

Bangkok & Northern Thailand



It might be the saffron-robed monk riding the Skytrain, or the sensuous smell of spices wafting up from a curry, or elephants strolling down the street alongside you, but at some point Thailand enters the soul.

All roads lead to Bangkok they say, and this fabled country is the Mekong region's most popular destination by far. In part this is because of all the irresistible attractions – the ancient ruins, the hill-tribe treks, the glorious temples, the golden beaches – but Thailand has also earned this status because of its comfortable balance between East and West, foreign and familiar. Thailand is arguably the world's most accessibly exotic location.

While the rest of the Mekong region suffered various incarnations of war and isolation, Thailand got a head start welcoming visitors, making it the easiest country in the region to travel around. But don't mistake convenience for lack of adventure or diluted culture. True, many visitors get stuck in various backpacker ghettos (often happily so), but the tourist trail still bypasses huge swathes of the country. Yes, Thailand can still facilitate journeys of discovery.

Though Thailand's path through modern history differs greatly from other countries in the Mekong region, its connection is more than just geographical. The ancient ebb and flow of empire spilt myriad cultures across the north of Thailand and took Thai traditions well beyond the nation's current borders. Lao, Khmer and Yunnanese influences remain a vital part of today's Thai tapestry.

Whether Thailand is solely intended as your gateway to the region or you come here with a laundry list of sights to check off, you'll be planning your return before you've even left.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Get back to nature at **Khao Yai National Park** (p156), one of the world's finest parks
- Visit timeless **hill-tribe villages** (p138) as you trek through the northern mountains
- Take time out from the fast lane in soporific **Chiang Khan** (p168)
- Cycle around the awesome ruins of **Sukhothai Historical Park** (p150)
- Explore the gleaming and seamy sides of Thailand's chaotic capital, **Bangkok** (p113)



HISTORY Rise of Thai Kingdoms

It is believed that the first Thais migrated here from modern-day Yunnan and Guāngxī, China, settling into small riverside farming communities that eventually fell under the dominion of the Angkor empire of present-day Cambodia.

By the 13th and 14th centuries, what is considered the first Thai kingdom, Sukhothai, began to chip away at the crumbling Angkor empire. The third Sukhothai king, Ramkhamhaeng, developed a Thai writing system and built Angkor-inspired temples that defined early Thai art. This kingdom is regarded as the cultural and artistic kernel of the modern state.

Sukhothai's intense flame was soon snuffed out by another emerging Thai power, Ayutthaya, which was established by Prince U Thong in 1350. This new centre developed into a cosmopolitan port on the Asian trade route courted by European nations attracted to the region for commodities and potential colonies, though the small nation managed to thwart foreign takeovers. For 400 years Ayutthaya dominated Thailand until the Burmese destroyed the capital in 1767.

The Thais eventually rebuilt their capital in present-day Bangkok, established by the Chakri dynasty, which continues to occupy the throne today. As Western imperialism marched across the globe, King Mongkut (Rama IV, r 1851–68) and his son and successor King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r 1868–1910) successfully steered Thailand into the modern age without becoming a colonial vassal. Their progressive measures included adopting Western-style education and dress. In return for the country's continued independence, King Chulalongkorn returned huge tracts of Laos and Cambodia to French-controlled Indochina.

A Struggling Democracy

In 1932 a peaceful coup converted Thailand into a constitutional monarchy loosely based on the British model. Nearly half a century of chaos followed. During the mid-20th century, a series of anticommunist military dictators wrestled each other for power, managing little more than the suppression of democratic representation and civil rights. In 1973, student activists staged demonstrations calling for a real constitu-

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 514,000 sq km
- **Capital** Bangkok
- **Country Code** ☎ 66
- **Population** 65 million
- **Money** US\$1 = 32.80B (baht)
- **Seasons** high Nov-Feb, low Mar-Jun, monsoon Jul-Oct
- **Phrases** *sà-wàt dīi* (hello), *lǎa kàwn* (goodbye), *khàwp khun* (thank you)

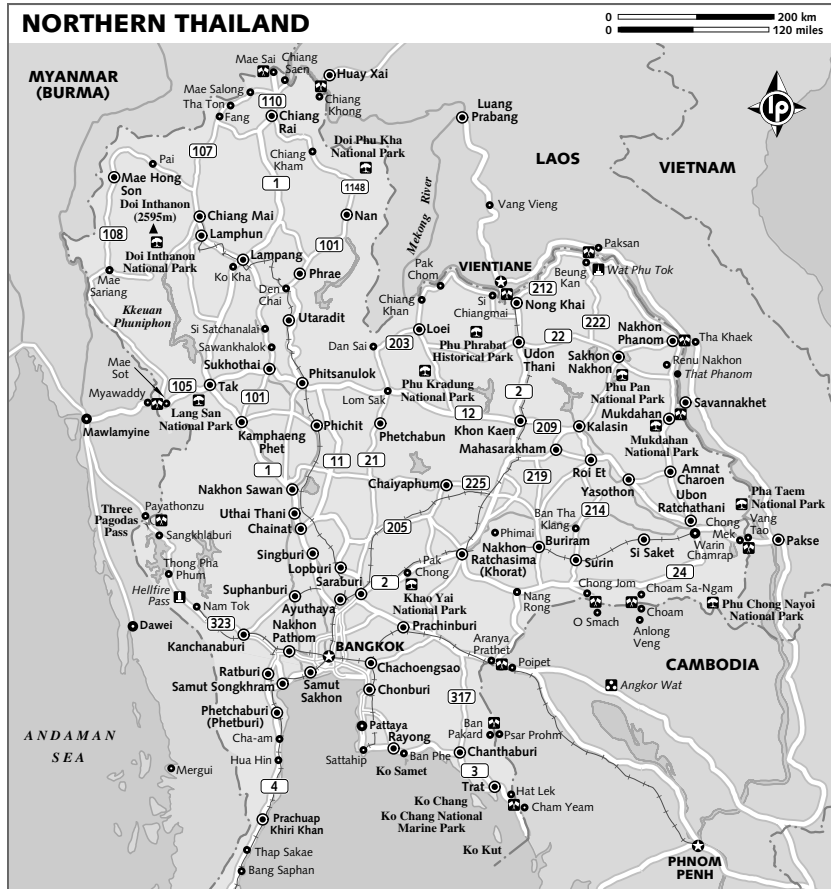
tion. A brief respite came, with reinstated voting rights and relaxed censorship. But in October 1976, a demonstration on the campus of Thammasat University in Bangkok was brutally quashed by the military, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries and the reinstatement of authoritarian rule. Many activists went underground to join armed communist insurgency groups hiding in the northeast.

In the 1980s and 1990s there were slow steps towards democracy, pushed along by massive, and sometimes violently repressed, street protests, but eventually civilian government was restored. Thailand's 16th constitution was enacted in October 1997 by parliamentary vote; Thailand's first charter not written under military order. During these tumultuous times, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX, r 1946–) defined a new political role for the monarchy. Although powerless to legislate, the king came to be viewed as a paternal figure who restrained excesses in the interests of all Thais.

Economic & Political Roller Coaster

During the 1990s, Thailand was one of the so-called tiger economies, roaring ahead with one of the world's highest growth rates. But the country's unabated growth imploded in 1997, leading to a nearly three-year recession. Thailand's convalescence progressed remarkably well and it pulled an 'early exit' from the International Monetary Fund's loan package in mid-2003.

The ambitious and charismatic billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister in 2001, promising to eliminate corruption, invest in impoverished villages and institute affordable health care. He delivered on



some of these promises, but also showed disdain for the press and civil liberties. His heavy-handed crackdown on the decades-old Muslim insurgency in the far south only flamed separatist and terrorist tendencies. But, thanks to his proactive response to the 2004 tsunami that killed thousands on Thailand's Andaman coast, Thaksin easily kept his job in the February 2005 election. His popularity soon plummeted due to a host of issues including a controversial tax-free US\$1.9 billion profit from the sale of his telecom corporation and, in the opinion of many, disrespecting the king.

On 19 September 2006, army chief Sonthi Boonyaratglin led a bloodless military coup. Bangkok citizens were so overjoyed that they

showered soldiers with flowers and food. Even go-go dancers staged an outdoor show for the men in uniform. At time of writing elections and a new constitution were due for October 2007.

PEOPLE & THE POPULATION

Thais are master chatters and will have a shopping list of questions: where are you from, are you married, do you have children? Occasionally they get more curious and want to know how much you weigh or how much money you make; these questions to a Thai are matters of public record and aren't considered impolite. They also love to dole out compliments. Foreigners who can speak even the most basic Thai are lauded as linguistic geniuses. Why do some foreigners come to Thailand and never

NO, THEY'RE NOT TALKING ABOUT FRUIT

Faràng means guava, but it's also the word Thais use for foreigners and can be merely descriptive, mildly derogatory or openly insulting, depending on the situation. While it is almost always the former, you will graduate to the latter by being clueless or disrespectful towards the culture. Here are some tips on avoiding that:

- Stand when the national anthem is played.
- Don't lick stamps, which usually bear an image of the king, or your fingers. To the Thais only animals lick things.
- Keep your feet on the floor, not on a chair, and never step over someone (or something – there might be a Buddha image in it) sitting on the ground.
- Don't touch Thais on the head.
- Dress modestly.

For more tips on earning the respect of locals, see p74.

leave? Because Thais know how to make visitors feel like superstars.

The National Psyche

Thais are laid-back, good-natured people who live by a philosophy of *sànuik* (fun), and every task is measured on the *sànuik* meter. Thai-on-Thai culture is tougher to unravel, but the guiding principles are *nàa* (face) and elder-junior hierarchy. Thais believe strongly in the concept of 'saving face', that is, avoiding confrontation and endeavouring not to embarrass themselves or other people (see the boxed text, p73). All relationships follow simple lines of social rank defined by age, wealth, status, and personal and political power. The elder of the table always picks up the tab. The junior in the workplace does the menial chores. The Western mindset is so different in this regard that it becomes something of a handicap in Thai society.

Religion and the monarchy, which is still regarded by many as divine, are the culture's sacred cows. You can turn your nose up at fish sauce or dress like a hippy, but don't insult the king and always behave respectfully in the temples. This applies to pictures of the king, including on Thai currency and stamps.

Population

About 75% of citizens are ethnic Thais, further divided by geography (north, central, south and northeast). Each group speaks its own Thai dialect and to an extent practises regional customs. Politically and economically the central Thais are dominant. People of Chinese ances-

try, many of whom have been in Thailand for generations, make up over 10% of the population. Ethnic Chinese probably enjoy better relations with the majority population here than in any other country in Southeast Asia. Other large minority groups include Vietnamese in the far east, Khmer in the southern side of the northeast and Lao spread throughout the north and east. Smaller non-Thai-speaking groups include the colourful hill tribes living in the northern mountains.

RELIGION

Country, family and daily life are all married to Theravada Buddhism (as opposed to the Mahayana schools found in East Asia and the Himalayas). Every Thai male is expected to become a monk for a short period in his life since a family earns great merit when a son 'takes robe and bowl'. Traditionally the length of time spent in a wat is three months; during the Buddhist lent (*phansàa*), which begins around July and coincides with the rainy season, or when an elder in the family dies.

More evident than the philosophical aspects of Buddhism is the everyday fusion with animist rituals. Monks are consulted to determine an auspicious date for a wedding or the likelihood of success for a business. Spirit houses are constructed outside buildings and homes to encourage the spirits to live independently from the family, but to remain comfortable so they bring good fortune to the site. Food, drink and furniture are all offered to the spirits to smooth daily life.

Roughly 95% of the population practises Buddhism, but there is a significant Muslim community, especially in southern Thailand.

ARTS Music

TRADITIONAL

Classical central Thai music features an incredible array of textures and subtleties, hair-raising tempos and pastoral melodies. Among the more common instruments is the *pii*, a woodwind instrument with a reed mouthpiece; it is heard prominently at Thai boxing matches. A bowed instrument, similar to examples played in China and Japan, is aptly called the *saw*. The *ránáat éhk*, is a bamboo-keyed percussion instrument resembling the Western xylophone, while the *khliú* is a wooden flute. This traditional orchestra originated as an accompaniment to classical dance-drama and shadow theatre, but these days it can be heard at temple fairs and concerts.

In the north and northeast there are several popular wind instruments with multiple reed pipes, which function basically like a mouth-organ. Chief among these is the *khaen*, which originated in Laos; when played by an adept musician it sounds like a rhythmic, churning calliope organ.

MODERN

Popular Thai music has borrowed much from the West, particularly its instruments, but retains a distinct flavour. The best example of this is the rock group Carabao. Performing for more than 30 years now, Carabao has crafted an exciting fusion of Thai traditional forms with heavy metal.

Another major influence on Thai pop was a 1970s group called Caravan. They created a modern Thai folk style known as *phleng phèua chii-wít* (songs for life), which features political and environmental topics rather than the usual moonstruck love themes.

The latest pop craze is hip-hop, best epitomised by Thaitanium and Joey Boy.

Sculpture & Architecture

On an international scale, Thailand has probably distinguished itself more in traditional religious sculpture than in any other art form. Thailand's most famous sculptural output has been its bronze Buddha images, coveted the world over for their originality and grace.

Architecture, however, is considered the highest art form in traditional Thai society. Ancient Thai homes consist of a simple teak structure raised on stilts. The space underneath also serves as the living room, kitchen, garage and barn. Rooflines in Thailand are steeply pitched and often decorated at the corners or along the gables with motifs related to the naga (mythical sea serpent).

Temple architecture symbolises elements of the religion. A steeply pitched roof system tiled in green, gold and red represents the Buddha (the Teacher), the Dhamma (Dharma in Sanskrit; the Teaching) and the Sangha (the fellowship of followers of the Teaching).

Theatre & Dance

Traditional Thai theatre consists of six dramatic forms: *khöhn*, formal masked dance-drama depicting scenes from the Ramakian (the Thai version of India's Ramayana) and originally performed only for the royal court; *lákhn*, a general term covering several types of dance-dramas (usually for nonroyal occasions), as well as Western theatre; *li-keh*, a partly improvised, often bawdy folk play featuring dancing, comedy, melodrama and music; *mánohraa*, the southern-Thai equivalent of *li-keh*, but based on a 2000-year-old Indian story; *nang*, or shadow plays, limited to southern Thailand; and *lákhn lék* or *hún lüang* puppet theatre.

ENVIRONMENT

About as large as France, Thailand stretches from dense mountain jungles in the north through flat central plains to southern tropical rainforests. Covering most of the country, monsoon forests are filled with a sparse canopy of deciduous trees that shed their leaves during the dry season to conserve water.

Wildlife

Thailand is particularly rich in bird life, with over 1000 recorded resident and migrating species; approximately 10% of the world's total. Thailand's most revered indigenous mammal, the elephant, is integral to the country's culture; it symbolises wisdom, strength and good fortune. Sadly, elephants, both wild and domesticated, are now endangered, having lost most of their habitat and their traditional role in society. No longer employable in the timber industry, the domesticated elephant and its mahout often wander through

major cities reduced to beggars and sideshows. **Friends of the Asian Elephant** (☎ 0 2945 7124; www. elephant.or.th) and the National Elephant Institute (p149) work to protect them.

Environmental Issues

Like all countries with high population density, there is enormous pressure on Thailand's ecosystems: 50 years ago about 70% of the countryside was forest, it's now 28%. In response to environmental degradation, the Thai government has created a large number of protected areas since the 1970s. Following devastating floods, exacerbated by soil erosion, logging was banned in 1989. Air and water pollution are problems in urban areas, and though things are improving, Bangkok is one of the world's most polluted cities.

Though Thailand has a better record than most of its neighbours at protecting endangered species, corruption hinders the efforts. Roughly 250 animal and plant species in Thailand are on the International Union for Conservation of Nature list of endangered or vulnerable species, with tigers being one of the most threatened because poachers continue to kill the cats for the lucrative Chinese pharmaceutical market.

BANGKOK

pop 7.5 million

Ladies and gentlemen, fasten your seatbelts. You are now entering Bangkok, a city always on the move. Ancient temples in the shadow of space-age shopping malls, soaring skyscrapers towering over tumbledown hovels, ubercool cafés and restaurants surrounded by simple street stalls, Bangkok is the nexus

GETTING INTO TOWN

The **Airport Express bus** (150B) runs four convenient routes to/from central Bangkok between 5am and midnight. Typical metered taxi fares from the airport are 200B to 250B to Th Sukhumvit, 250B to 300B to Th Khao San and 500B to Mo Chit bus terminal. Toll charges (paid by the passenger) vary between 20B to 60B. A 50B surcharge, payable to the driver, is added to all fares departing from the airport.

Public buses (around 35B) stop and drop at the public transportation centre, 3km from the terminal via free shuttle. If you're going to Siam Sq, Sukhumvit or Silom, use the On Nut Skytrain station bus (No 552). For Banglamphu, the Victory Monument bus (No 551) will get you pretty close. You can also get buses direct to Aranya Prathet (187B) and Nong Khai (454B) on the Cambodian and Laos borders respectively.

The Airport Train Link to central Bangkok could open by 2008.

of Thailand's past, present and future, and a superb subject for any urban connoisseur. In fact, nowhere else is Thailand's *khwaam pen thai* ('Thai-ness') more apparent than when watching people continue their village-like lives in front of the 21st-century façade.

Following the fall of Ayuthaya in 1767, the capital was briefly brought to Thonburi before moving across the river in 1782. But the name Bangkok, baptised by foreigners, actually refers to a small village within the larger beast. The Thais call their capital Krung Thep, or City of Angels, a much shortened version of the very official tongue-twister: *Krungthep mahanakhon amonratanakosin mahintara ayuthaya mahadilok popnopparat ratchathani burirom udomratchaniwet mahasathan amonpiman avatansathit sakkathattiya witsanukamprasit*.

ORIENTATION

Mae Nam Chao Phraya (the Chao Phraya River) divides Bangkok from the older city of Thonburi. Bangkok can be further divided into east and west by the main railway line feeding Hualamphong station. The older part of the city, crowded with historical temples, bustling Chinatown and the popular travellers' centre of Banglamphu (home of the famous Khao San Rd) is sandwiched between the western side of the tracks and the river. East of the railway is the new city, devoted to commerce and its attendant skyscrapers and shopping centres, particularly the Siam Sq, Sukhumvit and Silom districts.

This simple sketch of Bangkok's layout does an injustice to the chaos that the city has acquired through years of unplanned and rapacious development. A good map, such as Lonely Planet's *Bangkok City Map*, will be a big help.

INFORMATION

ATMs, banks, currency-exchange kiosks and internet cafés (charging around 30B on Th Khao San) are widespread.

Emergency

Tourist police (☎ 1155; 📞 24hr) English-speaking officers.

Internet Resources

Bangkok Recorder (www.bangkokrecorder.com) Good nightlife site.

Khao San Road (www.khaosanroad.com) News, reviews and profiles of Bangkok's famous tourist ghetto.

Real Thai (www.realthai.blogspot.com) Local Bangkok foodie takes a bite out of the Big Mango.

Medical Services

The following hospitals offer 24-hour emergency service and English-speaking staff. Prices are high, but so is the quality. Use these numbers to call an ambulance.

BNH (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2632 0550; 9 Th Convent)

Bumrungrad Hospital (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2667 1000; 33 Soi 3, Th Sukhumvit)

Post

Main post office (Map pp118-19; Th Charoen Krung; 📞 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat & Sun)

Tourist Information

Bangkok Tourism Division (Map p121; ☎ 0 2225 7612; www.bangkoktourist.com; 17/1 Th Phra Athit; 📞 9am-7pm)

TAT main office (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2250 5500; ground fl, 1600 Th Petchaburi; 📞 8.30am-4.30pm)

Travel Agencies

Not all Bangkok travel agencies are trustworthy, especially for cheap airline tickets. Try:

STA Travel (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2236 0262; www.sta.travel.com; 14th fl, Wall Street Tower, 33/70 Th Surawong)

Vieng Travel (Map p121; ☎ 0 2280 3537; www.viengtravel.com; Trang Hotel, 99/8 Th Wisut Kasat)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bangkok's most heavily toured areas (Wat Phra Kaew in particular) are favourite hunting grounds for con artists. Smartly dressed and slick talking (not all are Thai), their usual spiel is that the attraction you want to visit is closed for the day. This is the bait for the infamous gem scam (see boxed text, opposite) or perhaps the resurfaced card game scams – you won't win either so don't play. Also annoying are the tük-tük drivers who hope to make a commission by dragging you to a local silk or jewellery shop, even though you've requested an entirely different destination. Turn down all offers of 'free' or too-cheap-to-be-real sightseeing and shopping deals.

SIGHTS

Ko Ratanakosin Area

Most of Bangkok's must-sees reside in compact, walkable Ko Ratanakosin, the former royal district. Wat Arun is just a short ferry ride across the river in Thonburi.

Wat Phra Kaew (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2224 1833; admission 250B; 📞 8.30am-3.30pm), also known as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, is an architectural wonder of gleaming gilded stupas, mosaic-encrusted pillars and rich marble pediments. The highly stylised ornamentation is a shrine to the revered Emerald Buddha, which is housed in the main chapel. Actually made of Jasper, the 75cm-tall Buddha image endured an epic journey from northern Thailand, where it was hidden inside a layer of stucco, to its

THE GEM SCAM

If anyone offers you unsolicited advice about a gem store, you can be sure that you will soon find there is a 'sale' or some such nonsense there. They, or another partner, might also explain how you can sell bulk quantities of gems in your country. When you get home you'll find that they are worth far less than you paid, and might not even be real gems.

present home. In between it was seized by Lao forces and carried off to Luang Prabang and Vientiane, where it was later recaptured by the Thais. The admission fee includes entrance to Dusit Palace Park (right).

Within the same grounds is the **Grand Palace**, the former royal residence now used only for certain ceremonial occasions; the king's current residence is Chitlada Palace (closed to the public) in the northern part of the city.

