

Thailand Planning (Chapter)

Edition 14th Edition, February 2012

Pages 56

Page Range 2-51, 65-72



Coverage includes: 20 Top Experiences, Welcome to Thailand, Need to Know, Your Daily Budget, English in Thailand, What's New, If You Like: Beaches, Diving & Snorkelling, Great Food, Temples & Ruins, Outdoor Adventure and Festivals & Festivities, Month by Month, Itineraries and Regions at a Glance.

Useful Links:

Having trouble viewing your file? Head to [Lonely Planet Troubleshooting](#).

Need more assistance? Head to the [Help and Support](#) page.

Want to find more chapters? Head back to the [Lonely Planet Shop](#).

Want to hear fellow travellers' tips and experiences?

[Lonely Planet's Thorntree Community](#) is waiting for you!

welcome to Thailand



Sand between Your Toes

Thailand's beaches are mythical: tall palms angle over pearlescent sand, coral gardens flourish in the shallow seas and beach parties are liberally lubricated with alcohol and fun. With a long coastline (well, actually, two coastlines) and jungle-topped islands anchored in azure waters, Thailand is a tropical getaway for the hedonist and the hermit, the prince and the pauper. And in between the kissing cousins of sea and sky are dramatic limestone mountains standing sentinel. This paradise offers a varied menu of playing in the gentle surf of Bang Saphan Yai, diving with whale sharks in Ko Tao, scaling the sea cliffs of Krabi, learning to kiteboard in Hua Hin, recuperating at a

health resort in Ko Samui and feasting on the beach wherever sand meets sea.

Sacred Spaces

The celestial world is a close confidant in this Buddhist nation, where religious devotion is a colourful and ubiquitous spectacle. Gleaming temples and golden Buddhas frame both the rural and modern landscape with exuberance. Ancient banyan trees are ceremoniously wrapped in sacred cloth to honour the resident spirits, fortune-bringing shrines decorate humble noodle houses as well as monumental malls, while garland-festooned dashboards ward off traffic accidents. The Thai's ongoing dialogue with the divine an-



ALAN EVARD/LOVELY PLANET IMAGES ©

Friendly and fun-loving, exotic and tropical, cultured and historic, Thailand beams with a lustrous hue from its gaudy temples and golden beaches to the ever-comforting Thai smile.

(left) Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu (p384), Mae Hong Son.
(below) Terracotta sculptures, Chiang Mai (p234).



FRANK CARTER/LOVELY PLANET IMAGES ©

chors the day-to-day chaos to a solid base of tranquillity. Visitors can join in on the conversation through meditation retreats in Chiang Mai, noisy religious festivals in northeastern Thailand, peaceful underground cave shrines in Kanchanaburi and Phetchaburi or scenic hilltop temples in northern Thailand.

A Bountiful Table

No matter what draws you to the country first, a Thai meal will keep you hooked. Adored around the world, Thai cuisine expresses fundamental aspects of Thai culture: it is generous and warm, outgoing and nuanced, refreshing and relaxed. And it is much more delicious in its native setting.

Each Thai dish relies on fresh and local ingredients – from pungent lemongrass and searing chillies to plump seafood and crispy fried chicken. With a tropical abundance, a varied national menu is built around the four fundamental flavours: spicy, sweet, salty and sour. And then there are the regional differences, which propel travellers on an eating tour of Bangkok noodle shacks, seafood pavilions in Phuket, Burmese market stalls in Mae Hong Son, and luscious tropical fruit everywhere. Cooking classes reveal the simplicity behind the seemingly complicated dishes and mastering the markets becomes an important skill.

20 TOP EXPERIENCES

Bangkok

1 Food, shopping, fun, temples, palaces... What isn't available in Bangkok (p54)? Be prepared to adjust your itinerary if you've only given Bangkok the requisite day or two. The Bangkok of today is tidier and easier to navigate than ever before, and will pull you in with one of the world's biggest markets, fun bars, sublime eats and endless opportunities for urban exploration. Supplement your fun with more scholarly pursuits such as a cooking or Thai massage course, and we're certain you'll see Bangkok as much more than just a transit point. Wat Arun, beside the Chao Phraya River



Ko Tao

2 The dive-master's island, Ko Tao (p571) is the cheapest and easiest spot around to learn how to strap on a tank and dive into the deep. The water is warm and gentle and the underwater spectacles are not to be missed. Just offshore are scenic rocky coves and coral reefs frequented by all sorts of fish providing a snorkelling 'aperitif'. Ko Tao is a beautiful island even for nondivers. Its small size means you can explore all of its jungle nooks and crannies, looking for a sandy niche to call your own. Ao Chalok, Ko Tao

1

PHOLO CORRELLI/ONELV PLANET IMAGES ©



2

RICHARD NEBSKY/ONELV PLANET IMAGES ©





Mae Hong Son Province

3 Tucked in the country's northwest corner, this province (p380) has a lot more in common with neighbouring Myanmar (Burma) than anywhere else in Thailand. In fact, with its remote location, intimidating mountains and unique culture and cuisine, Mae Hong Son can seem like an entirely different country. Exploration is the reason to make the schlep here, and can take the form of tramping through one of the province's many caves, taking a hairpin turn on your motorcycle, or doing a self-guided trek from Mae La-Na to Soppong.

Prayers during Poi Sang Long, Mae Hong Son

Ko Pha-Ngan

4 Famous for its sloppy Full Moon parties and all-night techno parties, Ko Pha-Ngan (p556) has graduated from a sleepy bohemian island to full-on attraction for migrating party-people. The beach shanties have been transformed into boutiques, meaning comfort seekers have an alternative to Ko Samui. And in the northern and eastern coasts, the ascetic hammock hangers can still escape enough of the modern life to feel like a modern castaway (well-fed ones, of course). Just offshore is Sail Rock, one of the gulf's best dive sites. Hat Rin



4

5



ERNEST MANTERVA/CONEL PLANET IMAGES ©

6



PHOTO CONNELLA/CONEL PLANET IMAGES ©



Surin & Similan Islands Marine National Parks

5 These world-renowned dive sites (p616 and p617) have anchored Thailand as a global diving destination. Live-aboard trips set out from Khao Lak, allowing for more time at the famous sites where you can meet the local manta rays and whale sharks. There is the thrill of being far from land as the sun sinks into the sea and the night shows off its twinkling lights. The islands are an attraction in their own right with jungle-filled interiors and smooth white beaches surrounded by decent coral reefs. Similan Islands Marine National Park

Ayuthaya

6 A once vibrant, glittering capital packed with hundreds of temples, Ayuthaya (p157) today only hints at its erstwhile glory. Cycle around the brick-and-stucco ruins, which form part of a Unesco World Heritage Site, and try to imagine how the city must have looked in its prime, when it greeted merchants from around the globe. On the outskirts of the city sit several more attractions, including an enormous handicraft centre, the most eclectic royal palace you'll ever see and a water theatre. Wat Phra Si Sanphet

Ko Lanta

7 A beach bum's best friend, Ko Lanta (p669) sports a mellow island vibe and a parade of peachy sand. Social butterflies alight on the northern beaches for a same-same but different party scene. Solitude seekers migrate southward to low-key beach huts and a sleepy village ambience. Activities abound from hiking through a surreal landscape of limestone caves and crevices to diving to underwater hang-outs for sharks and rays. Sprinkle in some culture with a stop at the local markets or Ban Lanta, the historic commercial centre. Hat Nui



JOHN ELK/ILLU/LONEY PLANET IMAGES ©



AUSTIN BISH/LONEY PLANET IMAGES ©



WILIE MCCLAUGH/LONEY PLANET IMAGES ©

Sukhothai Historical Park

8 Step back in time about 800 years at Thailand's most impressive historical park (p355). Exploring the ruins of this former capital by bicycle is the classic Thailand experience, and is a leisurely way to wind through the crumbling temples, graceful Buddha statues and fish-filled ponds. Worthwhile museums and good-value accommodation round out the package. Despite its popularity, Sukhothai rarely feels crowded, but for something off the beaten track, head to nearby Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park, where you might be the only one scaling an ancient stairway. Wat Mahathat

Ko Samui

9 Eager to please, Samui (p538) is a civilised beach-resort island for the vacationing masses, many of whom fly in and out having made hardly any contact with the local culture. Chaweng is a luxurious stretch of sand where sun-worshippers come to see and be seen. However, there are still sleepy spots reminiscent of Samui's old moniker, 'Coconut Island', and a few gentle coves for families who need to get in and out quickly. Samui also boasts great amenities and a thriving health scene with yoga, meditation, detoxing and other yins to the island's partying yang.

Chiang Rai Province

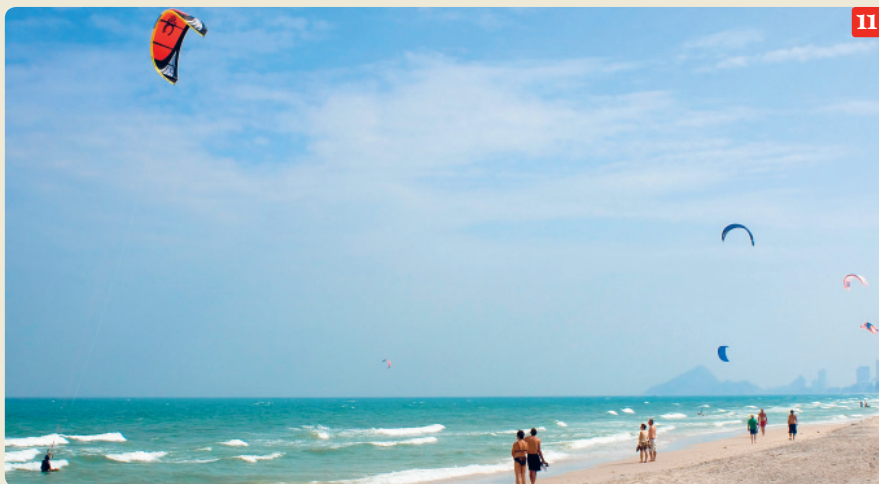
10 The days of the Golden Triangle opium trade are over, but Chiang Rai (p308) still packs intrigue in the form of fresh-air fun such as trekking and self-guided exploration. It's also a great destination for unique cultural experiences, ranging from a visit to an Akha village to a stay at the Yunnanese-Chinese hamlet of Mae Salong. From the Mekong River to the mountains, Chiang Rai is arguably Thailand's most beautiful province, and if you've set your sights further, it's also a convenient gateway to Myanmar (Burma), Laos and China.
Wat Rong Khun

Hua Hin

11 The king's choice, Hua Hin (p512) is a fine fit for both city and sea creatures. The beaches are long and wide, the market meals are fantastic and there's even Thai culture (fancy meeting you here). Explore the quiet beaches south of the city for a more secluded feel, hike to the top of a headland shrine or master the sea and the wind with a kiteboard lesson. And of course feast like a Thai from morning, noon and night. Kiteboarding, Hua Hin beach

Chiang Mai

12 Amid a jumble of mountains, Chiang Mai (p234) looks respectfully up to mighty Doi Suthep, whose sacred temple floats unnervingly on its forest bed. The old city, framed by a moat flopping with fish, is crammed with soaring temple peaks and twisting sois (lanes) best suited to exploration by bicycle. Stop for a temple 'monk chat', an intimate insight into those orange-robed figures. Browse the traditional handicraft outlets and when the sun sinks over Doi Suthep, feast on some of the north's best Burmese or Japanese cuisine. Wat Chiang Man



11

JANIS WAGNER/ALAMY ©



12

JOHN ELK/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES ©

Phetchaburi

13 A delightful mix of culture and nature combine in this provincial capital (p505), a close and quiet alternative to the hectic streets of Bangkok. Explore an antique hilltop palace, sacred cave shrines and bustling temples. Wander the old shophouse neighbourhood filled with do-it-yourself businesses run by Thai aunties and grannies. Then head off to the wilds of Kaeng Krachan National Park to spot wild gibbons and exotic birds. Phetchaburi is also a smart layover for travellers returning from the south.

