration. On your return to Thailand, the Thai immigration office at the bridge will give you a new 15-day visa (p766).

Myawadi is a fairly typical Burmese town, with a number of monasteries, schools, shops and so on. The most important temple is **Shwe Muay Wan**, a traditional bell-shaped *chedi* gilded with many kilos of gold and topped by more than 1600 precious and semiprecious gems. Another noted Buddhist temple is **Mvikyaungon**, called Wat Don Jarakhe in Thai and named for its crocodile-shaped sanctuary. Myawadi's 1000-year-old earthen city walls, probably erected by the area's original Mon inhabitants, can be seen along the southern side of town.

Ban Thai Guest House, Ban Pruk Sa Guesthouse and Bai Fern restaurant all rent out motorbikes. Bicycles are available for rent at Borderline, which also includes a suggested tour of the area.

Jit Motorcycle (☎0 5553 2099; 127/4-6 Th Prasat Withi; motorcycles per day 150B; ☉8am-5pm) Rents out motorcycles.

Mae Sot to Um Phang

Rte 1090 goes south from Mae Sot to Um Phang, 150km away. This stretch of road used to be called the 'Death Highway' because of the guerrilla activity in the area that hindered highway development. Those days ended in the 1980s, but lives are still lost because of brake failure or treacherous turns on this steep, winding road through incredible mountain scenery.

Along the way there are short hikes off the highway to two waterfalls, **Nam Tok Thararak** (26km from Mae Sot) and **Nam Tok Pha Charoen** (41km). Nam Tok Thararak streams over limestone cliffs and calcified rocks with a rough texture that makes climbing the falls easy. It's been made into a park of sorts, with benches right in the stream at the base of the falls for cooling off

and a couple of outhouse toilets nearby; on weekends food vendors set up here.

Just beyond Ban Rom Klao 4 – roughly midway between Mae Sot and Um Phang – is Um Piam, a very large Karen and Burmese refugee village with around 20,000 refugees that were moved here from camps around Rim Moei. There are also several Hmong villages in the area.

There are frequent *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* between Mae Sot and Um Phang to Mae Sot (120B, four hours).

Um Phang & Around

อุ้มผาง

Sitting at the junction of Mae Nam Klong and Huay Um Phang, **Um Phang** is an overgrown village populated mostly by Karen. Many Karen villages in this area are very traditional, and elephants are a common sight, especially in **Palatha**, a traditional Karen village 25km south of Um Phang. *Yaeng* (elephant saddles) and other tack used for elephant wrangling are a common sight on the verandahs of the houses in this village.

South of Um Phang, **Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary** is a Unesco World Heritage Site. Nearby is the largest waterfall in Thailand.

Sights

Nam Tok Thilawsu

WATERFALL

(น้ำตกทีลอซู) This waterfall is Thailand's largest, measuring an estimated 200m high and up to 400m wide during the rainy season. Thais, particularly fanatical about such things, consider Nam Tok Thilawsu to be the most beautiful waterfall in the country. There's a shallow cave behind the falls and several levels of pools suitable for swimming. The best time to visit is after the rainy season (November and December) when the 200m to 400m limestone cliffs alongside the Mae Nam Klong are streaming with water and Nam Tok Thilawsu is at its best.

The vast majority of people visit the falls as part of an organised tour, but it's also possible to go independently. If you've got your own wheels, take the turn-off to Rte 1167 just north of Um Phang. After 12km, turn left at the police checkpoint onto Rte 1288. Continue 6km until you reach the sanctuary checkpoint, where you're expected to pay the entry fee. It's another 30km along a rough road to the sanctuary headquarters.

If you're without transport, it's easy to book a truck just about anywhere in Um Phang (round trip 1800B to 2500B). Alternatively, you can take a Poeng Kloeng-bound *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to the sanctuary checkpoint (30B, every hour 6.30am to 3.30pm), and organise transport from there, although it's not always certain that trucks will be waiting.

Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary

WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

(เขตรักษาพันธุ์สัตว์ป่าอุ้มผาง; ☎ 0 5557 7318; admission 200B) The Nam Tok Thilawsu falls are near the headquarters of the Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary, which is about 50km from Um Phang, towards Sangkhlaburi in Kanchanaburi Province. The 2km path between the headquarters and falls has been transformed into a self-guided nature tour, with the addition of well-conceived educational plaques. Surrounding the falls on both sides of the river are Thailand's thickest stands of natural forest, and the hiking in the vicinity of Nam Tok Thilawsu can be superb. The forest here is said to contain more than 1300 varieties of palm; giant bamboo and strangler figs are also commonplace.

The wildlife sanctuary links with the Thung Yai Naresuan National Park and Huay Kha Kaeng Wildlife Sanctuary (another Unesco World Heritage Site), as well as Khlong Lan and Mae Wong National Parks

to form Thailand's largest wildlife corridor and one of the largest intact natural forests in Southeast Asia.

You can **camp** (50-100B) at the sanctuary headquarters at any time of year, although it's best to book ahead from November to January, when the falls are a particularly popular destination for Thais. This is also the only time of year when food is generally available at the headquarters, and if you visit at any other time you'll have to bring your own.

Tham Ta Khu Bi

CAVE

(ถ้ำตะโคน้ำ) From Ban Mae Klong Mai, just a few kilometres north of Um Phang via the highway to Mae Sot, Rte 1167 heads southwest along the Thai-Myanmar border. Along the way is the extensive cave system of Tham Ta Khu Bi, which in Karen allegedly means 'Flat Mango'. There are no guides here, so be sure to bring your own torch.

Poeng Kloeng

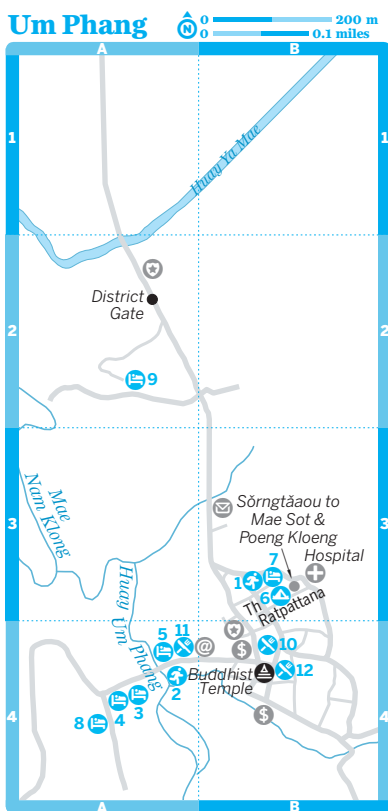
VILLAGE

(บ้านโป่งคลั่ง) After 12km, turn left onto Rte 1288, which leads to the checkpoint for Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary. Past this point the road deteriorates in quality, yet continues more than 70km, terminating in Poeng Kloeng – a Karen, Burmese, Indo-Burmese, Talaku and Thai trading village where buffalo carts are more common than motorcycles. The picturesque setting among spiky peaks and cliffs is worth the trip even if you go no further. From the *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* station in Um Phang there are *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to Poeng Kloeng (100B, 2½ hours, every hour 6.30am to 3.30pm).

Letongkhu & Sangkhlaburi

VILLAGES

(เลตองคุ) Roughly 12km south of Poeng Kloeng along a rough track (passable by 4WD in the dry season), near the Myanmar border on the banks of Mae Nam Suriya next to Sam Rom mountain, is the village of Letongkhu. According to what little anthropological information is available, the villagers, although for the most part Karen in language, belong to the Lagu or Talaku sect, said to represent a form of Buddhism mixed with shamanism and animism. Letongkhu is one of only six such villages in Thailand; there are reportedly around 30 more in Myanmar. Each village has a spiritual and temporal leader called a *pu chaik* (whom the Thais call *reu-sée* – 'rishi', or 'sage') who wears his hair long – usually tied in a topknot – and dresses in white, yellow or brown robes, depending on the subject.



Evangelistic Christian missionaries have infiltrated the area and have tried to convert the Talaku, thus making the Talaku sensitive to outside visits. If you do visit Letongkhu, take care not to enter any village structures without permission or invitation. Likewise, do not take photographs without permission. If you treat the villagers with respect then you shouldn't have a problem.

Sangkhlaburi is 90km or a four- to five-day trek from Poeng Kloeng. The route to Sangkhlaburi has several branches; the main route crosses over the border into Myanmar for some distance before crossing back into Thailand.

Because of the overall sensitive nature of this border area and the very real potential for becoming lost, ill or injured, a guide is highly recommended for any sojourn south of Um Phang. If you speak Thai, you may be able to arrange a guide for this route in Poeng Kloeng. Otherwise, a few trekking agen-

Um Phang

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 1 BC Adventure Tour..... B3
- Napha Tour.....(see 7)
- Trekker Hill.....(see 7)
- Tu Ka Su Cottage.....(see 8)
- 2 Weera Tour..... A4

Sleeping

- 3 Ban Phurkchaya..... A4
- 4 Ban Suansak Resort..... A4
- 5 Garden Huts..... A4
- 6 Phudoi Camp Site & Resort..... B3
- 7 Trekker Hill..... B3
- 8 Tu Ka Su Cottage..... A4
- 9 Umphang Country Huts..... A2

Eating

- 10 Bankrusun..... B4
- 11 Khrua Ton Makham..... A4
- 12 Morning/Evening Market..... B4
- Phudoi Restaurant.....(see 6)

cies in Um Phang have previously arranged such trips with advance notice. The best time of year to do the trek is October to January.

Activities

Trekking & Rafting

Virtually every guest house in Um Phang can arrange combination trekking and rafting trips in the area. Yet because Um Phang is dominated by Thai tourists, only a handful of guides have experience in dealing with foreign visitors, and likewise, few speak English. The agencies we list below have English-speaking guides.

A typical three-day, two-night trip involves both rafting and hiking, with a popular optional activity being elephant rides. The majority involve trips to Nam Tok Thilawsu and beyond, and longer or shorter trips, and trips to other local destinations, may also be arranged.

Rafting trips range from one-day excursions along the Mae Klong from Um Phang to Nam Tok Thilawsu, to three-day trips from Palatha to Nam Tok Thi Lo Re. Most rafting is only possible between November and February.

Um Phang Khi is a 'new' area for rafting, northeast of Um Phang. Officially there are 47 (some rafting companies claim 67) sets of rapids rated at class III (moderate) and class IV (difficult) during the height of the rainy season. The rafting season for Um Phang

Khi is short – August to October only – as at other times of the year the water level isn't high enough.

Costs are all-inclusive and start at about 4000B per person (two or more people) for a three-day rafting and trekking excursion. Elephant rides and other extras will bring the price up.

Trekker Hill TREKKING, RAFTING
(☎ 0 5556 1090; 620 Th Pravitpaiwan, Um Phang)
This recommended outfit has the greatest number of English-speaking guides and offers a variety of treks running from one- to four-days.

BC Adventure Tour TREKKING, RAFTING
(☎ 0 5556 1020; www.boonchuyatour.com) Offers a similar selection of treks and rafting trips, and guides with experience in dealing with foreign trekkers.

Napha Tour TREKKING, RAFTING
(☎ 0 5556 1287; Th Pravitpaiwan, Um Phang)
This outfit offers a variety of programs and English-speaking guides.

Tu Ka Su Cottage TREKKING, RAFTING
(☎ 0 5556 1295; www.tukasu.net; 40 Moo 6, Um Phang) If none of the above work, contact this resort for help in arranging English-speaking guides.

Weera Tour TREKKING, RAFTING
(no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 5556 1368) Located just off the main road, this company arranges excellent tours, although the number of English-speaking guides is limited.

Sleeping

Most places in Um Phang cater to large groups of Thai visitors, so individual foreign travellers are met with a bit of confusion. Likewise, many of the rooms in town are designed for four or more people, and singles or couples can usually negotiate lower rates, especially in the wet season.

Tu Ka Su Cottage HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎ 0 5556 1295; www.tukasu.net; 40 Moo 6, Um Phang; r incl breakfast 600-2000B; 🍷🍷🍷) This is the cleanest and best-run accommodation in Um Phang. The attractive collection of brick-and-stone, multiroom cottages is surrounded by flower and exotic fruit gardens. All bathrooms have hot-water showers with an outdoor feel. The cheaper bungalows are also vast and comfortable, and terrific value.

The owner is a great source of local information and there's free wi-fi.

Umphang Country Huts HOTEL \$\$\$
(no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 5556 1079; www.umphangcountryhut.com; r 500-2500B) Off the highway 2km before Um Phang, these huts enjoy a wooded hilly setting. Some of the rooms in the middle price range have two levels and balconies looking over a stream. The cheapest rooms have cold-water bathrooms. All were being renovated when we stopped by.

Baan Farang HOTEL \$\$
(☎ 08 3388 4223; r incl breakfast 700-1200B; 🍷) Located 3km from Um Phang, off the highway near the intersection that leads to Thilawsu, this attractive plot of land unites seven cosy huts, the more expensive of which are riverside.

Garden Huts HOTEL \$\$
(Boonyaporn Garden Hut; ☎ 0 5556 1093; www.boonyapornresort.com; 8/1 Moo 6, Um Phang; r 200-1500B) Operated by a sweet older lady, this collection of bungalows of varying degrees of comfort and size fronts the river. It features pleasant sitting areas and a well-cared-for garden. A new building has several spacious rooms with TV.

Ban Phurkchaya HOTEL \$\$\$
(no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 5556 1308; www.banphurkchaya.com; 186 Moo 6, Um Phang; r incl breakfast 600-2000B; 🍷) A cute compound of cutesy rooms. The rooms in the main structure are slightly less cute, but like all, appear clean and comfortable. There's no English sign here, but you'd have to struggle to miss it.

Phudoi Camp Site & Resort HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 5556 1049; www.phudoi.com; 637 Th Pravitpaiwan, Um Phang; tent 150B, bungalow with fan/air-con 400/500B; 🍷🍷) Primarily catering to its prebooked tour clients, Phudoi has bungalows set on a well-landscaped hillside near the village centre. The log cabin-style bungalows are spacious and have verandas. There's also a camping area and a restaurant with the same name.