Just northeast of Wat Phra Kaew the **Lak Meuang** (City Pillar; Map pp118-19; Th Ratchadamnoen Nai; admission free; 📞 8.30am-5.30pm), home of Bangkok's city spirit, is generally alive with the spectacle of devotion, including traditional dancers.

Wat Pho (Map pp118-19; Th Sanamchai; admission 50B; 📞 8am-5pm) sweeps the awards for superlatives: it's the oldest and largest temple in Bangkok, dating from the 16th century. It houses Thailand's largest reclining Buddha and it has the biggest collection of Buddha images in the country. The *big* attraction is the stunning reclining Buddha, 46m long and 15m high. The figure is modelled out of plaster around a brick core and is finished in gold leaf. The affiliated **Wat Pho Thai Traditional Massage School** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2221 3686; www.watpomassage.com Soi Penphat, Th Sanamchai) is the most famous centre of its kind.

The **National Museum** (Map p121; ☎ 0 2224 1402; Th Na Phra That 1; admission 40B; 📞 9am-3.30pm Wed-Sun), reportedly the largest in Southeast Asia, provides an overview of Thai art and culture, though labelling isn't always illuminating.

Wat Arun (Map pp118-19; admission 20B; 📞 9am-5pm) is a striking temple named after the Indian god of dawn, Aruna. It looms large on Mae Nam Chao Phraya's west bank, looking as if it were carved from granite; a closer inspection reveals a mosaic made of broken porcelain covering the imposing 82m Khmer-style *praang*

(tower). These broken ceramics are discarded ballast from Chinese merchant ships.

Chinatown

Gleaming gold shops, towering neon signs and shopfronts spilling out on to the sidewalk – welcome to Chinatown, the epicentre of Bangkok's bustling commercial cult. The neighbourhood's energy is at once exhilarating and exhausting; and it's fun to explore at night when it is lit up like a Christmas tree. Slicing through the centre of the district, the famous **Sampeng Lane** (Map pp118-19; Soi Wanit) is jam-packed with the useful and the useless, all at bargain prices. On the corner of Th Yaowarat and Th Chakrawat is **Thieves Market** (Nakhon Kasem; Map pp118-19; nr Th Yaowarat & Th Chakrawat), so named for the 'hot' items previously sold here.

On the western edge of Chinatown is **Phahurat**, a small Indian district. Th Chakraphet is chock-a-block with Indian restaurants and shops selling Indian sweets.

Wat Traimit (Map pp118-19; Th Yaowarat; admission 20B; 📞 9am-5pm) shelters a 3m-tall, 5.5-tonne, solid-gold Buddha image that was 'discovered' when it was being moved in the 1960s and the stucco exterior hiding it, presumably during one of Burma's many invasions, cracked. The labyrinthine passageways of **Wat Mangkon Kamalawat** (Neng Noi Yee; Map pp118-19; Th Charoen Krung; 📞 9am-6pm), locus of Vegetarian Festival activities (see p174), hold Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian shrines.

Other Attractions

Elegant **Dusit Palace Park** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2628 6300; admission 100B, free with Grand Palace ticket; 📞 9.30am-4pm) is a relaxing destination with multiple museums. The must-see is the 1868 **Vimanmek Teak Mansion** (Map pp118-19), reputedly the world's largest golden teakwood building. In the early 20th century Rama V lived in this graceful 81-room mansion and today it contains a treasure-trove of early Ratanakosin art objects and antiques. Compulsory English-language tours last an hour. Other exhibits in the park include handicraft displays in **Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall** (Map pp118-19) and the **Royal Elephant Museum** (Map pp118-19), which discusses but doesn't house pachyderms. Traditional Thai dances take place at 10.30am and 2pm.

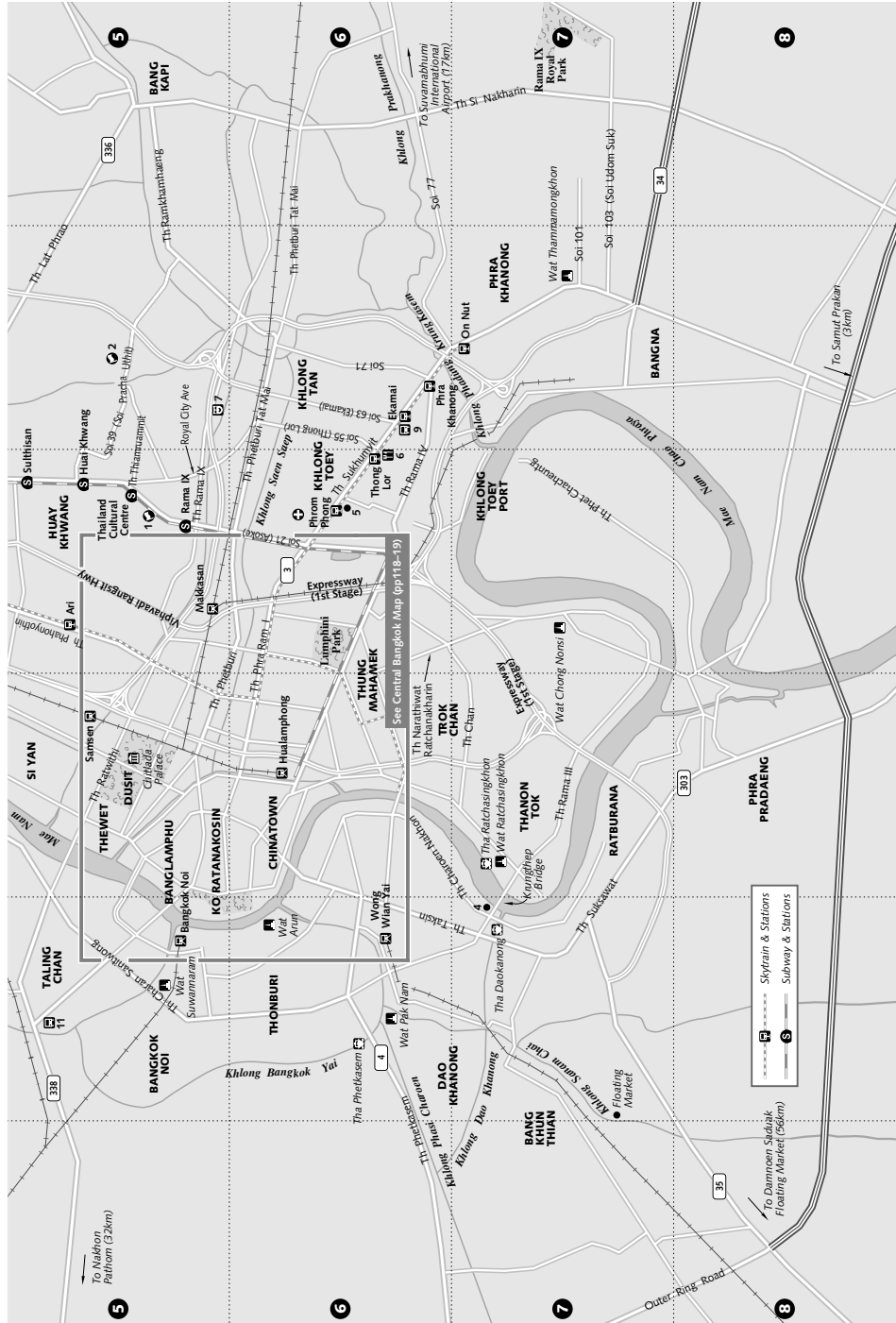
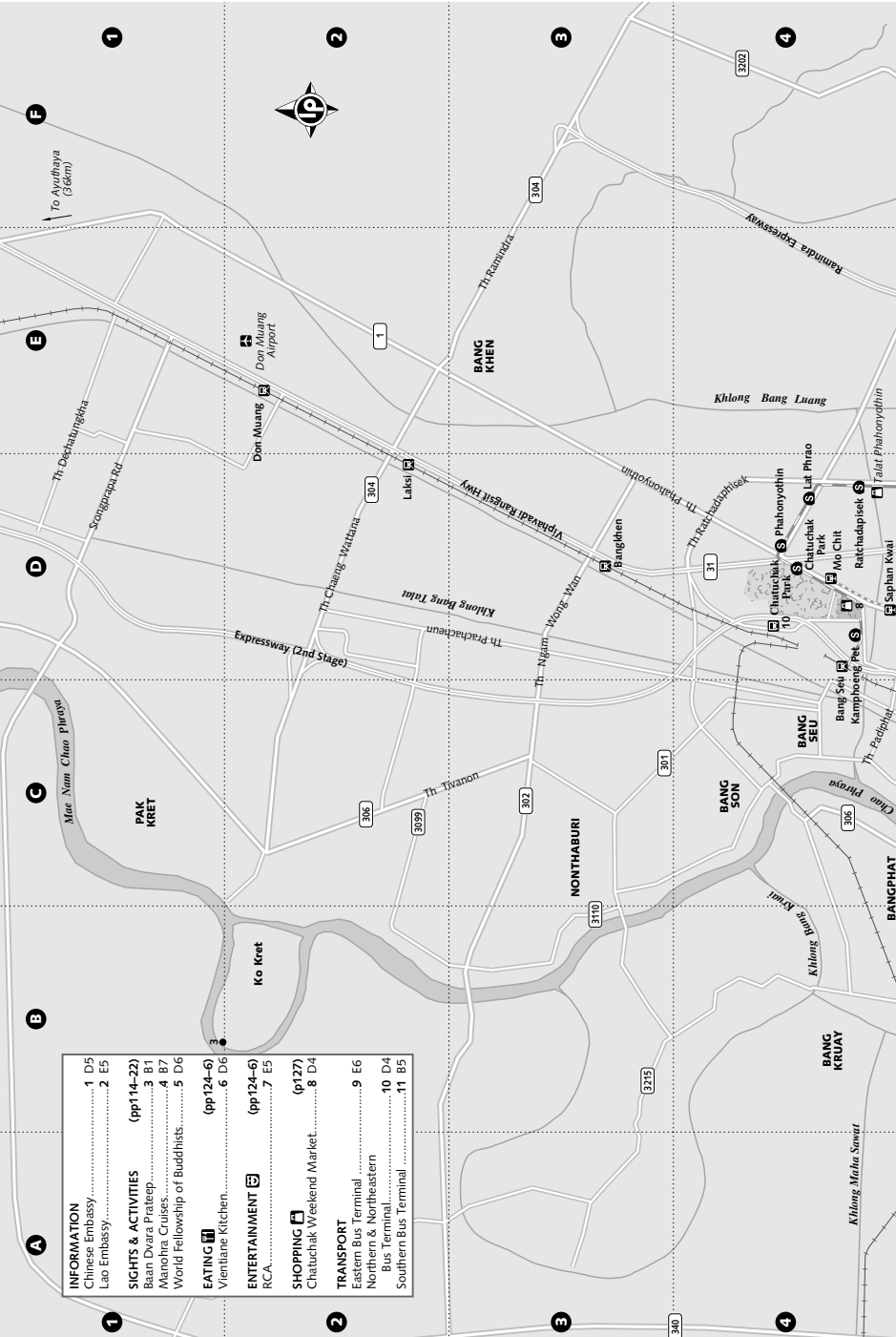
(Continued on page 122)

THÀNŌN & SOI

Throughout this book, *thànŏn* (meaning 'street') is abbreviated as 'Th'. A *soi* is a small street that runs off a larger street. The address of a site located on a *soi* will be written as 33 Soi 3, Th Sukhumvit, meaning off Th Sukhumvit on Soi 3.

Building numbers can be confounding; the string of numbers divided by slashes and dashes (eg 48/3-5 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit) indicate lot disbursements rather than sequential geography. The number before the slash refers to the original lot number; the numbers following the slash indicate buildings (or entrances to buildings) constructed within that lot. The preslash numbers appear in the order in which they were added to city plans, while the postslash numbers are arbitrarily assigned by developers.

Some Bangkok *soi* have become so large that they can be referred to both as *thànŏn* and *soi* (eg Soi Sarasin/Th Sarasin and Soi Asoke/Th Asoke). Smaller than a *soi* is a *trok* (sometimes spelt *tràwk*, meaning alleyway).





INFORMATION

- Australian Embassy.....1 F6
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Wat Benchamabophit (Marble Temple; Map pp118-19; Th Si Ayuthaya; admission 20B; ☎ 8am-5.30pm), built under Rama V in 1899, is made of white Carrara marble and is a stunning example of modern temple architecture. The real treasure here is a rear courtyard containing a multitude of Buddha images from all periods of Thai Buddhist art.

Jim Thompson House (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2216 7368; www.jimthompsonhouse.com; Soi Kasem San 2, Th Phra Ram I; admission 100B; ☎ 9am-5pm) is the beautiful house of the American entrepreneur Jim Thompson, who successfully promoted Thai silk to Western markets. Atmospherically sited on a small *khlong* (canal), his remarkable house was built from salvaged components of traditional Thai houses. His collection of Thai art and furnishings is equally superb. Compulsory tours in English and French run every 10 minutes.

ACTIVITIES

Spas & Massage

Depending on the neighbourhood, prices for massages tend to stay fixed: around 250B for a foot massage and around 500B for a body massage.

Wat Pho (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2221 3686; Th Sanamchai; ☎ 8am-5pm) runs the nation's premier massage school (p115) and has air-con service there, but the massage pavilions inside the temple itself provide a greater sense of tradition.

Spas are becoming increasingly popular in Thailand, and while **Health Land** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2637 8883; www.healthlandspa.com; 120 Th Sathon Neua; treatments from 750B) is more down-to-earth than most, the pampers factor still soars.

COURSES

Cooking

Run out of a private home, **Silom Thai Cooking School** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 4726 5669; 31/11 Soi 13, Th Silom; 1000B) offers an introduction to home-cooking and ordinary Thai life.

May Kaidee (Map p121; ☎ 0 9137 3173; off Soi Damnoen Klang Neua; www.maykaidee.com; 1000B) teaches all-vegetarian cooking. There is a restaurant (p125) here too.

Blue Elephant Thai Cooking School (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2673 9353; www.blueelephant.com; Thai Chine Bldg, 233 Th Sathon Tai; 3300B) is considered Bangkok's most gourmet cooking school.

DRESS FOR THE OCCASION

Thai temples are sacred places and visitors should dress and behave appropriately. Wear shirts with sleeves, long pants or skirts past the knees, and closed-toed shoes. Sarongs and baggy pants are available on loan at the entry area for Wat Phra Kaew. Shoes should be removed before entering buildings. When sitting in front of a Buddha image, tuck your feet behind you to avoid the great offence of pointing your feet towards a revered figure.

Meditation

World Fellowship of Buddhists (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2661 1284; www.wfb-hq.org; Soi 24, Th Sukhumvit) hosts meditation classes on the first Sunday of every month and can link you up with English-speaking teachers situated across Thailand.

Wat Mahathat (Map p121; ☎ 0 2222 6011) has three daily meditation sessions (7am, 1pm and 6pm) and the International Buddhist Meditation Centre here hosts twice-monthly lectures.

Baan Dvara Prateep (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 1845 5445; www.baanandvaprteep.com; 53/3 Mu 5, Ko Kret) is more relaxed than the strict temple environment, with the focus on relieving stress.

Muay Thai (Thai Boxing)

Sweating distance from Th Khao San, **Jitti's Gym Thai Boxing & Homestay** (Map p121; ☎ 0 2282 3551; www.jittigym.com; 13 Soi Krasab, Th Chakraphong; training from 300B) specialises in training foreign students of both genders.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Bangkok International Film Festival (www.bangkokfilm.org) Emphasises Asian cinema. Held mid-January.

Royal Ploughing Ceremony The King commences rice-planting season with a royal-religious ceremony at Sanam Luang in early May.

SLEEPING

The following districts offer widely different experiences. It can take quite a long time to get around the city, so choosing your location is as important as choosing your hotel.

Banglamphu & Thewet

Banglamphu, the neighbourhood that includes the backpacker street of Th Khao San, is a well-padded landing zone for jet-lagged travellers. It's getting quite gentrified these days.

At the bottom end, rooms (around 180B) are quite small with thin walls and shared bathrooms. At this price, just show up and start hunting as most cheapies don't take reservations. In the high season (November to February), it's wise to take the first bed you can find. As a rule, you can arrive anytime at night and find a place to crash.

Thewet, the leafy district north of Banglamphu near the National Library, is another travellers' enclave, especially for families and the over-30 crowd.

Chai's House (Map p121; ☎ 0 2281 4901, 49/4-8 Soi Rongmai; s/d 165/275B) This family-run guesthouse, all with shared bathrooms, is a quiet and secure spot that enforces a 1am curfew.

our pick Villa Guest House (Map p121; ☎ 0 2281 7009; 230 Soi 1, Th Samsen; r 250-500B) This old teak house, tucked away down a small alley, is wrapped in a leafy garden. The atmospheric rooms are furnished in period pieces and antiques, but it's shared bathrooms all the way.

Sri Ayuttaya Guest House (Map p121; ☎ 0 2282 5942; Soi Thewet, Th Si Ayuthaya; d 350-500B; ☎) Sri Ayuttaya has romantic rooms with hardwood floors, exposed brick and other stylish touches.

New World Lodge Hotel (Map p121; ☎ 0 2281 5596; www.newworldlodge.com; Soi 2, Th Samsen; r from 1300B; ☎) New World is large but unassuming. Rooms on the 4th or 5th floors boast terraces overlooking Khlong Banglamphu.

our pick Baan Chantra (Map p121; ☎ 0 2628 6988; www.baanchantra.com; 120 Th Samsen; d from 2200B; ☎) Unlike many other boutique hotels, Baan Chantra prefers comfortable and roomy over fashionable and pinched. Many of the house's original teak details remain.

Also recommended:

Donna Guesthouse (Map p121; ☎ 0 2281 9374; off Soi Damnoen Klang, Th Ratchadamnoen Klang; d 250-350B; ☎) Clean and quiet with big twin beds. Shared bathrooms.

New Siam Guesthouse (Map p121; ☎ 0 2282 4554; www.newsiam.net; 21 Soi Chana Songkhram, Th Phra Athit; s 290B, d 320-490B; ☎) Very clean spot with self-accessible lockers. Some facilities are shared.

Chinatown

A stay in this chaotic neighbourhood offers a distinctly anonymous experience from the usual walking-ATM treatment you'll get elsewhere. The downside is that traffic is horrendous.

TT Guest House (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2236 2946; 516-518 Soi Sawang, Th Maha Nakhon; r 250-280B) In a

low-key neighbourhood just beyond Chinatown, this family-run guesthouse boasts a shaded courtyard. The shared bathrooms are very clean.

238 Guesthouse (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2623 9287; 238 Th Phahurat; r 400-600B; ☎) This converted shophouse within walking distance of Ko Ratanakosin has generous rooms with all the basics.

Bangkok Centre Hotel (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2238 4980; www.bangkokcentrehotel.com; 328 Th Phra Ram IV; r from 1400B; ☎) You can see your train pull into the station from this hotel tower. It has all the usual midrange amenities.

Siam Square & Pratunam

Siam Sq lies conveniently along both Skytrain lines. A low-key, DIY traveller community bunks down on Soi Kasem San 1.

Pranee Building (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2216 3181; 93/12 Soi Kasem San 1; r 450B; ☎) One of the cheapest options on the street, Pranee isn't fancy but the rooms are large with air-con and hot water; the bathrooms are a tad decrepit.

Wendy House (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2216 2436; Soi Kasem San 1; d incl breakfast from 1000B; ☎) As professional as they come with genuine Thai-style concern for the guests. Rooms are on the small side though.

Asia Hotel (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2215 0808; www.asiahotel.co.th; 296 Th Phayathai; d from 2900B; ☎) A favourite of ageing backpackers who've moved beyond guesthouses, this huge place has a good location and large rooms. A walkway from the Skytrain is another plus.

Grand Hyatt Erawan (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2254 1234; www.bangkok.hyatt.com; Th Ratchadamri; r from US\$150; ☎) Within striking distance of the top shopping malls, the Erawan provides one of Bangkok's most prestigious postcommerce slumbers.

Also recommended:

A-One Inn (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2215 3029; www.aoneinn.com; 25/13-15 Soi Kasem San 1; d from 600B; ☎) Simple, but good value.

Pathumwan Princess (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2216 3700; www.pprincess.com; 444 Th Payathai; r from 3700B; ☎) Family favourite connected to MBK shopping centre and Skytrain.

Silom

The city's financial district along Th Silom is not the most charming area of town, but it is conveniently located for nightspots and the Skytrain.

New Road Guesthouse (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2237 1094; 1216/1 Th Charoen Krung; d 600-700B; 🍷) This friendly cheapie near the river is sandwiched between luxe hotels.

Niagara Hotel (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2233 5783; 26 Soi 9/Suksavitthaya, Th Silom; d 700B; 🍷) From the outside Niagara looks like just another crummy no-tell motel, but inside is one of the best bargains in Silom. The rooms are immaculate.

our pick La Résidence Hotel (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2233 3301; 173/8-9 Th Surawong; d 1200-1500B, ste 2700B; 🍷) La Résidence is a boutique inn with playfully and individually decorated rooms. A standard room is very small and fittingly decorated like a child's bedroom. The next size up is more mature and voluptuous.

Oriental Hotel (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2659 9000; www.mandarinoriental.com; 48 Soi Oriental/Soi 38, Th Charoen Krung; d US\$300; 🍷) While the rest of the city jumps overboard for the new Zen trend, the classic Oriental stays rooted in its Victorian past. It is consistently rated as one of the best hotels in the world and prides itself on personalised service.

Sukhumvit

Th Sukhumvit is the commercial corridor of the newest part of Bangkok; the western side is a busy sex tourist sector. If you're not amused by this, you may want to stay elsewhere, though the sex scene is far from ubiquitous and there are many other charms.

Atlanta (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2252 1650; 78 Soi 2, Th Sukhumvit; d from 400B; 🍷) You half expect Humphrey Bogart to trot down the stairs in this perfectly preserved, midcentury lobby. The rooms are skeletal in comparison, but good for the price. Sex tourists are forbidden.