Cave shrine, Tham Khao Luang

Khao Sok National Park

14 A deep and dark jungle hugs the midsection of southern Thailand. This ancient rainforest (p611) is filled with long sweaty hiking routes up dramatic limestone formations that reward with postcard-perfect views. Just remember to wear leech-proof gear to prevent an involuntary blood donation. Birds and bats call this forest home as does the rare *Rafflesia kerrii*, one of the stinkiest flowers on the planet. Reward all your outdoor work with riverside camping and listen to the symphony of the jungle.

Accommodation among the trees

13





15

Kanchanaburi

15 Walks on the wild side are the main reason to visit Kanchanaburi (p173), where dragon-scaled limestone mountains gaze down upon dense jungle. Trek past silvery waterfalls and rushing rivers in search of elusive tigers and gibbons, then spend the night at a homestay organised through an ethnic group. Once you've explored this western province's wartime past – the infamous Bridge Over the River Kwai is here – hold on tight to experience the growing number of adventure activities, which include ziplining, kayaking and elephant rides. Bridge Over the River Kwai

Phanom Rung Historical Park

16 Perched high atop an extinct volcano, the biggest and best Khmer ruin in Thailand (p424) is special. As you amble along the promenade, up the stairs and over the naga-flanked bridges, the sense of anticipation builds. And when you enter the temple, completely restored and still rich with Hindu sculpture, you will experience a moment of timelessness. While Phanom Rung is not as awe-inspiring as Cambodia's Angkor Wat, the experience here is impressive and different enough that you should visit both.

Mekong River

17 From the historic timber shophouses of Chiang Khan (p473) to the waterfalls of Pha Taem National Park (p441), northeastern Thailand's glorious arc of the Mekong River offers an incomparable smorgasbord of culture and beauty. This is not just the best of Isan; it's among the best of Thailand. Fishing villages, prehistoric rock paintings, holy temples, elephants, a bizarre sculpture park, and so much more are on offer for those who travel this little-known trail. Chase the meandering river aboard a rickety bus, long-tail boat or even a bicycle.





18

ANDERS BLONQVIST/CONELYP/PLANETIMAGES ©



19

CHRISTINA ASUND/CONELYP/PLANETIMAGES ©



20

FRANK CARTER/CONELYP/PLANETIMAGES ©

Phuket

18 An international-strength beach resort, Phuket (p622) is an easy-peasy destination for all ages. You can fly in from Bangkok, cutting out the long land journey, and then retreat into a five-star resort or arty boutique hotel for a trouble-free tropical vacation. There are slinky stretches of sand, hedonistic party pits and all the mod-cons needed for 21st-century rest and recreation. Plus there are day trips to mangrove forests, monkey-rescue centres and a ton of watersports, from diving to surfing (when the weather is right).

Pool scene, Ko Yao Noi

Khao Yai National Park

19 Here you'll find elephants, monkeys, gibbons, hornbills, pythons, bears, a million bats and a few wily tigers. Wildlife sightings are almost at the mercy of chance, but your odds are excellent at this vast Unesco World Heritage-listed reserve (p419) just a few hours out of Bangkok. And even if you don't meet many big animals, the orchids, birds, waterfalls and sense of adventure that inevitably arises when trekking in the jungle guarantee a good day. Khao Yai's mix of scenery, accessibility and beauty is hard to beat.

Ko Samet

20 So close to Bangkok and oh so pretty, Samet (p205) is a perfect beach when your time is pinched. The jungle eclipses developments, the sand and sea are tropically proportioned and a wooded coastal trail skirts between rocky headlands and a string of beautiful coves. People-watch by day, party by night on the popular northern beaches or hide away on the southern beaches for a well-earned nap. When your vacation is done, board the boat and be back in Bangkok by lunchtime. Jetty, Ao Cho

need to know

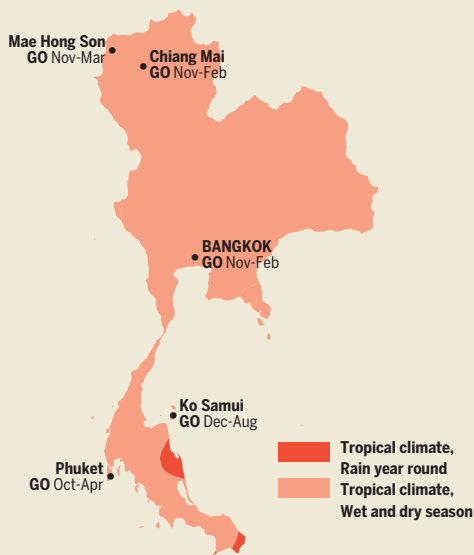
Currency

» Thai baht (B)

Language

» Thai

When to Go



High Season (Nov–Mar)

» A cool and dry season follows the monsoons, meaning the landscape is lush and temperatures are comfortable.

» Western Christmas and New Year's holidays bring crowds and inflated rates to the beaches.

Shoulder Season (Apr–Jun, Sep & Oct)

» Hot and dry (April to June) but less so in higher elevations.

» Beaches aren't crowded and ocean provides the air-con.

» September and October are ideal for the north and the Gulf coast.

Low Season (Jul–Oct)

» Monsoon season can range from afternoon showers to multiday drenchers.

» Some islands shut down and boat service is limited during stormy weather.

» Be flexible with travel plans.

Your Daily Budget

Budget less than

1500B

» Basic guest house room: 300–800B

» Excellent market and street stall meals

» One or two evening drinks

» Get-around town with public transport

Midrange

1500–3000B

» Flashpacker guest house or midrange hotel room: 800–1500B

» Western food lunches and seafood dinners

» Several evening beers

» Motorbike hire

Top End over

3000B

» Boutique hotel room: 3000B

» Fine dining

» Private tours

» Car hire

Money

» ATMs widespread and charge a 150B foreign-account fee. Visa and MasterCard accepted at upmarket places.

Visas

» International air arrivals receive 30-day visa; 15-day visa at land borders; 60-day visas from a Thai consulate before leaving home.

Mobile Phones

» Thailand is on a GSM network through inexpensive pre-paid SIM cards. 3G is coming...soon.

Transport

» Extensive and affordable buses, cheap air connections, slow and scenic trains. Easy to rent cars and motorcycles.

Websites

» **Tourism Authority of Thailand** (TAT; www.tourismthailand.org) National tourism department covering info and special events.

» **Thaivisa** (www.thaivisa.com) Expat site.

» **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com/thailand) Country profile and what to do and see.

» **Bangkok Post** (www.bangkokpost.com) English-language daily.

» **Thai Language** (www.thai-language.com) Online dictionary, Thai tutorials.

» **Thai Travel Blogs** (www.thaitravelblogs.com) Thailand-based travel blogger.

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	32B
Canada	C\$1	31B
China	Y10	40B
Euro zone	€1	44B
Japan	¥100	38B
New Zealand	NZ\$1	25B
Russia	R10	10B
UK	£1	50B
USA	US\$1	30B

For current exchange rates see www.xe.com.

Important Numbers

Thailand country code	☎66
Emergency	☎191
International access codes	☎001, 007, 008, 009 (different service providers)
Operator-assisted international calls	☎100
Tourist police	☎1155

Arriving in Thailand

» Suvarnabhumi International Airport

Airport Bus This service has been discontinued; there are local buses to the airport but the airport train is the better option.

Airport Rail Link

Local service (45B, 30 minutes) to Phaya Thai station; express service (150B, 15 minutes) to Makkasan station.

Taxi Meter taxis 200B to 300B plus 50B airport surcharge and tolls; about an hour to the city, depending on traffic.

English in Thailand

Don't know a lick of Thai? In most places you don't need to. Tourist towns are well-stocked with English speakers. Bus drivers, market vendors and even taxi drivers are less competent speakers. If there is a communication problem, though, Thais will find someone to sort things out. In small untouristed towns, it helps to know how to order food and count in Thai. Thais are patient (and honoured) at attempts to speak their language. With just a few phrases, you'll be rewarded with big grins and heaps of praise.

Thais have their own script, which turns educated Westerners into illiterates. Street signs are always transliterated into English, but there is no standard system so spellings vary widely and confusingly. Not all letters are pronounced as they appear (ie 'ph' is 'p' and final 'l' is often 'n'). Confounding, huh?

what's new

Get to the Beach Faster

1 Recent transport routes have emerged directly from Thailand's Suvarnabhumi International Airport to the Eastern Seaboard beaches of Ko Samet and Ko Chang. That means you can bypass Bangkok and be beachside sooner.

Kiteboarding

2 If all the watersports mated and had an offspring, it would be kiteboarding. Riders harness the wind and the waves at Hua Hin, Pranburi and Phuket, the kiteboarding hot spots.

Stylish Sleep for All

3 Bangkok has sprouted hip hostels, such as NapPark Hostel and Lub*d, far removed from the functional dorms of yore.

Flying Through the Canopy

4 Why walk when you can fly through the forest on an elevated zip-line? Ropes courses have proliferated wherever trees meet tourists in such places as Ko Tao, Sangkhlaburi, Pattaya and Pai.

Extreme Diving

5 Ko Tao is no longer just for beginners. Technical divers are now exploring underwater caves and even casting off

For this new edition of Thailand, our authors have hunted down the fresh, the transformed, the hot and the happening. These are some of our favourites. For up-to-the-minute recommendations, see lonelyplanet.com/thailand.

their scuba gear for lung-stretching free dives.