Trekker Hill HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 5556 1090; 620 Th Pravitpaiwan; dm/r 100/300B; 🍷) You may have ended up here even though it wasn't your choice – we're told that *sörng-tăa-ou* drivers are sometimes paid to drop passengers off here. Nonetheless, this rustic collection of huts on a steep hillside is a good place to stay, and

rooms have hot water and views of the valley and Um Phang. The restaurant serves three meals a day and also has satellite TV.

Ban Suansak Resort

HOTEL \$

(☎08 9839 5308; r 300-500B) Just outside the town on the road to Palatha, this 'resort' has 13 rooms in a new two-storey building and three bungalows that can sleep up to 10 people. The beds look pretty thin, but the place is spotless and has its own restaurant.

Eating

Um Phang has several very simple restaurants, morning and evening markets and a couple of small shops.

Khrua Ton Makham

THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; mains 30-70B; ☺lunch & dinner) This rustic place has a brief English-language menu, although the Thai menu is much more expansive. The restaurant is under a huge tamarind tree ('Ton Makham'), next door to the internet cafe.

Phudoi Restaurant

THAI \$\$

(mains 40-170B; ☺8am-10pm) When open, this restaurant has decent food. There's a bilingual menu and it's often the only place open past 9pm.

Bankrusun

CAFE \$

(mains 20-35B; ☺6.30am-8.30pm) Owned by a Thai musician, this souvenir shop/cafe offers good coffee, drinks and basic breakfasts.

Information

There are two ATMs in Um Phang, although it's still probably a good idea to bring cash. **Internet** (per hr 15B; ☺4-9pm Mon-Fri, 7am-9pm Sat & Sun) is available at a large cafe on the way to Ban Palatha.

Getting There & Away

There are frequent *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* from Um Phang to Mae Sot (120B, four hours, every hour from 6.30am to 1.30pm), departing from a stop at the top of Th Ratpattana.

Mae Sot to Mae Sariang

Rte 105 runs north along the Myanmar border from Mae Sot all the way to Mae Sariang (226km) in Mae Hong Son Province. The winding, paved road passes through the small communities of **Mae Ramat**, **Mae Salit**, **Ban Tha Song Yang** and **Ban Sop Ngao** (Mae Ngao). The thick forest in these

parts still has a few stands of teak and the Karen villages continue to use the occasional work elephant.

Nam Tok Mae Kasa, between the Km 13 and Km 14 markers, is an attractive waterfall fronting a cave. There's also a hot spring in the nearby village of Mae Kasa.

In Mae Ramat, don't miss **Wat Don Kaew**, behind the district office, which houses a large Mandalay-style marble Buddha.

At Km 58, after a series of roadblocks, you'll pass the immense refugee village of **Mae La** where it's estimated that 60,000 Burmese refugees live. The village is at least 3km long and takes a couple of minutes to drive past, bringing home the significant refugee problem that Thailand faces.

There are extensive limestone caverns at **Tham Mae Usu**, at Km 94 near Ban Tha Song Yang (there's another village of the same name further north). From the highway it's a 2km walk to Tham Mae Usu; note that it's closed in the rainy season, when the river running through the cave seals off the mouth.

At the northern end of Tak province, you'll reach **Ban Tha Song Yang**, a Karen village attractively set at the edge of limestone cliffs by the Mae Nam Moei. This is the last significant settlement in Tak before you begin climbing uphill and into the dense jungle and mountains of Mae Ngao National Park, in Mae Hong Son Province.

Ban Sop Ngao, little more than a roadside village that is home to the park headquarters, is the first town you'll come to in Mae Hong Son. From there it's another 40km to Mae Sariang, where there's ample food and accommodation.

Sleeping & Eating

There aren't too many places to stay and eat along this route. The most convenient base is Tha Song Yang (the town near Km 90 – not the village of the same name at the northern edge of Tak Province), as there are a few restaurants in town. Mae Salit, slightly further north, also has basic accommodation and food.

Thasongyang Hill Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5558 9088; www.thasongyanghill.9nha.com; Km 85, Rte 105, Ban Tha Song Yang; r 200-800B; ☹☹) North of Tha Song Yang, accommodation here takes the form of large modern rooms in a long building, or attractive bungalows in a flower-lined garden. There are a couple of similar hotels in the area, but this place is the nicest.

Per-pron Resort

(๒08 1774 5624; 110 Moo 2, Mae Salit; bungalows 300-350B) Just south of Mae Salit, this place has a few rustic bungalows looking over the Mae Nam Moei.

i Getting There & Away

Sǎng-tǎa-ou to Mae Sariang (200B, six hours, six departures from 6.20am to 12.20pm) depart from Mae Sot's old bus station, close to downtown.

MAE HONG SON PROVINCE

Accessible only by incredibly windy mountain roads or a dodgy flight to the provincial capital, this is Thailand's most remote province. Although it's undergone a tourist miniboom over the past decade, with many resorts opening in the area around the capital, few visitors seem to make it much further than Pai.

Mae Hong Son

POP 6000

แม่ฮ่องสอน

Mae Hong Son, with its remote setting and surrounding mountains, fits many travellers' preconceived notion of how a northern Thai city should be. A palpable Burmese influence and a border town feel don't dispel this image, and best of all, there's hardly a *túk-túk*

or *tout* to be seen. This doesn't mean Mae Hong Son is uncharted territory; the tour groups have been coming here for years, but the city's potential as a base for activities, from spa treatment to trekking, ensures that your visit can be quite unlike anyone else's.

Mae Hong Son is best visited between November and March when the town is at its most beautiful. During the rainy season (June to October) travel to the more remote corners of the province can be difficult because there are few paved roads. During the hot season, the Mae Nam Pai valley fills with smoke from slash-and-burn agriculture. The only problem with going in the cool season is that the nights are downright cold – you'll need at least one thick sweater and a good pair of socks for mornings and evenings, and a sleeping bag or several blankets.

History

Mae Hong Son has been isolated from Thailand geographically, culturally and politically for most of its short existence. The city was founded as an elephant training centre in the early 19th century, and remained little more than this until 1856, when fighting in Burma caused thousands of Shan to pour into the area. In the years following, Mae Hong Son prospered as a centre for logging and remained an independent kingdom until 1900, when King Rama V incorporated the area into the Thai kingdom.

WORTH A TRIP

MAE HONG SON LOOP

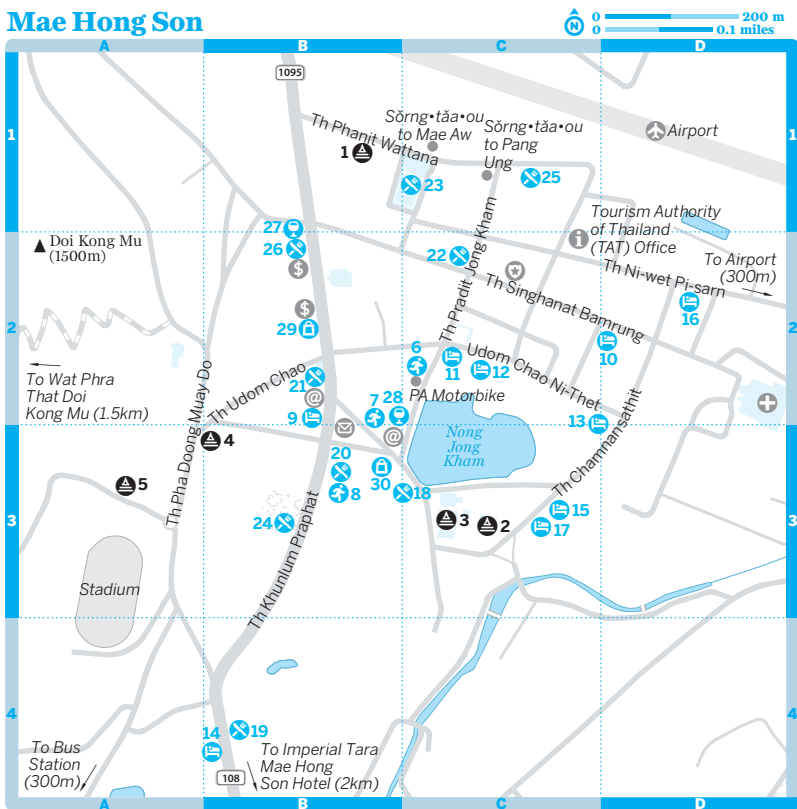
One of the most popular motorcycle riding tours in northern Thailand is the circuitous route that begins in Chiang Mai and passes through the length of Mae Hong Son Province before looping back to the city – a round trip of nearly 1000km.

The Mae Hong Son loop really begins 34km north of Chiang Mai when you turn onto Rte 1095 and lean into the first of its 1864 bends. It's slow going, and you start climbing almost immediately; however, the good thing about this route is that potential overnight stops are frequent – many of the towns with good accommodation and food are less than 70km apart – giving riders ample chance to reclaim the blood flow to their bottoms. Convenient overnight stops include Pai, 130km from Chiang Mai, Soppong, another 40km up the road, and Mae Hong Son, 65km from Soppong.

Upon reaching Khun Yuam, 70km south of Mae Hong Son, you can opt to take Rte 1263 to Mae Chaem, before continuing back to Chiang Mai via Doi Inthanon, the country's highest peak, or you can continue south to Mae Sariang and follow Rte 108 all the way back to Chiang Mai via Hot, although the distances between towns here are greater and best done on a more powerful and more comfortable motorcycle.

An excellent driving companion is Golden Triangle Rider's *Mae Hong Son Loop Guide Map*, available at most bookshops in Chiang Mai. The map shows accurate distances between locations along the loop, as well as potential side trips and other helpful information.

Mae Hong Son

**Long Time Tours**

(☎08 9838 6865; 21 Th Pradit Jong Kham; ☉8am-5pm) Another locally based outfit that can arrange a variety of tours.

Nam Rin Tour

(☎0 5361 4454; 21 Th Pradit Jong Kham) Mr Dam advertises 'Bad sleep, bad jokes', but his treks get good reports.

Mud Spa

Pooklon Country Club SPA
(☎08 6198 0722; Ban Mae Sang; ☉8am-6.30pm) This self-professed 'country club' is touted as Thailand's only mud treatment spa. Discovered by a team of geologists in 1995, the mud here is pasteurised and blended with herbs before being employed in various treatments (facial 60B). There's thermal mineral water for soaking (60B), and on weekends, massage (per hour 200B).

Pooklon is 16km north of Mae Hong Son in Mok Champae District. If you haven't got

TREKKING

TREKKING

your own wheels, you can take the daily Mae Aw-bound *sōrng-tāa-ou*, but this means you might have to find your own way back.

Tours**Rosegarden Tours**

(☎0 5361 1681; www.rosegarden-tours.com; 86/4 Th Khunlum Praphat; tours from 600B) Its English- and French-speaking guides focus on cultural and sightseeing tours.

Tour Merg Tai

(☎0 5361 1979; www.tourmerngtai.com; 89 Th Khunlum Praphat; van tours per day 1800B) This outfit mostly does city-based van tours and cycling tours, but can also arrange treks.

Festivals & Events**Poi Sang Long Festival**

ORDINATION CEREMONY
Wat Jong Klang and Wat Jong Kham are the focal point of this March festival, where young Shan boys are ordained as novice

Mae Hong Son

📍 Sights

- 1 Wat Hua Wiang..... B1
- 2 Wat Jong Kham..... C3
- 3 Wat Jong Klang..... C3
- 4 Wat Kam Kor..... B3
- 5 Wat Phra Non..... A3

🏞️ Activities, Courses & Tours

- 6 Friend Tour..... C2
- Long Time Tours..... (see 30)
- 7 Nam Rim Tour..... B2
- Rosegarden Tours..... (see 21)
- 8 Tour Merg Tai..... B3

🛏️ Sleeping

- 9 Baiyoke Chalet Hotel..... B2
- 10 Coffee Morning..... D2
- 11 Friend House..... C2
- 12 Jongkam G.H..... C2
- 13 Jongkham Place..... C2
- 14 Mountain Inn & Resort..... B4
- 15 Palm House..... C3

- 16 Residence@MaeHongSon..... D2
- 17 Romtai..... C3

🍴 Eating

- 18 Baan Tua Lek..... C3
- 19 Ban Phleng..... B4
- 20 Fern Restaurant..... B3
- 21 La Tasca..... B2
- 22 Mae Si Bua..... C2
- 23 Morning Market..... C1
- 24 Night Market..... B3
- 25 Night Market..... C1
- 26 No-Name Restaurant..... B2

🍷 Drinking

- 27 Crossroads..... B1
- 28 Sunflower Café..... B2

🛍️ Shopping

- 29 Maneerat..... B2
- 30 Night Market..... B3

monks in the ceremony known as *bòat lóok gâou*. As part of the Shan custom, the boys are dressed in ornate costumes (rather than simple white robes) and wear flower head-dresses and facial make-up.

Jong Para Festival

BUDDHIST FESTIVAL

Another important local event, it is held towards the end of the Buddhist Rains Retreat around October – three days before the full moon of the 11th lunar month, so it varies from year to year. The festival begins with local Shan bringing offerings to monks in the temples in a procession marked by the carrying of models of castles on poles. An important part of the festival is the folk theatre and dance, which is performed on the wát grounds, some of it unique to northwest Thailand.

Loi Krathong

TRADITIONAL

During this national holiday in November – usually celebrated by floating *grà-tong* (small lotus floats) on the nearest pond, lake or river – Mae Hong Son residents launch balloons called *grà-tong sà-wán* (heaven *grà-tong*) from Doi Kong Mu.

🛏️ Sleeping

Mae Hong Son generally lacks in inspiring accommodation, although there are a couple of standout midrange options. Because

it's a tourist town, accommodation prices fluctuate with the seasons, and outside of the high season (November to January) it's worth pursuing a discount.

INTOWN

Baiyoke Chalet Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎️) 0 5361 3132; trv1864@hotmail.com; 90 Th Khunlun Praphat; r incl breakfast 1280-1800B; 🍷@☎️) This place combines both a convenient location and comfortable lodging. As established in the lobby, the rooms are tastefully outfitted in hardwood and local themes. A downside is that the restaurant/lounge downstairs can get quite loud, so request a room away from the street or on an upper level. Low-season rates are 50% less.