Majestic Suites (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2656 8220; www.majesticssuites.com; 110-110/1 Th Sukhumvit; s/d 1160/1500B; 🍷) Small and friendly, the hermetically sealed rooms deliver privacy and quiet, even with screaming Sukhumvit right outside. It's positioned between Soi 4 and Soi 6.

Eugenia (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2259 9011; www.theeugenia.com; Soi 31, Th Sukhumvit; r from 5800B; 🍷) Colonial manor houses aren't an indigenous legacy in Thailand but this anachronistic 12-guestroom hotel indulges in the anomaly.

Also recommended:

Soi 1 Guesthouse (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2655 0604; www.soi1guesthouse.com; 220/7 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit; dm 250-350B; 🍷) Extraordinarily clean and comfy dorms plus wonderful owners.

Davis (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2260 8000; www.davisbangkok.net; Soi 24, Th Sukhumvit; d from 3000B; 🍷) Boutique hotel with stunning, Asian-themed rooms.

EATING

No matter where you go in Bangkok, food is always there. There is so much variety just on the street that you can go days without stepping inside a restaurant. Enacting the modern equivalent of hunter-gatherers, many visitors skip from stall to stall sampling *küaytiaw* (noodles), plates of *râat khào* (rice and curry) or *mùat phàt* (stir-fries) for 25B to 40B.

When the need comes for a restaurant, Bangkok's best are the décorless mom-and-pop shops that concentrate only on the food; most of these restaurants hover around 60B to 100B for a main dish. Higher prices always bring more ambience, and dining in Bangkok's fashionable or touristy restaurants is sometimes more for show than for flavour. All the great international cuisines, from Mexican to Japanese are available too.

Banglamphu & Thewet

This area near the river is one of the best for cheap Thai eats and because of the traveller presence, Western and vegetarian food are well represented. Prices are lower and the quality higher as you move away from Th Khao San.

Arawy (Alloy; Map p121; 152 Th Din So; mains 35B; 🍷 breakfast & lunch) This matron of meatless is one of the best Thai vegetarian restaurants in the city.

our pick Ton Pho (Map p121; ☎ 0 2280 0452; Th Phra Athit; mains 80-100B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This converted floating dock does all the staples with the expertise of a Thai grandmother. The lack of décor inversely matches the strength of the food.

Hemlock (Map p121; ☎ 0 2282 7507; 56 Th Phra Athit; mains 80-200B; 🍷 dinner) Living-room-sized restaurants line Th Phra Athit and form a social gathering point for Banglamphu's bohemians. This cosy gem has an eclectic range with many items that don't usually pop up on menus.

Shoshana (Map p121; off Th Chakraphong; mains 100-150B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) One of Khao San's longest-running Israeli restaurants, tucked away in an unnamed, almost secret alley beside the petrol station, Shoshana serves gut-filling falafel-and-hummus plates.

Also recommended:

May Kaidee (Map p121; ☎ 0 9137 3173; off Soi Damnoen Klang Neua; mains 50B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The most popular, but not necessarily the best, of several veggie shops in this area. Cooking classes are also offered (see p122).

Roti-Mataba (Map p121; Th Phra Athit; mains 60-80B; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This Bangkok legend does a whirlwind business of *kaeng mât-sâm-an* (Thai Muslim curry).

Chinatown

When you mention Chinatown, Bangkokians begin dreaming of noodles, usually prepared by street vendors lining Th Yaowarat, near Trok Itsaranuphap (Soi 16), after dark. Of course, the dining is good in the Indian district of Phahurat too.

Old Siam Plaza (Map pp118-19; ground fl, Th Triphet; mains 50-100B; 🍷 lunch) The Thai version of Willy Wonka's factory turns seemingly savoury ingredients like beans and rice into syrupy sweet desserts, like *lâuuk chúp* (miniature fruits made of beans) and *tâkôh* (coconut pudding in banana leaves), right before your eyes.

Th Phadungdao Seafood Stalls (Map pp118-19; Th Yaowarat; mains 160-300B; 🍷 dinner) After sunset, this frenetic street sprouts outdoor barbecues, iced seafood trays and sidewalk seating.

Also recommended:

Bà-mii Hong Kong (Map pp118-19; Th Yaowarat; mains 50B; 🍷 dinner) There is a veritable noodle adventure behind the big red sign.

Royal India (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2221 6565; 392/1 Th Chakraphet; mains under 100B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) North Indian cuisine heavily influenced by Persian flavours.

Siam Square & Pratunam

Locals, not wandering *faràng* (Westerners), are the primary target of the food vendors on Soi Kasem San 1, so you know you are getting some quality grub. It's a who's who of Western and Japanese fast-food chains across the rest of Shop-landia.

our pick Mahboonkroong Food Centre (Map pp118-19; 6th fl, Th Phra Ram I; mains 40-60B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The typical shopping mall food court in Thailand is similar to Western ones in that the food is cheap. The difference is that it's also fresh and flavourful. Buy coupons from the ticket desk and then cash in whatever you don't spend.

My Collection (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2655 7502; 2/10 Th Withayu; mains 250-320B; 🍷 lunch daily, dinner Fri & Sat) Full of pretty things like antique linens,

teak furniture and bone China, the ambience is delicate and intimate, everything that Bangkok's fine-dining scene is lacking. The menu is firmly international.

Also worth a try is **Gourmet Paradise** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2610 8000; ground fl, Siam Paragon, Th Phra Ram I; mains 60-250B; 🍷 lunch & dinner), an upmarket international food court.

Silom

Office workers swarm the shanty villages of street vendors for lunch and simple Indian restaurants proliferate towards the western end of Th Silom and Th Surawong, but this area is known for its elegant restaurants preparing international fusion and royal Thai cuisine.

Sara-Jane's (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2676 3338; 55/21 Th Narathiwat Ratchanakharin; mains 100-200B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) One of Bangkok's most famous *faràng* has built a small food empire from the marriage of Isan (northeast Thailand) and Italian food.

Eat Me (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2238 0931; 1/6 Soi Phiphat 2; mains 200-400B; 🍷 dinner) A little bit of cosmo Sydney has blossomed here off Th Silom. Chic, minimalist décor is accessorised by rotating modern art. And lest we forget, the food is creative and modern, spanning the globe from pumpkin risotto to tuna tartare.

Head to the very popular **Ban Chiang** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2236 7045; 14 Soi Si Wiang, Th Surasak; mains 100-180B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) for northeastern Thai cuisine.

Sukhumvit

This avenue is the communal dining room of most of Bangkok's expat communities, from Italian to Arabic.

Cabbages & Condoms (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2229 4611; Soi 12, Th Sukhumvit; mains 150-200B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This restaurant is the ideal introduction to Thai food for anyone still fine-tuning their chilli radar. Plus all proceeds go towards sex education and AIDS prevention programmes through the Population and Community Development Association (PDA), headquartered next door.

Vientiane Kitchen (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2258 6171; 8 Soi 36, Th Sukhumvit; mains 150-220B; 🍷 dinner) *Mâw lam* (traditional northeastern Thai music) bands play the rollicking tunes of the Isan countryside while the fiery *tôm yam kung* (hot and sour soup), *lâap mûu* (minced pork salad) and *kài yâang* (grilled marinated chicken) will give you a bee-stung pout without collagen injections.

GAY & LESBIAN BANGKOK

Bangkok's homosexual community enjoys nearly unprecedented tolerance. **Utopia** (www.utopia-asia.com) and the **Lesbian Guide to Bangkok** (www.bangkoklesbian.com) are good resources.

Patpong Soi 2 and Soi 4 have the highest concentration of gay dance clubs in the city. **DJ Station** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2266 4029; 8/6-8 Soi 2, Th Silom) gets a mixed Thai-*faràng* crowd and has a *kàthoey* (transvestite) cabaret. Old-timer conversation bars, such as **Balcony** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2235 5891; 8/6-8 Soi 4, Th Silom), are over on Soi 4.

Bangkok has just started to develop a lesbian-only nightclub scene with easy-going **Shela** (Map pp118-19; Soi Lang Suan, Th Ploenchit) currently a favourite.

Tamarind Café (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2663 7421; 27 Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; mains 200-250B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Pacific Rim cuisine goes vegetarian at this sleek eatery sharing space with Gallery F-Stop. It's one of the most creative menus in town.

Maha Naga (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2662 3060; Soi 29, Th Sukhumvit; mains 300-700B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Its East-meets-West flavours receive mixed reviews, but Maha Naga has a setting to die for: a pan-Asian fantasy of winking candles, Moorish courtyards and Balinese carvings.

Also recommended:

Al Hussain (Map pp118-19; 75/7 Soi 3/1, Th Sukhumvit; mains 150-250B; ☺ lunch & dinner) An open-air café in a winding maze of cramped sublanes known as Little Arabia.

Bourbon St Bar & Restaurant (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2259 0328; Soi 22, Th Sukhumvit; mains 150-300B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Highly regarded Cajun/Creole, American and Mexican meals.

Pizzeria Bella Napoli (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2259 0405; 3/3 Soi 31, Th Sukhumvit; mains 200-500B; ☺ lunch & dinner) A boisterous crowd gathers in this Little Italy spot.

DRINKING

Center Khao San (Map p121; Th Khao San) offers front-row views of the road's multicultural carnival and bands upstairs, while **Hippie de Bar** (Map p121; Th Khao San) has chill DJs. Low-key **Baghdad Café** (Map p121; Soi 2, Th Samsen), just over Khlong Banglamphu, is a sardine-tight *shishah* (water-pipe) bar that also serves alcohol.

Th Silom and Sukhumvit represent the stock-and-trade of Bangkok bars: English- and Irish-style pubs and yuppie clubs. **O'Reilly's Irish Pub** (Map pp118-19; 62/1-2 Th Silom) and **Cheap Charlie's** (Map pp118-19; Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; ☺ closed Sun) have wallet-friendly happy-hours for the neighbourhood's wage-slave *faràng*. The **Moon Bar at Vertigo** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2679 1200; Banyan Tree Hotel, 21/100 Th Sathon Tai), outside on the 59th floor, will take your breath away.

ENTERTAINMENT

Bangkok's entertainment scene goes well beyond its naughty side – **Nana Entertainment Plaza** (Map pp118-19; Soi 4, Th Sukhumvit) and **Soi Cowboy** (Map pp118-19; off Th Sukhumvit) lead the way in that scene – but even if you're usually in bed by 9pm, Bangkok still offers interesting postdinner diversions, from flash cinemas to traditional cultural performances.

Dance Clubs

The trick in Bangkok is to catch the right club on the right night. **Bangkok Recorder** (www.bangkokrecorder.com) documents the rotating theme nights and visiting DJ celebs. Cover charges range from 500B to 600B and usually include a drink. Don't even think about showing up before 11pm and always bring ID.

A safe bet, **RCA** (Map pp116-17; Royal City Avenue, Th Phra Ram IX) is a block full of nightclubs offering good times for all kinds. **Lucifer** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2234 6902; 2nd fl, Soi Patpong 1, Th Silom) and its consistently tripped-out techno-rave soundtrack is currently a keystone of Bangkok's dance halls.

Lounge on a row of mattresses at **Bed Supperclub** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2651 3537; 26 Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit), between a meal and a spin on the dance floor.

Live Music

The **Bangkok Gig Guide** (www.bangkokgigguide.com) is a good source of who's on which stage. Of late, Th Khao San has become a hot venue for Thai indie bands.

Bangkok's jazz scene is strong with **Living Room** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2653 0333; Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, 250 Th Sukhumvit) and **Brown Sugar** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2250 1825; 231/20 Th Sarasin) two sure bets.

Another always enjoyable Bangkok institution is **Saxophone Pub & Restaurant** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2246 5472; 3/8 Th Phayathai) with brilliant acoustics and up-close views of the reggae, rhythm and blues, and jazz acts rocking the house.

Muay Thai (Thai Boxing)

Lumphini Stadium (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2251 4303; Th Phra Ram IV; ☺ 6pm Tue, Fri & Sat) and **Ratchadamnoen Stadium** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2281 4205; Th Ratchadamnoen Nok; ☺ 6pm Mon, Wed & Thu, 5pm Sun) host Thailand's biggest *muay thai* matches. Foreigners pay 1000/1500/2000B for 3rd-class/2nd-class/ringside seats: advance reservations needed for ringside. Don't buy tickets from the hawkers hanging outside the stadium. Lumphini might move, so ask before travelling here.

Traditional Arts Performances

As Thailand's cultural repository, Bangkok offers visitors an array of dance and theatre performances.

The Art Deco **Chalermkrung Royal Theatre** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2222 0434; Th Triphet) provides a striking venue for *khòhn* (masked dance-drama based on the Ramakian). Don't wear shorts, singlets or sandals when you visit. **Sala Rim Nam** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2437 3080; Soi 38, Th Charoen Krung; 1850B; ☺ 7-10pm), the Oriental Hotel's affiliated dinner theatre, has superb classical dance and mediocre food. Dusit Palace Park (p115) hosts free classical dance performances.

The ancient art of Thai puppetry has been rescued by **Natayasala** (Joe Louis Puppet Theater; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2252 9683; www.thaipuppet.com; Suan Lum Night Bazaar, Th Rama IV; 900B; ☺ 7.30pm).

SHOPPING

Bangkok is not the place for recovering shopaholics because the temptation to stray from the path is overwhelming. The best of Bangkok's shopping centres line the Skytrain through Siam Sq. Among your choices are the gleaming **Siam Paragon** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2610 8000; Th Phra Ram I; ☺ 10am-10pm) and **Mahboonkrong** (MBK; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2217 9111; Th Phra Ram I; ☺ 10am-10pm), which is just a few air-conditioners and escalators fancier than a street market.

Markets

Don't let the bargaining put you off, it's good fun for seller and buyer.

Chatuchak Weekend Market (Map pp116-17; ☺ 8am-6pm Sat & Sun) The mother of all markets sprawls over a huge area with 15,000 stalls and an estimated 200,000 visitors a day. Everything is sold here, from snakes to handicrafts to aisles and aisles of clothes.

Patpong Night Market (Map pp118-19; Patpong Soi 1 & 2, Th Silom; ☺ 6pm-midnight) More popular than Patpong's Ping-Pong shows; it's full of pirated goods.

Pratunam Market (Map pp118-19; Th Phetburi; ☺ 8am-6pm) The in-town version of Chatuchak.

Th Khao San Market (Map p121; Th Khao San; ☺ 11am-11pm) T-shirts, artwork, souvenirs and traveller ghetto gear.

GETTING THERE & AWAY**Air**

All flights use **Suvarnabhumi International Airport** (☎ 0 2723 0000; www.bangkokairportonline.com), pronounced 'soo-wan-na-poom', 30km east of the city. See p177 for specific information about international air services and p178 for a list of domestic airlines.

Bus

Buses using government bus stations are far more reliable and less prone to incidents of theft than those departing from Th Khao San.

The **Northern & Northeastern bus terminal** (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2936 2841), commonly called Mo Chit station (*sàthāanii mǎw chít*), serves almost every destination covered in this book, including unexpectedly, Aranya Prathet. Take the Skytrain to Mo Chit and transfer onto city bus 512, 3, 49 or 77.

Use the **Eastern bus terminal** (Ekamai; Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2391 2504) – take the Skytrain to Ekamai – if you are headed to Cambodia via Hat Lek and the **Southern bus terminal** (Sai Tai Mai; Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2435 1200) in Thonburi (take bus 30 from Banglamphu) for Nakhon Pathom.

Train

Bangkok's main train station, **Hualamphong** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2220 4334; Th Phra Ram IV) handles all services to the north and northeast. Ignore all touts here and avoid the travel agencies just outside the train station. **Bangkok Noi** (Map pp118-19; Thonburi) handles services to Nakhon Pathom; it can be reached by river ferry to Tha Rot Fai.

GETTING AROUND

Because of parking hassles and traffic jams, hiring a car for getting around Bangkok is not recommended.

Boat

See the boxed text (p128) for the lowdown on water travel in Bangkok.

VENICE OF THE EAST

In Bangkok's early days, *khlong* (canals), not roads, transported goods and people, and the mighty Mae Nam Chao Phraya was the superhighway leading to the interior of the country. All life centred on this vast network and Thais considered themselves *jão ndam* (water lords). Most of the canals are gone now, but aqua-transport still flows through Bangkok. It offers a glimpse into the past, and, where the rail lines don't yet run, it's often the swiftest way to get around.

The **Chao Phraya River Express** (www.chaophrayaboat.co.th; tickets 10-32B) has four boat lines on the river – two express (yellow, orange or blue flags), the local (without a flag) and the tourist service that stops at different piers – plus small boats running back and forth across to Thonburi (3B per trip). Services run roughly 6am to 6.30pm.

The quickest option for getting from Banglamphu (use Tha Phan Fah) to points east, such as Siam Sq, are the **khlong taxis** (8-16B; ☎ 6am-7pm) on Khlong Saen Saep.

The loveliest and leafiest trips are through the remaining canals in Thonburi such as Khlong Bangkok Noi and Khlong Mon, the latter featuring orchid farms. Long-tail boats can be hired from most piers for about 700B per hour.

Dinner Cruises

Combine river transport with dining for a unique Bangkok experience. **Yok Yor Marina & Restaurant** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2863 0565; www.yokyor.co.th; 885 Soi Somdet Chao Phraya 17, Thonburi; adult/child 120/60B plus meal costs; ☎ 8-10pm) is a favourite among Thais celebrating birthdays.

For a little more entertainment, **Wan Fah Cruises** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2639 0704; River City Shopping Complex; dinner cruise 1200B, ☎ 7-9pm) operates a wooden boat complete with Thai music and dance. Or for a more regal touch, **Manohra Cruises** (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2476 0022; www.manohracruises.com; Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa, Thonburi; cocktail/dinner cruise 500/1700B, ☎ 7.30-10pm) runs a fleet of converted teak rice barges. Cocktail cruises run between 6pm and 7pm.

Bus

Bangkok's bus service is frequent and frantic, so a bus map (like *Bangkok Bus Map* by Roadway) is a necessity. Don't expect it to be 100% correct though; routes change regularly.

Fares for ordinary (non-air-con) buses vary from 7B to 8B (red/green buses) to 8.50B (red express). The white-and-blue air-con buses range from 11B up to 19B, depending on the distance travelled. Orange Euro 2 air-con buses start at 12B.

The following bus lines are useful for tourists who are travelling between Banglamphu and Siam Sq:

- **Bus No 73** Huay Khwang to Saphan Phut with stops at MBK (connect to BTS Skytrain), Hualamphong (connect to train or MRT subway), Chinatown and Saphan Phut (connect to River Express).
- **Bus No 15** Tha Phra to Sanam Luang with stops at MBK, Th Ratchadamnoen Klang (accessible to Th Khao San), Sanam Luang (accessible to Wat Phra Kaew).
- **Bus No 47** Khlong Toei Port to Department of Lands with stops along Th Phra Ram IV, MBK, Th Ratchadamnoen and Sanam Luang.

Metro

Bangkok's subway or underground (depending on your nationality) connects Bang Sue train station, near Mo Chit bus terminal, in the north with Hualamphong train station in the centre, stopping in Sukhumvit and Silom along the way. The system will be greatly expanded in coming years, including stops in Chinatown.

Trains operate from 6am to midnight and cost 15B to 39B, depending on distance. Unlimited travel cards cost 120/300B for one/three days.

Skytrain

The elevated Skytrain (*rôt fai fáa*) whisks you through 'new' Bangkok (Silom, Sukhumvit and Siam Sq) in air-conditioned comfort with some interesting bird's-eye views to boot.

The Sukhumvit Line follows its namesake street and swings all the way north to near Chatuchak Weekend Market and Mo Chit bus terminal, while the Silom Line runs from the Siam Sq area to the banks of Mae Nam Chao Phraya. Expansions are planned on both.

Trains run frequently from 6am to midnight and the handy maps in the stations

clearly explain the layout. Fares vary from 10B to 40B, and ticket machines only accept coins, but change (plus various discounted passes including the one-day, 120B unlimited ticket) is available at the information booths.

Taxi

Fares for metered taxis are always lower than those for nonmetered taxis. Insist your driver uses the meter; sometimes they 'forget'. Fares generally run from 50B to 80B in central Bangkok and passengers pay freeway tolls. Taxi drivers sometimes seem to know less about the city than you do, so grab your hotel's business card to guarantee getting home.

Motorcycle taxis typically camp out at the beginning of a residential *soi* to transport people the last few kilometres home. *Soi* trips usually cost 10B, but, for about the same price as a túk-túk, they will take you anywhere.

Túk-Túk

Some travellers swear by túk-túk, but most have a hard time bargaining a fair price; patience and a winning smile help. Still, surviving the hassles, the hairpin turns and the suffocating exhaust is part of the Bangkok experience.

If a túk-túk driver offers to take you on a sightseeing tour, walk away – it's a touting scheme designed to pressure you into purchasing overpriced goods.

AROUND BANGKOK & CENTRAL THAILAND

The fertile plains stretching north from the Gulf of Thailand are the cultural heart of the country. The early Thai nation evolved along the 'mother waters' of Mae Nam Chao Phraya and grew to greatness in the former capital of Ayuthaya. Every place featured here is day-trip distance from Bangkok, but Lopburi and Ayuthaya are best as overnighters.

SAMUT PRAKAN

Samut Prakan's main claim to fame is the **Ancient City** (Muang Boran; ☎ 0 2323 9253; www.ancientcity.com; admission 300B; ☎ 8am-5pm), a 130-hectare outdoor museum with 109 scaled-down replicas of Thailand's most famous historic monuments, including some that no longer survive. Visions of Legoland may spring to mind, but

the Ancient City is architecturally sophisticated and definitely worth the trip.

Ordinary bus 25 (5B) and air-con bus 507, 508 and 511 (16B to 18B) ply regular routes between Bangkok's Southern bus terminal and Samut Prakan. The trip can take up to two hours, depending on traffic. From Samut Prakan's bus station, cross the main road and catch white or red *sáwngtháew* 36 (7B) which pass the Ancient City.