Cliff-hanging in Krabi

6 Everyone knows that Krabi is Thailand's rock-climbing capital but did you know that free-climbing is the latest trend? Assaults on overhanging sea cliffs are done without ropes and the ocean is there to catch you.

Hip Chiang Mai

7 Chiang Mai has its antique charms but happening Th Nimmanhaemin is a fountain of youth. Check out new restaurants such as Su Casa and the people-watching perch at At 9 Bar.

Isan Fashionista

8 More traditional than trendy, the northeast has graduated into the stylish world of boutique hotels with Khorat's V-One, Khao Yai's Hotel des Artists and Khon Kaen's Glacier Hotel.

Ringleaders: Muay Thai Warriors

9 Rather than packing on the pounds, train to be a lean, mean fighting machine at the new crop of *moo-ay tai* (muay thai) training and fitness camps, such as Pattaya's Fairtex Sports Club and Phuket's Promthep Muay Thai Camp.

Resort Beaches on the Cheap

10 Thailand's beaches have transformed quickly from bamboo huts to luxury villas. We can't turn back time but we've got more budget options on big-spender beaches, such as Ko Kut, Ko Chang and Hua Hin.

if you like...



Beaches

From intimate coves to leggy coastlines, Thailand's beaches are beauty queens and draw a steady crowd of international sun-seekers. Long gone are the days of having paradise to yourself but the scenery is still supreme.

Ko Phi-Phi A real looker, this Andaman island has craggy limestone sea cliffs and ribbons of cerulean water and a boozy party scene (p662)

Ko Pha-Ngan The original beach bum island hosts boisterous Full Moon parties and a whole lot of hammock hanging in between (p556)

Hua Hin City-meets-sea for beach lovers who need sand and sophistication (p512)

Trang Islands A family favourite with soaring limestone cliffs, blonde sands and techno-free nights (p680)

Bang Saphan Yai With a handful of cheap huts on the beach, this mainland spot is delightfully stuck in the '90s (p530)

Diving & Snorkelling

The warm clear waters of the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea harbour a variety of underwater landscapes and marine species that rank Thailand among the world's top diving destinations. The Andaman is the regional blockbuster, while the Gulf is good for beginners.

Surin & Similan Islands

National Marine Parks One of the world's top diving spots, these Andaman islands have dramatic rocky gorges, hard and soft coral reefs and a laundry list of marine life; live-aboard trips depart from Khao Lak (p616)

Ko Lanta Nearby feeding stations for manta rays, whale sharks and other large pelagic fish earn this Andaman island high diving marks (p669)

Ko Tao With affordable dive schools, shallow waters and year-round conditions, Ko Tao remains the country's scuba-training island. Its near-shore reefs mean you can go snorkelling right after breakfast (p571)

Ko Kradan A snorkeller's paradise with pristine hard and soft corals just past the silky shore (p682)

Great Food

Thai food is fabulously flavoured, remarkably convenient and ridiculously cheap. Street stalls spring up wherever there are appetites, night markets serve everyone dinner, and family restaurants deliver colourful plates of traditional recipes.

Curries The soup that eats like a meal, Thai curry is pungent, fiery and colourful. Bangkok, southern Thailand and northern Thailand all whip up their own variations.

Isan cuisine The food that fuels labour, the northeast's triumvirate dishes – *gàì yâhng* (grilled chicken), *sôm-dam* (spicy green papaya salad) and *kôw nêe-o* (sticky rice) – have converts across the country.

Seafood Grilled prawns, spicy squid stir-fries, crab curries, fried mussels – get thee to the coast and dine on the fruits of the sea.

Fruits Whole meals are made up of the luscious variety of Thai fruits, which are sold in abundance at day markets or displayed like precious jewels in glass cases by roaming vendors.

Cooking Courses Learn how to replicate the tricks of the trade at cooking schools in Bangkok (p96) or Chiang Mai (p255)



If you like... learning, make your holiday smarter by studying Thai language, traditional massage or Buddhist meditation in Chiang Mai (p252)

Culture: Temples & Ruins

The Thai landscape is filled with monuments to the gods, be they glittering Buddhist temples or ancient Khmer sanctuaries. Many of the country's most famous temples are de facto museums, sheltering religious art, history and regional identities.

Bangkok The seat of the monarchy is also the seat of Thai Buddhism, and its most exalted Buddha figure resides comfortably in Wat Phra Kaew (p58)

Ayuthaya The ruins of this fabled city stand testament to the formative years of Thai history, identity and architecture (p157)

Sukhothai Cycle around the well-preserved grounds of this ancient city, the capital of one of Thailand's first home-grown kingdoms (p355)

Chiang Mai Northern Thailand boasts its own historic and artistic lineage and within Chiang Mai's old walled city are antique teak temples decorated with tinkling bells (p234)

Phanom Rung This Khmer outpost built in the Angkor style has surveyed this rural landscape for centuries (p424)

Outdoor Adventure

From the mountains in the north to the rainforests of the south, a variety of adventures allows visitors to trek, paddle and be carried by elephants through the tropical landscape. Along the mountain ridges, ethnic hill-tribe villages hold on to an ancient way of life.

Kanchanaburi Exert a little for a big reward at an outdoor buffet of waterfall spotting, rafting and elephant riding, just a short journey from Bangkok (p173)

Kaeng Krachan National Park Disappear into a wild landscape in this little-visited park, south of Bangkok (p509)

Khao Yai National Park Spot elephants, monkeys, snakes and creepy-crawlies in Thailand's oldest national park (p419)

Mae Hong Son Small-scale trekking groups head off into the mountainous frontier between Thailand and Burma (p380)

Ko Chang When you tire of the sea, plunge into the jungle-covered hills where local guides have played since childhood (p216)

Khao Sok National Park Canoe and hike through Thailand's ancient rainforest studded with limestone mountains (p611)

Festivals & Festivities

Thais love to turn up the tunes, fire up the grill and open a bottle of booze in honour of any occasion: home-grown festivals, imported holidays and even made-up excuses to party.

Full Moon Party Ko Pha-Ngan's lunar event turns sunbathers into all-night, day-glo revellers. Copy-cat moon parties and other lunar cycles are celebrated throughout the islands.

Music festivals From jazz to alt-rock, Thailand hosts an impressive playlist of music festivals. Bangkok's Fat Festival features indie bands, Hua Hin prefers jazz and Pattaya does international/Asian rock. Ko Samui hosts international DJs and occasionally Pai pays tribute to reggae.

Fruit festivals Provincial towns celebrate their signature agricultural product with genuine small-town charm. Chanthaburi pays homage to its orchards of mangosteens, durian and rambutan, while Chiang Rai celebrates the venerable lychee.

Songkran The festival begins with the use of water as a mark of respect then, in some locations, erupts into a water war where no one stays dry (p23)

month by month

Top Events

- 1** Songkran, April
- 2** Loi Krathong, November
- 3** Ubon Ratchathani's Khao Phansaa, July
- 4** Vegetarian Festival, September
- 5** Surin Elephant Round-up, November

January

The weather is cool and dry in Thailand, ushering in the peak tourist season when Europeans escape dreary winter weather.



Chinese New Year

Thais with Chinese ancestry celebrate the Chinese lunar new year (dates vary) with a week of house-cleaning and fireworks. Phuket, Bangkok and Pattaya all host citywide festivities, but in general Chinese New Year (*drùd jeen*) is a family event.

February

Still in the high season swing, snowbirds flock to Thailand for sun and fun.



Makha Bucha

One of three holy days marking important moments of Buddha's life, Makha Bucha (*mah-ká boo-chah*) falls on the full moon of the third lunar month and commemorates Buddha preaching to 1250 enlightened monks who came to hear him 'without prior summons'. A public holiday, it's mainly a day for

temple visits. Organisations and schools will often make merit as a group at a local temple.



Flower Festival

Chiang Mai displays its floral beauty during a three-day period. The festival highlight is the flower-decorated floats that parade through town.

March

Hot and dry season approaches and the beaches start to empty out. The winds kick up ushering in kite-flying and kiteboarding season. This is also Thailand's semester break (mid term), and students head out on sightseeing trips.



Pattaya International Music Festival

Pattaya showcases pop and rock bands from across Asia at this free music event, attracting bus loads of Bangkok university students.



Kite-Flying Festivals

During the windy season, colourful kites battle it out over the skies of Sanam

Luang in Bangkok and elsewhere in the country.



Golden Mango Season

Luscious ripe mangoes come into season from March to June and are sliced before your eyes, packed in a container with sticky rice and accompanied with a sweet sauce. Reason enough to visit in the 'summer'.

April

Hot, dry weather sweeps across the land and the tourist season is winding down, except for one last hurrah during Songkran. Make reservations well in advance since the whole country is on the move for this holiday.



Songkran

Thailand's traditional new year (12-14 April) starts out as a respectful affair then degenerates into a water war. Morning visits to the temple involve colourful processions of the sacred Buddha images, which are ceremoniously sprinkled with water. Elders are shown respect by younger family members by having water sprinkled on their

hands. Afterwards Thais load up their water guns and head out to the streets for battle: water is thrown, catapulted and sprayed from roving commandos and outfitted pick-up trucks at willing and unwilling targets. Chiang Mai and Bangkok are the epicentres of the battles. Innocent bystanders shelter indoors until the ammunition runs out.

May

Leading up to the rainy season, festivals encourage plentiful rains and bountiful harvests. This is an underappreciated shoulder season when prices are lower and tourists are few but it is still incredibly hot.



Royal Ploughing Ceremony

This royal ceremony employs astrology and ancient Brahman rituals to kick off the rice-planting season. Sacred oxen are hitched to a wooden plough and part the ground of Sanam Luang in Bangkok. The ritual was revived in the 1960s by the king, and Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn has assumed the ceremony's helm.



Rocket Festival In the northeast, where rain can be scarce, villagers craft bamboo rockets (*bàng fai*) that are fired into the sky to encourage precipitation so that the upcoming rice-planting season will be successful. This festival is celebrated in Yasothon, Ubon Ratchathani and Nong Khai.



Visakha Bucha The holy day of Visakha Bucha (*wi-sāh-kà boo-chah*) falls on the 15th day of the waxing moon in the sixth lunar month and commemorates the date of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing away). Activities are centred around the temple.

June

In some parts of the country, the rainy season is merely an afternoon shower, leaving the rest of the day for music and merriment.



Hua Hin Jazz Festival

Jazz groups descend on this royal retreat for a musical homage to the king, an accomplished jazz saxophonist and composer.