Residence@MaeHongSon

HOTEL \$\$

(☎️) 0 5361 4100; www.theresidence-mhs.com; 41/4 Th Ni-wet Pi-sarn; r 900-1400B; 🍷@☎️) One of the more recent places to go up, this cheery yellow building houses 11 inviting rooms. Teak furnishings abound, and lots of windows ensure ample natural light. There's also a sunny communal rooftop area, a friendly English-speaking owner, and bicycles provided free of charge.

Romtai

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎️) 0 5361 2437; www.maehongson-romtai.com; Th Chamnansathit; r 600-1200B, bungalows 1500-1700B; 🍷@☎️) Hidden behind both the lakeside

DON'T MISS

WAT PHRA THAT DOI KONG MU

Climb the hill west of town, Doi Kong Mu (1500m), to visit this Shan-built **wát** (วัดพระธาตุคอกของมู; admission free), also known as Wat Plai Doi. The view of the sea of fog that collects in the valley each morning is impressive; at other times of the day you get wonderful views of the town and surrounding valleys. Two Shan *chedi*, erected in 1860 and 1874, enshrine the ashes of monks from Myanmar's Shan State. Around the back of the wát you can see a tall, slender, standing Buddha and catch views west of the ridge.

temples and a bland-looking reception area, this place has a huge variety of accommodation, ranging from spacious, clean rooms to bungalows looking over a lush garden with fishponds.

Jongkham Place

GUEST HOUSE \$\$\$

(☎ 05361 4294; 4/2 Th Udom Chao Ni-Thet; bungalows/ste 800/2000B; ๙๙) This family-run place by the lake has four attractive wooden bungalows and two penthouse-like suites. All accommodation includes TV, fridge and air-con.

Mountain Inn & Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 05361 1802; www.mhsmountaininn.com; 112/2 Th Khunlum Praphat; r incl breakfast 1500-2800B, ste incl breakfast 4500B; ๙๙) This hotel has clean, cosy rooms with Thai decorative touches. There is a pretty courtyard garden with small ponds, benches and parasols. Standard rooms are a better deal than deluxe as you get a terrace overlooking the garden.

Coffee Morning

HOTEL \$

(☎ 05361 2234; 78 Th Singhanat Bamrung; r 300-500B; ๙๙) This old wooden house unites an attractive cafe/bookshop and four basic but cosy rooms. Considering that bathrooms are shared, the high-season rates aren't exactly a deal, but free internet and the fun cafe atmosphere make up for this.

Palm House

HOTEL \$

(☎ 05361 4022; 22/1 Th Chamnansathit; r 350-600B; ๙๙) This two-storey cement building offers several characterless but clean rooms with TV, hot water and fan/air-con.

The helpful owner speaks English and can arrange transport when he's not napping.

Friend House

HOTEL \$

(☎ 05362 0119; 20 Th Pradit Jong Kham; r 150-400B; ๙) Superclean rooms run from the ultra basic that share hot-water bathrooms to larger rooms with private bathrooms.

Jongkam GH

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎ 08 1594 5323; 7 Udom Chao Ni-Thet; r 200-400B) Fan-cooled, mattress-on-the-floor rooms in a lakeside garden.

OUTSIDE OF TOWN

Southwest of town, a few kilometres towards Ban Huay Deua and Ban Tha Pong Daeng on the river, are a few 'resorts', which in the Thai sense of the term means any hotel near a rural or semirural area. Discounts of up to 40% are common in the low season and online discounts can be found any time of year.

TOP CHOICE Fern Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 05368 6110; www.fernresort.info; 64 Moo 10, Tambon Pha Bong; bungalows incl breakfast 2500-3500B; ๙@๙๙) This long-standing eco-friendly resort is one of the more pleasant places to stay in northern Thailand. The 40 Shan-style wooden bungalows are set among tiered rice paddies and streams and feature stylishly decorated interiors. Nearby nature trails lead to the adjacent Mae Surin National Park, and to encourage community-based tourism, most of the employees come from local villages. The downside is that the resort is 7km south of town, but free pick-up is available from the airport and bus terminal, and regular shuttles run to/from town stopping at the Fern Restaurant.

Sang Tong Huts

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 05362 1680; www.sangtonghuts.com; Th Makhasanti; bungalows 800-3000B; ๙๙๙) This popular set of bungalows in a wooded area just outside of town is one of the more character-filled places to stay. There's a huge variety of bungalows, all of them spacious and well designed. And the tasty baked goods and a pool make up for the distance from the centre of town. It's popular among repeat visitors to Mae Hong Son, so it pays to book ahead. Sang Tong Huts is about 1km northeast of Th Khunlum Praphat, just off Th Makhasanti – if going towards Pai, turn left at the town's northernmost stoplight and follow the signs.

Imperial Tara Mae Hong Son Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 0 5368 4444-9; www.imperialhotels.com/tara-maehongson; 149 Moo 8; r incl breakfast 2200-2800B, ste incl breakfast 2900-5400B; ④⑤⑥) Rooms in this upmarket, 104-room hotel all have wooden floors and are tastefully decorated. French windows that open onto a terrace make a change from the standard business hotel layout. Facilities include a sauna, swimming pool and fitness centre. It's about 2km south of town.

Pana Huts

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 5361 4331; www.panahuts.com; 293/9 Moo 11, Th Makhasanti; r & bungalows 700-800B; ④) Set in a wooded area outside of town, the six slightly overpriced bamboo huts all have hot-water bathrooms and terraces. The communal area feels appropriately rustic, with its thatched teak leaf roof, wooden benches and enclosed campfire for chilly nights. Pana Huts is about 1km northeast of Th Khunlum Praphat, just off Th Makhasanti – if going towards Pai, turn left at the town's northernmost stoplight and follow the signs.



Eating & Drinking

Mae Hong Son's morning market is a fascinating place to have breakfast. Several vendors at the north end of the market sell unusual dishes such as *tò-a òn*, a Burmese noodle dish supplemented with thick chickpea porridge and deep-fried bits of vegetables, chickpea flour cakes and tofu. Other vendors along the same strip sell a local version of *kà-nòm jeen nám ngée-o*, often topped with *kahng pòrng*, a Shan snack of battered and deep-fried vegetables.

The city also has two good night markets; the night market near the airport offers mostly takeaway northern Thai-style food while the night market at the southern end of Th Khunlum Praphat has more generic Thai food.

Ban Phleng

NORTHERN THAI \$

(no roman-script sign; 108 Th Khunlum Praphat; mains 45-100B; ☺lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This popular open-air restaurant does a handful of very tasty local dishes – you're safe going with anything that says 'Maehongson style' on the English-language menu. Ban Phleng is just south of town – look for the white banners at the side of the road.

No-Name Restaurant

THAI \$\$

(Th Khunlum Praphat; mains 30-170B; ☺lunch & dinner) There really is no name here (it's a tax thing), but this has no negative repercussions on the tasty, central Thai-style dishes. There's a limited English-language menu, or you can simply choose from the fresh veggies out front.

Mae Si Bua

NORTHERN THAI \$

(51 Th Singhanat Bamrung; mains 20-30B; ☺lunch) Like the Shan grandma you never had, Auntie Bua prepares a huge variety of different Shan curries, soups and dips on a daily basis. Try her delicious *gaang hang-lair*, an incredibly rich curry of pork belly with a flavour not unlike American-style barbecue sauce.

Fern Restaurant

INTERNATIONAL-THAI \$\$

(Th Khunlum Praphat; mains 70-180B; ☺10.30am-10pm) The Fern is almost certainly Mae Hong Son's most upscale restaurant, but remember, this is Mae Hong Son. Nonetheless, service is professional and the food is decent. The expansive menu covers Thai, local and even European dishes. There is live lounge music some nights.

La Tasca

ITALIAN \$\$

(Th Khunlum Praphat; mains 89-209B; ☺lunch & dinner) This cosy place has been serving homemade pasta, pizza and calzone for as long as we can remember and is one of the few places in town to serve relatively authentic Western food.

Baan Tua Lek

CAFE \$

(51 Th Singhanat Bamrung; mains 20-30B; ☺7am-9pm; ④⑤) This tiny, modern cafe serves good coffee drinks and a few sweets and cakes.

Crossroads

BAR

(61 Th Khunlum Praphat; ☺8am-1am) This friendly bar-restaurant is a crossroads in every sense, from its location at one of Mae Hong Son's main intersections to its clientele that ranges from wet-behind-the-ears backpackers to hardened locals. Oh, and there's steak.

Sunflower Café

BAR

(Th Pradit Jong Kham; ☺7am-midnight) This open-air place combines draught beer, live lounge music and views of the lake. Sunflower also does meals (35B to 180B) and runs tours.

Shopping

From October to February the walkway around the Jong Kham Lake becomes a lively **night market** (☎5-10pm).

A few well-stocked souvenir shops can be found near the southern end of Th Khunlum Praphat, including **Maneerat** (80 Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎8am-9pm), which features an extensive array of Shan and Burmese clothing, as well as Burmese lacquerware boxes.

Information

Most of the banks at the southern end of Th Khunlum Praphat have ATMs. Foreign-exchange services are available at Bangkok Bank and Kasikornbank, among others.

A few internet shops can be found around the southern end of Th Khunlum Praphat.

Mae Hong Son Internet (88 Th Khunlum Praphat; per hr 30B; ☎8.30am-11pm)

Main post office (Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

Srisangwal Hospital (☎0 5361 1378; Th Singhanat Bamrung) A full-service facility that includes an emergency room.

Tourism Authority of Thailand office (TAT; ☎nationwide call centre 1672, Mae Hong Son 0 5361 2982; www.travelmaehongson.org; Th Niwet Pi-sarn; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Basic tourist brochures and maps can be picked up here.

Tourist police (☎nationwide call centre 1155, Mae Hong Son 0 5361 1812; Th Singhanat Bamrung; ☎8.30am-4.30pm)

Getting There & Away

Air

For many people the time saved flying from Chiang Mai to Mae Hong Son versus bus travel is worth the extra baht. There are four flights daily (1590B to 1890B, 35 minutes), operated by **Kan Air** (☎nationwide call centre 02 551 6111, Mae Hong Son 0 5361 3188; www.kanairlines.com; Mae Hong Son airport) and **Nok Air** (☎nationwide call centre 1318, Mae Hong Son 0 5361 2057; www.nokair.co.th; Mae Hong Son airport).

A tük-tük into town costs about 80B.

Bus

Mae Hong Son's bus station is 1km south of the city. **Prempracha Tour** (☎0 5368 4100) conducts bus services within the province and **Sombat Tour** (☎0 5361 3211) conducts services between Mae Hong Son and Bangkok.

Other bus destinations from Mae Hong Son include:

Bangkok (718B to 838B, 15 hours, three departures from 2pm to 4pm)

Chiang Mai (northern route, 127B, eight hours, 8.30am and 12.30pm)

Chiang Mai (southern route, 178B, nine hours, frequent departures from 6am to 9pm)

Khun Yuam (50B, two hours, frequent departures from 6am to 9pm)

Mae Sariang (95B, four hours, frequent departures from 6am to 9pm)

Pai (70B, 4½ hours, 8.30am and 12.30pm)

Soppong (40B, two hours, frequent departures from 6am to 9pm)

Minivan

Air-conditioned minivans, a popular way to get around the province, also depart from the bus station.

Chiang Mai (250B, six hours, every hour from 7am to 3pm)

Pai (150B, 2½ hours, every hour from 7am to 4pm)

Soppong (150B, 1½ hours, every hour from 7am to 4pm)

Getting Around

The centre of Mae Hong Son can easily be covered on foot, and it is one of the few towns in Thailand that doesn't seem to have a motorcycle taxi at every corner. However, some can be found near the entrance to the morning market, and charge 20B to 30B for trips within town; to Doi Kong Mu it costs 100B return. There are also a few tük-tük in town; most are at the bus stop and charge 40B per trip within town and 80B to/ from the airport or bus station.

Because most of Mae Hong Son's attractions are outside of town, renting a motorcycle or bicycle is a wise move.

PA Motorbike (☎0 5361 1647; 21 Th Pradit Jong Kham; ☎7.30am-7.30pm) Opposite Friend House, rents motorbikes (250B per day) and trucks (1500B to 2500B per day).

PJ (☎08 4372 6967; Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎8am-7.30pm) Rents motorbikes (150B per day).

Titan (Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎10am-10pm) Rents good-quality mountain bikes (80B per day).

Around Mae Hong Son

PHA BONG HOT SPRINGS บ่อน้ำร้อนผาบ่อง Eleven kilometres south of the capital in the Shan village of Pha Bong is this public park with **hot springs** (private bath/bathing room 50/400B; ☎8am-sunset). You can take a private bath or rent a room, and there's also a massage (per hour 150B). The springs can be reached on any southbound bus.

THAM PLA FOREST PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติถ้ำปลา (adult/child 100/50; ☺6am-6pm) This **provincial park**, 16km north of Mae Hong Son, is centred around Tham Pla, or Fish Cave, a water-filled cavern where hundreds of soro brook carp thrive. The fish grow up to 1m long and are found only in the provinces of Mae Hong Son, Ranong, Chiang Mai, Rayong, Chanthaburi and Kancharaburi. The fish eat vegetables and insects, although the locals believe them to be vegetarian and feed them only fruit and vegetables, which can be purchased at the park entrance.

A 450m path leads from the park entrance to a suspension bridge that crosses a stream and continues to the cave. A **statue** of a Hindu *rishi* called Nara, said to protect the holy fish from danger, stands nearby. It's a bit anticlimactic, but the park grounds are a bucolic, shady place to hang out; food and picnic tables are available.

Buses to Pai pass by, but renting a motorcycle is the best way to get here.