NAKHON PATHOM

Nakhon Pathom, 56km west of Bangkok, claims to be the oldest city in Thailand, but the only clue to its longevity is the **Phra Pathom Chedi**, originally erected in the early 6th century. The current bell-shaped structure right in the heart of town was built over the original in the early 11th century by the Khmer king, Suryavarman I. This alteration created the world's tallest Buddhist monument, 127m high. A **museum** (admission by donation; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) has some Dvaravati sculpture.

Other worthwhile stops include **Phra Phutthamonthon**, a 15.8m-tall Sukhothai-style standing Buddha statue, and the lifelike fibreglass sculptures of the **Thai Human Imagery Museum** (☎ 0 3433 2607; admission 250B; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-6pm Sat & Sun).

Air-con bus 997 and 83 (41B, one hour) leave frequently to Nakhon Pathom from Bangkok's Southern bus terminal, and they can drop you off at the Thai Human Imagery Museum and near Phra Phutthamonthon. To return to Bangkok, catch a bus on Th Phayaphan, a block from the train station. Bus 78 to Damnoen Saduak leaves from the same stop. Coming by rail, your best bets are the regular runs from Bangkok's Hualamphong station (from 35B, two hours).

DAMNOEN SADUAK FLOATING MARKET

As iconic to Thailand as temples and palm trees, the wooden canoes laden with fruits and vegetables, paddled by women wearing indigo-hued clothes and wide-brimmed straw hats, at **Damnoen Saduak** (☎ 7am-4pm Sat & Sun) are a sentimental piece of history. This is the most famous and most touristy of Thailand's floating markets, but it's also the most photogenic. Get there before 9am to beat the tour-bus hordes.

Air-con bus 78 and 996 go direct from Bangkok's Southern bus terminal (82B, two

hours), starting at 6am. Boat hire along the canals costs about 300B per hour.

AYUTHAYA

pop 90,500

In their race to reach the Gulf of Thailand, three rivers (Chao Phraya, Pa Sak and Lopburi) converge to form the island of Ayuthaya, the former Thai capital. The rivers formed both a natural barrier to invasion and an invitation to trade. From 1350 to 1767, Ayuthaya was the cultural centre of the emerging Thai nation and by the end of the 17th century, the population had reached one million. Many foreign visitors proclaimed it the most illustrious city they had ever seen, but eventually the river defences were unable to repulse the Burmese and after two years of war the capital fell; the royal family fled to Thonburi, near present-day Bangkok, and the Burmese looted the architectural and religious treasures. Today a modern, surprisingly un-touristy city has sprung up around the holy ruins and life still largely revolves around the river. The famous Loi Krathong festivities (see p174) take place in Bang Pa-In, 24km south of Ayuthaya.

Information

ATMs and internet cafés are abundant, especially along Th Naresuan.

Ayuthaya Hospital (☎ 0 3524 1446; Th U Thong)

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

TAT (☎ 0 3524 6076; 108/22 Th Si Sanphet; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Si Sanphet)

Sights

A Unesco World Heritage Site, Ayuthaya's historic temple ruins are scattered throughout this once magnificent city, and along the encircling rivers. A good way to visit the 'off the island' sites is on a boat tour (from 200B per hour), easily arranged at various guesthouses or at the pier near the night market. Most temples are open 8am to 4pm and many are illuminated between 7pm and 9pm.

ON THE ISLAND

Before hitting the ruins, bone up on their history at the modern and interesting **Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre** (☎ 0 3524 5124; Th Rotchana; admission 100B; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun). Ayuthaya also has two national museums. The

Chantharakasem National Museum (Th U Thong; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) is in a striking 1577 palace, but the **Chao Sam Phraya National Museum** (Th Rotchana; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) has a more impressive collection.

The most distinctive example of Ayuthaya architecture is **Wat Phra Si Sanphet** (admission 30B) where three bell-shaped *chedi* (religious monuments) taper off into descending rings. Built in the late 14th century on the grounds of the royal palace, this was the once the city's largest and most important temple. The adjacent **Wihaan Phra Mongkhon Bophit** houses a huge bronze seated Buddha.

Wat Phra Mahathat (admission 30B) is presumed to be one of the first Khmer-style *praang* built in the capital, but shutterbugs invariably snap more pictures of the Buddha head engulfed by tentacle-like tree roots. The 15th-century *praang* across the street at **Wat Ratburana** (admission 30B) is in better condition. Nearby **Wat Thammikarat**, which probably predates the Ayuthaya period, stands out for the *singha* (guardian lion) sculptures ringing the remains of the *chedi*.

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Wat Ratburana.....	14	D2
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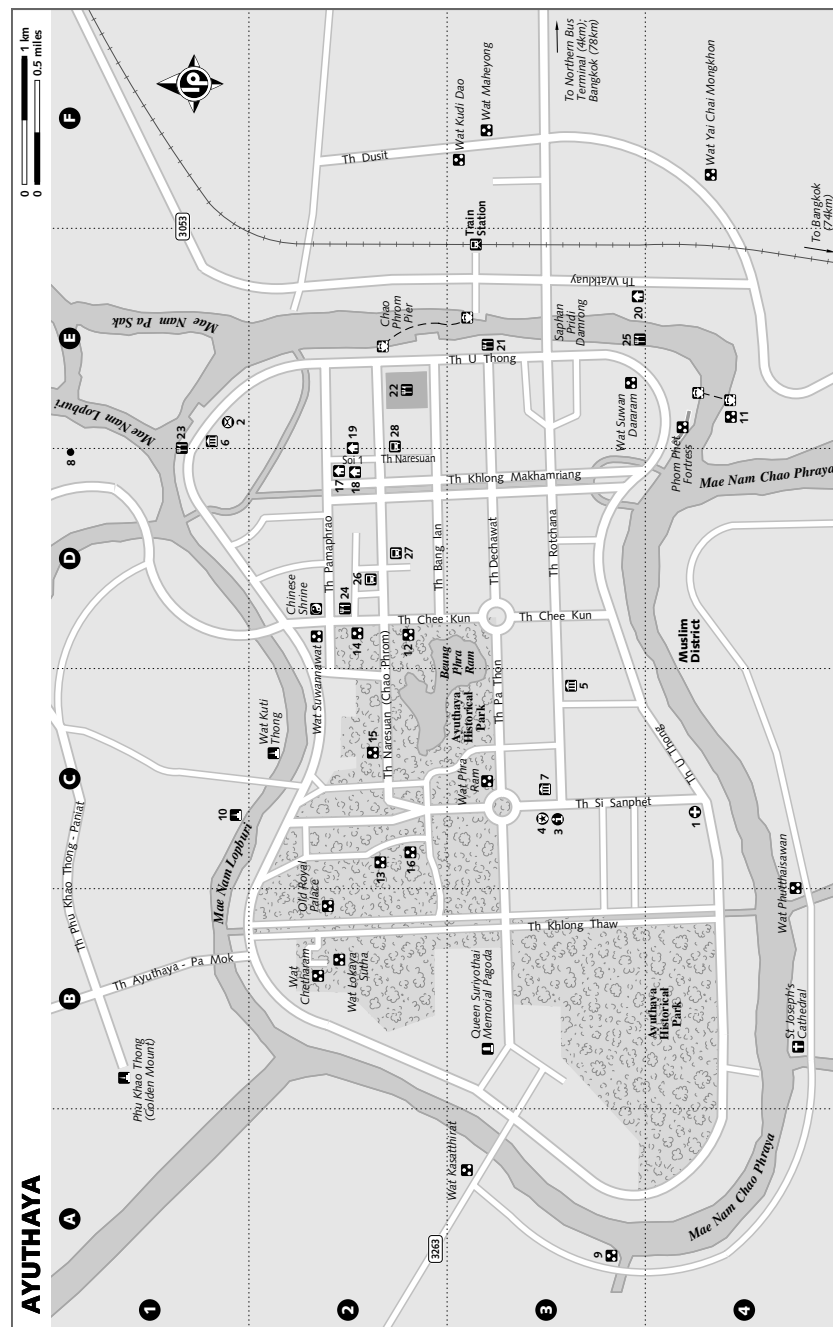
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AYUTHAYA

OFF THE ISLAND

The main *wihāan* (sanctuary) of the modern-looking **Wat Phanan Choeng** (admission 30B) contains a 19m-high sitting Buddha image. On weekends the temple is crowded with pilgrims from Bangkok who pay for saffron-coloured cloth to be ritually draped over the image and buy bags of fish to empty into the river.

Wat Chai Wattanaram (admission 30B), built in the 17th century and extensively restored in the 1980s, is a good example of Angkor-Khmer style. It's also a premier sunset-watching spot.

Instead of destroying **Wat Na Phra Mehn** (admission 30B) during their 1767 conquest, the Burmese made it their headquarters. The *bôt* (central sanctuary) contains an amazing carved wooden ceiling depicting the Buddhist heavens while the smaller *wihāan* has a stone Buddha in a European pose (sitting in a chair). Also to the north is the **elephant kraal**, a restored version of the stockades once used for the annual roundup of wild elephants.

Sleeping

PU Guest House (☎ 0 3525 1213; 20/1 Soi Thaw Kaw Saw; s/d from 200/300B; 📶 📺 📺) Most of Ayuthaya's budget options are clustered around the mini-traveller ghetto of Soi 1, Th Naresuan, including this low-key, well-rounded place.

Tony's Place (☎ 0 3525 2578; 12/18 Soi 1, Th Naresuan; r 200-500B; 📶 📺) The party atmosphere keeps this longtime favourite packed.

Baan Lotus Guest House (☎ 0 3525 1988; 20 Th Pamaphrao; r 500B) This old teak house overlooking the lotus-covered pond is beautifully restored, smartly appointed and splendidly managed.

Woraburi Hotel (☎ 0 3524 9600; 89 Th Watkluy; r from 1800B; 📶 📺 📺) This eight-storey tower has a touch of Bangkok sophistication and most rooms get a bear-hug view of the river.

Eating

Baan Khun Phra (☎ 0 3524 1978; 48/2 Th U Thong; mains 40-80B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The intimate riverside terrace restaurant behind its namesake guesthouse serves good nibblers.

Malakor (Th Chee Kun; mains 50-100B; 🍳 lunch & dinner) This charming, two-storey wooden house has an incredible view of Wat Ratburana, which is stunning after dark.

Phae Krung Kao (mains 60-200B; 🍳 lunch & dinner) One of several floating restaurants on Mae Nam Pa Sak.

our pick **Hua Raw Night Market** (Th U Thong) and **Chao Phrom Market** (Th Naresuan) offer a good variety of Thai, Chinese and Muslim dishes, including *roti sai mai*, a flaky roti wrapped around melted palm sugar.

Getting There & Away**BUS**

Ayuthaya has two bus terminals. Buses from the south, west and east stop at the main bus terminal, which is near the guesthouse area. Frequent buses serve Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (63B, 1½ hours) and Lopburi (45B, two hours). Minivans, departing from Th Naresuan, east of the main bus terminal, run to Bangkok's Victory Monument (60B, two hours).

Long-distance northern buses stop at the **northern terminal** (☎ 0 3533 5304), 5km east of the centre. It has services to most major northern towns, including Sukhothai (216B to 300B, six hours), Chiang Mai (605B to 805B, nine hours) and Nan (500B to 800B, eight hours).

TRAIN

Trains to Ayuthaya leave Bangkok's Hualamphong station (15B to 66B, 1½ hours) almost hourly between 6am and 11pm. From Ayuthaya, the train continues north to Lopburi (13B to 57B, one hour) and beyond, or to the northeast.

Getting Around

Bikes can be rented at most guesthouses (30B to 50B per day). A tük-tük trip should be about 20B on the island and around 40B from the train station.

LOPBURI

pop 62,800

Founded during the Dvaravati period (6th to 11th centuries), Lopburi serves visitors an interesting juxtaposition of ancient brick ruins and not-so-ancient shophouses and hotels. But most visitors come here, often as a pit-stop on their way to Chiang Mai, to see the resident troop of mischievous monkeys that make one of Thailand's oldest cities their home and playground.

Information

There are several banks in the old part of Lopburi.

Hospital (☎ 0 3662 1537; Th Ramdecho)

Police (☎ 0 3642 4515; Th Na Phra Kan)

Post office (Th Phra Narai Maharat)

TAT (☎ 0 3642 2768; Th Phraya Kamjat; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm)

Sights

The former palace of King Narai, **Phra Narai Ratchaniwet** (☎ 0 3641 1458; Th Sorasak; admission 30B; 🕒 7.30am-5.30pm) is a good place to begin a tour of Lopburi. Built between 1665 and 1677, it has an unusual blend of French and Khmer styles. Inside the grounds is the **Lopburi National Museum** (🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Wed-Sun), which houses an excellent collection of Lopburi period sculpture, as well as an assortment of Khmer, Dvaravati, U Thong and Ayuthaya art and traditional tools.

Prang Sam Yot (Th Wichayen; admission 30B; 🕒 8am-6pm) represents classic Khmer-Lopburi style and is a Hindu-turned-Buddhist temple. Originally, the three towers symbolised the Hindu trinity of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. Now two of them contain ruined Lopburi-style Buddha images. The monument is lit up at night and constantly crawling with monkeys.

Other Khmer ruins in the old town include **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat** (Th Na Phra Kan; admission 30B; 🕒 7am-5pm) and **Wat Nakhon Kosa** (Th Na Phra Kan), both dating to the 12th century, and **Prang Khaek** (Th Wichayen), Lopburi's oldest monument, which went up sometime in the 11th century.

Two churches for foreigners were founded during the reign of King Narai. A partial brick and stucco tower is all that's left of **Wat San Paolo** (Th Ramdecho) while the *wihāan* at **Wat Sao Thong Thong** (Th Wichayen), with its incongruous but intriguing Gothic-style windows, is now a Buddhist temple.

Sleeping & Eating

Nett Hotel (☎ 0 3641 1738; 17/1-2 Th Ratchadamnoen; r 200-350B; 📶 📺) The clean and friendly Nett has newly tiled air-con rooms.

Thepthani Hotel (☎ 0 3641 1029; Th Phra Narai Maharat; r 400B; 📶 📺) Rajabhat University's hotel has spacious rooms with cable TV. Blue buses between old and new town pass here.

White House (Th Phraya Kamjat; mains 60-120B; 🍳 dinner) This pleasant little spot opposite the TAT office offers a range of quality Thai-Chinese specialities.

Central Market (off Th Ratchadamnoen & Th Surasongkhram; 🕒 8am-2pm) Just north of the palace, this is a great place to pick up *kai yāang* (fried or

roast chicken) with sticky rice, *klúay khàek* (Indian-style fried bananas) and other delights. There's a vegetarian pavilion in the centre.

Getting There & Away

Lopburi's bus station is almost 2km outside the old district. Buses head to Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (air-con 130B, 3½ hours) every 20 minutes.

There are frequent train services throughout the day south to Bangkok's Hualamphong station (local/rapid/express 28/125/170B, 4½/three/three hours). The local train to Ayuthaya (13B) takes about an hour. Lopburi's train station is on the edge of the old town and has luggage storage if you are just making a short stop here.

CHIANG MAI

pop 204,000

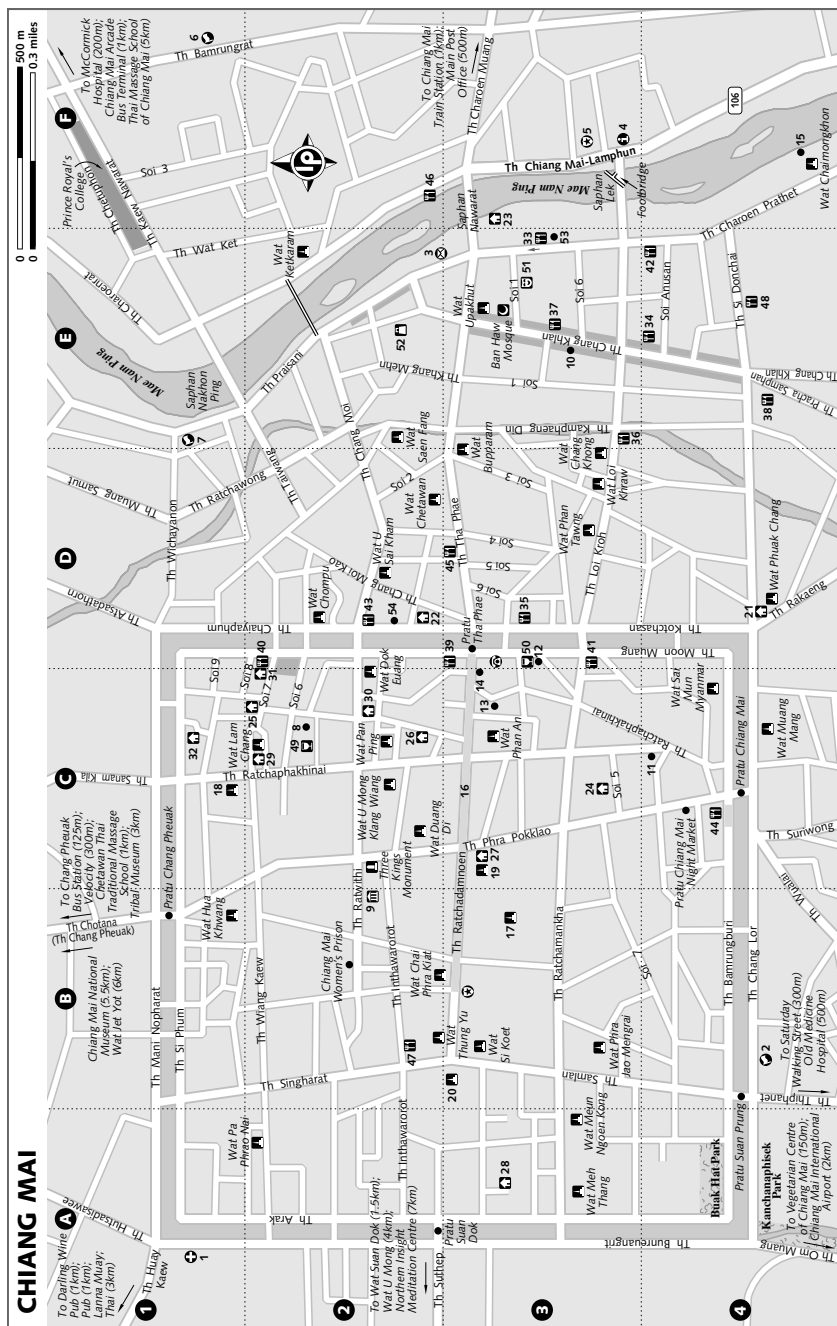
To Thais, Chiang Mai is a national treasure; a cultured symbol of nationhood. For visitors, it's a cool place to kick back and soak up some Thai-ness while still having all the comforts of home close at hand. Beyond the city limits, Chiang Mai Province boasts a multitude of mountains and more natural forest cover than any other province in the north, so trekking and other outdoor outings are big business.

The old city of Chiang Mai is a neat square bounded by moats and remnants of a medieval-style wall built 700 years ago to defend against Burmese invaders. A furious stream of traffic flows around the old city, but inside narrow *soi* branch off the clogged arteries into a quiet world of charming guesthouses with leafy gardens.

ORIENTATION

Th Moon Muang, along the east moat, is the main traveller centre. Intersecting with Th Moon Muang, Th Tha Phae runs east from the exterior of the moat towards Mae Nam Ping, changing into Th Charoen Muang across the river where it passes the train station. The trendy Th Nimmanhaemin area is west of the old city.

Navigating Chiang Mai is fairly simple, but a copy of Nancy Chandler's *Map of Chiang Mai* is a good investment. Several free, ad-filled maps are also available.



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INFORMATION

You will stumble over internet cafés, banks and ATMs on seemingly every street you visit in Chiang Mai.

Emergency

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Chiang Mai-Lamphun)

Internet Resources

Chiang Mai Online (www.chiangmai-online.com) Basic information about Chiang Mai and comprehensive accommodation listings.

City Life (www.chiangmainews.com) Posts articles on local events, culture and art, along with current news developments.

Media

Chiangmai Mail Weekly newspaper; good source of local news.

City Life Oriented as much towards residents as tourists, with articles on local culture, politics and people.

Medical Services

Chiang Mai Ram Hospital (☎ 0 5322 4861; 8 Th Bunreuangrit) The most modern hospital in town, with higher-than-average prices.

McCormick Hospital (☎ 0 5326 2200; 133 Th Kaew Nawarat) The best-value place for minor treatment.

Post

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

Tourist Information

TAT (☎ 0 5324 8607; Th Chiang Mai-Lamphun; 🕒 8am-4.30pm) Keeps a list of registered trekking guides, plus maps and brochures.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Many travellers report that their belongings (particularly credit cards) stored at Chiang Mai guesthouses have gone walkabout. If you stow your bags while you go trekking, make an itemised list of all belongings, including travellers cheques, and note your credit card balance. See Guest House Blues (p139) for further warnings.

Take care in the unlit backstreets around the Night Bazaar. A few women have been attacked.

SIGHTS

Temples

Chiang Mai has more than 300 temples – almost as many as Bangkok. The temple architecture here is markedly different from other parts of Thailand. Notice the intricate wood-carvings and colourful murals; hallmarks of the Lanna period (13th and 14th centuries). Three-tiered umbrellas adorning the tops of the temples, Singha lions guarding the entrances and high-base *chedi* are all Burmese influences.

A perfect example of Lanna architecture, **Wat Phra Singh** (Th Singarat) is the star of the inner-city's soaring stupas. Established in 1345, this

wat contains murals depicting Lanna customs and dress, a scripture repository and the city's most revered Buddha image, Phra Singh (Lion Buddha).

Wat Chiang Man (Th Ratchaphakhinai), the oldest wat within the city walls, was erected by King Mengrai, Chiang Mai's founder, in 1296. Two famous Buddha images (Buddha Sila and the Crystal Buddha) are kept here in the *wihān* to the right of the main *bôt*.