Phi Ta Khon The Buddhist holy day of Bun Phra Wet is given a Carnival makeover in Dan Sai village in northeastern Thailand. Revellers disguise themselves in garish 'spirit' costumes and parade through the village streets wielding wooden phalluses and downing rice whisky. The festival commemorates a Buddhist legend in which a host of spirits (*pěe*, also spelt '*phi*') appeared to greet the Buddha-to-be (Prince Vessantara or Phra Wet), the penultimate birth. Dates vary.

July

With the start of the rainy season, the religious community and attendant

festivals prepare for Buddhist Lent, a period of reflection and meditation. If you can stand a little drizzle, this is an ideal time for rural sightseeing as rice planting begins and the parched landscape turns a verdant green.



Asahna Bucha The full moon of the eighth lunar month commemorates Buddha's first sermon during Asahna (also spelt Asalha) Bucha (*ah-sāhn-hà boo-chah*).



Khao Phansaa The day after Asahna Bucha marks the beginning of Buddhist Lent (the first day of the waning moon in the eighth lunar month), the traditional time for men to enter the monkhood and when monks typically retreat inside the monastery for a period of study and meditation. During Khao Phansaa, worshippers make offerings of candles and other necessities to the temples and attend ordinations. In Ubon Ratchathani, the traditional candle offerings have grown into elaborately carved wax sculptures that are shown off during the Candle Parade.

August

Overcast skies and daily showers mark the middle of the rainy season. The predictable rains just adds to the ever-present humidity.



HM the Queen's Birthday The Thai Queen's Birthday (12 August) is a public holi-

day and national mother's day. In Bangkok, the day is marked with cultural displays along Th Ratchadamnoen and Sanam Luang.

October

Religious preparations for the end of the rainy season and the end of Buddhist Lent begin. The monsoons are reaching the finish line (in most of the country).

Vegetarian Festival

A holiday from meat is taken for nine days (during the ninth lunar month) in adherence with Chinese Buddhist beliefs of mind and body purification. Cities with large Thai-Chinese populations, such as Bangkok, Hua Hin, Pattaya, Trang and Krabi, are festooned with yellow banners heralding vegetarian vendors, and merit-makers dressed in white shuffle off for meditation retreats. In Phuket the festival gets extreme, with entranced marchers turning themselves into human shish kebabs.

Ork Phansaa

The end of the Buddhist lent (three lunar months after Khao Phansaa) is marked by the *gā-tin* ceremony, in which new robes are given to the monks by merit-makers. The peculiar natural phenomenon known as the 'naga fireballs' coincides with Ork Phansaa. In Mae Hong Son, the end of Buddhist Lent is marked by the Shan-style Jong Para festival, in which miniature castles are paraded on poles



(Above) The end of the rainy season is the time to explore beaches such as Ko Tarutao Marine National Park
(Below) Getting soaked at Songkran, Chiang Mai



to the temples. Localities near rivers and the ocean celebrate with traditional long-tail boat races. Nakhon Phanom's Illuminated Boat Festival electrifies an old-fashioned tradition.



King Chulalongkorn

Day

Rama V is honoured on the anniversary of his death at the Royal Plaza in Dusit. Crowds of devotees come to make merit with incense and flower garlands. Held on 23 October.

November

The cool, dry season has arrived and if you get here early enough, you'll beat the tourist crowds. The beaches are inviting and the landscape is lush: perfect for trekking and waterfall-spotting.



Surin Elephant Round-up

Held on the third weekend of November, Thailand's biggest elephant show celebrates this northeastern province's most famous residents. The event in Surin

begins with a colourful elephant parade culminating in a fruit buffet for the pachyderms. Re-enactments of Thai battles showcase mahouts and elephants wearing royal military garb.



Loi Krathong

One of Thailand's most beloved festivals, Loi Krathong is celebrated on the first full moon of the 12th lunar month. The festival thanks the river goddess for providing life to the fields and forests and asks for forgiveness for the polluting ways of humans. Small handmade boats (called *kràthong* or *grà-tong*) are sent adrift in the country's waterways. The *grà-tong* are origami-like vessels made from banana leaves. They're decorated with flowers, and incense, candles and coins are placed in them. Loi Krathong is believed to have originated in Sukhothai, where it is celebrated today with much pomp. In Chiang Mai the festival is also called Yi Peng.



Lopburi Monkey Festival

During the last week of November, the town's

troublesome macaques get pampered with their very own banquet, while merit-makers watch merrily.

December

The peak of the tourist season has returned with fair skies, busy beach resorts and a holiday mood.



HM the King's Birthday

Honouring the king's birthday on 5 December, this public holiday hosts parades and merit-making events; it is also recognised as national father's day. Th Ratchadamnoen Klang in Bangkok is decorated with lights and regalia. Everyone wears pink shirts, pink being the colour associated with the monarchy.



Chiang Mai Red Cross and Winter Fair

A 10-day festival that displays Chiang Mai's cultural heritage with a country-fair atmosphere; expect food (lots of it) and traditional performances.



Responsible Travel

Don'ts

Don't step on a dropped bill to prevent it from blowing away – Thai money bears a picture of the king.

Never step over someone or their personal belongings.

Avoid tying your shoes to the outside of your backpack where they might accidentally brush against someone.

Don't get a tattoo of the Buddha – the culture ministry is seeking to ban the practice and it is considered sacrilegious.

Dos

Stand respectfully for the national anthem (unless you're inside a home or building), which is played at 8am and 6pm.

Rise for the royal anthem, which is played in movie theatres before every screening.

Greet people with a smile and a cheery *sà-wàt-dee kráp* if you're male or *sà-wàt-dee ká* if you're female.

Bring a gift if you're invited to a Thai home and take off your shoes when you enter.

Lower your head slightly when passing between two people having a conversation or when passing near a monk.

Dress modestly (cover to the elbows and ankles) for temple visits and always remove your shoes when entering any building containing a Buddha image.

Extend the right hand out while the left hand gently grips the right elbow when handing an object to another person or receiving something – truly polite behaviour.

Hair-raising adventures and postcard snapshots make great souvenirs from a trip, but the travel experiences that become lifelong companions are the moments when you stop being an invading alien and connect with someone who may not speak your language or share your culture. Stepping outside of the comfortable tourist zones and into the community can elevate you from an economic opportunity to an honoured guest and even a friend.

There are a number of ways to respectfully visit and interact with a host country: learning the language, customs and culture; volunteering your time and skills to disadvantaged people; and supporting businesses with environmental or social justice missions. The People & Culture chapter (p721) provides insights into Thailand's rich heritage and gives tips on culture.

Cultural Etiquette

The monarchy and the religion (which are often viewed as interconnected) are treated with extreme deference in Thailand. Thais avoid criticising or disparaging the royal family for fear of offending someone or, worse, being charged for *lèse majesté*, which carries a jail sentence. With the king's increasing frailness, *lèse-majesté* charges have increasingly been doled out to foreigners, Thai expats, political rivals and academics.

Buddha images are sacred objects. Thais consider it bad form to pose in front of

one for a photo or to clamber upon them (in the case of temple ruins), instead they would show respect by performing a *wâi* (a prayer-like gesture) to the figure no matter how humble it is. As part of their ascetic vows, monks are not supposed to touch or be touched by women. If a woman wants to hand something to a monk, the object is placed within reach of the monk or on the monk's 'receiving cloth'. Women don't sit next to monks on public transport and they cross out of the way on streets to avoid an accidental brush.

From a spiritual viewpoint, Thais regard the head as the highest and most sacred part of the body and the feet as the dirtiest and lowest. Many of the taboos associated with the feet have a practical derivation as well. Traditionally Thais ate, slept and entertained on the floor of their homes with little in the way of furniture. To keep their homes and eating surfaces clean, the feet (and shoes) contracted a variety of rules.

When sitting in a religious edifice, Thais sit in the 'mermaid' position with their legs folded to one side so that the bottoms of the feet or the toes aren't pointed at a Buddha image.

Shoes aren't worn inside private homes and temple buildings, as a sign of respect and for sanitary reasons. Thais can kick off their shoes in one fluid step and many lace-up shoes are modified by the wearer to become slip-ons. Thais also step over the threshold, which is where the spirit of the house is believed to reside. On some buses and 3rd-class trains, you'll see Thais prop up their feet on the adjacent bench; while this isn't the height of propriety, do notice that they always remove their shoes before doing so. Thais also take off their shoes if they need to climb up onto a chair or seat.

Thais don't touch each other's head or ruffle their hair as a sign of affection. Occasionally you'll see young people touching each other's head, which is a teasing gesture, maybe even a slight insult, between friends.

Social Conventions & Gestures

The traditional Thai greeting is made with a prayerlike palms-together gesture known as *wâi*. The depth of the bow and the placement of the fingers in relation to the face is dependent on the status of the

person receiving the *wâi*. Adults don't *wâi* children and in most cases service people (when they are doing their jobs) aren't *wâi-ed*, though this is a matter of personal discretion.

In the more traditional parts of the country, it is not proper for members of the opposite sex to touch one another, either as lovers or as friends. Hand-holding is not acceptable behaviour outside of the major cities such as Bangkok. But same-sex touching is quite common and is typically a sign of friendship, not sexual attraction. Older Thai men might grab a younger man's thigh in the same way that buddies slap each other on the back. Thai women are especially affectionate with female friends, often sitting close to one another or linking arms.

Thais hold modesty in personal dress in high regard, though this is changing among the younger generation. The importance of modesty extends to the beach as well. Except for urban Bangkokians, most Thais swim fully clothed. For this reason, sunbathing nude or topless is not acceptable and in some cases is even illegal.

See p726 for other insights on dealing with Thai people.

Tourism

Most forms of tourism, despite the prevailing prejudices, have a positive economic effect on the local economy in Thailand: providing jobs for young workers and business opportunities for entrepreneurs. But in an effort to be more than just a consumer, many travellers look for opportunities to spend where their money might be needed, either on charitable causes or activities that preserve traditional ways of life. Thailand has done a surprisingly good job at adapting to this emerging trend by promoting village craft programs and homestays. Unfortunately, much of this is aimed at the domestic market rather than international visitors. But more and more, foreign tourists can engage in these small-scale tourism models that offer an insight into traditional ways.

Homestays

You can travel independently without isolating yourself from the culture by staying at one of Thailand's local homestays. More

TOP HOMESTAYS

- » Ban Prasat, Nakhon Ratchasima
- » Ban Kham Pia, Bueng Kan
- » Ban Ta Klang, Surin
- » Ban Mae Kampong, Chiang Mai

popular with domestic tourists, homestays differ from guest houses in that visitors are welcomed into a family's home, typically in a small village that isn't on the tourist trail. Accommodation is basic: usually a mat or foldable mattress on the floor, or occasionally a family will have a private room. Rates include lodging, meals with the family and cultural activities that highlight a region's traditional way of life, from rice farming to silk weaving. English fluency varies, so homestays are also an excellent way to exercise your spoken Thai.