LONG-NECKED KAYAN VILLAGES

หมู่บ้านกะเหรี่ยงคอขาว These villages are Mae Hong Son's most touted – and most controversial – tourist attraction. The 'long-necked' moniker stems from the habit of some Kayan (sometimes also referred to as Padaung, a Shan term) women of wearing heavy brass coils around their necks. The coils depress the collarbone and rib cage, which makes their necks look unnaturally stretched. A common myth claims if the coils are removed, the women's necks will fall over and the women will suffocate. In fact the women attach and remove the coils at will and there is no evidence that this deformation impairs their health at all.

Nobody knows for sure how the coil custom got started. One theory is that it was meant to make the women unattractive to men from other tribes. Another story says it was so tigers wouldn't carry the women off by their throats; most likely it is probably nothing more than a simple fashion accessory. Until relatively recently the custom was largely dying out, but money from tourism, and quite possibly the influence of local authorities eager to cash in on the Kayan, have reinvigorated it.

Regardless of the origin, the villages are now on every group tour's itinerary, and have become a significant tourist draw for Mae Hong Son. The villages are often de-

ridated as human zoos, and there are certainly elements of this, but we find them more like bizarre rural markets, with the women earning much of their money by selling tacky souvenirs and drinks. The Kayan we've talked to claim to be happy with their current situation, but the stateless position they share with all Burmese refugees is nothing to be envied, and these formerly independent farmers are now reliant on aid and tourists to survive. A report on the villages by journalist Patrick Winn can be seen at www.globalpost.com/dispatch/thailand/110128/thailand-tourism-burma-refugee-chiang-mai.

If you want to see any of the three Kayan settlements in Mae Hong Son, any travel agency in Mae Hong Son can arrange a tour. The most-touted Kayan village is **Huai Seua Thao**, about 7km from Mae Hong Son. More remote, but definitely not off the beaten track, is **Kayan Tayar**, near the Shan village of Ban Nai Soi, 35km northwest of Mae Hong Son. Both collect an entry fee from non-Thais of 250B per person. Another 'long-necked' community is based at **Huay Pu Keng** and is included on long-tail boat tours departing from Tha Pong Daeng.

MAE AW & AROUND

เมื่อ A worthwhile day trip from the provincial capital is to Mae Aw, an atmospheric Chinese outpost right at the Myanmar border, 43km north of Mae Hong Son.

The road to Mae Aw is a beautiful route that passes through tidy riverside Shan communities such as **Mok Champae** before suddenly climbing and winding through impressive mountain scenery. Stops can be made at **Pha Sua Waterfall**, about 5km up the mountain, or **Pang Tong Summer Palace**, a rarely used royal compound a few kilometres past the waterfall.

For an interesting detour, at Ban Na Pa Paek take a left and continue 6km to the Shan village of **Ban Ruam Thai**. There are several basic places to stay and eat here, and the road ends 500m further at **Pang Ung**, a peaceful mountain reservoir surrounded by pines that is immensely popular among Thai day trippers in search of a domestic Switzerland.

Drive back to Ban Na Pa Paek the way you came. From there it is 6km further north past hills holding tea and coffee plantations to Mae Aw. The modern Thai name for the town is Ban Rak Thai (Thai-Loving Village) and the town was established by Yunnanese

KMT fighters who fled from communist rule in 1949. The town sits on the edge of a large reservoir and the faces and signs are very Chinese. The main industry here has become tea, and there are numerous places to taste the local brew, as well as several restaurants serving Yunnanese cuisine.

There's a brief dirt road to the border crossing, but it's not advisable to do any unaccompanied trekking here, as the area is an infamous drug route.

Sleeping & Eating

Ban Din Guest House HOTEL \$\$
(๒08 4854 9397; Mae Aw/Ban Rak Thai; r 300-750B) This place and other similar outfits ringing Mae Aw's reservoir offer basic accommodation in adobe-style bungalows.

Guest House and Home Stay GUEST HOUSE \$\$
(๒0 5307 0589, 08 3571 6668; Ban Ruam Thai; r 400-1500B) The first guest house in Ban Ruam Thai (there are now numerous 'homestays' offering accommodation from 200B to 400B), this place consists of several simple bamboo huts positioned on a slope surrounded by coffee plants, tea plants and fruit trees. Even if you're not staying, stop here for a brew; the owner is passionate about coffee, and there is a roasting room where visitors can roast and grind their own beans.

Gee Lee Restaurant CHINESE \$\$
(no roman-script sign; Mae Aw/Ban Rak Thai; mains 40-250B; ☺8am-7pm) This was one of the first places in Mae Aw to serve the town's Yunnanese-style Chinese dishes to visitors. Stewed pork leg and stir-fried local veggies are the specialities. It's at the corner of the lake, just before the intersection that leads to the centre of the village.

Getting There & Away

There are three daily *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* that head towards Mae Aw: two that only go as far as Ban Ruam Thai (80B, one hour, 9am and 3pm), and another that terminates in Mae Aw (70B, one hour, 2pm). Both depart from Mae Hong Son's municipal market only when full, which can sometimes be a couple of hours after the scheduled departure time. Because of this, it's probably worth getting a group of people together and chartering a vehicle; the *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* drivers we talked to quoted 1000B for either destination, while any tour agency in Mae Hong Son will arrange a vehicle for around 1500B.

Alternatively, the route also makes a brilliant motorcycle ride – just make sure you have enough petrol, as the only station is in Ban Na Pa Paek, at the end of a very long climb.

Pai

POP 2000

ปาย

Spend enough time in northern Thailand and eventually you'll hear rumours that Pai is the Khao San Rd of northern Thailand. Although this is definitely a stretch, in recent years the small town has started to resemble a Thai island getaway – without the beaches. Guest houses appear to outnumber private residences in the 'downtown' area, the internet is never more than a few steps away and the nights buzz with the sound of live music and partying.

However, unlike the islands, Pai (pronounced more like the English 'bye' not 'pie') is now just as popular among Thais as foreigners. During the peak of the cool season (December and January), thousands of Thais from Bangkok crowd the town, making parts of it feel more like Chatuchak Weekend market than a remote valley town in Mae Hong Son. Traffic jams aren't unusual during this time of year, and accommodation becomes so scarce that many are forced to rough it in tents.

Despite all this, the town's popularity has yet to impact on its setting in a nearly picture-perfect mountain valley. There's heaps of quiet accommodation outside the main drag, a host of natural, lazy activities to keep visitors entertained, a vibrant art and music scene, and the town's Shan roots can still be seen in its temples, quiet back streets and fun afternoon market.

Sight

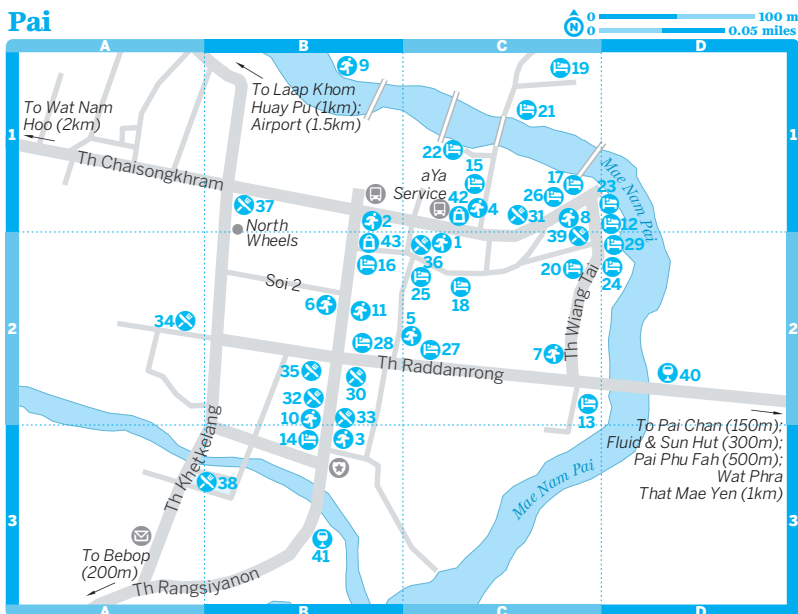
Many of Pai's sights are found just outside the city centre and in the surrounding areas.

Buddhist Temples

Wat Phra That Mae Yen TEMPLE
(วัดพระธาตุแม่เย็น) This temple sits atop a hill and has good views overlooking the valley. Walk 1km east from the main intersection in town, across a stream and through a village, to get to the stairs (353 steps) that lead to the top. Or take the 400m sealed road that follows a different route to the top.

Wat Nam Hoo TEMPLE
(วัดน้ำฮู) Wat Nam Hoo is about 2km from Pai and houses a sacred Buddha image said to have once emitted holy water from its head. The place is popular with visiting Thais and there's a small market on the grounds.

Pai



Pai

Activities, Courses & Tours

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- 2 Duang Trekking B1
- 3 Mam Yoga House B3
- 4 Pai Adventure C1
- 5 Pai Cookery School C2
- 6 Pai Kayak B2
- 7 Pai Traditional Thai Massage C2
- 8 Pai Zip Line C1
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Sleeping

- 12 Baan Pai Village D1
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- 15 Breeze of Pai Guesthouse C1
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- 18 Mr Jan's Guest House C2
- 19 Pai Country Hut C1
- 20 Pai Fah C2
- 21 Pai Nai Fun C1
- 22 Pai River Villa C1
- 23 Pai RiverCorner D1
- 24 Pai Vimaan Resort D2
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Eating

- 30 Amido's Pizza Garden B2
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- 33 Charlie & Lek Health
Restaurant B2
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- 35 Je-In Pai B2
- Khanom Jeen Nang Yong (see 4)
- 36 Mama Falafel C2
- 37 Nong Beer B1
- 38 Saengthongaram Market B3
- TTK (see 28)
- 39 Witching Well C2

Drinking

- 40 Don't Cry D2
- 41 Ting Tong B3

Shopping

- 42 Siam Books C1
- 43 Walking Street B2

Waterfalls

There are a few waterfalls around Pai that are worth visiting, particularly after the rainy season (October to early December). The closest and the most popular, **Nam Tok Mo Paeng**, has a couple of pools that are suitable for swimming. The waterfall is a total of 8km from Pai along the road that also leads to Wat Nam Hoo – a long walk indeed, but suitable for a bike ride or short motorcycle trip. Roughly the same distance in the opposite direction is **Nam Pembok**, just off the road to Chiang Mai. The most remote is **Nam Tok Mae Yen**, a couple of hours' walk down the rough road east of Pai, just before the turn-off to Fluid.

Motorcycle and bike rentals are available at several guest houses, as well as at aYa Service.

Other Sights

Ban Santichon

VILLAGE

(บ้านสันติชน) About 4km outside of Pai, a small market, delicious Yunnanese food, tea tasting, pony rides and Yunnanese **adobe-style accommodation** (☎08 1024 3982; bungalows 1000-1500B) make the KMT village of Ban Santichon not unlike a Chinese-themed amusement park.

Tha Pai Hot Springs

HOT SPRINGS

(เขาน้ำร้อนท่าปาย; adult/child 200/100B; ☀6am-7pm) Across the Mae Nam Pai and 7km south-east of town via a paved road is the springs, a well-kept local park 1km from the road. A scenic stream flows through the park; the stream mixes with the hot springs in places to make pleasant bathing areas. The water is also diverted to a couple of nearby spas; see opposite.

Pai Canyon

CANYON

(เขาปาย) Located 8km from Pai along the road to Chiang Mai, a paved stairway here culminates in an elevated lookout over high rock cliffs and the Pai valley. The latter can be followed by a dirt trail, but lacking shade, is best tackled in the morning or afternoon.

Memorial Bridge

LANDMARK

(สะพานประวัติศาสตร์ท่าปาย) It may look like an antiquated bridge to us, but to thousands of Thai tourists who stop here during the tourist season, it's one of several crucial photo ops along the '762 curves' to Pai. Located 9km from Pai, the bridge was originally built by Japanese soldiers during WWII. Other crucial Pai-themed photo ops include the huge sign at Coffee in Love, about 3km

south of Pai, and the cutesy shops selling T-shirts along Th Chaisongkhrum.



Activities

Massage & Spa Treatments

There are plenty of traditional Thai massage places around town charging around 150B an hour. Reiki, crystal healing acupuncture, reflexology and other non-indigenous methods of healing are also available; keep your eyes open for signs or refer to the monthly *Pai Events Planner*.

Pai Traditional Thai Massage

MESSAGE

(PTTM; ☎0 5369 9121; www.pttm1989.com; 68/3 Soi 1, Th Wiang Tai; massage per 1/1½/2hr 180/270/350B, sauna per visit 80B, 3-day massage course 2500B; ☀9am-9pm) This long-standing and locally owned outfit offers very good northern-Thai massage, as well as a sauna (cool season only) where you can steam yourself in *sà-mùn-prai* (medicinal herbs). Three-day massage courses begin every Monday and Friday and last three hours per day. The friendly couple that do the massages and teach the course are accredited and are graduates of Chiang Mai's Old Medicine Hospital.

A few local businesses near Tha Pai Hot Springs have taken advantage of the healing thermal waters.

Pai Hotsprings Spa Resort

SPA

(☎0 5306 5748; www.paihotspringsparesort.com; 84-84/1 Moo 2, Ban Mae Hi; 1hr massage 300B, thermal water soak 100B; ☀7am-10pm) A resort-style hotel that also offers massages and thermal water soaks.

Aroma Pai Spa

SPA

(☎0 5306 5745; www.aromapaipa.com; 110 Moo 2, Ban Mae Hi; thermal water soak 50B, spa treatments from 850B; ☀7am-9pm) Offers soaks in private rooms and a communal pool, as well as a variety of spa treatments.

Spa Exotic

SPA

(☎0 5306 5722; www.spaexotic.com; 86 Moo 2, Ban Mae Hi; ☀7am-7pm) Next door to Aroma, this place goes a step further and channels the hot water into its bungalow bathrooms; non-guests can soak for 80B.

Rafting & Kayaking

Rafting and to a lesser extent, kayaking, along the Mae Nam Pai during the wet season (approximately June to February) is also a popular activity. The most popular trip

TROUBLE IN PAIRADISE?