The huge ruined *chedi* at **Wat Chedi Luang** (Th Phra Pokklao) either collapsed during an earthquake in 1545 or from cannon fire in 1775 during the recapture of Chiang Mai from the Burmese. A partial restoration has preserved its 'ruined' look while ensuring it doesn't crumble further.

The large, old teak *wihān* at **Wat Phan Tao** (Th Phra Pokklao) is one of Chiang Mai's unsung treasures.

Modelled somewhat imperfectly on the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, India, **Wat Jet Yot** (Hwy 11) was built to host the eighth World Buddhist Council in 1477. The seven spires represent the seven weeks Buddha was supposed to have spent in Bodhgaya after his enlightenment.

Built in a forest grove in 1373, **Wat Suan Dok** (Th Su) contains a 500-year-old bronze Buddha image and colourful *jataka* murals, but the scenic sunsets are the biggest attraction.

The forest temple of **Wat U Mong** (Soi Wat U Mong), dating from Mengrai's rule, has a fine image of the fasting Buddha. Brick-lined tunnels in an unusual-looking large, flat-topped hill were supposedly fashioned around 1380 for a clairvoyant monk; some are still open for exploration.

Museums

Lanna history and works of art are documented at the superb **Chiang Mai National Museum** (☎ 0 5322 1308; www.thailandmuseum.com; Hwy 11; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) northwest of town.

Chiang Mai's former Provincial Hall, a masterpiece of Thai architecture, has been converted into the **Chiang Mai Arts & Cultural Centre** (☎ 0 5321 7793; www.chiangmaicitymuseum.org; Th Phra Pokklao; admission 90B; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Tue-Sun). There are interesting interactive historical displays, temporary art exhibitions and more in the 15 rooms.

Whether you plan to do a hill-tribe trek or not, the **Tribal Museum** (☎ 0 5321 0872; admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri), at Ratchamangkhla

Park north of the city, is worth a visit. Video shows run between 10am and 2pm and cost 20B to 50B.

Chiang Mai Night Bazaar

Chiang Mai's leading tourist attraction is the legacy of the original Yunnanese caravans that stopped here along the ancient trade route between Simáo (in China) and Mawlamyine (on Myanmar's - Burma's - Indian Ocean coast). Today the **bazaar** (nr Th Chang Khlan & Th Loi Kroh; ☎ sunset-midnight) sprawls over several blocks with the epicentre at the Th Chang Khlan and Th Loi Kroh junction. Made up of hundreds of street vendors, several different roofed areas and ordinary shops, the market offers a huge variety of handicrafts, as well as designer goods (both fake and licensed) at very low prices, if you bargain well.

Walking Streets

A more chilled-out shopping experience than the Night Bazaar, Chiang Mai's **Sunday Walking Street** (Th Ratchadamnoen; ☎ 4pm-midnight Sun) is very popular. Blocked off to traffic, the street fills with colourful stalls selling wares ranging from food to hill-tribe crafts. Buses playing down the street add to the atmosphere. Th Wualai, the new **Saturday Walking Street** (☎ 4pm-midnight Sat) isn't as popular.

ACTIVITIES

Ping River Trips

From a small pier behind Wat Chaimongkhon, **Mae Ping River Cruises** (☎ 0 5327 4822; www.maeppingrivercruise.com; Th Charoen Prathet; per person 400B; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) offers two-hour daytime cruises in long-tail, roofed boats through the countryside with stops at a small fruit and flower farm.

Rock Climbing

Chiang Mai Rock Climbing Adventures (☎ 0 6911 1470; www.thailandclimbing.com; 55/3 Th Ratchaphakhinai; 1/3-day course 1800/6600B) leads climbing and caving trips to an impressive set of limestone cliffs, known as Crazy Horse Buttress, about 20km east of town. The office offers gear sales and rentals and a partner-finding service.

Trekking

Chiang Mai is one of the most popular places in Thailand to arrange a trek. Many guesthouses and lots of travel agents want a slice of

action in this 'competitive' (read: cut-throat) business and it's important to shop around before signing up. Most treks include visits to hill-tribe villages, some jungle action, plus the option of rafting or elephant rides. See the boxed text, p138, for further information.

COURSES

Buddhist Meditation

Northern Insight Meditation Centre (☎ 0 5327 8620; www.palikanon.com/vipassana/tapotaram/tapotaram.htm; donation) Offers 10- to 26-day individual intensive courses in Vipassana with English-speaking interpreters available.

Wat Suan Dok (☎ 0 5380 8411, ext 114; www.monkchat.net; Th Suthep; retreats/courses free) Wat Suan Dok has a two-night, three-day meditation retreat at the end of each month, as well as an overnight meditation course every Tuesday (2.15pm Tuesday to 1.30pm Wednesday). Informal 'monk chats' are offered 5pm to 7pm Wednesday and Friday.

For a more casual introduction to Buddhism, attend the Sunday afternoon (3pm) lectures at Wat U Mong (opposite) or drop by for 'monk chat' from 1pm to 6pm at Wat Chedi Luang (opposite) where you can ask questions.

Cooking

Cooking classes (usually costing 800B to 1000B per day) are a big hit in Chiang Mai. Try the following:

Baan Thai (☎ 0 5335 7339; www.baanthaicookery.com; 11 Soi 5, Th Ratchadamnoen)

Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School (☎ 0 5320 6388; www.thaicookeryschool.com; 47/2 Th Moon Muang)

Gap's Thai Culinary Art School (☎ 0 5327 8140; www.gaps-house.com; 3 Soi 4, Th Ratchadamnoen)

Thai Farm Cooking School (☎ 08 7174 9285; www.thaifarmcooking.com; 2/2 Soi 5, Th Ratchadamnoen)

Muay Thai (Thai Boxing)

Lanna Muay Thai (Kiatbusaba; ☎ 0 5389 2102; www.lannamuaythai.com; 64/1 Soi Chiang Khian; day/month 250/7000B) The former training camp of famous *kathoey* (transvestite) boxer Parinya Kiatbusaba welcomes foreign students.

Traditional Massage

More visitors learn to pummel bodies the Thai way in Chiang Mai than anywhere else. We've received good reports about the following: **Chetawan Thai Traditional Massage School** (☎ 0 5341 0360; www.watpomassage.com/map_chiangmai_en.html; 7/1-2 Soi Samud Lanna, Th Pracha Uthit; 5-day foot/Thai massage course 5500/7000B) Affiliated with the

Wat Pho massage school in Bangkok. Offers tuition in foot and Thai massage.

Lek Chaia (☎ 0 5327 8325; www.nervetouch.com; 25 Th Ratchadamnoen; 5-day course 4000B) Khun Lek, a Thai woman who has been massaging and teaching for more than 40 years, specialises in *jap sen* (similar to acupressure) and the use of medicinal herbs.

Old Medicine Hospital (OMH; ☎ 0 5327 5085; www.thaimassagehospital.ac.th; 78/1 Soi Siwaka Komarat, Th Wualai; 10-day course 4000B) The OMH curriculum is very traditional, with a northern-Thai slant. A two-day foot massage course (2000B) is also offered.

Thai Massage School of Chiang Mai (TMC; ☎ 0 5385 4330; www.tmc-school.com; Th Chiang Mai-Mae Jo; 5-day course 5300B) Northeast of town, TMC has a solid, government-licensed massage curriculum. Transport to the school is included.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Flower Festival The mother of Chiang Mai festivals features parades of flower-draped floats. Held February.

Loi Krathong This nationwide festival (see p174) is celebrated with gusto in Chiang Mai in October and November.

Winter Fair Held late December to early January, this is a big event on the Chiang Mai calendar, with all sorts of activities and interesting visitors from the hills.

SLEEPING

Most budget lodging guesthouses are clustered on either side of the east moat, and most will arrange free transport from the bus or train station if you call.

Lamchang House (☎ 0 5321 0586; Soi 7, Th Moon Muang; r 90-170B) This wooden Thai-style house has lots of character, including some Thai decoration and fresh flowers in the rooms and a small garden restaurant. Bathrooms are shared.

Julie Guesthouse (☎ 0 5327 4355; www.julieguesthouse.com; 7 Soi 5, Th Phra Pokklao; dm 60B, r 90-300B) This funky place has a colourful range of rooms, and the covered roof terrace with hammocks and the garden café with a pool table are good places to meet other travellers.

Siri Guesthouse (☎ 0 5332 6550; www.siri.gh@hotmail.com; Soi 5, Th Moon Muang; r 300-350B) This new place offers fantastic-value rooms stylishly decorated with dark-wood furniture and some Thai touches.

Chiangmai Gold Star Hotel (☎ 0 5323 2492; 53 Th Sitwong; r 350-750B; ☎) Straddling the budget-midrange divide, this friendly 29-room hotel is a little old fashioned but has character. The large rooms are decorated with ornate Burmese furniture and Thai pictures.

TREKKING TIPS

Thousands of visitors trek into the hills of northern Thailand each year. Most come away with a sense of adventure, but, due to bad guides or incompatible group members, some are disillusioned by the experience.

Do your homework before you sign up for a trek. Ask how many people will be in the group (six to 10 is a good range), find out exactly when the tour begins and ends (some three-day treks last less than 48 hours) and be sure you know exactly what the tour includes so you are not hit with additional expenses.

As for choosing the guide, many work freelance, so there's no way to predict which companies will give the best service, but at least make sure your guide is licensed. The TAT office in Chiang Mai (p135) maintains a list of licensed agencies and is making efforts to regulate trekking companies. Ultimately, the most important thing to do is talk to people who have just returned from a trek.

Also, don't overestimate your level of physical fitness; you'll be crossing mountainous terrain in unpredictable weather. The best time to trek is November to February, when the weather is refreshing, there's little or no rain and wildflowers are in bloom.

Trekking can be arranged in numerous towns, and there are benefits to organising your trek outside Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Prices tend to be lower, the companies smaller and friendlier and you usually get into more remote areas. Of course, the downside is that there are fewer companies to choose from and less opportunity to get the low-down from fellow travellers.

Visiting Hill-Tribe Villages

The natural scenery can be stunning, but just about everyone who treks does so to visit villages. The term 'hill tribe' (*chao khao*, or 'mountain people', to Thais) refers to ethnic minorities living in mountainous northern and western Thailand. Each hill tribe has its own language, customs, mode of dress and spiritual beliefs. Most are of seminomadic origin, having migrated to Thailand from Tibet, Myanmar (Burma), China and Laos during the past 200 years or so. The Tribal Research Institute in Chiang Mai estimates the total hill-tribe population to be around 550,000.

For the hill-tribe groups of Thailand, tourism is a mixed blessing. Since the Thai government is sensitive about the image it displays to the West, tourism has forced it to improve some of its policies towards hill tribes, but tourism has also contributed to the erosion of traditional customs. Because trekking is big business, some villages have become veritable theme parks with a steady supply of visitors filtering in and out, creating exactly the opposite environment to the one trekkers hope to find. In fact, the only villages that now offer a truly authentic experience are ones you shouldn't be visiting. But that's not to say that sensitive and inquisitive visitors can't have a meaningful experience. Treks do still offer a chance to see how traditional, subsistence-oriented societies function and if you have a good guide you will learn a lot.

It's impossible to leave a community unaffected by your visit, but observing local taboos (which your guide should explain) greatly minimises the impact. The following protocol applies to pretty much all villages.

- Do not hand out candy, pens or other small gifts. These may bring smiles to the children, but it brings shame to their parents and cultivates a tradition of begging. If you want to give a gift, talk to your guide beforehand about materials the local school or health centre may need.
- Dress modestly no matter how hot and sweaty you are.
- Always ask for permission before taking photos, even if you think nobody is looking.
- Show respect for religious symbols and rituals. Don't touch totems at village entrances or any other object of obvious symbolic value without asking permission.
- Set a good example to hill-tribe youngsters by not using drugs. An increasing number of young people in the villages are now hooked on opium, heroin and amphetamines, in part due to the influence of young trekkers.

Sri Pat Guest House (☎ 0 5321 8716; www.sri-patguesthouse.com; 16 Soi 7, Th Moon Muang; r 900B; 🍽️) Rustic-looking tiles in the bathrooms and rattan furniture give this 17-room guesthouse a chic Thai-modern style. All rooms have a terrace and plenty of extras.

Galare Guest House (☎ 0 5381 8887; www.galare.com; 7/1 Soi 2, Th Charoen Prathet; r 1100B; 🍽️) Set in an old-style Thai house on the river near the Night Bazaar, this friendly and well-managed guesthouse has spacious rooms with some charm.

Rachamankha (☎ 0 5390 4111; www.rachamankha.com; 6 Th Ratchamankha; r 6900-18,000B; 🍽️ 📺 📺) This architect-owned hotel, filled with exquisite Lanna antiques and artworks, feels like the compound of a 16th-century temple built for royalty.

Also recommended:

Daret's House (☎ 0 5323 5440; 4/5 Th Chaiphaphum; r 180B) A longtime travellers' fave with well-worn rooms.

Montra House (☎ 0 5341 8658; Soi 5, Th Ratchad-amnoen; r 200B; 📺) Basic but spotless digs, some with shared bathroom.

RCN Court (☎ 0 5341 8280; 35 Soi 7, Th Moon Muang; r 300-450B; 🍽️ 📺) Well-equipped rooms and lots of extras like a small fitness centre.

Tri Gong Residence (☎ 0 5321 4754; www.trigong.com; 8 Soi 1, Th Sribhum; r 600B; 🍽️ 📺) Stylish rooms with rattan and teak furniture surrounding a courtyard. Free wi-fi.

Parasol Inn (☎ 0 5381 4011; www.parasolinn.com; 105/1 Th Prah Pokklao; r 1000-1500B; 🍽️ 📺) New hotel just off Sunday Walking Street.

GUESTHOUSE BLUES

Beware bus or minivan services from Th Khao San in Bangkok that advertise a free night's accommodation in Chiang Mai. What usually happens on arrival is that the 'free' guesthouse demands you sign up for one of their hill treks immediately; if you don't, the guesthouse is suddenly 'full'. Sometimes they levy a charge for electricity or hot water. The better guesthouses don't play this game.

Many cheaper guesthouses make more money from their restaurants and tour services than room charges, hence you may be pressured to eat and to sign up for a trek; you might even be evicted if you don't. It's always best to ask if it's OK to take a room only.

EATING

You won't lack for variety in Chiang Mai as the city has arguably the best assortment of restaurants outside Bangkok.

Thai

Si Phen Restaurant (☎ 0 5331 5328; 103 Th Inthawarorot; mains 40-80B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Si Phen serves both northern- and northeastern-style dishes, including a variation of *sôm-tam* (spicy papaya salad) made with pomelo fruit.

Aron (Rai) Restaurant (☎ 0 5327 6947; 45 Th Katchasan; mains 40-90B; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A top spot for Chiang Mai specialities, such as *kaeng awm* and *kaeng khae*, curries which rely on local roots and herbs for their distinctive, bitter-hot flavours. The spacious open-air dining area upstairs catches the night breeze.

Just Khao Soi (☎ 0 5381 8641; 108/2 Th Charoen Prathet; mains 100B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Chiang Mai is famed for its fine *khao sawy*, a Shan-Yunnanese concoction of chicken (or, less commonly, beef), spicy curried broth and flat, squiggly wheat noodles. This place offers a gourmet version of it, letting you create your own.

Also recommended:

Ratana's Kitchen (☎ 0 5387 4173; 320-322 Th Tha Phae; mains 30-90B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Inexpensive Thai dishes from several regions, and a few *farang* favs.

Antique House (☎ 0 5327 6810; 71 Th Charoen Prathet; mains 80-160B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Eat northern Thai dishes in an elegant teak house.

Chiang Mai is full of interesting day and night markets serving inexpensive and tasty foods. The buzzing **Anusan Night Market** (Soi Anusan, Th Chang Khlan; 🍽️ dinner), known mainly for its seafood, is part of the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar (p136). The nearby **Galare Food Centre** (Th Chang Khlan; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) features Thai classical dancing nightly. Also recommended is the **Pratu Chiang Mai Night Market** (Th Bamrung-buri; 🍽️ dinner) where people tend to make an evening of eating and drinking.

International

July 4U (☎ 0 5327 8715; 5 Th Ratchamankha; mains 50-135B; 🍽️ breakfast & lunch) Silly name, but serious food. This cute café serves fantastic organic breakfasts, create-your-own sandwiches, salads, smoothies and juices.

Chiangmai Saloon (☎ 08 1930 2212; 80/1 Th Loi Kroh; mains 80-300B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Ignore the ersatz Wild West décor and head straight for the huge steaks and Tex-Mex.

Giorgio Italian Restaurant (☎ 0 5381 8236; 2/6 Th Prachasamphan; mains 100-250B; 🍴 lunch Mon-Sat, dinner daily) Chiang Mai's most ambitious, and some say the best, Italian eatery features a full range of pasta and exceptional salads.

House (☎ 0 5341 9011; 199 Th Moon Muang; mains 200-790B, tapas 50-110B; 🍴 dinner) This ambitious restaurant occupies a mid-20th-century house that once belonged to an exiled Burmese prince. The menu successfully fuses Thai and European elements, complemented by an excellent wine list.

Also recommended:

Mike's (Th Chaiyaphum; mains 40-115B; 🍴 dinner) Damn good hamburgers served until 3am.

Herb Garden (☎ 0 5341 8991; Soi 1, Th Ratchad-amnoen; mains 40-150B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Unusually, the Thai food here is as good as the Western.

Riverside Bar & Restaurant (☎ 0 5324 3239; 9-11 Th Charoenrat; mains 75-200B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) A river cruise (70B) departs nightly at 8pm.

Vegetarian

Chiang Mai has a huge choice of vegetarian food thanks to its love of all things healthy.

Vegetarian Centre of Chiang Mai (☎ 0 5327 1262; 14 Th Om Muang; mains 15-30B; 🍴 breakfast & lunch Mon-Fri) Sponsored by the Asoke Foundation, an ascetically minded Buddhist movement, this cafeteria serves some of the cheapest food in the city.

Whole Earth Restaurant (☎ 0 5328 2463; 88 Th Si Donchai; mains 120-300B) Set in a teak house, with a suitably mellow atmosphere. The food is well-presented Thai and Indian, both vegetarian and nonvegetarian.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

The ale flows fast and furiously at the strip of bars along Th Moon Muang near the Pratu Tha Phae. It's a familiar sight: lots of sweaty *faràng*, cheap beer and miles of neon. More low-key is the cluster of rustic outdoor bars behind Th Ratchaphakhinai, such as Rasta Café and Heaven Beach, serving cheap beers and cool tunes to travellers and expats.

Riverside Bar & Restaurant (☎ 0 5324 3239; 9-11 Th Charoenrat) In a twinkly setting on Mae Nam Ping, this is one of the longest-running live-music venues in Chiang Mai. Two cover bands play nightly and the food is reliably good.

Pinte Blues Pub (33/6 Th Moon Muang) Another old-timer (open more than 20 years), Pinte serves only espresso and beer.

Darling Wine Pub (☎ 0 5322 7427; 49/21 Th Huay Kaew) Darling serves fine wines by the glass or bottle in a sophisticated but relaxed atmosphere.

Pub (☎ 0 5321 1550; 189 Th Huay Kaew) In an old Tudor-style cottage set well off the road, this venerable Chiang Mai institution semisuccessfully calls up the atmosphere of an English country pub.

Bubbles (☎ 0 5327 0099; Th Charoen Prathet) The Pornping Tower Hotel's disco heaves with a mix of locals and *faràng* remembering how to rave moves. The 100B entrance ticket exchanges for a drink.

SHOPPING

From modern art to Burmese antiques, you can buy just about anything in Chiang Mai. Even long before tourists began visiting the region, Chiang Mai was an important centre for handcrafted ceramics, silks, umbrellas, silverwork and woodcarvings; and today it's still the country's number-one source of handicrafts.

The city's top shopping stops are the Night Bazaar (p136) and the Walking Streets (p136). Other good retail destinations are **Talat Warorot** (off Th Chang Moi; 🕒 5am-6pm), the oldest and most famous market in Chiang Mai, which has a little of everything, and Th Tha Phae with a mix of antiques, jewellery, homewares and clothes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Regularly scheduled international flights arrive at **Chiang Mai International Airport** (☎ 0 5327 0222) from Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Kunming (China), Singapore, Taipei (Taiwan), Vientiane and Luang Prabang (Laos), and Yangon and Mandalay (Myanmar).

Domestic routes include Bangkok, Mae Hong Son, Pai and Sukhothai. Discount flights to Bangkok can go as low as 899B one way, almost as cheap as a VIP bus.

See p177 for further information on international airlines and p178 for details of domestic carriers.

Bus

There are two bus stations in Chiang Mai: **Arcade** (☎ 0 5324 2644), northeast of town, handles Bangkok and most long-distance routes, while **Chang Pheuk** (☎ 0 5321 1586), north of the centre, primarily handles destinations within Chiang

BUSES FROM CHIANG MAI

Destination	Bus type	Fare (B)	Duration (hr)
Bangkok	air-con	434	11
Bangkok	VIP	651	10
Chiang Rai	ordinary	100	4
Chiang Rai	air-con	140	3
Chiang Rai	VIP	280	3
Mae Hong Son (via Mae Sariang)	ordinary	187	8
Mae Hong Son (via Mae Sariang)	air-con	337	8
Mae Hong Son (via Pai)	ordinary	142	7
Mae Hong Son (via Pai)	air-con	200	7
Nan	ordinary	158	6
Nan	air-con	221	7
Pai	ordinary	80	4
Pai	air-con	142	4
Sukhothai	ordinary	167	6
Sukhothai	air-con	234	5

Mai Province. From the town centre, a tük-tük or chartered *sáwngháew* to the Arcade bus terminal should cost about 50B to 60B; to Chang Pheuk, get a *sáwngháew* at the normal 20B per person rate.