Hill-Tribe Trekking

Though marginalised within mainstream society, the hill-tribe minorities remain a strong tourism draw with large and small businesses organising trekking tours to villages for cultural displays and interactions. Economically, it is unclear whether hill-tribe trekking helps alleviate the poverty of the hill-tribe groups and in turn helps to maintain their separate ethnic identity. Most agree that a small percentage of the profits from trekking filters down to individual families within hill-tribe villages, giving them a small source of income that might prevent urban migration. One guide we spoke to estimated that 50% of the tour budget was spent on purchasing food, lodging and supplies from hill-tribe merchants at the host village.

In general the trekking business has become more socially conscious than in previous decades. Most companies now tend to limit the number of visits to a particular area to lessen the impact of outsiders on the daily lives of ordinary villagers. But the industry still has a long way to go. It should be noted that trekking companies are Thai owned and employ Thai guides, another bureaucratic impediment regarding citizenship for ethnic minorities. Without an identification card, guides from the hill tribes do not qualify for a Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) tour guide

licence and so are less than desirable job candidates.

Trekkers should also realise that the minority tribes maintain their own distinct cultural identity and many continue their animistic traditions, which define social taboos and conventions. If you're planning on visiting hill-tribe villages on an organised trek, talk to your guide about dos and don'ts.

Here is a general prescription to get you started.

- » Always ask for permission before taking any photos of tribes people, especially at private moments inside their dwellings. Many traditional belief systems regard photography with suspicion.
- » Show respect for religious symbols and rituals. Don't touch totems at village entrances or sacred items hanging from trees. Don't participate in ceremonies unless invited to.
- » Avoid cultivating the practice of begging, especially among children. Don't hand out candy unless you can also arrange for modern dentistry. Talk to your guide about donating to a local school instead.
- » Avoid public nudity and be careful not to undress near an open window where village children might be able to peep in.
- » Don't flirt with members of the opposite sex unless you plan on marrying them. Don't drink or do drugs with the villagers; altered states sometimes lead to culture clashes.
- » Smile at villagers even if they stare at you. Ask your guide how to say 'hello' in the tribal language.
- » Avoid public displays of affection, which in some traditional systems are viewed as offensive to the spirit world.
- » Don't interact with the villagers' livestock, even the free-roaming pigs; these creatures are valuable possessions, not entertainment oddities. Also avoid interacting with jungle animals, which in some belief systems are viewed as visiting spirits.
- » Don't litter.

TOP PLACES FOR HILL-TRIBE TREKKING

- » Chiang Mai
- » Chiang Rai
- » Mae Hong Son
- » Mae Sariang

» Adhere to the same feet taboos that apply to Thai culture (see p34). Don't step on the threshold of a house, prop your feet up against the fire or wear your shoes inside.

Elephant Encounters

Throughout Thai history, elephants have been revered for their strength, endurance and intelligence, working alongside their mahouts harvesting teak, transporting goods through mountainous terrain or fighting ancient wars.

But many of the elephant's traditional roles have either been outsourced to machines or outlawed (logging was banned in 1989), leaving the domesticated animals and their mahouts without work. Some mahouts turned to begging on the streets in Bangkok and other tourist centres, a dangerous practice that the government is working to curb through fines and incentive programs.

But most elephants, like many human migrants, found work in Thailand's burgeoning tourism industry, which varies from circus-like shows to elephant camps giving rides to tourists. Other elephant encounters include mahout-training schools, while sanctuaries and rescue centres provide modest retirement homes to animals that can no longer work and are no longer profitable to their owners. See the boxed text, p38 for more.

There is much debate within the animal welfare community as to how to prevent abuse and ensure humane conditions for domesticated elephants. Until an alternative is developed tourism at least helps to temporarily fix the elephant unemployment issue and with proper education conscientious tourists can ensure that safe working conditions for elephants are the industry norm.

Here are some questions to ask the elephant camps to make sure you've chosen a well-run operation. Also see Environment & Wildlife (p751) for recommended elephant centres and sanctuaries.

- » Does the camp employ a veterinarian? Good camps keep their elephants under regular medical supervision.
- » What is its policy on procuring new elephants? Many of the wild-caught animals come from the Thai-Burmese border.
- » How many hours per day do the elephants work? A brisk-paced walk for about four hours per

day (with breaks for eating and drinking in between) is considered adequate exercise.

- » How many adults do the elephants carry? Elephants can carry a maximum of 150kg (330lb) of weight on its back, plus a mahout on its neck. Tally up you and your partner's combined weight and request a separate elephant if you tip the scales.
- » Are the elephants kept in a shady spot near fresh water and a food source? What do they eat? A balanced diet includes a mixture of fruit, grasses, bamboo and pineapple shoots.
- » Do the elephants have noticeable wounds? This is often a sign of mistreatment.

Diving

The popularity of Thailand's diving industry places immense pressure on fragile coral sites. To help preserve the ecology, adhere to these simple rules.

- » Avoid touching living marine organisms, standing on coral or dragging equipment (such as fins) across the reef. Coral polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact.
- » When treading water in shallow reef areas, be careful not to kick up clouds of sand, which can easily smother the delicate reef organisms.
- » Take great care in underwater caves where your air bubbles can be caught within the roof and leave previously submerged organisms high and dry.
- » Join a coral clean-up campaign that's sponsored by dive shops.
- » Don't feed the fish or allow your dive operator to dispose of excess food in the water. The fish become dependent on this food source and don't tend to the algae on the coral, causing harm to the reef.

Volunteering

When you travel to another country it is easier to see the areas of suffering much more clearly than you can in your own country. And Thailand is still technically a developing country, lacking a tight-knit social safety net and an executed environmental protection program. There are a myriad of organisations in Thailand to address both the needs of the locals and visitors' desire to help.

PACHYDERM DILEMMA

Working elephants have a career of about 50 years and are trained at a young age by two mahouts, usually a father-and-son team, who can see the animal through its lifetime. Thai law requires that elephants be retired and released into the wild at age 61. They often live for 80 years or more. It costs about 30,000B (US\$1000) per month to provide a comfortable living standard for an elephant; this amount is equivalent to the salary of Thailand's upper middle class.

Activists within the elephant welfare world disagree about the best way to handle the domesticated population, which numbers about 3500 elephants. At issue is the current solution to the problem of unemployed elephants, namely elephant treks and mahout programs. Some activists maintain that elephants should not be domesticated, bred or ridden because the process is cruel and painful for the animals. Instead the animals should live in as natural a state as possible, either in the wild or in wild-like sanctuary settings.

Proponents of working elephants believe that elephant tourism can provide these domesticated creatures and their human caretakers (the mahouts, who are often part of an extended elephant-herding tribe in Surin) with a respectable livelihood and comfortable working and living conditions that they otherwise wouldn't be able to afford. Many believe that there isn't enough wild space to 'free' the elephants and without the elephant camps the mahouts and the animals would return to a life of begging.

Another complicating factor is the buying of elephants to tourism-related businesses, including sanctuaries (the term used by sanctuaries is 'rescue' though there is often a monetary transaction with the elephant owner). According to Thai law, captive elephants can be bought, sold and transported as long as they have the proper permits and certificates verifying that the animal was born on a farm instead of in the forest. But the system is easily manipulated and it is more profitable to sell a 'free' forest elephant than to breed one. Poachers are typically local people with knowledge of elephant round-ups, the traditional process of corralling wild populations. In other cases, the animals are caught in Burma and transported across the border.

Conscientious elephant camps are aware of the practice and have a variety of methods of circumventing fraud. The Royal Elephant Kraal & Village in Ayuthaya has a successful breeding program and doesn't engage in the elephant trade. The Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation, affiliated with the Anantara and Four Season resorts in Sop Ruak, hires elephants and their mahouts on a contractual basis instead of buying elephants. Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand in Phetchaburi buys old and infirmed animals at below-market prices to prevent the mahout from buying a wild-caught replacement.

Humanitarian & Educational Work

Education is the primary source for volunteer opportunities. In Thailand, the public schools offer tuition-free education for 12 years to anyone living legally in the country. The definition of a legal resident excludes some hill-tribe villagers in the northern mountains and undocumented Burmese refugees and immigrants. Even for members of these groups who do have the proper documentation, the associated fees for attending school (such as uniforms, supplies and books) are often too expensive for families to afford. The incidental fees of an education

also exclude many fully recognised but poor citizens living in the northeast.

Not only is there a need for volunteer teachers but the teaching profession is a revered one and offers rewarding interactions into a supportive community. If you want more of a cultural challenge than just a job overseas, look into programs in rural areas where English is limited and foreigners are few. In these situations, you'll learn Thai more quickly and observe a way of life with deeper connections to the past.

Northern Thailand, especially Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, has a number of volunteer opportunities working with disadvantaged hill-tribe groups. Chiang Mai, Mae Sot and Sangkhlaburi have distressed communities

of Burmese refugees and migrants. There are also many volunteer teaching positions in northeastern Thailand, the country's agricultural heartland. The destination chapters also have reviews of small-scale volunteer opportunities at orphanages and drop-in centres.

The following organisations are worth investigating:

Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand

(Afect; www.akhathai.org; Chiang Rai) A hill-tribe-run NGO that operates schools and public information programs in northern Thailand villages.

Andaman Discoveries (☎08 7917 7165; www.andamandiscoveries.com; Phang-Nga) Manages a learning centre for children of Burmese migrants, an orphanage and a school for disabled children in southern Thailand.

Cultural Canvas Thailand (☎08 6920 2451; www.culturalcanvas.com; Chiang Mai) Places volunteers in migrant learning centres, art programs and other social-justice projects in northern Thailand.

Dragonfly Volunteer Projects (☎08 7963 0056; <http://thai-dragonfly.com>; Nakhon Ratchasima) Trains and places volunteers in building, teaching and animal-welfare projects throughout the country.

Isara (☎0 4246 0827; www.isara.org; Nong Khai) Places English and computer teachers in underprivileged schools around Thailand; one of the few volunteer programs that are free, and includes housing and some meals.

LemonGrass Volunteering (☎08 1977 5300; www.lemongrass-volunteering.com; Surin) Places volunteer teachers in classrooms and student camps around Surin, in the northeast.

Open Mind Projects (☎0 4241 3578; www.openmindprojects.org; Nong Khai) Offers volunteer positions in IT, health care, education and community-based ecotourism throughout Thailand.

Redemptorist Foundation (www.fr-ray.org; Pattaya) Operates a variety of educational and outreach programs for disadvantaged people in Pattaya.