In September 2005, a series of mudslides and floods devastated Pai, wiping away entire guest-house complexes and destroying the city's bridges. In a few short days it seemed that the town's tourism infrastructure, which had been growing steadily since the 1980s, would suffer a major, if not permanent, setback.

It certainly didn't take long to recover. The next year it's estimated that 367,869 tourists visited Pai. Many were foreign tourists, drawn to the town's cheap accommodation and reputation as a peaceful, natural destination. But in 2006, for the first time, the majority of visitors were Thai, largely inspired by the Thai love flicks *Rak Jang* and *Happy Birthday*, both of which were filmed in the town.

Despite its immense popularity, Pai has largely been able to remain a positive example of tourism development in Thailand. Unlike elsewhere in the country, the residents of Pai have maintained a significant role in the development of their town. Natural and cultural conservation have long been fundamental aspects of Pai's tourism sector. And the town has been able to remain loyal to its rural roots, which form the basis of a lively art and music scene that leave most visitors with an overwhelmingly positive impression.

Tourism has also brought prosperity to the formerly isolated farming community. Land in desirable parts of the town is said to sell for as much as US\$65,000 an acre, and many locals are now employed in various tourist service-related jobs, or supplement their income by selling handicrafts. Roads and other infrastructure have improved, and in 2007 Pai's commercial airport commenced flights. And the general consensus among residents is that they welcome the tourists and the income they bring.

On the other hand, the huge influx of visitors to Pai has also resulted in a host of new problems. The town is beginning to experience difficulties in dealing with increasing amounts of rubbish and sewage. Locals complain of being kept awake by the sound of live music and partying. Drug use is widespread. And the city's police force has garnered considerable negative press where it concerns tourists and tourism, ranging from a brief crackdown on so-called 'illegal dancing' in the city's bars to the controversial shooting death of a Canadian tourist in early 2008.

In some ways the 2005 floods have been something of a wake-up call for the residents of Pai. Closing times at the town's bars are now strictly enforced, waste-water treatment is in the process of being made mandatory, and a new dump is being considered. But if Pai continues to maintain its current level of popularity, it remains to be seen whether or not the town can maintain the same level of responsible development that made it such an attractive destination to begin with.

runs from Pai to Mae Hong Son, which depending on the amount of water, can traverse rapids in scale from grade one to grade five. Rates are all-inclusive (rafting equipment, camping gear, dry bags and insurance) and run from about 1200B to 1500B per person for a one-day trip and from 1800B to 2500B per person for two days. Outfitters include:

Pai Adventure

RAFTING

(☎ 0 5369 9385; www.thailandpai.net; Th Chaisongkhram) The one- to three-day white-water rafting trips offered by this recommended outfit can be combined with trekking and other activities. Can also offer a jungle survival course upon request.

Thai Adventure Rafting

RAFTING

(☎ 0 5369 9111; www.thairafting.com; Th Chaisongkhram) This French-run outfit leads

one- and two-day trips. On the way, rafters visit a waterfall, a fossil reef and hot springs; one night is spent at the company's permanent riverside camp. Thai Adventure has two offices along Th Chaisongkhram.

Back-Trax

RAFTING

(☎ 0 5369 9739; backtraxinpai@yahoo.com; Th Chaisongkhram) With more than a decade of experience, this company offers multiday rafting excursions, as well as inner tubing trips and, of course, reiki lessons.

Pai Kayak

KAYAKING

(☎ 0 5306 4426; www.paikayak.com; Pai Let's Go Tour, Th Rangsiyanon) During the wet season, this outfit conducts two daily two-hour kayaking excursions along the Mae Nam Pai at 10am and 3pm.

Trekking

Guided treks range in cost from about 700B to 1000B per person per day, in groups of two or more, and are all-inclusive. Most treks focus on the Lisu, Lahu and Karen villages in and around neighbouring Soppong. Treks can be booked through guest-house-based agencies such as the long-standing **Duang Trekking** (☎0 5369 9101; <http://sites.google.com/site/lungtangtrekking/>; Duang Guest House, Th Chaisongkhram), or through specific outfitters, including all of the rafting outfits listed above.

Other Activities

Fluid

SPORTS FACILITY

(Ban Mae Yen; admission 60B; ☎9am-6.30pm) Pool/gym complex just outside of town, roughly across from Sun Hut. Includes a herbal steam room during the cool season (per hour 80B).

Pai Zip Line

ZIP-LINE

(☎0 5404 9010; Th Chaisongkhram; 800B; ☎8am-6pm) This new attraction, 7km from Pai near Pembok Waterfall, features a zip-line above forest canopy. The whole thing takes about two hours and concludes with a dip in the falls.

Thom's Pai Elephant Camp

ELEPHANT RIDES

(☎0 5369 9286; www.thomelephant.com; Th Rangsiyanon; elephant rides per person 500-1500B) The most established company and with an office in town. You can choose between riding bareback or in a seat, and some rides include swimming with the elephants – a barrel of laughs on a bouncing elephant in the river. Rides include a soak in the hot-spring-fed tubs afterwards.

Courses

Lessons in Thai massage are available at Pai Traditional Thai Massage, and Thai cooking lessons are also available at Sipsongpanna hotel.

Pai Cookery School

THAI COOKING

(☎08 1706 3799; Soi Wanchaloem; lessons 600-1000B; ☎11am-1pm & 2-6.30pm) With a decade of experience, this outfit offers a variety of courses spanning three to six dishes. The course typically involves a trip to the market for ingredients. Contact a day in advance.

Taste of Pai

THAI COOKING

(☎0 5369 9453; Th Chaisongkhram; lessons 700B; ☎9am-3.30pm) This new outfit conducts nearly day-long lessons in Thai

cookery. Classes involve a visit to the fresh market followed by instruction in six dishes.

Rose Gym

THAI BOXING

(☎08 7855 6433; www.muaythaibox.com; Ban Mae Hi; tuition per half-day/day 250/400B; ☎8-10am & 4-6pm) Offers scholarship in Thai boxing, just across the Nam Pai.

Mam Yoga House

YOGA

(☎08 9954 4981; www.mamyoga.paieexplorer.com; Th Rangsiyanon; 1-day course from 200B; ☎10am-noon & 3-5pm) Just north of the police station, Mam offers Hatha Yoga classes and courses in small groups.

S Wirasut

THAI BOXING

(☎08 0678 5269; lessons 400B; ☎8am-noon & 2-5pm) Chalee and Kot lead instruction in Thai boxing at this rustic gym about 1km outside of town, on the turn-off just before Fluid.

Sleeping

In the couple of years since we were last here, Pai has seemingly undergone an explosion in accommodation, and the rumour on the ground during our visits was that there are more than 500 hotels, guest houses and resorts. Although 'downtown' Pai has seen relatively little change in this respect, there are tens of new resorts in an approximate 3km circle around the town. Despite the glut of accommodation, during the height of the Thai tourist season (December to January), accommodation in Pai can be nearly impossible to come by and tents are available for about 100B.

Keep in mind that prices fluctuate significantly in Pai, and nearly all the mid-range and top-end accommodation cut their prices, sometimes by as much as 60%, during the off season. We've listed high-season walk-in rates here.

IN TOWN

Pai used to be an exceedingly inexpensive place to stay and we still recall the days of the 50B riverside bungalow. But the 2005 flood demolished most of the truly cheap places, most of which have been replaced by upper-budget or midrange choices. There are still some cheap places just outside of the centre of town, which is where you should base yourself if you're coming to Pai with preconceived notions of an idyllic, rural stay.

Rim Pai Cottage

(☎ 0 5369 9133; www.rimpaicottage.com; Th Chaisongkhram; bungalows incl breakfast 1300-5000B; 🍷🍷) The homelike bungalows here are spread out along a secluded and beautifully wooded section of the Nam Pai. The interiors have a romantic feel with their mosquito nets and Thai decorating details, and the open bathrooms are particularly nice. There are countless cosy riverside corners to relax at, and a palpable villagelike feel about the whole place. Rim Pai is an excellent deal in the low season when the prices drop dramatically.

HOTEL \$\$\$

Baan Pai Village

(☎ 0 5369 8152; www.baanpaivillage.com; Th Wiang Tai; bungalows incl breakfast 500-1500B; 🍷@🍷) This well-maintained place has a collection of wooden bungalows set among winding pathways. The bungalows don't leave heaps of room to stretch, but have floor-to-ceiling sliding windows, large, quite plush bathrooms, rattan mats and axe cushions for relaxing, plus spacious terraces to enjoy the garden. There are also a few cheaper, but simpler, bamboo huts.

HOTEL \$\$

Hotel des Artists

(☎ 0 5369 9539; www.hotelartists.com; Th Chaisongkhram; r incl breakfast 3600-4000B; 🍷🍷) It took years, but finally somebody saw the potential in this beautiful wooden Shan-style mansion. The 14 slightly crowded rooms mingle pan-Asian and Western design elements in a tasteful, attractive package. Twin beds are on an elevated platform, and all rooms have balconies, those with riverside views being the more expensive.

HOTEL \$\$\$

Pai River Villa

(☎ 0 5369 9796; www.wangchangpuek.com; r incl breakfast 1000B, bungalows incl breakfast 1200-2500B; 🍷🍷) This place boasts some of the more attractive midrange riverside bungalows in town. The air-con bungalows are spacious and attractive, and have wide balconies that encourage lazy riverside relaxing and mountain viewing. The fan bungalows are a significantly tighter fit, and there's an adjacent house with 11 rooms.

HOTEL \$\$\$

Pai RiverCorner

(☎ 0 5369 9049; www.pairivercorner.com; Th Chaisongkhram; r incl breakfast 3270-6540B; 🍷@🍷🍷) The nine rooms here include beautiful Thai furniture, gorgeous colours and lots of deluxe details. Definitely the place for the design-conscious, all rooms

HOTEL \$\$\$

have river-facing balconies and some have lounges and interior spa pools.

Pai Vimaan Resort

(☎ 0 5369 9403; www.paivimaan.com; Th Wiang Tai; r incl breakfast 3500-4500B, bungalows incl breakfast 8000B; 🍷🍷) The highlight here is the five riverside tented bungalows. Huge, and equipped with air-con, TV and other modern amenities, they redefine camping. The resort's three-storey bungalows are bright and airy, with the top-floor rooms allowing great views of the river, and there are also rooms in the main wooden structure.

HOTEL \$\$\$

Baan Tawan Guest House

(☎ 0 5369 8116; www.pai-baantawan.com; 117 Moo 4, Th Wiang Tai; r incl breakfast 1000-3000B, bungalows incl breakfast 1800-3000B; 🍷@🍷) The older, more charming, more expensive, riverside two-storey bungalows made with salvaged teak are the reason to stay here, but there are also spacious rooms in a large two-storey building.

HOTEL \$\$

Breeze of Pai Guesthouse

(☎ 08 1998 4597; helendavis2@yahoo.co.uk; Soi Wat Pa Kham; r 400B, bungalows with fan/air-con 500/800B; 🍷🍷) This well-groomed compound near the river consists of nine attractive and spacious rooms and six large A-frame bungalows. It's close to the action without the noise pollution, and the friendly English owner can provide good local advice.

HOTEL \$\$

Pai Country Hut

(☎ 08 4046 4458; Ban Mae Hi; bungalows incl breakfast 500B; 🍷) The bamboo bungalows here are utterly simple, but are tidy and have bathrooms and inviting hammocks. Although it's not exactly riverside, it's the most appealing of several similar places in the area.

HOTEL \$

Pai Nai Fun

(☎ 08 9123 5042; www.painaifun.com; Ban Mae Hi; bungalows incl breakfast 600-2200B; 🍷🍷) Located across the river, this place boasts a variety of accommodation, ranging from A-frame huts to adobe bungalows. It's no longer new, but is quieter than staying in town and bicycles can be borrowed for free.

HOTEL \$\$\$

Blue Lagoon Hotel

(☎ 0 5369 9998; www.paibluelagoon.com; Th Rangsiyanon; r 1000-1800B; 🍷🍷🍷) This two-storey suburban-feel hotel, complete with pool and tropical plants, is more Las Vegas than Pai. Large rooms are available for travelling families.

HOTEL \$\$\$

Pai Fah

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5306 4446; www.paifahhotel.com; Th Wiang Tai; r with fan 1500B, with air-con 1800-2500B; ④@☎) This self-professed 'boutique house' takes the form of simple but bright and clean rooms in a two-storey villa steps from all the action.

Villa De Pai

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5369 9109; 87/1 Th Wiang Tai; bungalows incl breakfast 1400-3000B; ④) Slightly aged, but clean and conveniently located riverside bungalows.

TTK

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 5369 8093; 8/10 Th Raddamrong, also spelt Ratchadamnoen; r 400-600B; ④☎) Set behind the Israeli restaurant of the same name, the rooms here lack any effort at interior design, but are spotless and conveniently located.

Tayai's House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 5369 9579; off Th Raddamrong; r 400-600B; ④) Simple but clean fan and air-con rooms in a leafy compound a short walk from the main drag.

Pravee's House

HOTEL \$

(☎0 5369 9368; Soi Wanchaloem; r with fan/air-con 500/600B; ④☎) The rooms in this garden compound aren't as nice as their exterior suggests, but will do in a pinch.

Charlie's House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎0 5369 9039; Th Rangsiyanon; r 200-600B; ④) This long-standing and locally run place offers a range of options in a suburban compound.

Mr Jan's Guest House

GUEST HOUSE \$\$\$

(☎0 5369 9554; Soi Wanchaloem 18; r 300-2000B; ④) Owned by a native of Pai, the rooms here are set around a medicinal herb garden, although they can be plain and somewhat dark.

OUTSIDE OF TOWN

If you've got your own wheels, there are far more options outside of the centre of Pai than we have room to list here. The vast majority are targeted towards domestic, rather than foreign, tourists, which means they fall in the mid and upper range of the price spectrum and typically take the form of air-con-equipped bungalow compounds.