Train

The **train station** (☎ 0 5324 5364; Th Charoen Muang) is on the eastern edge of town, and many travellers arrive by overnight train from Bangkok. Advance booking is highly advised. There are seven rapid and express trains per day between Chiang Mai and Bangkok with prices starting at 231B for 3rd-class fan seats and running to 1353B for a 1st-class air-con sleeper. The trip takes anywhere from 12 to 15 hours.

GETTING AROUND

Airport taxis cost 120B. Pick up a ticket at the taxi kiosk just outside the baggage-claim area, then present the ticket to the drivers outside arrivals. The airport is about 3km from the city centre. Public bus 4 (red *sáwngháew*, 15B) and 10 (white bus, 10B) run from the airport to Th Tha Pae between 6am and 9pm. You can charter a tük-tük or red *sáwngháew* from the centre of Chiang Mai to the airport for around 65B.

Hordes of red *sáwngháew* circulate the city with fares of 15B to 20B per person, but drivers often try to get you to charter. The *sáwngháew* don't have set routes; you simply flag them down and tell them where you want to go. Tük-tük only do charters at

30B for short trips and 40B to 60B for longer ones. Chiang Mai still has loads of *sáamláw*, especially in the old city around Talat Warorot. They cost around 20B to 30B for most trips. There are five fledgling fixed-route bus services (the free maps available at TAT show the routes), three with white air-con buses (10B) and two with red *sáwngháew* (15B), but most people still use the regular *sáwngháew*.

There are numerous car-hire agencies in town with reliable cars from 1000B. Two well-regarded agencies are **North Wheels** (☎ 0 5387 4478; www.northwheels.com; 70/4-8 Th Chaiyaphum) and **Alternative Travel** (☎ 08 1784 4856; noree9000@hotmail.com; 56 Mu, 9 Th Mea Faek Mai), the latter specialising in cars with drivers and customised tours.

Traffic is a bit heavy, but Chiang Mai is small enough that everything is accessible by bike. Rentals cost 30B to 50B a day from guesthouses and various places along the east moat. **Contact Travel** (☎ 0 5381 2444; www.activethailand.com; 73/7 Th Charoen Prathet) and **Velocity** (☎ 0 5341 0665; velocity@thaimail.com; 177 Th Chang Pheuk) rent good-quality rides.

NORTHERN THAILAND

The peaks and valleys of northern Thailand are the guardians of an abundance of natural and cultural attractions that make the area a must for most travellers traversing the kingdom. The first true Thai kingdoms arose in

the north, endowing this region with a wide range of traditional culture and architecture, which are now the country's most beautiful Thai temple ruins. It's also the home of Thailand's hill tribes. But the scenic beauty of the north has been fairly well preserved: the region boasts more natural forest cover than any other.

Northern Thais (*khon meuang*) are very proud of their local customs, considering northern ways to be part of Thailand's original culture. Look for symbols frequently displayed by northern Thais to express cultural solidarity – clay water jars placed in front of homes, *kàlue* (carved wooden 'X' motifs) that decorate house gables, Shan or hill tribe-style shoulder bags and the *sêua mâw hâwm* (indigo-dyed rice-farmer's shirt) worn on Friday at many banks, universities and other institutions.

PAI

pop 3000

The hippy trail is alive and well in Pai, a cool, moist corner of a mountain-fortressed valley. A solid music, art and New Age scene has settled in with the town's more permanent population of Shan, Thai and Muslim Chinese, though in the high season Pai can feel completely overrun by *faràng*. The town itself can be explored in a matter of minutes, but the real adventure lies along the paths in the hills beyond.

Sights & Activities

Guesthouses can provide information on local trekking for as little as 700B per day if no rafts or elephants are involved.

Thai Adventure Rafting (☎ 0 5369 9111; www.activethailand.com/rafting; Th Rangsiyanon) has a great reputation (some companies are very lax about safety). Its two-day white-water rafting trips from Pai to Mae Hong Son cost 2400B per person.

Elephant rides through the jungle are just one of the choices at **Thom's Pai Elephant Camp Tours** (☎ 0 5369 9286; www.geocities.com/pai_tours; Th Rangsiyanon; 1-/2hr rides 300/450B). Other options include bamboo-raft trips and hill-tribe village stays.

Across Mae Nam Pai and 8km southeast of town is **Tha Pai Hot Springs** (admission free, soaking 50B), a scenic, well-kept local park. There is a dry-season camp site (30B per pitch) here.

Sleeping

The most atmospheric guesthouses are spread along the banks of Mae Nam Pai and they number in the dozens.

Good View Guest House (Ban Mae Yen; r 100-250B) This sociable place about a kilometre out of town has simple, shared bathroom, A-frame bungalows and rooms with views of the mountains and rice fields. There are lots of thatched communal areas with hammocks, and places for campfires.

Shan Guest House (☎ 0 5369 9162; off Th Rangsiyanon; r 100-300B) This well-run and well-worn spot is close to Pai's nightlife. A dining and lounging pavilion sits in the middle of a big pond.

Baan Pai Village (☎ 0 5369 8152; www.baanpaivillage.com; Th Wiang Tai; r 500-650B) Beautiful wooden bungalows set among winding pathways and a garden give Baan Pai charm.

Paradise (☎ 0 9838 7521; www.pairadise.com; 98 Mu 1, Ban Mae Yen; bungalows 650-1000B) Atop the ridge, Paradise features superstylish, spacious and chic bungalows among a pretty garden. The spring-fed pond is suitable for swimming.

Also recommended:

Pravee's House (☎ 0 5369 9368; Soi Wanchaloem; r 200-600B; ☎) An attractive house with large rooms and small verandas.

Pai River Corner (☎ 0 5369 9049; www.pairivercorner.com; Th Chaisongkhram; r 3000-6000B; ☎) Elegant rooms by the river for the design-conscious.

Eating & Drinking

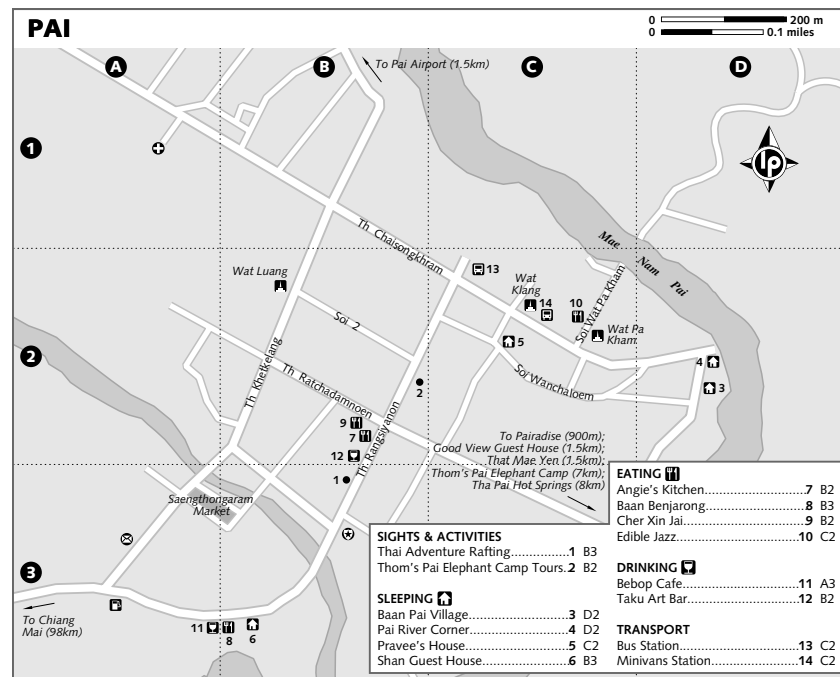
Pai's expat population has generated a large and varied roster of restaurants.

Cher Xin Jai (Th Ratchadamnoen; mains 20B; ☎) breakfast & lunch) This simple place with low tables on rattan mats serves delicious and cheap vegan Thai food.

Edible Jazz (Soi Wat Pa Kham; mains 30-90B; ☎) lunch & dinner) The cushions-on-the-floor atmosphere makes this place a good choice for a leisurely late-night pasta, sandwiches or Mexican. Jazz CDs play in the background and occasionally the Thai owner breaks out the guitar.

Baan Benjarong (☎ 0 5369 8010; Th Rangsiyanon; mains 40-120B; ☎) lunch & dinner) It doesn't look much from outside, but this could be the best Thai food in Pai, and the tables in the back have views of the rice paddies.

Taku Art Bar (Th Rangsiyanon) Partially owned by a well-known Thai artist, Taku is the main centre for visiting Thai hipsters. Both the



music (live and otherwise) and the pop-arty décor are rather funky.

Also recommended:

Angie's Kitchen (☎ 0 5369 9105; Th Rangsiyanon; mains 30-100B; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) All the typical Thai and Western dishes balanced by unusual fruit shake mixes.

Bebop Cafe (Th Rangsiyanon) This old traveller favourite hosts blues, R&B and rock bands nightly.

Getting There & Away

Siam General Aviation (☎ 0 2664 6099; www.sga.aero) has daily Chiang Mai flights (one way 1450B, 35 minutes).

Buses to Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 80/142B, four hours) and Mae Hong Son (ordinary/air-con 70/98B, three hours) leave five times daily. Air-con minibuses (150B) to these towns go hourly.

MAE HONG SON

pop 8300

Hemmed in by mountains, Mae Hong Son, Thailand's far northwestern provincial capital, feels like the end of the road, but because of the surrounding beauty and hill-tribe villages,

it's a solid link in the tourist trail. The town's population is predominantly Shan, but the feel is more a Thai town than minority mountain getaway.

Among the province's biggest draws are the 'long-necked' Padaung refugee villages where women wear brass coils to push down the collarbone and rib cage. Opinions vary on whether visiting these villages is constructive (they fled ethnic conflict in Myanmar and survive on tourist dollars) or exploitive (body modification was dying out before tourists started coming, now young girls are getting it).

Information

There are plenty of banks with ATMs and foreign-exchange services on Th Khunlum Praphat. Internet access is widely available.

Post office (Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

Srisangwal Hospital (☎ 0 5361 1378; Th Singhanat Bamrung)

TAT (☎ 0 5362 3016; Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Singhanat Bamrung)

Sights & Activities

More impressive than Shan-built **Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu** itself are the views of Mae Hong Son from this hill located west of town; especially when early-morning seas of fog fill the valley.

Burmese-style **Wat Jong Klang** and **Wat Jong Kham** are the focal points of the **Poi Sang Long Festival** in March, when young Shan boys are ordained as novice monks. The boys, dressed in ornate costumes, are carried on the shoulders of friends or relatives around the temples under festive parasols.

The guesthouses in town arrange **treks** (per person per day about 700-800B) to the nearby hill-tribe villages and **white-water rafting** on Mae Nam Pai. Reliable operators include the following:

Friend Tour (☎ 0 5361 1647; 21 Th Pradit Jong Kham)

Rosegarden Tours (☎ 0 5361 1577; www.rosegarden-tours.com; 86/4 Th Khunlum Praphut)

Sunflower Café Tour (☎ 0 5362 0549; www.sunflowercafétour.com; Th Udom Chaonithet)

Tour Merng Thai (☎ 0 5361 1979; Th Khunlum Praphat)

Sleeping

Johnnie House (☎ 0 5361 1667; Th Pradit Jong Kham; r 100-250B) The new rooms with private hot-water showers and lake views are an excellent deal here. The shared bathrooms are much more basic.

Pana Huts (☎ 0 5361 4331; www.panahuts.com; 293/9 Mu 11 Pang Moo; bungalows 400-500B) These cute bamboo huts on a jungle hill on the edge of town have pots of flowers and other charms. There is a campfire pit in the rustic communal area and the food is quite good.

Piya Guest House (☎ 0 5361 1260; 1/1 Th Khunlum Praphat; bungalows 600B; ♿) This well-managed place has cement bungalows with wooden floors set around a quiet garden with small lotus ponds. There is a pleasant lake view from the restaurant up front.

Sang Tong Huts (☎ 0 5362 0680; www.sangtonghuts.com; bungalows 700-1600B; ♿) Each of these eclectic hillside huts on the edge of town is individually styled and decorated using many natural materials. Staying here brings a sense of being in nature.

Fern Resort (☎ 0 5368 6110; www.fernsort.info; 64 Mu Bo, Tambon Pha Bong; standard/deluxe/ste 1500/1800/2500B;

♿ ♿) This lush, ecofriendly resort 9km outside town (free transport available) features Shan-style wooden bungalows with stylishly decorated interiors. To encourage community-based tourism, most of the employees come from local villages.

Also recommended:

Princes Guest House (☎ 0 5361 1136; princesguesthouse@gmail.com; Th Pradit Jong Kham; r 150-400B; ♿ ♿) Spotless, great-value rooms on the lake.

Romtai (☎ 0 5361 2437; Th Chumnanatit; r 250-600B; ♿) Spacious, clean rooms and bungalows looking over a garden.

Eating & Drinking

Sunflower Café (☎ 0 5362 0549; Th Udom Chaonithet; mains 40-150B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A fine place to while away some time, Sunflower offers freshly baked breads, serious soups and salads, and popular pizzas.

Kai Mook (☎ 0 5361 2092; 23 Th Udom Chaonithet; mains 55-160B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This smart, open-air restaurant has one of the better Thai-Chinese menus in town, with creative specialties like *yam bai kùt* (yam with fern leaves).

Crossroads (Th Singhanat Bamrun; mains 50-200B) This two-storey bar set in a wooden house is a friendly, laid-back place with a pool table and huge cocktail list.

Also recommended:

BBQ Corner (☎ 08 1385 7277; Th Udom Chaonithet; all-you-can-eat 69B; ☺ dinner) Cook your all-you-can-eat meal right at your table.

La Tasca (☎ 0 5361 1344; Th Khunlum Praphat; mains 90-145B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Decent pizzas, pastas and calzones.

Getting There & Away

Thai Airways (☎ 0 5361 2220; www.thaiair.com; Th Singhanat Bamrun; one-way 1270B) and **Nok Air** (☎ 1318; www.nokair.com; one-way 900B) fly to Chiang Mai in 35 minutes. **PB Air** (☎ 0 5361 4369; www.pbair.com; one-way 2370B) flies direct from Bangkok.

There are two bus routes from Chiang Mai: the northern (ordinary/air-con 142/200B, seven hours) is faster by about an hour and has the best scenery, but the southern (ordinary/air-con 187/337B, eight hours) includes more bathroom breaks and smells better (ie fewer motion-sick passengers).

THA TON

In the far northern corner of Chiang Mai Province, little Tha Ton is the launching point for river trips to Chiang Rai, and, to a much

lesser degree, for hill-tribe treks. The relaxing ride down Mae Nam Kok is a big hit with tourists, and the villages along the way are geared up for visitors.

The best places to stay in Tha Ton tend to be on the opposite side of the river from the riverboat dock, including spic-and-span **Thaton Garden Riverside** (☎ 0 5345 9286; r 300-500B; ♿).

From Chiang Mai's Chang Pheuk terminal you can take a bus (ordinary 90B, four hours, seven daily). Direct or air-con minivans (120B, 3½ hours, half-hourly) depart from behind Chang Pheuk on Soi Sanam Kila for Fang where yellow *sawnthūew* continue to Tha Thon (20B, 40 minutes).

Chiang Rai-bound boats (350B, three to five hours) taking up to 12 passengers leave Tha Ton at 12.30pm. More comfortable six-person charters are available for 2200B. Another alternative are three-day bamboo house-raft rides with stops in the villages along the way. Guesthouses run these trips for 2500B per person, but if you organise it yourself, it could cost around 1900B for a six-person raft.

CHIANG RAI

pop 73,300

Leafy and well groomed, Chiang Rai is more liveable than visitable, lacking any major tourist attractions; though the fact that it's less polluted and more laid-back than Chiang Mai are good enough reasons to come here, plus it's an exceptional spot for arranging hill-tribe treks.

Information

You'll have no problem finding banks and internet access.

Orn's Bookshop (☎ 08 1022 0318; ☺ 8am-8pm) Turn right down the *soi* past Boonbunda Guest House.

Overbrook Hospital (☎ 0 5371 1366; Th Singkhlaei)

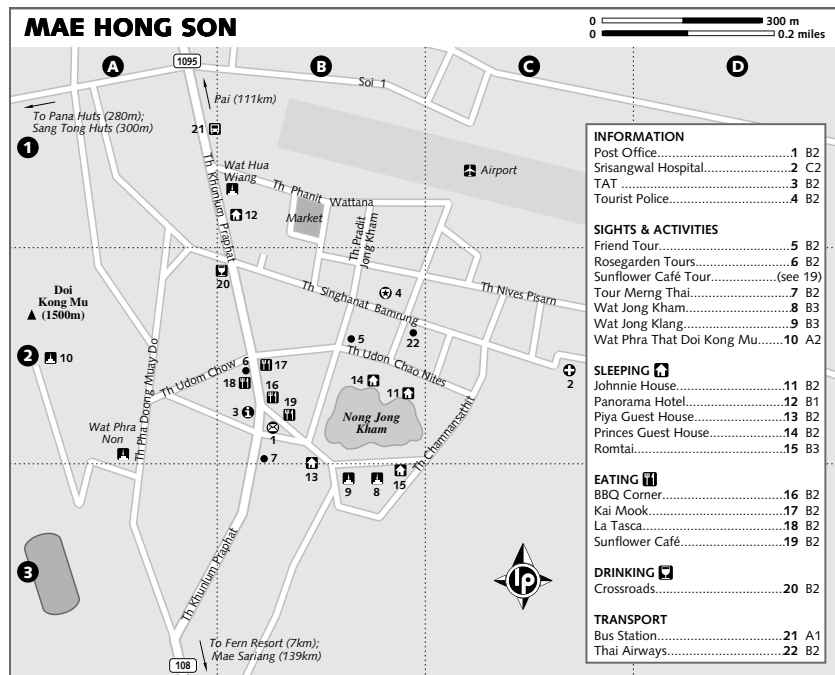
Post office (Th Utrakit; ☺ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun)

TAT (☎ 0 5374 4674; Th Singkhlaei; ☺ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Tourist police (☎ 1115; Th Pahonyothin)

Sights

In the mid-14th century, lightning cracked the *chedi* at **Wat Phra Kaew** revealing the much-honoured Emerald Buddha (now at Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew, see p114). There is now a near copy of the original sculpture here, and another at nearby **Wat Phra Singh**. **Wat Rong Khun**, 13km south of town,



is a unique contemporary take on temple design.

The **Hilltribe Museum & Education Center** (☎ 0 5374 0088; www.pda.or.th/chiangrai; 620/1 Th Thanalai; admission 50B; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun), run by the nonprofit PDA, is very educational.

Trekking

More than 30 travel agencies, guesthouses and hotels offer trekking trips. Daily rates average 950B per person. Profits from the following agencies go directly to community-development projects.

Akha River House (☎ 08 9997 5505; www.akhahill.com; 423/25 Soi 1, Th Kohloy) Wholly owned and managed by Akha people.

Mirror Art Group (☎ 0 5373 7412; www.mirrorartgroup.org; 106 Mu 1, Ban Huay Khom, Tambon Mae Yao) One-week homestay programmes are a speciality. Volunteer opportunities available.

Natural Focus (☎ 0 5371 5696; www.naturalfocuscenter.com; 129/1 Soi 4, Th Pa-Ngiw, Rop Wiang) Specialising in nature tours.

PDA Tours & Travel (☎ 0 5374 0088; cpdatour@hotmail.com; Hilltribe Museum & Education Center; 620/1 Th Thanalai) Culturally sensitive tours led by PDA-trained hill-tribe members.

Sleeping

our pick Akha River House (☎ 0 5371 5084; www.akha.info; 423/25 Soi 1, Th Kohloy; s 100-200, d 150-300B; ☎) This Akha-owned guesthouse has comfortable rooms and bungalows in a manicured

garden, a lounge area along the river and free bikes. Some profits go towards community projects.

City Home (☎ 0 5360 0155; 868 Th Phahonyothin; r 400B; ☎) Down a tiny soi, smack in the middle of town, this quiet four-storey hotel offers excellent value.

Golden Triangle Inn (☎ 0 5371 1339/6996; www.goldenchiangrai.com; 590/2 Th Phahonyothin; r incl breakfast 800B; ☎) Though it has 39 rooms, all with tile or wood floors and stylish furniture but no TVs, this place feels more like a home than a hotel.

Also recommended:

Pam's Guest House (☎ 08 9433 5134; Th Jet Yot; r 150-250B) Plain, but clean and friendly.

Boonbundan Guest House (☎ 0 5375 2413; 1005/13 Th Jet Yot; r 170-500B; ☎) The old favourite has something to suit every budget.

Legend of Chiang Rai (☎ 0 5391 0400; www.thelegend-chiangrai.com; 124/15 Th Kohloy; studio 3900-5900, villa 8100B; ☎) Perfect if you want to be pampered.

Eating

Muang Thong Restaurant (☎ 0 5371 1162; Th Phahonyothin; mains 60-100B; ☎ 24hr) Packed nightly for Thai and Chinese dishes such as *kaeng pàa phèt*, a delicious duck curry.

Aye's Restaurant (☎ 0 5375 2535; 869/170 Th Phahonyothin; mains 90-500B; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Rattan furniture and parasols give this friendly spot a slightly colonial feel, and everything from the steak schnitzel to the curries is tasty and well presented.

Old Siam (☎ 0 5371 4282; 541/2 Th Phahonyothin; mains 105-250B; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Low lighting and lovely decoration make this teak house a romantic gem. The fish and curry dishes are quite good.

Also recommended:

BaanChivitMai Bakery (☎ 08 1764 7020; Th Prasopsuk; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun) Profits from this Swedish bakery at the bus station support work with orphans.

Cabbages & Condoms (☎ 0 5395 2314; 620/1 Th Thanalai; mains 35-200B; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Decent northern Thai food, and all profits to PDA.

Il Pirata (☎ 08 9758 9173; 868/8 Th Phahonyothin; mains 50-200B; ☎) lunch & dinner) A simple Italian-run Italian restaurant.