Travel to Teach (☎08 4246 0351; www.travel-to-teach.org; Chiang Mai) Offers flexible volunteering positions in schools, English camps

or temples with placements in Mae Hong Son and Chiang Mai.

Volunthai (www.volunthai.com; Bangkok) A family-run operation that places volunteers in teaching positions at rural schools with homestay accommodation.

Environmental & Animal Welfare Work

As Thailand becomes industrialised, there are continued pressures on the natural environment and the wild populations of animals. Though the problems are apparent, clear answers are not. There is a strong environmental movement within the country but their efforts are often disparate and function on a small-scale. A number of NGOs undertake local conservation efforts, run rescue and sanctuary centres for wild animals that have been adopted as pets or veterinarian clinics that tend to the domesticated population of dogs and cats.

The following are centres and sanctuaries that rely on volunteer labour; your hard work is often rewarded with meaningful interactions with the animals.

Elephant Nature Park (☎0 5320 8246; www.elephantnaturepark.org; Mae Taeng) Accepts volunteers, including veterinarians, to help care for the resident elephants.

Highland Farm Gibbon Sanctuary (☎0 9958 0821; www.highland-farm.org; Mae Sot) Gives a permanent home to orphaned, abandoned and mistreated gibbons; volunteers are asked for a one-month commitment and to help with daily farm chores.

Starfish Ventures (☎44 800 1974817; www.starfishvolunteers.com) Places volunteers in conservation, teaching and animal welfare programs throughout Thailand, but mainly in Surin.

Wild Animal Rescue Foundation (WARF) (www.warthai.org) Operates the Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre and a conservation education centre in Ranong Province on the Andaman Coast. Job placements include assisting with the daily care of gibbons that are being rehabilitated for life in the wild or counting and monitoring sea-turtle nests.

Wildlife Friends of Thailand Rescue Centre (www.wfft.org) Puts volunteers to work caring for sun bears, macaques and gibbons at its animal rescue centre outside of Phetchaburi.



Islands & Beaches

Best Beaches for Diving & Snorkelling

Ko Tao Gulf island where everyone learns to dive.

Ko Kradan Andaman snorkelling heaven; popular with daytrippers.

Khao Lak Gateway to the world-renowned Surin and Similan Islands and Burma Banks.

Ko Lanta Underappreciated Andaman dive sites, conveniently close.

Best Islands & Beaches for Kids

Dolphin Bay Low-key scenic bay close to Bangkok.

Hua Hin International Gulf mainland resort with a long coastline.

Ko Ngai (Trang Islands): Shallow tropical Andaman bay with coral reefs.

Ko Lanta Sand, sea, eat, repeat – and nap under a coconut tree.

Best Party Beaches

Ko Samui Get your beach drunk on in Hat Chaweng.

Ko Pha-Ngan The full moon turns everyone into a party werewolf.

Ko Phi-Phi The sauce-loving sorority sister of Thai party beaches.

Planning Your Trip

The monsoon rains and peak tourist season are two factors determining when to go and which islands and beaches to pick. The rainy weather varies between the two coasts and there are dry and wet microclimates as well as seasonal severity of rains.

When To Go

Best Times

» **March to April** The hot, dry season means that the days are mostly rain-free and the tourist crowds have mostly returned home.

» **Late October to November** In Ko Chang and the Andaman, this is an ideal shoulder season near the end of the rains and before the end-of-year holidaymakers arrive. The Gulf gets a second rainy season from October to December.

Times to Avoid

» **May to October** The monsoon rains arrive, some hotels shut-down and boat travel can be interrupted by storms. The Gulf tends to stay dry from May to June with rains typically starting in July.

» **December to February** Peak tourist season on Thai islands and beaches. Rates soar and beaches are packed. The Gulf coast gets a second rainy season from October to December.

All the tropical stereotypes apply to the Thai beaches: white stoles of sand punctuated by arcing palm trees and jewel-toned waters. The bays are shallow, warm and gentle and often fringed by coral reefs, making Thailand a major dive and snorkelling destination.

OVERVIEW OF THAILAND'S ISLANDS & BEACHES

BEACHES	PACKAGE, HIGH-END TOURISTS	BACK- PACKERS	FAMILIES	PARTIES	DIVING & SNORKELLING	PERSONALITY
Ko Chang & Eastern Seaboard						
Ko Samet	✓	✓	✓	✓		Easy to get to and pretty beach getaway from Bangkok
Ko Chang	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	International resort, mediocre beaches, jungle interior
Ko Wai		✓	✓		✓	Primitive daytripper, deserted in the evening
Ko Mak	✓	✓	✓			Mediocre beaches, great island vibe
Ko Kut	✓	✓	✓			Pretty semi-developed island, great for solitude
Hua Hin & the Southern Gulf						
Hua Hin	✓	✓	✓			International resort, easy access to Bangkok
Pranburi & Around	✓		✓			Quiet and close to Bangkok
Ban Krut			✓			Low-key and popular with Thais
Bang Saphan Yai		✓	✓			Cheap and beachy
Ko Samui & the Lower Gulf						
Ko Samui	✓	✓	✓	✓		International resort for social beach-goers
Ko Pha-Ngan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Boho beach with boozy Hat Rin
Ko Tao	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Dive schools galore
Ang Thong		✓	✓			Gorgeous karst scenery, rustic
Ao Khanom		✓	✓			Quiet, little known
Phuket & the Andaman Coast						
Ko Chang (Ranong)		✓	✓		✓	Rustic
Ko Phayam		✓	✓			Quiet, little known
Surin & Similan Islands			✓		✓	Dive sites accessed by live-aboards
Ko Yao	✓	✓	✓			Poor beaches but nice vibe, great scenery
Phuket	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	International resort for social beach-goers
Ao Nang	✓	✓	✓		✓	Touristy, close to Railay
Railay	✓	✓	✓			Rock-climbing centre
Ko Phi-Phi	✓	✓		✓	✓	Pretty party island
Ko Jum	✓	✓	✓			Mediocre beach, nice island vibe
Ko Lanta	✓	✓	✓		✓	Mediocre beach, nice island vibe
Trang Islands	✓	✓	✓		✓	Ko Ngai good for kids
Ko Bulon Leh		✓	✓		✓	Pretty beaches, little known
Ko Tarutao		✓	✓			Semi-developed national park
Ko Lipe	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Hot spot, handy for visa-runs
Ko Adang		✓			✓	Popular with daytrippers



Culture & Cuisine

Best Cities for Eating

Bangkok Great street eats, tasty international comfort food, high-end dining too.

Hua Hin Seafood, seafood and seafood, plus some noodles for a change.

Chiang Rai Nosh on northern cuisine like a local.

Chiang Mai Market meals, northern specialties, Burmese eats and sushi and salads.

Best Hill-Tribe Treks

Chiang Mai Well-developed trekking scene for organising a quick foray.

Chiang Rai Many hill-tribe outreach projects are funded through treks.

Mae Hong Son More remote setting with more involved experiences.

Mae Sariang Even more remote than Mae Hong Son but developing a responsible-tourism reputation.

Best Hang-Out Towns

Pai Hippie hang-out in a pretty mountain valley.

Prachuap Khiri Khan Escape the crowds in this seaside town.

Nong Khai Cycle around this pleasant Mekong River town.

Mae Salong Ethnic Chinese village sits atop a mountain ridge cultivated with tea plantations.

Planning Your Trip

The monsoon rains and seasonal temperatures are two factors determining when to go. The bulk of the country experiences one rainy season, followed by 'winter' (when it is cool and dry) then 'summer' (when it is hot and dry). High season in Chiang Mai and the north is during the winter months (November to February) and advance reservations on lodging and transport are recommended during Songkran in April.

When to Go

Best Times

» **November to February** The winter season has cool temperatures and the northern mountains are still green from the previous months' rains. In higher elevations it can be cold at night. This is the best time to do trekking or waterfall spotting.

» **June to October** The rainy season isn't the best time to do a northern trek but it is ideal for seeing rice-planting season, especially in the northeast, which gets less rain than the rest of the country.

Times to Avoid

» **March to May** The summer season is oppressively hot and dry. The landscape becomes parched and in Chiang Mai and northern Thailand the agricultural fields are burned for the next year's crop creating a smoky haze.

Though it might be poorly signed in English, Thailand is one massive museum for those who know how to look for it. Each



JERRY AL. ALEXANDER/CONVEY PLANET IMAGES ©



TOM COOPER/CONVEY PLANET IMAGES ©

- » (above) Street food (p123), Bangkok
- » (left) Lisu woman and child, near Pai (p388)

TOP CULTURAL TOWNS

- Bangkok** First stop for culture vultures bulking up on Thai history.
- Chiang Mai** Northern Thailand's cultural repository of temples and architecture.
- Ayuthaya** Crumbling ruins from a once-great capital.
- Sukhothai** Can't do Ayuthaya without Sukhothai, a well-preserved ancient city.
- Kanchanaburi** Unlikely WWII sightseeing town plus cave temples and scenic drives.
- Ubon Ratchathani** Rewarding wandering, temples and museums in a pleasant Isan city.

Thai town follows the same blueprint – revolving around a temple and a day market, as food and religion are the centrepieces of daily life. The famous Thai temples exemplify the artistic evolution of the kingdom – the inheritance of Buddhism, which came from Sri Lanka, the imposing military style of the Khmer empire, and the emergence of a distinct Thai artistic personality.

The day market is another indicator of geography and cultural affiliations. Here you'll find the standard repertoire of colourful fruits piled up like miniature pyramids and standard vegetables that get shipped across the country in small pick-up trucks. A requisite visit to the local day market will reveal the region's agricultural specialties, quirky forest herbs and culinary toolkit. Antiquated coconut grinders appear in the southern markets while sugarcane presses across the country squeeze out nature's original sweet drink from an unlikely looking source. Northern markets prepare blue-hued sticky rice desserts that look like something dreamed up by Willy Wonka.

Radiating out from the market is the commercial strip, typically where Thai-Chinese families have built mercantile enterprises selling utilitarian necessities ranging from paint to motorcycles. A few towns still boast the old wooden shophouses that once dominated the mercantile districts more than half a century ago. Roads in the commercial

centre are divided into lanes (called soi) and lanes are divided into alleys; if you follow one or the other you'll eventually end up in someone's living room, usually an open-air porch where a child is being bathed from an earthenware basin or where a sarong-clad grandmother keeps tabs on neighbourhood gossip.

Regardless of the similarities seen across Thailand, every region has its own collective personality, which is reflected in the language, architecture and food that provide a new dimension to the familiar template of Thai towns. The border regions are unique cross-pollinations of cultures separated by arbitrary geopolitical lines. In the north, the cultures are akin to the mountainous regions of Burma and Laos, while the north-east shares its cultural heritage with the dry plains of Laos and Cambodia. Added to this, is the Chinese influence, most notably visible in the Chinatowns in a number of cities. Appreciating these different influences helps build a deeper cultural understanding of a superficially monolithic culture.