Bulunburi

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5369 8302; www.bulunburi.com; 28 Moo 5 Ban Pong; bungalows incl breakfast 1350-3300B; ④@) Set in a tiny secluded valley of rice fields and streams, the seductively bucolic

location is as much a reason to stay here as the attractive accommodation. The compound's most apparent structure, the conelike open-air lobby, is decorated with attractive murals and boasts a central fire-place. The bungalows mostly continue the tasteful design theme established in the lobby, and are large, well equipped and stylish. The hotel is about 2.5km from the centre of town along the road to Mae Hong Son - look for the well-posted turn-off, about 1km from Pai.

Bueng Pai Resort

RESORT HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 9265 4768; www.paifarm.com; 185 Moo 5 Ban Mae Hi; bungalows 400-1800B; ④☎) Uniting yoga enthusiasts and fisherfolk, the 12 simple bungalows here are strategically and attractively positioned between a functioning farm and a pond stocked with freshwater fish. During the tourist season Run and Orn serve meals made with their own organic produce, and fishing equipment is available for rent year-round. Bueng Pai is 2.5km from Pai, off the road that leads to Tha Pai Hot Springs - look for the sign.

Pairadise

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5369 8065; www.pairadise.com; 98 Moo 1 Ban Mae Hi; bungalows 800-1500B; ④☎) Popular with the Western yoga-and-meditation set, this tidy resort looks over the Pai Valley from atop a ridge just outside town. The bungalows are stylish, spacious and include gold leaf lotus murals, beautiful rustic bathrooms and terraces with hammocks. All surround a waterfall-fed pond that is suitable for swimming. The hotel is nearly 1km east of Pai - look for the sign just after the bridge.

Sipsongpanna

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5369 8259, 08 1881 7631; 60 Moo 5, Ban Juang, Wiang Neua; bungalows incl breakfast 1000-2500B; @☎) This fun place boasts a chilled-out atmosphere that feels authentically local rather than contrived. The adobe-style riverside bungalows are rustic and a bit quirky with a mix of bright colours, beds on elevated platforms and sliding-glass doors opening to wide balconies. There are also still a few original wooden bungalows, although these are being phased out. There is a vegetarian cafe and Thai vegetarian cooking lessons are available. The hotel is about 2.5km from the centre of town off the road to Mae Hong Son - look for the well-posted turn-off, about 1km from Pai.

Phu Pai

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5306 5111; www.phupai.com; 93 Moo 1, Mae Na Theung; bungalows incl breakfast 3500-7500B; ④⑤⑥) This self-professed 'Art Resort' is a well-done and attractive gathering of locally styled luxury bungalows. Views are the focus here, with most bungalows edging rice fields, and the infinity pool sporting a terrific view of the Pai Valley. The hotel is about 4km from the centre of town off the road to Mae Hong Son – look for the well-posted turn-off just after the airport runway, about 1.3km from Pai.

Pai Chan

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 1180 3064; www.paichan.com; 191 Moo 1 Ban Mae Hi; bungalows incl breakfast 600-2000B; ④⑤) Pai Chan doesn't look like much from the parking lot, but a closer look reveals attractive and comfortable heavy wooden bungalows, each with a spacious balcony overlooking rice fields or an inviting pool. The hotel is 300m east of Pai off the road that leads to Tha Pai Hot Springs – look for the sign just after the bridge.

Sun Hut

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5369 9730; www.thesunhut.com; 28/1 Ban Mae Yen; bungalows incl breakfast 900-1900B; ④) Located in a junglelike setting with a stream running through it, this long-standing and rustic resort is one of the more unique places in the area. Bungalows are nicely spaced apart and more expensive ones have porches and lots of charm. Service is friendly and gentle, there's an organic garden, a vegetarian restaurant, and an attractive communal area with hammocks and napping guests. The hotel is 300m east of the Mae Nam Pai along the road that leads to Tha Pai Hot Springs.

PuraVida

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 9635 7556; www.puravidapai.com; 65 Moo 3 Wiang Nua; bungalows 1600B; ④⑤) A friendly Dutch-Thai couple look after these eight cute bungalows on a well-manicured hillside in the quiet Wiang Nua area. The 'honeymoon' bungalow offers a bit more privacy, and all rooms are similarly equipped with air-con, TV, fridge and hot water. The hotel is about 4km from the centre of town off the road to Mae Hong Song – look for the well-posted turn-off, about 1km from Pai.

Lychee Garden Bungalow

GUEST HOUSE \$\$

(☎08 5471 9220; 159 Moo 2 Wiang Nua; bungalows 500-1500B; ④⑤) The four bungalows here, located in an overflowing garden and

shaded by lychee trees, may not be the most luxurious accommodation in the area, but they're clean, with good bedding, TV, air-con and hot water. The Israeli-Thai couple who run the place will do their best to make you feel like family. The hotel is about 2.5km from the centre of town off the road to Mae Hong Song – look for the well-posted turn-off, about 1km from Pai.

Amy's Earth House

GUEST HOUSE \$

(☎08 6190 2394; www.amyhouse.net; Ban Mae Khong; bungalows 600B; ④) Amy's claims to have been the first adobe accommodation in Pai. Mud bungalows are simple, but spacious, and have open-air showers, and are on a landscaped hillside looking over the valley. The hotel is about 3.5km from the centre of town off the road to Mae Hong Song – look for the well-posted turn-off just after the airport runway, about 1.3km from Pai.

Pai Treehouse

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 1911 3640; www.paitreehouse.com; 90 Moo 2 Mae Hi; bungalows incl breakfast 1200-12,000B; ④⑤⑥) It's every child's fantasy hotel: wooden bungalows suspended from a giant old tree. Even if you can't score one of the three elusive tree-house rooms (they're popular), there are several other attractive bungalows, many near the river. On the vast grounds you'll also find elephants and floating decks on the Mae Nam Pai, all culminating in a family-friendly atmosphere. The resort is 6km from Pai, just before Tha Pai Hot Springs.

Pai Phu Fah

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎08 1906 2718; www.paiphufah.com; 178/1 Moo 1 Ban Mae Hi; r & bungalows 900-1900B; ④) There's a decent range of accommodation here, from bungalows to rooms, nearly all of it good value. It's about 500m east of the Mae Nam Pai along the road to Thai Pai Hot Springs (which is 7km east of Th Raddamrong).

 **Eating**

At first glance, Pai has a seemingly impressive range of restaurants for such a small town, but a few meals will reveal that the quality of food is generally pretty mediocre. Even the Thai food is fairly dull, and your best dining options are, quite paradoxically, probably Chinese and Israeli. And to make things worse, if you're here outside of the tourist season (approximately November to February), many of the town's better

restaurants can be closed, although the options listed here should be open year-round.

During the day, there's takeaway food at **Saengthongaram market** (Th Khetkelang). For tasty take-home local eats, try the **evening market** (gàht láang; Th Raddamrong) that unfolds every afternoon from about 3pm to sunset. And every evening during the tourist season several vendors set up along Th Chaisongkhram and Th Rangsiyanon, selling all manner of food and drink from stalls and refurbished VW vans.



Laop Khom Huay Pu NORTHERN THAI \$
(no roman-script sign; Ban Huay Pu; mains 35-60B; ☺9am-10pm) Escape the dreadlocks and tofu crowd and get your meat on at this unabashedly carnivorous local eatery. The house special, and the dish you must order, is *lâhp kôo-a*, minced meat (beef or pork) fried with local herbs and spices. Accompanied by a basket of sticky rice, a plate of bitter herbs and a cold Singha, it's the best meal in Pai. The restaurant is on the road to Mae Hong Son, about 1km north of town, just past the turn-off to Sipsongpanna.

Yunnanese Restaurant CHINESE \$\$
(no roman-script sign; Ban Santichon; mains 25-200B; ☺8am-8pm) This open-air place in the Chinese village of Ban Santichon serves the traditional dishes of the town's Yunnanese residents. Standouts include *mântô* (steamed buns), here served with pork leg stewed with Chinese herbs. There are several dishes using unique local crops and other dishes involving exotic ingredients such as black chicken. Or you could always go for the excellent noodles, made by hand and topped with a delicious mixture of minced pork, garlic and sesame. The restaurant is in an open-air adobe building behind the giant rock in Ban Santichon, about 4km west of Pai.

Mama Falafel ISRAELI \$
(Soi Wanchaloem; set meals 80-90B; ☺11am-8pm) This friendly native of Pai has been cooking up tasty falafel, hummus, schnitzel and other Jewish/Israeli faves since 2002. Set meals win in both quality and quantity. Come on Friday and Saturday when she does hamin, the Jewish stew, accompanied by challah bread.

Khanom Jeen Nang Yong THAI \$
(no roman-script sign; Th Chaisongkhram; mains 20B; ☺lunch & dinner) This place specialises in

kà-nôm jeen – thin rice noodles served with a currylike broth. They do a particularly rich and spicy *kà-nôm jeen nám ngée-o*, great with deep-fried pork rinds, but don't worry about getting the names right – simply point to whichever clay pot looks the tastiest. It's in the same building as Pai Adventure.

Burger House AMERICAN \$\$
(Th Rangsiyanon; mains 80-210B; ☺9am-8.30pm) If you are hankering after a big juicy burger this is the place to come. Try the super-high Barbarian Burger with its two quarter pounders, two cheeses and special sauce. Or if you need a fortifying breakfast, go for the Truck Driver Special, which will probably take most of the morning to get through.

Je-In Pai VEGETARIAN \$
(Pure Vegetarian Food; Th Raddamrong; mains 40-80B; ☺10am-8pm; ♻️) Opposite the District Office, this simple open-air place serves tasty and cheap vegan and vegetarian Thai food. During lunch, choose from the metal trays out front. There's good fruit and soy milk shakes too.

Nong Beer THAI \$
(cnr Th Khetkalang & Th Chaisongkhram; mains 30-60B; ☺10am-8pm) The atmosphere at this extremely popular place is akin to a food court (you have to exchange cash for tickets, and everything is self-serve), but it's a good place for cheap and authentic Thai eats ranging from *kôw soy* to curries ladled over rice. Open until they run out of food – usually about 8pm.

Big's Little Cafe INTERNATIONAL \$
(Th Chaisongkhram; mains 55-100B) Big does largely English-influenced Western dishes, from bacon butties to burgers, not to mention breakfasts and a tasty homemade sausage.

Witching Well INTERNATIONAL \$
(Th Wiang Tai; dishes 40-80B) This foreigner-run place is where to come if you're looking for authentic sandwiches, pasta, cakes and pastries. They also do the kind of breakfasts you're not going to find elsewhere in Pai.

TTK ISRAELI \$
(The Thai Kebab; Th Raddamrong; dishes 40-150B; ☺8.30am-8.30pm; ♻️) The expansive menu here spans Israeli dishes from standards to surprises, with breakfast options and Thai vegetarian thrown in for good measure.

Good Life

INTERNATIONAL \$

(Th Wiang Tai; dishes 60-140B; ☎☎) Wheat grass and secondhand books (sample title: *The Aloe Answer*) function as interior design at this eclectic and popular cafe. In addition to heaps of teas, coffees, 'juice joints' and other tasty drinks, they also do breakfasts and vegetarian Thai dishes.

Amido's Pizza Garden

PIZZA \$\$

(Th Raddamrong; pizzas 150-340B; ☎dinner) Considering how far Pai is from Naples, we reckon they do a pretty damn good pizza here.

Charlie & Lek Health Restaurant

THAI \$

(Th Rangsiyanon; mains 30-140B; ☎11am-2pm & 6-9pm) This popular place does central Thai-style fare for foreigners: lots of veggie options and light on the flavours.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

There are tens of bars in Pai – too many to list here – and given the fickleness of the local drinking scene, few would likely still be around by the time this goes to print. Instead, below we list some of the more long-standing places found outside of town.

As a general guide to 'downtown' Pai's entertainment scene, most of the open-air and VW van-based cocktail bars are along Th Chaisongkhram; Th Wiang Tai is where you'll find the mostly indoor and chilled reggae-type places; the 'guest house' style restaurant/bars with a diverse soundtrack are mostly found on Th Rangsiyanon; and a few live music bars can be found along the eastern end of Th Raddamrong.

Bebop

LIVE MUSIC

(Th Rangsiyanon; ☎6pm-1am) This legendary box is popular with travellers and has live music nightly (from about 9pm), playing blues, R&B and rock.

Ting Tong

BAR

(Th Rangsiyanon; ☎7pm-1am) A sprawling compound of bamboo decks, concrete platforms, hidden tables and towering trees, this is one of the larger bars in town. Reggae/dub defines but doesn't rule the play list, and there's occasional live music.

Don't Cry

BAR

(Th Raddamrong; ☎6pm-late) Located just across the river, this is the kind of reggae bar you thought you left behind on Ko Phangan. Soporifically chilled out and open (albeit quietly) until the last guy goes home.

**Shopping**

Every evening during the tourist season, from November to February, a walking street forms along Th Chaisongkhram and Th Rangsiyanon. The western end of the former is home to a particular abundance of shops selling Pai-themed tat aimed at domestic tourists.

Siam Books

BOOKSHOP

(☎0 5369 9075; Th Chaisongkhram) Boasts the town's largest selection of new and used books.

**Information**

There are plenty of places around town, especially at the western end of Th Raddamrong, that offer internet services (20B to 30B per hour).

Several exchange booths and ATMs can be found along Th Rangsiyanon and Th Chaisongkhram.

Pai Explorer (www.paiexplorer.com) is the free local English-language map. The *Pai Events Planner* (PEP) is a free monthly map that covers cultural events, travel destinations and some restaurant and bar openings, and can be picked up around town.

**Getting There & Away****Air**

Pai's airport is around 1.5km north of town along Rte 1095 and offers a daily connection to Chiang Mai (1890B, 25 minutes) on **Kan Air** (☎nation-wide call centre 02 551 6111, Pai 0 5369 9955; www.kanairlines.com; Pai airport).

Bus

Pai's tiny bus station runs ordinary (fan-cooled) and minibus (propane-fuelled) departures to Chiang Mai and destinations in Mae Hong Son.