The night market, off Th Phahonyothin, offers a good collection of food stalls, plus music and dance shows.

Getting There & Away

Chiang Rai Airport (☎ 0 5379 3048), 8km north of town, fields eight daily Bangkok flights. **Air Asia** (☎ 0 5379 3545; www.airasia.com), with prices starting at 1400B, is the cheapest. **One-Two-Go** (☎ 0 5379 3555; www.fly12go.com) and **Thai Airways** (☎ 0 5371 1179; www.thaiair.com; 870 Th Phahonyothin) are the competition.

Chiang Rai is also accessible by a popular boat journey originating from Tha Ton (see p145 for details). Boats head upriver daily at 10.30am.

Chiang Rai's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 5371 1224; Th Prasopsuk) is in the heart of town. Buses head frequently to Bangkok (air-con/VIP 511/900B, 11 hours), Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 100/140B, three hours) and Chiang Khong (ordinary 57B, 2½ hours).

GOLDEN TRIANGLE & AROUND

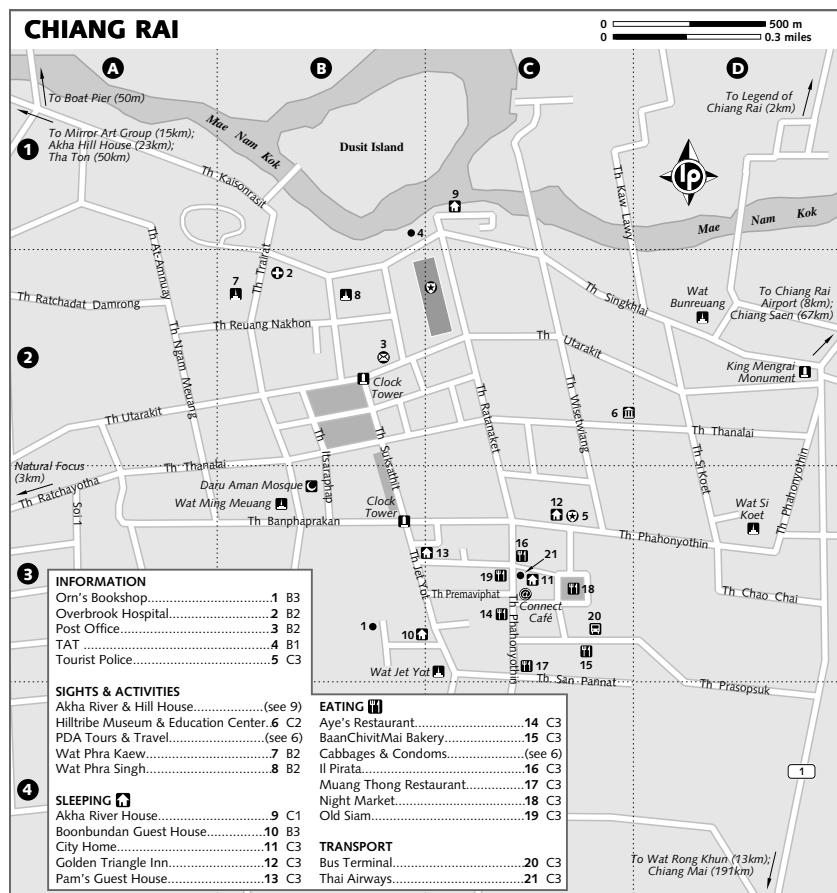
The tri-country border between Thailand, Myanmar and Laos forms the legendary Golden Triangle, a mountainous frontier where the opium poppy was once an easy cash crop for the region's ethnic minorities. As early as the 1600s, opium joined the Asian trade route, along with spices and other natural resources, and the world was soon hooked on opium and its derivatives, morphine and heroin. While Myanmar and Laos remain big players in the drug trade, Thailand has successfully stamped out its cultivation through crop-substitution programmes and aggressive law enforcement. Today the region's sordid past is marketed as a tourist attraction. Sop Ruak, which sits at the junction, has become a tour-bus tourist trap, but other villages in this area are worth a look.

CHIANG SAEN

pop 55,000

Despite steady riverbarge traffic trade with China, Chiang Saen remains a pretty sleepy town. You can while away a day exploring the scattered ruins of the long-extinct Chiang Saen kingdom, visiting the small **Chiang Saen National Museum** (☎ 0 5377 7102; 702 Th Phahonyothin; admission 30B; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Wed-Sun) or watching boat traffic.

Simple but good-value rooms and A-frame bungalows, a handy (though slightly noisy) location opposite the river and night market, plus a variety of travel services available on site have made **Chiang Saen Guest House** (☎ 0 5365 0196; s/d with shared bathroom 80/100B,



CROSSING INTO CHINA: CHIANG SAEN TO JĪNGHÓNG

Although it was once possible to travel by cargo ship from Chiang Saen to JĪnghóng in China, now it's only permitted via passenger boat through **Xishuangbanna Tianda Tourism & Shipping** (☎ 0 5365 1136, 08 9637 1178; one way/return 4000/7000B; ☎ 8am-5pm). The office is located on the main road opposite the Chiang Saen port (1km south of the ferry pier). The 50-seater speedboat goes through Myanmar and Laos but passengers stay on board. To do this trip you must already have your visa for China (quicker to arrange from Chiang Mai or Bangkok). The people at Chiang Saen Guest House (p147) can book you a ticket and help you get a visa for China. It takes at least four workdays to get the visa.

The trip from Chiang Saen to JĪnghóng takes 15 hours when conditions are good. During drier months the going is slower, as rocks and shallows can hamper the way. When this is the case a night's stay in Guanlei is included. Boats depart from Chiang Saen on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday at 5am.

s/d 200/250B, bungalows 250B) a longtime favourite with travellers.

Chiang Saen is most easily reached by bus via Chiang Rai (33B, 1½ hours). Blue *sǎwngthǎew* go to Chiang Khong (60B, two hours).

CHIANG KHONG

pop 9000

More remote yet more lively than Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong is an important market town for local hill tribes: several villages inhabited by Mien and White Hmong are nearby. Lots of travellers pass this way between Thailand and Laos. Several banks have branches in town with ATMs and foreign exchange services.

There is no shortage of lodging in town, much of it on the river. **Reuan Thai Sophaphan** (☎ 0 5379 1023; p_durasawang@hotmail.com; 8 Th Sai Klang; r 200-600B; ☎) has spacious rooms in a beautiful teak building while the southern location of **Nomad's Guest House** (☎ 0 5365 5537; 153/4 Mu 3, Baan Sop Som; r 200-500B; ☎) makes it a good place for

people who aren't getting on the morning's first bus or ferry.

Buses depart hourly for Chiang Rai (57B, 2½ hours) and daily for Bangkok (air-con/VIP 493/985B, 12 hours). Boats taking up to 10 passengers can be chartered up the Mekong River to Chiang Saen for 2700B.

NAN

pop 24,300

Nan was a semiautonomous kingdom until 1931, and it still retains something of its former isolation and individuality along with parts of the old city wall.

Information

Internet services and banks with ATMs are easy to find.

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

Tourist information centre (☎ 0 5471 0216; Th Pha Kong; ☎ 8am-5pm)

Sights & Activities

Survey the town's distinctive Lanna and Thai Lü-influenced **temples** and take a look at Wat Phumin's **murals**. Visiting the **National Museum** (☎ 0 5477 2777; Th Pha Kong; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-noon, 1-4pm) helps to pass an unhurried day. Many visitors stop in Nan only long enough to arrange a trek into mountainous **Doi Phu Kha National Park** (☎ 0 5470 1000; admission 400B) and Mabri, Hmong, Mien, Thai Lü and Htin villages.

Ever reliable **Fhu Travel Service** (☎ 0 5471 0636; www.fhuttravel.com; 453/4 Th Sumonthewarat) has been leading treks to hill-tribe villages in the surrounding mountains for two decades. Tours start from 800B per person per day. Fhu also offers boat, bike and elephant trips.

CROSSING INTO LAOS: CHIANG KHONG TO HUAY XAI

Ferries (20B) make the passage from Chiang Khong to the Lao village of Huay Xai frequently between 8am and 6pm from Tha Reua Bak, a pier situated at the northern end of Chiang Khong. If you're driving, there's the option of a vehicle ferry (US\$50). The two-day boat trips to Luang Prabang are a good way to continue on. For information on crossing the border in the other direction, see p314.

Sleeping

Doi Phukha Guest House (☎ 0 5475 1517; 94/5 Soi 1, Th Arayawarat; s/d 100/150B) The helpful English-speaking owner is the best asset at this rambling old house north of the centre.

SP Guest House (☎ 0 5477 489; Soi Tok Huawiang Tai; r 250-350B; ☎) All rooms at this well-situated guesthouse are large and well-equipped, making it the best value in town.

Dhevaraj Hotel (☎ 0 5471 0078; www.dhevarajho tel.com; 466 Th Sumonthewarat; r incl breakfast 700-1200B; ☎ ☎ ☎) This city-centre hotel is a tad disorganised, but the rooms are clean with the amenities you'd expect at this price.

Eating

Yota Vegetarian Restaurant (Th Mahawong; mains 10-35B; ☎ breakfast & lunch) The owner here is the friendliest lady in town, and she will not let you walk away hungry.

Da Dario (☎ 08 7184 5436; Th Mahayot; mains 40-160B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Italian restaurant gets it right in all regards from the homy atmosphere and attentive service to it's mixed Western and Thai menu. Breakfast and lunch are served at the Th Mahayot location and then the action moves around the corner to Th Anantaworaritidet at 5pm.

The night market on Th Anantaworaritidet by the junction with Th Pha Kong, has some tasty food stall offerings.

Getting There & Away

PB Air (☎ 0 5477 1729; www.pbair.com) flies to Bangkok (one way 3160B) once daily.

The government bus station is about 500m southwest of town. Buses travel frequently to Bangkok (air-con/VIP 388/770B, 10 to 11 hours), occasionally to Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con/VIP 158/221/440B, seven hours) and once daily to Chiang Rai (air-con 150B, seven hours).

LAMPANG & AROUND

Lampang is like a low-key, laid-back little Chiang Mai. Like its larger sibling, Lampang was constructed as a walled rectangle and boasts magnificent temples.

Sights & Activities**TEMPLES & MUSEUMS**

Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao is one of the many former homes of the Emerald Buddha, now residing in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew (p114). Its **Lanna Museum** (admission by donation) displays

religious paraphernalia and woodwork. Nearby, **Baan Sao Nak** (Many Pillars House; ☎ 0 5422 7653; admission 30B; ☎ 10am-5pm) is a huge teak Lanna-style house supported by 116 teak pillars and furnished with Burmese and Thai antiques. Three rooms display northern Thai crafts.

The wooden *mondòp* (a square, spire-topped shrine room) at **Wat Pongsanuk Tai** is one of the best remaining local examples of original Lanna-style temple architecture, which emphasised open-sided wooden buildings. The old town's other fine structures include **Wat Si Rong Meuang** and **Wat Si Chum**, both built in the late 19th century by Burmese artisans.

In the village of **Ko Kha**, 18km to the south-west of Lampang, lies **Wat Phra That Lampang Luang**, arguably the most beautiful wooden Lanna temple in northern Thailand. It is an amazing structure with walls like a huge medieval castle. Three small museums outside the southern gate display Buddha images, festival paraphernalia and other ethnographic artefacts. To get here, catch an eastbound *sǎwngthǎew* (20B) on Th Rawp Wiang to Ko Kha's *sǎwngthǎew* station where it's a 3km chartered motorcycle taxi ride (30B) to the temple.

NATIONAL ELEPHANT INSTITUTE

The **National Elephant Institute** (☎ 0 5422 8035; www.thaielephant.org; admission 50B; ☎ elephant bathing 9.45am & 1.15pm) protects elephants by promoting ecotourism, providing medical care and training young elephants. The centre features elephant shows (10am, 11am and 1.30pm) and rides through the surrounding forest. Rides operate between 8am and 3.30pm and cost 100B (10 minutes) to 800B (one hour) depending on duration. There are also a variety of mahout courses including a one-day introduction (2500B) and a three-day (8000B) homestay programme.

Bus and *sǎwngthǎew* (25B) bound for Chiang Mai will drop you off 1.5km away where vans (20B) shuttle visitors to the centre.

HORSE CARRIAGE RIDES

Lampang is known throughout Thailand as Meuang Rot Mah (Horse Cart City) because it's the only town in Thailand where horse-drawn carriages are still used as transport. A 15-minute/one-hour ride around town costs 150/300B.

Sleeping & Eating

Tip Inn Guest House (☎ 0 5422 1821; 143 Th Talat Kao; r 100-160B; 🍷 🍴) Friendly hosts, very basic rooms. A renovation is planned.

Riverside Guest House (☎ 0 5422 7005; www.riversidelampang.com; 286 Th Talat Kao; r 300-600B, ste 800B; 🍷) The walls are thin, but this characterful, restored teak building tucked away near the river is still a champ. There is a midnight curfew.

Pin Hotel (☎ 0 5422 1509; 8 Th Suan Dok; r from 450B; 🍷) The pristine and quiet Pin feels like a Hyatt or Marriott, only smaller and more intimate.

Heuan Chom Wang (☎ 0 5422 2845; 276 Th Talat Kao; mains 40-120B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This romantic riverside spot in a beautiful old teak building serves northern and central Thai fare.

Riverside Bar & Restaurant (☎ 0 5422 1861; 328 Th Thip Chang; mains 45-225B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Set in a rambling old teak structure on the river, this is *the* place to be in Lampang. There's live music, a full bar and an enormous menu of vegetarian, northern Thai and Western dishes, though pass on the pasta.

Getting There & Away

PB Air (☎ 0 5422 6238, www.pbair.com; one way 1950B) flies daily to Bangkok. Buses to Lampang (ordinary/air-con 51/71B, two hours) leave Chiang Mai's Arcade terminal every half-hour during the day and also from a small bus station near TAT. The **bus terminal** (☎ 0 5427 7410) in Lampang is some way out of town; 15B by shared *sāwngthāew*. You can also travel between Lampang and Chiang Mai by train (2nd/3rd class 50/23B, two hours).

SUKHOTHAI

pop 39,800

The Khmer empire extended its influence deep into modern-day Thailand before a formidable rival arose in 1257 to undermine the distant throne's frontier. Naming its capital Sukhothai (Rising Happiness), the emerging Thai nation flourished militarily, claiming lands as far north as Vientiane, and culturally, developing a Thai alphabet and distinctive architecture and art. All this was accomplished in 150 years, before Sukhothai was superseded by Ayuthaya to the south. If you can only digest one 'ancient city', Sukhothai should top the list; the ruins here are better preserved and less urban than those at Ayuthaya. While the old city will charm the pants off anyone, the

modern town of Sukhothai (12km from the ruins) is the embodiment of ordinary.

Information

Post office (Th Nikhon Kasem; 📧 8.30am-noon Mon-Fri, 1-4.30pm Sat & Sun)

Sukhothai hospital (☎ 0 5561 0280; Th Jarot Withithong)

Tourist police (☎ 1155) At Sukhothai Historical Park.

Sights & Activities

SUKHOTHAI HISTORICAL PARK

The original capital of the first Thai kingdom was surrounded by three concentric ramparts and two moats bridged by four gateways. Today the remains of 21 historic sites lie within the old walls, with another 70 within a 5km radius. The ruins are divided into five zones, and there is a 30B admission fee for each zone; the central zone is 40B. A 150B ticket includes entrance to all sites and associated museums. Thailand's **Loi Krathong festival** originated here and is celebrated over five days. In addition to the magical floating lights, there are fireworks, folk-dance performances and a light-and-sound production.

The **historical park** (🕒 6am-6pm), known as *meuang kao* (old city), is best reached from town by frequent *sāwngthāew* (15B, 30 minutes) leaving from the south side of Th Jarot Withithong near Mae Nam Yom. Bicycles (20B per day) are the best way of getting around the park and can be rented near the park entrance. The park operates a tram service through the old city for 20B per person.

Central Zone

Ramkhamhaeng National Museum (☎ 0 5561 2167; admission 30B; 🕒 9am-4pm) provides an excellent introduction to Sukhothai history and culture.

The crown jewel of the old city, **Wat Mahathat**, is one of the best examples of Sukhothai architecture, typified by the classic lotus-bud stupa that features a conical spire topping a square-sided structure on a three-tiered base. This vast assemblage, the largest in the city, once contained 198 *chedi*, as well as various chapels and sanctuaries. Some of the original Buddha images remain, including a 9m standing Buddha among the broken columns.

Wat Si Sawai, just south of Wat Mahathat, has three Khmer-style *praang* and a pictur-

esque moat. **Wat Sa Si** is a classically simple Sukhothai-style temple set on an island. **Wat Trapang Thong**, next to the museum, is reached by the footbridge crossing the large, lotus-filled pond that surrounds it. It remains in use today.

Other Zones

In the northwestern corner, **Wat Si Chum** contains a massive seated Buddha tightly squeezed into an open, walled *mondòp*. Somewhat isolated to the north of the city, **Wat Phra Pai Luang** is similar in style to Wat Si Sawai, but the *praang* are larger. The large, bell-shaped stupa at **Wat Chang Lom**, to the east, is supported by 36 elephants sculpted into its base. **Wat Saphan Hin**, on a hill 4km west of the old city walls, features a 12.5m-high standing Buddha image looking back to Sukhothai.

Sleeping

Most accommodation is in New Sukhothai, and budget options predominate. The local taxi mafia is particularly obnoxious here; don't believe anyone who tells you a guesthouse has closed. Many guesthouses offer free pick-up from the bus terminal.

Garden House (☎ 0 5561 1395; tuigardenhouse@yahoo.com; 11/1 Th Prawet Nakhon; r 150B, bungalows 250-350B; 🍷 🍴) This popular and great-value place has characterful bungalows with large terraces and well-kept rooms in a wooden house. The restaurant screens movies nightly.

Ban Thai (☎ 0 5561 0163; banthai_guesthouse@yahoo.com; 38 Th Prawet Nakhon; r 150B, bungalows 250-450B; 🍷) As friendly as they come, Ban Thai's excellent rooms (the cheapest with shared bathrooms) sit around an intimate garden. This is a great resource for local information, and it runs a range of interesting bicycle tours (half-/full day 400/700B).

Lotus Village (☎ 0 5562 1484; www.lotus-village.com; 17 Th Ratchathani; r 350-1350B; 🍷 🍴) These Thai-style houses with tastefully decorated modern rooms and bungalows sit in a lush garden among lotus ponds. There's a spa, arty boutique and communal seating area.

Ruean Thai Hotel (☎ 0 5561 2444; www.ruean thaihotel.com; 181/20 Soi Pracha Ruammit, Th Jarot Withithong; r 250-2500B; 🍷 🍴 🍷) This antique-filled, two-storey hotel has heaps of character and prices to meet everyone's budget. The cheapest rooms are nothing special, but hit the midrange and they are quite nice indeed.

Other recommendations:

Ninety-Nine Guest House (☎ 0 5561 1315; 234/6 Soi Panitsan; s/d 120/150B) A two-storey teak house surrounded by gardens.

River House (☎ 0 5562 0396; riverhouse_7@hotmail.com; 7 Soi Watkuhasuwan; r 150-350B) Simple, tidy rooms in an old teak house overlooking the river.

Old City Guest House (☎ 0 5569 7515; 28/7 Mu 3; r 120-600B; 🍷) A range of rooms around an old teak house close to the Historical Park.

Eating

Kuaytiaw Thai Sukhothai (Th Jarot Withithong; mains 20-30B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This is a good spot to try Sukhothai-style *kuaytiaw*.

Poo Restaurant (☎ 0 5561 1735; 24/3 Th Jarot Withithong; mains 25-80B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple bar-restaurant in the heart of town offers great breakfasts, hearty sandwiches and very tasty Thai dishes – plus delectable chocolates.

Dream Café (☎ 0 5561 2081; 86/1 Th Singsawat; mains 60-140B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This compelling café is a treasure-trove of 19th-century Thai antiques. The food is no slouch either, with a selection of sandwiches, pastas, Thai standards and 'stamina drinks'.

The **night market** (Th Jarot Withithong & Th Rat Uthit), near the bridge has tasty treats and many vendors have bilingual menus. There is a collection of food stalls and simple open-air restaurants near the ticket kiosk in the historical park.

Getting There & Away

Bangkok Airways (☎ 0 5564 7224; www.bangkokair.com) operates a daily flight from Bangkok (1700B, 70 minutes) and Chiang Mai (1440B, 40 minutes). Bangkok Airways charges 120B to transport passengers between the airport and Sukhothai; the airport is 27km out of town.

The **bus terminal** (☎ 0 5561 4529) is 4km northwest of the town centre. Options include Bangkok (air-con/VIP 273/407B, seven hours), Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 167/234B, five hours) and Khon Kaen (ordinary/air-con 179/322B, 6½ hours).

Getting Around

A chartered *sāwngthāew* should cost 40B to any guesthouse from the bus terminal. Shared rides (10B) run down Th Jarot Withithong. *Sāamlāw* and motorbike taxi rides should cost 30B in town or 80B to the

historical park. Poo Restaurant and several guesthouses hire motorcycles.

SI SATCHANALAI-CHALIANG HISTORICAL PARK

Set amid rolling mountains 56km north of Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai and Chaliang were a later extension of the Sukhothai empire. The 13th- to 15th-century ruins in the **historical park** (☎ 0 5567 9211; admission 40B or free with all-inclusive Sukhothai ticket; 🕒 8.30am-5pm) are in the same basic style as those in Sukhothai Historical Park, but the setting is more peaceful and almost seems untouched. The **information centre** (🕒 8.30am-5pm) distributes free park maps and has a small historical exhibit. Bikes (20B) can be hired around town, or take the tram (20B) site to site.