The best ways to explore these differences and the various attractions of must-see towns is to go on a walk-about, sampling street food, poking around the commercial centre and catching local transport to outlying attractions. For more information on the food staples of different regions, see p738.

TOP HANDICRAFT VILLAGES & MARKETS

- Ko Kret** Little island near Bangkok makes pottery the old-fashioned Mon way.
- Hang Dong** Northern Thailand's centre for furniture and decorative arts, just outside Chiang Mai.
- Ban Tha Sawang** Renowned silk-weaving centre near Surin.
- Mae Sot** Border town selling Burmese handicrafts at local shops and markets.
- Nan** Textiles, jewellery and other northern handicrafts make for in-situ shopping.



Travel with Children

Best Regions for Kids

Eastern Seaboard & Ko Chang

Families with children flock to Ko Chang. Shallow seas are kind to young swimmers and the low evening tides make for good beachcombing. Older children will like the interior jungle, elephant camp and mangrove kayaking. Neighbouring islands Ko Wai and Ko Kut have clear water.

Southern Gulf

Hua Hin attracts an international crowd and has a long sandy coastline for pint-sized marathons and hillside temples for monkey spotting. Phetchaburi's cave temples often deliver a bat sighting. Ban Krut and Bang Saphan Yai are so casual you can wake up and play in the waves before breakfast.

Ko Samui & Lower Gulf

Older children can snorkel Ko Tao without worry. Ko Samui, especially its northern beaches, is a hit with pram-pushers and toddlers, while Chaweng appeals to older kids.

Phuket & Andaman Coast

As well as the beach, Phuket has amusements galore, though steer clear of the Patong party scene. There are at least a dozen islands along this coast where families can frolic in the sea.

Thailand for Children

Thais are serious 'cute' connoisseurs and exotic-looking foreign children rank higher on their adorable meter than stuffed animals and fluffy dogs. Children are instant celebrities and attract almost paparazzi-like attention that eclipses the natural shyness of Thai people.

Babies do surprisingly well with their new-found stardom, soaking up adoration from gruff taxi drivers who transform into loving uncles wanting to play a game of peekaboo (called 'já äür'). If you've got a babe in arms, the food vendors will often offer to hold the child while you eat, taking the child for a brief stroll to visit the other vendors.

At a certain age, kids develop stranger anxiety, which doesn't mix well with the Thai passion for children. The author's four-year-old spent a lot of time in Thailand hiding behind her skirt when the ladies would come a calling. Often she had to strategically shield him from their love pinches. In these cases, she would explain that he was 'shy' (*'ki aye'*), a polite way of bowing out of further interaction. For the preschool set, who are becoming self-conscious but still have major cute quotient, we recommend sticking to tourist centres instead of trotting off to far-flung places where foreigners, especially children, will attract too much attention.

To smooth out the usual road bumps of dragging children from place to place, check out Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children*,

EATING WITH KIDS AUSTIN BUSH

Dining with children, particularly with infants, in Thailand is a liberating experience as the Thais are so fond of kids. Take it for granted that your babies will be fawned over, played with, and more than not, carried around, by restaurant wait staff. Regard this as a much-deserved break, not to mention a bit of free cultural exposure.

Because much of Thai food is so spicy, there is also an entire art devoted to ordering 'safe' dishes for children, and the vast majority of Thai kitchens are more than willing to oblige.

In general Thai children don't start to eat spicy food until primary school, before then they seemingly survive on *kôw nêe-o* (sticky rice) and jelly snacks. Other kid-friendly meals include chicken in all of its nonspicy permutations – *gài yâhng* (grilled chicken), *gài tởt* (fried chicken) and *gài pát mét má-môo-ang* (chicken stir-fried with cashew nuts) – as well as *kài jee-o* (Thai-style omelette). A mild option includes *kôw man gài*, Hainanese chicken rice.

which contains useful advice on how to cope with kids on the road, with a focus on travel in developing countries.

Children's Highlights

Of the many destinations in Thailand, children will especially enjoy the beaches, as most are shallow, gentle bays good for beginner swimmers. The further south you go, the clearer the water and where there are near-shore reefs curious fish will swim by for a visit.

Animal amusements abound in Thailand, but animal conditions and treatment are often sub-par compared with standards in the West. Elephant rides, bamboo rafting and other outdoor activities around Chiang Mai and Kanchanaburi are more animal- and kid-friendly. Many of the beach resorts, such as Phuket and Ko Chang, also have wildlife encounters, waterfall spotting and organised water sports ideal for children aged six years and older.

Bangkok is great fun for those in awe of construction sites: the city is filled with cranes, jackhammers and concrete-pouring trucks. Then there's the aboveground Sky-train and shopping malls complete with escalators (a preschool favourite). The city's immense shopping options will appeal to the tweens and teens. For sights that will interest kids, see the boxed text, p98.

Kids on a train kick might like an overnight journey. On the train they can walk around and they're assigned the lower sleeping berths with views of the stations. The author's son's favourite part of their five-week trip through Thailand was the speedboats they took to get around the Ko Chang archi-

pelago. The child also got very excited when the hotel had two soaps, a reminder that children are adorably easily pleased. And the mosquito net they slept under in Ko Kut became their very own 'bat cave'.

Even the temples can be engaging places for children. The climb to the hilltop temples are a great way to expend energy and some of the forested hills have resident monkeys and cave shrines. Merit-making at a Buddhist temple is surprisingly child-friendly – there's the burning joss sticks, the bowing in front of the Buddha and the rubbing of gold leaf on the central image. It is a very active process that kids can be a part of. Also most temples have a fortune-telling area, where you shake a bamboo container until a numbered stick falls out. The number corresponds to a printed fortune. A variation on this is to make a donation into a pot (or in some cases an automated machine) corresponding to the day of the week you were born and retrieve the attached fortune.

Planning & Practicalities

Amenities specially geared towards young children – such as child-safety seats for cars, high chairs in restaurants or nappy-changing facilities in public restrooms – are virtually nonexistent in Thailand. Therefore parents will have to be extra resourceful in seeking out substitutes or just follow the example of Thai families (which means holding smaller children on their laps much of the time).

Baby formula and nappies (diapers) are available at minimarkets and 7-Elevens in the larger towns and cities, but the sizes are

usually small, smaller and smallish. If your kid wears size 3 or larger, head to Tesco Lotus, Big C or Tops Market stores. Nappy rash cream is sold at the pharmacies.

Hauling around little ones can be a challenge. Thailand's footpaths are often too crowded to push a pram, especially today's full-size SUV versions. Instead opt for a compact umbrella stroller that can squeeze past the fire hydrant and the mango cart and that can be folded up and thrown in a *túk-túk*. A baby pack is also useful but make sure that the child's head doesn't sit higher than yours: there are lots of hanging obstacles poised at forehead level.

Health & Safety

For the most part parents needn't worry too much about health concerns, although it pays to lay down a few ground rules (such

as regular hand washing) to head off potential medical problems. Children should be warned not to play with animals as rabies is relatively common in Thailand and many dogs are better at barking and eating garbage than being pets.

Mosquito bites often leave big welts on children. If your child is bitten, there are a variety of locally produced balms that can reduce swelling and itching. All the usual health precautions apply (see p776).

Children familiar with urban environments will do well in Thailand's cities, where traffic is chaotic and pedestrian paths are congested. Thai cities are very loud and can be a sensory overload for young children. Be sure that your child cooperates with your safety guidelines before heading out as it will be difficult for them to focus on your instructions amid all the street noise.

regions at a glance



Bangkok

Food ✓✓✓
Nightlife ✓✓✓
Shopping ✓✓✓

Classic Siam

Beyond the modern veneer of this megacity are the flamboyant royal temples that cradle the revered symbols of Thai Buddhism. The great temples built along Chao Phraya River were a show of strength for the resurrected Siam after its ancient and devastating war with Burma. Today these temples are both national pilgrimage sites and the country's greatest displays of classical art and architecture.

More is Better

This multiwatt megacity peddles excess in every permutation, from the sky-

scraper mountain ranges and luxe malls to the never-ending traffic jams and late-night after-hours clubs. Food can be found everywhere from pushcarts to grease-stained wok shops and it is all delicious. The city's cosmopolitan upbringing shines in fine dining and fashion-minded cafes. Shopping flourishes in crisp modern malls and humble streetside markets, including Chatuchak, a super-sized collection of tented stalls selling everything that can be peddled.

Toast the Stars

The quintessential night out in Bangkok is still a plastic table filled with sweating Beer Changs but this aspirational city capitalises on its skyscraper towers with half a dozen rooftop bars, where the breezes are cool and the cocktails are fizzy. Bangkok's legions of young and hip university students are always out on the town, filling music clubs with the latest indie beats or hangar-like entertainment zones that offer a buffet of eating, dancing and drinking.



Central Thailand

Culture/History ✓✓✓
Mountains ✓✓
Festivals ✓

Mother Waters

This fertile river plain is Thailand's cultural heartland, which birthed the once-dominant ancient kingdom of Ayuthaya. Today the Ayuthaya ruins are a Unesco World Heritage Site and a must-stop along the culture trail. Amiable Lopburi and its ancient ruins, some of which are informally ruled by a troop of monkeys, can be visited in a day. Loi Krathong is celebrated in Bang Pa-In palace with great spectacle.

Mountain Journeys

The subdued town of Kanchanaburi played an unlikely role in WWII when Japanese forces used Allied POWs to build the infamous Death Railway. It is also the gateway to the misty mountains of southwestern Thailand leading all the way to the Burmese border. Rivers and waterfalls carve the contours and a collection of parks makes this one of Thailand's wildest corners.

p156



Ko Chang & Eastern Seaboard

Beaches ✓✓
Diving/Snorkelling ✓
Small Towns ✓✓

A Chain of Islands

Jungle-covered Ko Chang and a collection of smaller islands stake out one last territorial claim in the Gulf's warm waters before ceding to Cambodia. Overland travellers en route to coastal Cambodia and Russian package tourists claim Ko Chang for its tropical ambience, dive sites and thriving party scene. Further afield, quiet Ko Kut excels in seaside seclusion, Ko Mak boasts a laid-back island vibe and little Ko Wai, with its clear, reef-filled waters, has the prettiest views you've ever seen.