Chiang Mai (72B to 150B, three to four hours, frequent departures from 8am to 4pm)

Mae Hong Son (70B, 4½ hours, 11am and 1pm)

Soppong (40B, 1½ hours, 11am and 1pm)

Minivan

Minivans also depart from Pai's bus terminal. You can also book tickets at **aYa Service** (☎0 5369 9940; www.ayaservice.com; 22/1 Moo 3 Th Chaisongkhram), which runs hourly air-con minivan buses to Chiang Mai (150B, three hours, frequent departures from 8am to 4pm), as well as a single departure to Chiang Rai (550B, five hours) and Mae Sai (850B, six hours) at 5.30am, and Chiang Khong (650B, seven hours) at 8pm.

Chiang Mai (150B, three hours, every hour from 7am to 4.30pm)

Mae Hong Son (150B, 2½ hours, every hour from 8.30am to 5.30pm)

Soppong (100B, one hour, every hour from 8.30am to 5.30pm)

i Getting Around

Most of Pai is accessible on foot. Motorcycle taxis wait at the taxi stand across from the bus station. Fares are 100B to Ban Santichon and 120B to Nam Tok Mo Paeng.

For local excursions you can rent bicycles or motorcycles at several locations around town.

aYa Service (☎ 5369 9940; www.ayaservice.com; Th Chaisongkhram; bikes per 24hr 80-700B) This busy outfit has more than 100 bikes. There are a couple of similar places in the immediate vicinity.

North Wheels (www.northwheels.com; Th Khetkelang; motorcycle/car per 24hr 150/1500B; ☀7am-8pm)

Soppong

สามเ็อง

Soppong (also sometimes known as Pang-mapha, actually the name of the entire district) is a small market village a couple of hours northwest of Pai and about 70km from Mae Hong Son. There's not much to see in town, but the surrounding area is defined by dense forests, rushing rivers and dramatic limestone outcrops and is *the* place in northern Thailand for caving. The best source of information on caving and trekking in the area is the owner of Cave Lodge in nearby Tham Lot, the most accessible cave in the area.

There are also several Shan, Lisu, Karen and Lahu villages that can easily be visited on foot.

If you're here on Tuesday morning, check out the town's rustic **market**.

h Activities

Trekking & Rafting

Cave Lodge near Tham Lot, 9km from Soppong, has experienced local guides and arranges recommended kayaking, trekking and caving trips in the area.

Poodoi Namfaa Tour & Trekking

TRKING, RAFTING

(☎ 08 4372 5295) This new outfit can arrange various outdoor pursuits, all led by local Musoe, Lisu and Karen guides. The emphasis is on two-day rafting trips along the Nam Khong and Nam Pai rivers (1500B per person, at least four people, all-inclusive). Two-day treks start at 800B per person (at least two people). The office is at the far western edge of town.

h Sleeping & Eating

All accommodation, much of which is found along Soppong's main road, is clearly marked by signs. There's little in the way of food in Soppong, but virtually every guest house has a restaurant attached.

TOP CHOICE

Soppong River Inn

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 5361 7107; www.soppong.com; bungalows 300B, r 700-1500B; ☑@☑) Combining nine rooms in a rambling riverside structure and a handful of free-standing basic bungalows, this is the most attractive place in Soppong. Set among lush gardens with winding paths, the rooms have heaps of character and are all slightly different. The River Rim Cottage is our fave, as it has a private balcony situated right over the river. Soppong River Inn is at the western edge of town, within walking distance of the bus station.

Little Eden Guesthouse

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 5361 7054; www.littleeden-guesthouse.com; r & bungalows 450-2000B; ☑@☑) The five A-frame bungalows around a pleasant, grass-decked pool are well kept with hot-water showers. And four new rooms in a new building should be finished by the time you read this. Yet, it's the beautiful two-storey 'houses' that make this place special. Perfect for families or a group of friends, they are stylishly decorated, have living rooms, interesting nooks and crannies, and terraces with hammocks.

Baan Café

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 5361 7081; khunjui@yahoo.com; r/bungalows 600/1200B) Located near the bridge, about 750m west of Soppong's bus stop, this place combines spotless rooms and houselike bungalows in a parklike setting by the Nam Lang. The bungalows include fireplaces, have balconies looking over the river and are terrific value. Baan Café is also one of the better restaurants in town and serves locally grown coffee.

Rock

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 5361 7134; www.therockresort.com; r & bungalows incl breakfast 1500-5000B; ☑@☑) Located about 1.5km west of town, you can't miss this place. The new bungalows are scattered across a manicured riverbank pockmarked with rock formations. Rooms are equipped with TV, fridge and air-con, and a suspension bridge links the grounds with adjacent flower gardens. This place is geared towards

THE CAVES OF PANGMAPHA

The 900-sq-km area of Pangmapha district is famous for its high concentration of cave systems, where over 200 have been found. Apart from Tham Lot (p400), one of its most famous is Tham Nam Lang, which is 20km northwest of Soppong near Ban Nam Khong. It's 8.5km long and said to be one of the largest caves in the world in terms of volume.

Many of the caves are essentially underground river systems, some of which boast waterfalls, lakes and 'beaches'. *Cryptotora thamicola*, an eyeless, waterfall-climbing troglitic fish that forms its own genus, is found in only two caves in the world, both of which are in Pangmapha, Thailand. Other caves contain little or no life, due to an abundance of noxious gases or very little oxygen.

More than 85 of the district's 200 limestone caverns are known to contain ancient teak coffins carved from solid teak logs. Up to 9m long, the coffins are typically suspended on wooden scaffolds inside the caves. The coffins have been carbon-dated and shown to be between 1200 and 2200 years old. The ends are usually carved and Thai archaeologists have identified at least 50 different design schemes. Pottery remains found in coffin caves are on display in the Nature Education Centre at Tham Lot (p400).

The local Shans know these burial caves as *tâm pêe* (spirit caves), or *tâm pêe maan* (coffin caves). It is not known who made them or why they were placed in caves, but as most caves have fewer than 10 coffins it indicates that not everyone was accorded such an elaborate burial. Similar coffins have been found in karst areas west of Bangkok and also in Borneo, China and the Philippines, but the highest concentration of coffin caves from this period is in Pangmapha.

The easiest coffin caves to visit are found just past Pangmapha Hospital, 2km west of Soppong, and the coffin caves in Tham Lot, 9km from Soppong. Several caves that scientists are investigating at the moment are off limits to the public, but John Spies at Cave Lodge (p400) may know which caves are possible to explore. His book, *Wild Times*, is also a great informal guide to the area's caves.

Thai tourists and communicating in English might be a problem.

Lemon Hill Guest House GUEST HOUSE \$\$
(☎0 5361 7039, 0 5361 7213; r & bungalows 300-1500B; 📶📶) Due to its location across from the town bus stop, this guest house is probably the most popular place in town, although it must be said that there are nicer places to stay. There's a mish-mash of accommodation ranging from rooms to bungalows – check out a few before coming to a decision.

Rim Doi HOTEL \$
(☎08 8413 9964; r & bungalows 200-650B) About 2km from Soppong, along the road to Tham Lot, this place unites bamboo huts and more permanent-feeling rooms on a grassy hillside. Rooms are large and comfortably furnished.

Northern Hill Guest House HOTEL \$\$
(☎0 5361 7081; khunjui@yahoo.com; r & bungalows 800-1500B) This place combines several cramped but tidy bungalows on a hill looking over Soppong. Some rooms include TV and fridge. Northern Hill is at the eastern

extent of town, opposite the turn-off to Tham Lot.

Baanlek Guest House GUEST HOUSE \$
(☎08 9485 7596; r 250B; 📶) Two very simple rooms in a small house (Baanlek) at the eastern end of Soppong. The owner also conducts **cooking courses** (www.flyingturtlecooking.com; half/full day 700/900) at her farm.

Baankeawmora THAI \$
(dishes 40-160B; ☀8am-6pm) Good food and real coffee can be had at this cute wooden house along the road to Tham Lot. Early morning breakfasts and late dinners can be arranged in advance.

i Information

Soppong's police station is 1.5km west of the town. The town's only ATM is found there.

i Getting There & Around

Motorcycle taxis stationed at the bus stop in Soppong will take passengers to Tham Lot or the Cave Lodge for 80B per person; private pick-up trucks will take you and up to five other people for 300B.

Buses and minivans stop near the town's market.

Bus

Chiang Mai (95B, six hours, 10.30am and 2.30pm)

Mae Hong Son (40B, two hours, 12.30pm and 2.30pm)

Pai (40B, 1½ hours, 10.30am and 2.30pm)

Minivan

Chiang Mai (250B, five hours, every hour from 8.30am to 5.30pm)

Mae Hong Son (150B, 1½ hours, every hour from 9.30am to 6.30pm)

Pai (100B, one hour, every hour from 8.30am to 5.30pm)

Around Soppong

THAM LOT

ถ้ำลอด

About 9km north of Soppong is Tham Lot (pronounced *tâm lôrt* and also known as *tâm nám lôrt*), a large limestone cave with impressive stalagmites and 'coffin caves' (see the boxed text, p399), and a wide stream running through it. Along with Tham Nam Lang further west, it's one of the largest known caves in Thailand. The total length of the cave is 1600m, and for 600m the stream runs through it.

At the **Nature Education Centre** (☎8am-5.30pm) and entrance, you must hire a gas lantern and guide for 150B (one guide leads one to four people) to take you through the caverns; visitors are not permitted to tour the caves alone. Tham Lot is a good example of community-based tourism as all of the guides at the cave are from local Shan villages.

Apart from the main chamber, there are also three side chambers – Column Cavern, Doll Cave and Coffin Cave – that can be reached by ladders. It takes around two hours to explore the whole thing. Depending on the time of year it is necessary to take a bamboo raft for some or all of the journey through the caves. Access to parts of the cave may be limited between August and October because of water levels.

From the entrance to the exit and taking in the Column Cavern, Doll Cave and Coffin Cave, the rafts (up to four adults) cost 400B return, or 300B one way. If going one way you can walk back from outside the cave (20 minutes), only possible during the dry season. In the dry season it may be possible to wade to the Doll Cave and then take a

raft through to the exit (300B return, 200B one way). Try to be at the exit at sunset when hundreds of thousands of swifts pour into Tham Lot and cling to their bedtime stalagmites.

Sleeping & Eating

A row of **outdoor restaurants** (dishes 15-40B; ☎9am-6pm) outside the Tham Lot park entrance offers simple Thai fare.

Cave Lodge

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5361 7203; www.cavelodge.com; dm 90-120B, r 250B, bungalows 300-2000B) Open since 1986, this is one of the more legendary places to stay in northern Thailand (and probably the first guest house in Mae Hong Son). Run by the unofficial expert on the area, John Spies, the 19 rooms here are basic but unique and varied. The setting on a wooded hillside above the Nam Lang is beautiful and options for adventure abound. Choose from caving and kayaking trips, guided or unguided treks (good maps are available) or just hang out in the beautiful communal area. The traditional Shan herbal sauna is an experience and the custom ovens bake bread and other treats. Tham Lot is a short walk away.

MAE LA-NA

แม่ละนา

Set in an incredibly picturesque mountain valley 6km off Rte 1095, this tiny Shan village feels like a lost corner of the world. The most famous local attraction is **Tham Mae La-Na**, a 12km-long cavern with a stream running through it. Although local guides are willing to take people inside, in reality the cave lacks the appropriate infrastructure to support visitors, who run a serious risk of permanently damaging delicate cave formations and disturbing the habitat of sensitive cave fish. A better bet is to check out the nearby **Tham Pakarang** (Coral Cave) and **Tham Phet** (Diamond Cave), both of which feature good wall formations. Guides (200B) can be found during the day at the *sāh-lah* (often spelt as *sala*; open-sided, covered meeting hall) and at the main village shop. Some of the caves may not be accessible during the rainy season.

Mae La-Na is also a good base for some inspiring **walks**. Some of Mae Hong Son's most beautiful scenery is within a day's ramble, and there are several Red and Black Lahu villages nearby. It's also possible to walk a 20km half-loop all the way from Mae La-Na to Tham Lot and Soppong. Khun Am-

pha at Maelana Garden Home can provide a basic map and advice. Experienced riders can do this route on a sturdy dirt bike – but not alone or during the rainy season.

The Mae La-Na junction is 13km west of Soppong. A motorcycle taxi here from Soppong costs 200B. Along the way you'll pass the Black Lahu village of Jabo, which also boasts a coffin cave.

Sleeping & Eating

A dozen homes in Mae La-Na have collaborated to form a **homestay program** (per person per night 100B) where the money goes back into a community fund. Meals can be prepared for 70B per person. Inquire at the sporadically staffed wooden house at the entrance to town.

Maelana Garden Home HOTEL \$
(☎08 1706 6021; r & bungalows 200-500B) At the edge of town towards Tham Mae La-Na, this attractive farmlike compound combines two wooden houses and a few A-frame bamboo bungalows. The rooms are basic but clean and comfy. Authentic Shan meals can be prepared (100B per person), and the lady who runs it speaks a bit of English and is a good source of information. Call ahead – transport can be arranged for 100B from Rte 1095 or from Soppong for 400B – or ask for Khun Amphat at the village shop/petrol station.

Khun Yuam

ကုန်းယွမ်

POP 7000

About halfway between Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Son, where all northbound buses make their halfway stop, is the quiet hillside town of Khun Yuam. This little-visited town is a nice break from more 'experienced' destinations nearby. There are a couple of places to stay and a few notable sights.

Sights

Thai-Japan Friendship Memorial Hall MUSEUM
(admission 50B; ☺8am-4pm) At the northern end of town, a collection of rusted military trucks marks the Thai-Japan Friendship Memorial Hall. The centre was being renovated on our most recent visit, but in past years housed weapons, military equipment, personal possessions and fascinating black-and-white photographs that document the period when the Japanese occupied Khun Yuam in the closing weeks of the war with Burma. After they had recovered, some of

the Japanese soldiers stayed in Khun Yuam and married. The last Japanese soldier who settled in the area died in 2000.