Provincial Prominence

Tourists often overlook the eastern seaboard's small towns of Chanthaburi, famous for a weekend gem market, and Trat, a transit link to Ko Chang. But these provincial towns are charming for their ordinariness and middle-class prosperity, not found on the islands.

p191



Chiang Mai Province

Culture/History ✓✓✓
Food ✓✓
Nightlife ✓✓

Lanna Latitudes

A refreshing counterpoint to Bangkok's mayhem, charming Chiang Mai proudly displays northern Thailand's unique history and culture in its antique fortified city. Culture geeks flock here for sightseeing, cooking courses, language classes and massage training. During Songkran the city goes famously wild in an all-out water war. Beyond the old city gates are hip hang-outs and clubs where the uni students keep the city pointed into the future.

Curries & Noodles

Northern Thailand has its own versions of standard Thai dishes, reflecting its cooler climate and proximity to Yunnan and Burma. The curries are hardy, and pork dominates the grill. The dining scene is down to earth, concentrating on flavours instead of fads.

p232



Northern Thailand

Culture/History ✓✓✓
Mountains ✓✓✓
Food ✓✓

Ancient Kingdoms

In olden times, rival city-states with their fortified walls and sandstone Buddhist monuments sprang up throughout the upper plains of northern Thailand, defining important artistic and historical periods for the country. Sukhothai and its peaceful ancient city is the most atmospheric of them all and an easy detour north to Chiang Mai.

Misty Mornings

Further north the terrain becomes rugged as it climbs into the highlands shared with Laos and Burma. Winding roads and scenic vistas are highlights of Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son Provinces. And tucked into high-altitude valleys are ethnic minorities whose traditional practices continue to fascinate modern globe-trekkers. The regional menu in the north is a melange of Thai, Shan and Yunnan, catered by small dusty markets.

p294



Northeastern Thailand

Culture/History ✓✓
Food ✓✓✓
Festivals ✓✓✓

Ancient Angkor

The northeast was once a remote frontier of the great Angkor empire, based in present-day Cambodia, which built miniature versions of fantastic Angkor Wat throughout the countryside, still a frontier in some ways.

Powered by Sticky Rice

This rice-growing region is intimately tied to the agricultural clock and draws a regional pride from the local staple. The rainy season heralds the planting of tender green shoots still done by hand. Homestays in the region place visitors smack dab in the middle of the paddies complete with impervious water buffaloes. Local festivals put on an authentic cultural displays of folk beliefs and traditional dancing and music that can't be found anywhere else in the country.

p406



Hua Hin & the Southern Gulf

Culture/History ✓
Beaches ✓✓
Small Towns ✓✓

Royal Coast

Successive Thai kings escaped Bangkok's stifling climate to this coastal getaway. Bangkok Thais follow in their footsteps today, stopping in Phetchaburi to tour an historic hilltop palace and cave shrines, and then on to Hua Hin, a modern seaside retreat. The region's coastline is long and inviting and not nearly as crowded as every other beach resort in Thailand. Honeymooners and families will appreciate this short cut to the beach.

Surf & Turf

This coastal region is an excellent combination of sea and city for beach-lovers looking for a sense of place. Prachuap Khiri Khan is a mellow small town with stunning karst scenery, and Hua Hin and Phetchaburi both boast atmospheric shophouse districts indicative of Thailand's coastal cities settled by Chinese merchants.

p503



Ko Samui & the Lower Gulf

Beaches ✓✓✓
Diving/Snorkelling ✓✓

Diver Down

The three Samui sister islands, with their various charms, have been pursued by smitten island-hoppers for decades. The warm gentle seas and wallet-friendly prices keep Ko Tao as one of the globe's best places to learn how to dive. Just offshore are snorkelling spots that make fish-spotting fun and easy.

Bronzing Bodies

Next door is Ko Pha-Ngan, known for lunar parties and coastal loafing. Gone are the thatch shacks but the layabout vibe remains. And finally professional Samui caters to international tastes, high-end resorts and active vacationers who fly in and out with purpose. A daytrip dreamboat, Ang Thong National Park is a stunning collection of hulking limestone mountains jutting out of azure seas.

p535



Phuket & the Andaman Coast

Beaches ✓✓✓

Diving/Snorkelling ✓✓✓

Cousteau Territory

Big fish, pristine coral, clear waters – diving and snorkelling sites dot the coast all the way from the world-renowned Similan and Surin National Marine Parks to the Malaysian border. Most visitors pack a snorkel set in their day bags for impromptu sessions.

Karst Cathedrals

All along the Andaman limestone mountains fringed with beardlike vegetation jut out of jewel-coloured waters with monumental stature. The spectacle is breathtaking and enhanced by a variety of sports, based in Krabi and Ko Yao, that turns the landscape into an outdoor playground.

Just Phuket

Thailand's leading international beach destination excels in comfort for the holidaying masses. Resorts specialise in design and pampering and the modern convenience of an airport delivers time-crunched visitors from sky to shore faster.

p602

Thai Temples

Religion permeates Thailand from deep within the souls of the faithful to the unseen ethereal realm. Sacred spaces can be found in humble corners and exalted centres, and the Thai temple (wát) is the focal point of every community, the repository of traditional art and architecture and the primary counsellor for those with wishes and needs.

Wat Phra Kaew (p58), Bangkok



Top Temples

Thailand's most famous temples have earned adoration from the faithful both for their artistic beauty as well as for their resident Buddha or holy relics.

Wat Phra Kaew, Bangkok

1 The holiest of them all, this temple (p58) contains the country's most revered Buddha image, through which the exaltation of monarchy, nation and religion become one. The temple is a dazzling spectacle of mosaic-tiled facades, gilded spires and ornate murals.

Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai

2 Sitting atop a sacred mountain, this picturesque temple (p251) is venerated by Thai Buddhists for its golden *chedi* (stupa) and Buddha relic buried inside. It is also a beautiful example of Lanna (northern Thai) architecture that gazes down at Chiang Mai.

Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, Phitsanulok

3 In a land that prizes beauty, this temple (p349) is a major pilgrimage stop because of its resplendent Buddha. The seated figure glows with a heavenly lustre that is accented by an intricate and stylised halo.

Wat Pho, Bangkok

4 Wat Pho (p59) specialises in relaxation: it is the national repository for traditional massage and even its resident Buddha (a 46m long, 15m high reclining figure) assumes a slumbering pose. Dotting the shaded complex are giant Chinese sculptures.

Wat Phra Si Sanphet, Ayuthaya

5 Though time and war have taken its toll, Thailand's former capital of Ayuthaya survives with a gravity-defying elegance in Wat Phra Si Sanphet (p157). Its most striking feature is the picturesque profile of three tapered *chedi* spires – a feature of the era.

Clockwise from top left

1. Prangs at Wat Phra Kaew
2. Wat Phra That Doi Suthep
3. Seated Buddha statue, Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat
4. Reclining Buddha statue, Wat Pho



2

JERRY ALEXANDER/LOVELY PLANET IMAGES ©



3

JERRY ALEXANDER/LOVELY PLANET IMAGES ©



Thai Buddhism

The practice of Buddhism in Thailand is highly varied and individualised. For many it starts at dawn when the orange-robed barefoot monks solemnly process through town collecting food alms from the faithful. It is a genuinely touching ritual attesting to the religion's deep devotion and compassion. Daily devotions also occur in homes and businesses where small shrines to the site's guardian spirit are offered morning prayers, lit joss sticks and even treats in exchange for a prosperous and trouble-free day.

The formal aspects of the religion – funeral rites, meditation courses, merit-making and dharma talks – are carried out at the temples. But Thai temples are a jumble of strict orthodoxy and folk beliefs, often mixing religious guidance with luck-enhancing rituals. When in need, be it a broken heart or money troubles, Thais turn to the temple first beseeching the resident Buddha image for divine assistance. Some temples also host fortune-tellers and monks are trained in astrology.

Temples also serve a social function, as a destination for friends and families on a weekend tour. Stopping into a town's famous temple to make merit is the Western equivalent of visiting a regional museum. Paying respect to a temple's central Buddha usually involves offerings of lotus bud, joss sticks and small sheets of gold leaf.

TOP READS ON THAI BUDDHISM

- » **A Still Forest Pool: The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah**, Achaan Chah (2004)
- » **Thailand: Into the Spirit World**, by Marlane Guelden (1995)
- » **Phra Farang: An English Monk in Thailand**, by Phra Peter Pannapadipo (1999)
- » **Buddhism Explained**, by Laurence-Khantipalo Mills (1999)

Clockwise from top left

1. Monks at Wat Phon Chai, Dan Sai (p476) **2.** Lotus offering, Sukhothai Historical Park (p355) **3.** Golden Buddha statues at Wat Phra That Doi Suthep (p251), Chiang Mai





Temple Tour

10 days

Temple buffs can get to know the ins and outs of Thai Buddhism on this journey from Bangkok north to Chiang Mai.

» Start in **Bangkok** (p54), the seat of the Thai triumvirate: nation, monarchy and religion. Tour the famous riverside temples of Wat Phra Kaew, Wat Pho and Wat Arun. If you long to see more, not too far away are interesting Wat Saket and Wat Suthat.



ANDERS BLONQVIST/LOVELY PLANET IMAGES ©



PETER STUCKENKOPF/LOVELY PLANET IMAGES ©

» Take a day trip to **Ayuthaya** (p157), a former empire where once gilded temples have become haunting ruins pockmarked by time. Here, Wat Phra Si Sanphet is a must-see on any temple tour. And why not tour the temples like royalty aboard an elephant.

» Take the train to **Phitsanulok** (p348) to pay homage to Thailand's stunning Buddha in Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat and the 700-year-old Buddha at interesting Wat Ratburana. Do as the Thais and eat at the famous noodle shop near Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat as a post-pilgrimage pit-stop.

» Bus over to **Sukhothai** (p355) to meditate among the fine ancient ruins of a now-deceased empire that heralded Thailand's golden era'. Be sure to see Wat Mahathat and Wat Si Chum. The ancient city is so vast that visiting the sites by bicycle is recommended.

» Bus north to **Chiang Mai** (p234) to immerse yourself in northern Thai architecture, visiting the old city and Wat Phra Doi Suthep, which overlooks the city. In the city itself, Wat Phra Singh and Wat Chedi Luang make fine venerable stops.

Clockwise from top left & following page

1. Wat Phra Kaew, Bangkok **2.** Wat Si Sawai, Sukhothai
3. Row of statues, Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai **4.** Elephant tour of Ayuthaya ruins **5.** Statue of the Buddha with protective *naga* (serpents) at Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai **6.** Monks, Bangkok

2

JEAN-PIERRE LESCOURNET/ONLY PLANET IMAGES ©



3

MARK KIRBY/ONLY PLANET IMAGES ©



5

FELIX HODGSON/ONELLY PLANET IMAGES ©



6

HUW JONES/ONELLY PLANET IMAGES ©



© Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'