Wat To Phae

TEMPLE

About 6km to the west of Khun Yuam, the atmospheric Wat To Phae sits alongside a country stream and boasts a Mon-style *chedi* and an immaculate Burmese-style *wi-hahn*. Inside the latter, take a look at the large, 150-year-old Burmese *kalaga* (embroidered and sequined tapestry) that's kept behind curtains to one side of the main altar. The tapestry depicts a scene from the *Vessantara Jataka* and local devotees believe one accrues merit simply by viewing it.

Ban Mae U Khaw

VILLAGE

On the slopes of Doi Mae U Khaw, 25km from Khun Yuam via Rte 1263, is the Hmong village of Ban Mae U Khaw. During late November the area blooms with scenic Mexican sunflowers, known locally as *dòrk booa torng*. This event is incredibly popular among Thais and accommodation in the town is booked out. Continue another 25km along the same route and you'll reach the 100m **Nam Tok Mae Surin** (admission 200B), part of the Mae Surin National Park and reportedly Thailand's highest cataract.

Sleeping & Eating

There are also a few homestay options in Ban To Phae.

Ban Farang

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5362 2086; janny5alisa@hotmail.com; 499 Th Ratburana; dm incl breakfast 150B, r incl breakfast 700-800B, bungalows incl breakfast 800-1600B; ☹) Off the main road towards the north end of town (look for the signs near the bus stop). The tidy bungalows are set on a wooded hillside. The cheaper fan bungalows are plain and dark but have a terrace. The more expensive ones come with air-con, fridge, cable TV and a terrace. Herbal massage is available and the restaurant on-site is reasonable.

Mithkhoonyoum Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5369 1057; 61 Rte 108; r 150-1000; ☹) On the main road through the town centre, Mithkhoonyoum Hotel has simple, clean rooms, some with private bathrooms.

In Khun Yuam you'll find a collection of modest rice and noodle shops along the east side, or Rte 108, towards the southern end of town. Most of these close by 5pm or 6pm.

Information

There are a couple of banks with ATMs along the main strip.

Getting There & Away

Buses stop regularly at Khun Yuam on their runs between Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Song. The bus station is just north of town.

Chiang Mai (145B to 258B, seven to eight hours, frequent departures from 6.30am to 10.30pm)

Mae Hong Son (50B to 80B, 1½ to two hours, five departures from 3am to 5.30pm)

Mae Sariang (60B to 100B, three to four hours, frequent departures from 6.30am to 10.30pm)

Mae Sariang

แม่สะเรียง

POP 20,000

Little-visited Mae Sariang is gaining a low-key buzz for its attractive riverside setting and potential as a launching pad for sustainable tourism and trekking opportunities. There are several hill-tribe settlements nearby, particularly around Mae La Noi, 30km north of the city, and the area south of Mae Sariang is largely mountainous jungle encompassing both Salawin and Mae Ngao National Parks.

Sights

Wat Jong Sung & Wat Si Bunruang TEMPLES
(วัดจองสูง/วัดศรีบุญเรือง) Two adjacent Burmese-Shan temples, Wat Jong Sung and Wat Si Bunruang, just off Mae Sariang's main street, are definitely worth a visit if you have time. Built in 1896, Wat Jong Sung is the more interesting of the two temples and has slender, Shan-style *chedi* and wooden monastic buildings.

Activities

Trekking & Rafting

The area surrounding Mae Sariang is probably one of the country's best for trekking and tours. This is not only due to the area's natural beauty and cultural diversity, but also because of a new breed of responsible, sustainable and community-based touring and trekking outfits. Prices below are for groups of at least two people.

Dragon Sabaii Tours

TREKKING

(☎08 5548 0884; www.thailandhilltribeholidays.com; Th Mongkolchai; 1-day tour max four people 2500B) Emphasises eco- and cultural tour-

ism primarily in the Mae La Noi area just north of Mae Sariang. This new outfit offers a variety of tours aimed at giving a genuine introduction to the local way of life and hill-tribe culture. Activities range from nonintrusive tours of hill-tribe villages to homestays, 'volunteerism', and cooking and farming with hill tribes, all of which are designed to benefit local communities directly.

Mae Sariang Tours

TREKKING, RAFTING

(☎08 2032 4790, 08 8404 8402; www.maesariangtravel.multiply.com; 1-day/2-day/3-day trek per person 1600/2200/2600B, plus expenses, min 2 people) Mae Sariang Man, as the owner of this company prefers to be known, is an experienced trekker who leads environmentally conscious and community-based treks and rafting trips in the jungles and national parks surrounding his native city. To ensure that the communities receive what they deserve, trekkers can opt to pay all expenses outside of the guide fee directly to the villagers themselves. He can be contacted at Northwest Guest House.

Salawin Tour & Trekking

TREKKING, RAFTING

(☎08 1024 6146; Th Laeng Phanit; per person per day 800B) Mr Salawin and his brothers have been leading tours in the area for years. Their trips typically involve activities such as elephant riding, rafting and hiking. At research time Mr Salawin could be found at River Bank Guest House, but had plans to move next door to the soon-to-be River View Guesthouse.

Sleeping

Riverhouse Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

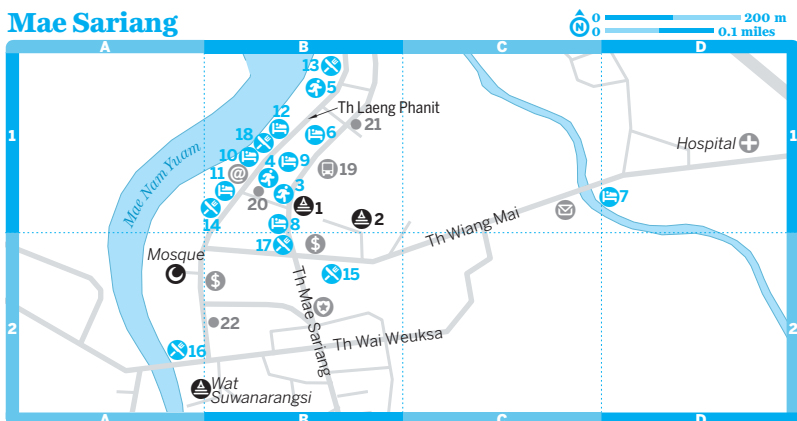
(☎0 5362 1201; www.riverhousehotels.com; 77 Th Laeng Phanit; r incl breakfast 750-1300B; ☎@☎) The combination of nostalgia-inducing teak and stylish decor makes this riverside boutique hotel the best spot in town. Air-conditioned 2nd-floor rooms have huge verandas overlooking the river, as well as floor-to-ceiling windows.

River Bank Guest House

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5368 2787; Th Laeng Phanit; r 600-800B; ☎☎) Rooms in this attractive riverside house are decked out in hardwood and have lots of natural light. It's worth shelling out 200B more for the rooms on the upper floor as the cheaper rooms feel cramped and have comically small TVs.

Mae Sariang



Mae Sariang

📍 Sights

- 1 Wat Jong Sung B1
2 Wat Si Bunruang B1

👤 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 3 Dragon Sabaii Tours B1
4 Mae Sariang Tours B1
5 Salawin Tour & Trekking B1

🛏 Sleeping

- 6 Huean Kham Khong B1
7 Mitaree Guesthouse & Garden
House Resort D1
8 Mitaree Hotel B1
9 Northwest Guest House B1
River Bank Guest House (see 5)
10 Riverhouse Hotel B1

- 11 Riverhouse Resort B1
12 Riverside Guesthouse B1

🍴 Eating

- 13 Ban Rao B1
14 Coriander in Redwood B1
15 Inthira Restaurant B2
16 Kai Yang Rai Khwan A2
17 Leelawadee B2
18 Sawadee Restaurant & Bar B1

🚗 Transport

- 19 Bus Station B1
20 Rental Shop B1
21 Sombat Tour B1
22 Sörng•tää•ou to Mae Sam Laep B2

Northwest Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎08 9700 9928; www.northwestgh.blogspot.com; 81 Th Laeng Phanit; r 250-450B; 🍷🍴📶) The rooms in this cosy wooden house are simple (think mattress on the floor) but get natural light and are a good size. To make up for it, the guest house offers a huge variety of services, ranging from motorcycle rental to fish spa (!).

Mitaree Guesthouse & Garden House Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 5368 1109; www.mitareehotel.com; 24 Th Wiang Mai; r 150-1200B; 🍷🍴📶) Located by the post office and owned by the same people who run Mitaree Hotel, it has a mish-mash

of nicer rooms, the more expensive of which have hot water, air-con and cable TV.

Huean Kham Khong

HOTEL \$\$\$

(no roman-script sign; ☎0 5368 2416; Th Laeng Phanit; bungalows 800B; 🍷🍴📶) The five cute bungalows appear comfortable, and are equipped with TV, fridge and air-con, but the plot of land they're on certainly doesn't have much atmosphere.

Riverhouse Resort

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎0 5368 3066; www.riverhousehotels.com; Th Laeng Phanit; r incl breakfast 1800-2800B; 🍷🍴📶) Located virtually next door to Riverhouse Hotel, and run by the same people, this place is similar but lacks its sister's charm.

Ask for a river view room as the town-side ones are the same price.

Mitaree Hotel

HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 5368 1110; www.mitareehotel.com; 256 Moo 2, Th Mae Sariang; r 250-500B; ☎) This place is Mae Sariang's oldest hostelry. It has fan-cooled rooms in the old wooden wing or rooms with air-con and hot-water shower in the new wing.

Riverside Guesthouse

HOTEL \$
(☎ 0 5368 1188; 85/1 Th Laeng Phanit; r 200-550B; ☎) The location at the edge of the Nam Yuam is great, but the quality of accommodation and service have dipped in recent years, making it an unremarkable budget choice.



Eating & Drinking

Inthira Restaurant

THAI \$
(Th Wiang Mai; mains 30-150B; ☎ 8am-10pm) Probably the town's best restaurant, this place features a strong menu of dishes using unusual ingredients such as locally grown shiitake mushrooms and fish from the Mae Nam Moei. Everything's tasty, the prices are low and the setting cosy and informal.

Kai Yang Rai Khwan

THAI \$\$
(mains 30-180B; ☎ lunch) Head here for the Isan trinity of grilled chicken, papaya salad and sticky rice. This simple place is at the foot of the bridge crossing.

Leelawadee

THAI \$
(cnr Th Wiang Mai & Th Mae Sariang; mains 40-180B; ☎ 7am-9pm; ☎) This cosy and friendly place has an English-language menu of both one-dish meals and mains, as well as real coffee and free wi-fi.

Sawadee Restaurant & Bar

THAI \$
(Th Laeng Phanit; mains 40-150B; ☎ 8am-midnight; ☎) Like a beachside bar, this is a great place to recline with a beer and watch the water (in this case the Mae Nam Yuam). There's a lengthy menu with lots of options for vegetarians.

Ban Rao

THAI \$
(Th Laeng Phanit; mains 30-140B; ☎ dinner) For an authentic Thai dinner minus the spice, head to this homey riverside restaurant. The English-language menu touches on just about everything, from familiar curries to the more exotic *yam sôm oh*, a Thai-style salad of pomelo.

Coriander in Redwood

INTERNATIONAL-THAI \$\$
(Th Laeng Phanit; dishes 50-180B; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) The city's poshest restaurant, this attractive wooden structure makes a big deal of its steaks, but we'd suggest sticking with Thai dishes such as the various *nám prik* (chilli-based dips). There's also ice cream and iced coffee drinks for an afternoon cooler.

Information

Mae Sariang has several banks with ATMs. **Internet** (Th Laeng Phanit; per hr 20B; ☎ 10am-9pm) is available next to Riverhouse Hotel.

Getting There & Around

Located at the bus station, **Prempracha Tour** (☎ 0 5368 1347) conducts buses between Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Song. *Sǒrng-tǎa-ou* to Mae Sot (200B, six hours, frequent departures from 6.30am to 12.30pm) also depart from the bus station when full.

With an office just north of the bus station, **Sombat Tour** (☎ 0 5368 1532; Th Mae Sariang) handles buses to Bangkok.

Motorcycles and bicycles are available for rent at a **rental shop** (☎ 08 1181 3695; ☎ 8am-5pm) near Th Laeng Phanit, as well as at Northwest Guest House.

Destinations anywhere in town are 20B by motorcycle taxi.

Bus destinations from Mae Sariang:

Bangkok (444B to 571B, 13 hours, four departures from 4pm to 7.30pm)

Chiang Mai (95B to 171B, four to five hours, five departures from 7am to 3pm)

Khun Yuam (60B to 100B, two to three hours, six departures from 7am to 1am)

Mae Hong Son (95B to 171B, three to four hours, six departures from 7am to 1am)

Around Mae Sariang

SALAWIN NATIONAL PARK & MAE

SAM LAEP อุทยานแห่งชาติสาละวินแม่สามแลบ This **national park** (☎ 0 5307 1429; admission 200B) covers 722 sq km of protected land in Mae Sariang and Sop Moei districts. The park is heavily forested in teak, Asian redwood and cherrywood, and is home to the second-largest teak tree in Thailand. There are numerous hiking trails, and it's also possible to travel by boat along the Mae Nam Salawin to the park's outstation at Tha Ta Fang.

The main headquarters are 6km from Mae Sariang and have bungalow-style accommodation (300B to 1200B), which can

be booked via the **Royal Forest Department** (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th).

The riverside trading village of **Mae Sam Laep** is nearly at the end of a 50km winding mountain road from Mae Sariang, within the park boundaries. Populated by Burmese refugees, many of whom are Muslims, the town has a raw, border-town feel and is a launching point for **boat trips** along the Mae Nam Salawin. The trips pass through untouched jungle, unusual rock formations along the river and, occasionally, enter Myanmar.

From the pier at Mae Sam Laep it's possible to charter boats south to Sop Moei (1500B, 1½ hours), 25km from Mae Sam Laep, and north to the Salawin National Park station at Tha Ta Fang (1200B, one hour), 18km north of Mae Sam Laep. There are passenger boats as well, but departures are infrequent and, unless you speak Thai, difficult to negotiate.

There are frequent *sōrng-tāa-ou* from Mae Sariang to Mae Sam Laep (70B, 1½ hours, frequent departures from 6.30am to 3.30pm), departing from Th Laeng Phanit near the morning market.

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