Wat Chedi Jet Thaew has seven rows of stupas in classic Sukhothai style. **Wat Chang Lom** has a *chedi* surrounded by Buddha statues set in niches and guarded by the fine remains of elephant buttresses. Head along the riverside for 2km to **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat** (admission 10B), a very impressive temple with well-preserved *praang* and a variety of seated and standing Buddhas. Climb to the top of the hill supporting **Wat Khao Phanom Phloeng** for a view over the town and river.

The beautiful pottery of the Si Satchanalai-Sukhothai area was once exported across Asia. Much of it was made in Si Satchanalai, and rejects, buried in the fields, are still being discovered. Several of the old kilns have been carefully excavated and can be viewed along with original pottery samples at the **Si Satchanalai Centre for Study & Preservation of Sangkhalok Kilns** (admission 30B or free with the all-inclusive Sukhothai ticket). There are two groups of kilns that are open to the public: one in Chaliang and the larger outdoor Sawankhalok Kilns site 5km northwest of the Si Satchanalai ruins.

Wang Yom Resort (Sunantha; ☎ 0 5563 1380; bungalows 600-1000B; 🍷) has rustic, worn bungalows in a mature garden just outside the old city. It's nothing special. There are more choices in the nearby town of Sawankhalok, about 20km south of the park.

Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park is off Rte 101 between Sawankhalok and new Si Satchanalai. From Sukhothai, take a Si Satchanalai bus (38B, 1½ hours) and ask to get off at *meuang kao*. The last bus back leaves around 4.30pm.

KAMPHAENG PHET

pop 27,500

Kamphaeng Phet (Diamond Wall) was once an important front line of defence for the Sukhothai kingdom. It's a nice place to spend a day wandering around the ruins and experiencing a small northern provincial capital that sees few tourists.

The **Kamphaeng Phet Historical Park** (☎ 0 5571 1921; admission 40B; 🕒 8am-5pm) contains a number of temple ruins and the very fine remains of a long city wall. The **Kamphaeng Phet National Museum** (☎ 0 5571 1570; admission 30B; 🕒 9am-noon & 1-4pm Wed-Sun) has a collection of artefacts from the Kamphaeng Phet area plus the usual survey of Thai art periods, while the **Kamphaeng Phet Regional Museum** (☎ 0 5572 2341; admission 10B; 🕒 9am-4pm) next door fills a series of central Thai-style wooden structures on stilts set among nicely landscaped grounds.

Among the many temples outside the city wall (included in the historical park ticket) are **Wat Phra Si Iriyabot**, which features the shattered remains of standing, sitting, walking and reclining Buddha images sculpted in the classic Sukhothai style, and **Wat Chang Rawp** (Elephant-Encircled Temple), which is just that, a temple with an elephant-butressed wall.

Sleeping & Eating

Three J Guest House (☎ 0 5571 3129; threejguest@hotmail.com; 79 Th Rachavitee; r 200-500B; 🍷 📺) This pleasant collection of bungalows, the cheapest with shared facilities, in a pretty garden has a very hospitable host. Bicycles and motorcycles are available for rent.

Phet Hotel (☎ 0 5571 2810; 189 Th Bamrungrat; r 500-800B; 🍷 📺 📺) This comfortable hotel features spacious, well-maintained, modern rooms with views over Kamphaeng Phet.

A small night market sets up every evening in front of the provincial offices, near the old city walls, and there are some cheap restaurants near the roundabout. There are also a few floating restaurants on the river, including **Phae Rim Ping** (☎ 0 5571 2767; mains 40-140B; 🍷 lunch & dinner).

Getting There & Away

The government bus station is across the river, so hop off in town when you arrive. Buses to Bangkok (air-con/VIP 215/274B, five hours) and Sukhothai (ordinary/air-con 39/70B, 1½ hours) leave throughout the day.

NORTHEAST THAILAND

For most travellers, and even many Thais, the northeast is Thailand's forgotten backyard. In some ways Isan, as the region is called, offers a glimpse of the Thailand of old: rice fields run to the horizon; water buffalo wade in muddy ponds; silk weaving remains a cottage industry; pedal rickshaw drivers pull passengers down city streets; and, even for people who've had to seek work in the city, hearts and minds are still tied to the village.

You'll also find as many differences as similarities to the rest of Thailand. The language, food and culture are more Lao than Thai, with hearty helpings of Khmer and Vietnamese thrown into the melting pot. And though it's Thailand's poorest region by far, based on an official government Well-Being Index the people of the northeast are also the nation's happiest; a fact that is evident if you spend even just a little time here.

And spend time here you should. The scenery along parts of the Mekong is often nothing short of amazing, Angkor temple ruins pepper the region and superb national parks protect some of the wildest corners of the country. Thailand's tourist trail is at its bumpiest here (English is rarely spoken), but the fantastic attractions and daily interactions will likely be highlights of your trip.

NAKHON RATCHASIMA (KHORAT)

pop 215,000

Khorat, the brash gateway to the northeast, is a city you grow to know. Get past the sprawl along Hwy 2 and you'll find a distinctly Isan city with many quiet nooks (inside the east side of the historic moat, for example), where Thai life, largely untouched by the country's booming tourist industry, goes on in its own uncompromising way.

Information

There are banks galore in Khorat, all with ATMs and exchange services.

Net Guru (☎ 0 4425 7441; Th Phoklang; per hr 20B;

🕒 24hr)

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

Ratchasima Hospital (☎ 0 4426 2000; Th Mittaphap)

TAT (☎ 0 4421 3666; 2102-2104 Th Mittaphap;

🕒 8.30am-4.30pm) On the western edge of town.

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Chang Pheuek) Opposite bus terminal 2.

Sights

In the city centre, the **Thao Suranari Memorial** honours a local heroine who led the inhabitants against Lao invaders during the reign of Rama III (r 1824-51). A holy shrine, the statue receives visitors who offer gifts and prayers or hire singers to perform Khorat folk songs. The steady activities of the devotees make for a lively cultural display. Behind the memorial is **Chumphon Gate**, the only original city gate still standing.

For a dose of Khmer and Ayuthaya art, visit **Maha Wirawong National Museum** (☎ 0 4424 2958; Th Ratchadamnoen; admission 10B; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Wed-Sun), housed in the grounds of Wat Sutchinda.

Sleeping

Doctor's House (☎ 0 4425 5846; 78 Soi 4, Th Seup Siri; r 150-180B) One of the few cheapies where guests bearing rucksacks are the norm, this old wooden home has three shared bathrooms, but it is not for party animals as the gate is locked at 10pm.

Tokyo Hotel Mansion (☎ 0 4424 2873; 331 Th Suranari; r 240-366B; 🍷 📺) Around the corner from the bus terminal, this hotel shows a little more attention to detail than most of Khorat's cheapies.

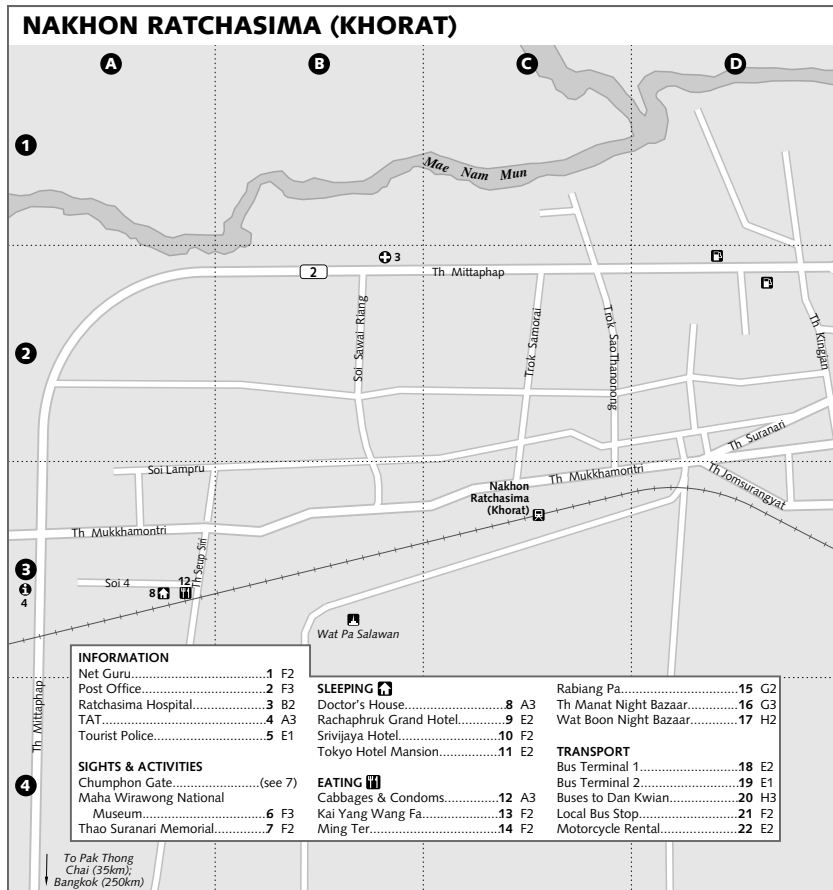
Srivijaya Hotel (☎ 0 4424 2194; 9-11 Th Buarong; r 480-530B; 🍷 📺) The Srivijaya is much too ordinary to deserve its self-appointed 'boutique hotel' label; nevertheless the comfy, spic-and-pan rooms guarantee a good night's sleep.

Rachaphruk Grand Hotel (☎ 0 4426 1222; www.rachaphruk.com; 311 Th Mittaphap; r 1200B; 🍷 📺 📺) 'Grand' is laying it on a little thick, but the only hotel in this class in the city centre is a decent bet if you fancy a few business-style comforts.

Eating

Cabbages & Condoms (☎ 0 4425 3760; 86/1 Th Seup Siri; mains 35-180B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Like the original in Bangkok, this is dining for a cause to help the PDA. It has a leafy terrace to indulge in a carefully crafted menu of Thai and Western favourites.

ourpick **Rabiang Pa** (☎ 0 4424 3137; 284 Th Yommarat; mains 40-220B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The leafiest, loveliest and lowest-key restaurant on this stretch of Th Yommarat has a massive picture menu for risk-free ordering.



Khorat is overflowing with tasty Thai and Chinese restaurants serving cheap meals, particularly along Th Ratchadamnoen near the Thao Suranari Memorial. Two notables are **Ming Ter** (☎ 0 4424 1718; 698 Th Ratchadamnoen; mains 25-60B; ☺ breakfast & lunch), a simple vegetarian affair, and **Kai Yang Wang Fa** (Th Ratchadamnoen; whole chicken 75B; ☺ lunch & dinner) with takeaway grilled chicken. The **Wat Boon Night Bazaar** (Th Chumphon) is the best night market for dining, though **Th Manat Night Bazaar** (Th Manat) is also fun.

Getting There & Away

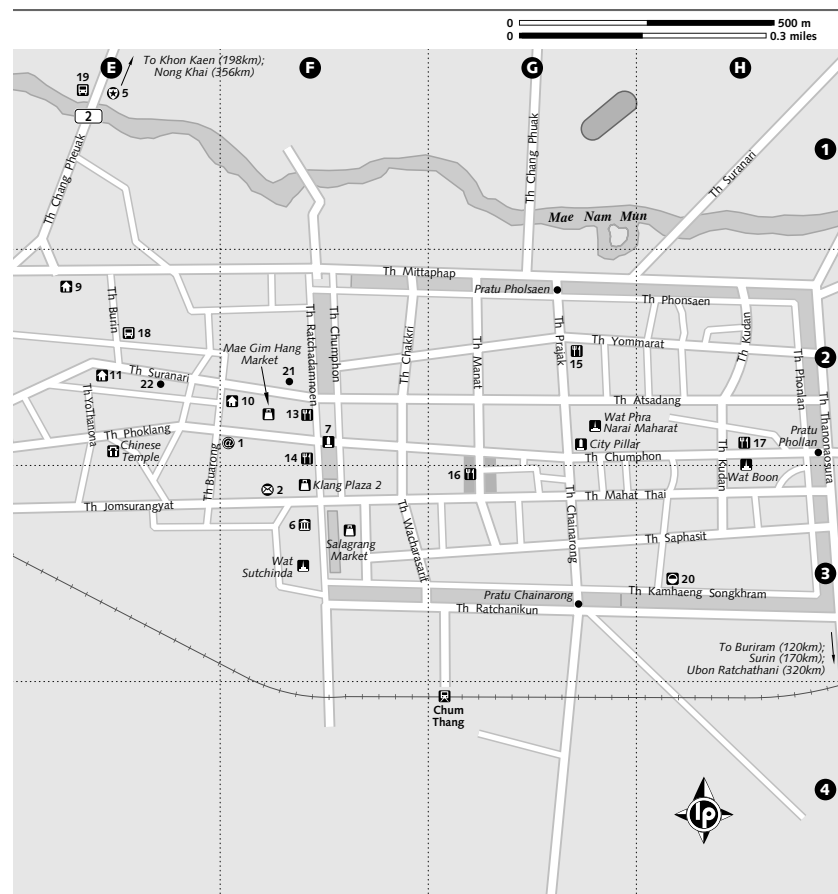
There are two bus terminals in Khorat. **Terminal 1** (☎ 0 4424 2899; Th Burin) in the city centre serves Bangkok and towns within the province. Other destinations, plus more Bangkok

buses, use **terminal 2** (☎ 0 4425 6006) off Hwy 2. There are frequent departures to Bangkok (air-con 212B, three hours), Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 155/279B, seven hours) and Nong Khai (ordinary/air-con 220/338B, six hours).

Eleven trains a day connect Khorat with Bangkok's Hualamphong train station (1st/2nd/3rd class 460/221/95B), and 10 continue to Ubon Ratchathani (1st/2nd/3rd class 268/133/58B). The fastest trains to Bangkok take 4½ hours.

Getting Around

Săwngthăew (8B) run fixed routes through the city, with most starting at bus terminal 1 and then passing down Th Suranari. **Săwngthăew**



1 takes you past the train station and near Doctor's House and the TAT office, while **săwngthăew** 15 takes a scenic route to bus terminal 2.

Túk-túk and motorcycle taxis cost between 30B and 70B to most places around town. Several shops on Th Suranari near the intersection with Th Buarong hire motorcycles.

AROUND NAKHON RATCHASIMA Phimai

One of northeastern Thailand's finest surviving Khmer temple complexes sits at the heart of this innocuous little town 60km northeast of Khorat. Originally started by Khmer King Jayavarman V in the late 10th century and finished by King Suryavarman I early in the

11th, **Prasat Phimai** (☎ 0 4447 1568; admission 40B; ☺ 7.30am-6pm) shares a number of design features with Angkor Wat, including the roof of its 28m-tall main shrine, and may have been its model. Thanks to a superb restoration, Phimai projects a majesty that transcends its modest size. There is a grand sound-and-light show at the ruins the second weekend of November, as part of the **Phimai Festival**, and a smaller version the last Saturday of the month from October to April.

Phimai National Museum (☎ 0 4447 1167; Th Tha Songkhrai; admission 30B; ☺ 8.30am-4pm), outside the main complex, has a fine collection of Khmer sculpture, including a serene bust of Jayavarman VII, Angkor's most powerful king.

Phimai is usually a day-trip destination, but there are a few places to crash, including the squeaky clean **Boonsiri Guest House** (☎ 0 4447 1159; 228 Th Chomsudasadet; dm 150B, r 450-650B; ☹ ☹ ☹).

Buses for Phimai leave frequently from Khorat's bus terminal 2 (37B, 1¼ hours).

Craft Villages

South of Khorat are two of Thailand's most successful craft villages. **Dan Kwian** pottery has a rough texture and rustlike hue and the clay is moulded into all kinds of objects, including reproductions of ancient Khmer sandstone sculpture. Buses (12B, 30 minutes) run from near Khorat's south city gate.

Jim Thompson bought much of his silk in **Amphoe Pak Thong Chai**. Buses (30B, 40 minutes) leave Khorat's terminal 1 every half-hour.

KHAO YAI NATIONAL PARK

Up there with the world's finest national parks, **Khao Yai** (☎ 08 1877 3127; admission 400B; ☹ 6am-9pm) incorporates one of the largest intact monsoon forests in mainland Asia, which is why it was named a Unesco World Heritage Site – that and the abundant wildlife, including some 250 elephants (best spotted on a night safari) and one of Thailand's largest hornbill populations. The park has many miles of trekking trails and some superb waterfalls.

Most of the hotels around Khao Yai offer park tours (the two listed following have some of the most lauded guides) and this is really the ideal way to visit. Prices start at around 1000B, though compare companies carefully because some include the park entrance fee while others do not.

Sleeping & Eating

There are many hotels on the road to the park, but you can also sleep in the park itself.

our pick Greenleaf Guest House (☎ 0 4436 5024; www.greenleaf4tour.com; Th Thanarat; r 200-300B) This place has some of the few budget rooms outside nearby Pak Chong.

Khao Yai Garden Lodge (☎ 0 4436 5178; www.khaoyai-garden-lodge.com; Th Thanarat; r 350-2500B; ☹ ☹ ☹) The lodge has a good variety of rooms in a lovely garden setting.

There are two campgrounds offering basic two-sleeper bungalows (800B) and fancier three-bedroom villas (3500B). You will pay 30B per person to camp and can rent two-

person tents for 100B. Simple dorms (50B) are another option if not in use by groups.

There are many restaurants outside the park, plus five inside it.

Getting There & Away

To reach Khao Yai you need to connect to Pak Chong, which is on the highway between Bangkok (ordinary/air-con 115/148B, 2½ hours) and Khorat (ordinary/air-con 45/77B, 1½ hours). Pak Chong is also on the rail line, but trains are slower than the bus, especially if coming from Bangkok.

You can catch a *săwngthăew* to the park's northern gate (25B, 45 minutes) from in front of the Pak Chong 7-Eleven store 300m west of the ordinary bus terminal. It's another 14km to the visitor centre and park guards are used to talking drivers into hauling *faràng* up there. Some shops on Pak Chong's main road hire motorcycles.

PHANOM RUNG HISTORICAL PARK

Crowning the summit of a spent volcano, a good 70 storeys above the flat fields below, **Phanom Rung** (☎ 0 4463 1746; admission 40B; ☹ 6am-6pm), will impress even those suffering acute temple overload. Dating from the 10th to 13th centuries, Thailand's most spectacular Angkor monument faces east towards the sacred capital of Angkor in Cambodia. It was first built as a Hindu monument and features sculpture relating to the worship of Vishnu and Shiva. Later the Thais converted it into a Buddhist temple.

One of the most striking design features is the promenade leading to the main entrance. The avenue is sealed with laterite and sandstone blocks and flanked by sandstone pillars with lotus-bud tops. The avenue ends at the first and largest of three *naga* (mythical serpent) bridges. The central *prasat* (tower) has a gallery on each of its four sides, and the entrance to each gallery is itself a smaller incarnation of the main tower. The galleries have curvilinear roofs and false-balustrade windows. Once inside the temple walls, check out the galleries and the *gopura* (entrance pavilion), paying particular attention to the lintels over the doors. The craftsmanship at Phanom Rung represents the pinnacle of Khmer artistic achievement, on a par with the bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat.

The rice-growing region around Phanom Rung is peppered with dozens of minor Khmer

ruins. Most are little more than jumbled piles of laterite block, but **Prasat Meuang Tam** (Lower City; admission 30B; ☹ 6am-6pm), which gets few visitors despite sitting only 7km southeast of Phanom Rung, is in good shape. Though it also has an ancient past, **Wat Khao Angkhan** (☹ daylight hr), some 20km west of Phanom Rung atop another extinct volcano, stands out for its flamboyant nouveau Khmer-style buildings that sort of harken back to the age of empire.

Sleeping

Phanom Rung can be undertaken as a day trip from Khorat, Buriram or Surin, each with a full spread of lodging choices. But the closest place to lay your head is Nang Rong where several places stand out. You can arrange motorcycle and car hire and guides at each.

our pick Honey Inn (☎ 0 4462 2825; www.honeyinn.com; 8/1 Soi Si Kun; r 200-350B; ☹ ☹ ☹) A longtime travellers' favourite, this welcoming guest-house manages to be very homey despite the functional design. It's 1km northeast of the bus station.

our pick P California Inter Hostel (☎ 0 4462 2214; Th 59/9 Sangkakrit; california8gh@yahoo.com; r 250-500B; ☹ ☹ ☹) Newer and cosier than Honey Inn, this hostel is on the far east side of town and is another friendly and helpful choice.

Cabbages & Condoms (☎ 0 4465 7145; Hwy 24; r 240-1500B; ☹ ☹ ☹) This pleasant PDA-run resort (all profits to charity) is ringed by gardens and little lakes west of town, and has a full range of rooms.

Getting There & Away

From Buriram take a Chanthaburi-bound bus to Ban Ta Pek (ordinary/air-con 35/55B, 1½ hours, every 40 minutes) where you'll need to take a motorcycle taxi (150B) or *săwngthăew* (300B for three people) the rest of the way. These rates include waiting times while you tour the ruins.

Buses from Nang Rong to Chanthaburi also pass through Ban Ta Pek (20B, 30 minutes, every 40 minutes), or you can take one of the five daily *săwngthăew* (20B, 45 minutes) from the market on the east end of town that go to the foot of the mountain (where a motorcycle taxi to the top will cost about 30B less).

Those coming by bus from Khorat (air-con 78B, two hours) or Surin (air-con 65B, two hours) should get off at Ban Ta-Ko, a well-marked turn-off about 14km east of Nang

Rong. Once in Ban Ta-Ko you can wait for one of the buses or *săwngthăew* from Nang Rong that will pass through Ban Ta Pek (10B) and then continue as previously mentioned, or take a motorcycle taxi all the way to Phanom Rung (300B return).

Motorcycle taxi drivers will add Meuang Tam onto Phanom Rung for about 100B.

SURIN & AROUND

pop 41,200

Quiet Surin doesn't have much to say for itself until November, when the provincial capital explodes into life for the Elephant Roundup when some 300 pachyderms come to town to perform battle re-enactments and other tusker tricks.

Information

Microsys (Th Sirirat; per hr 15B; ☹ 24hr) You can access email here.

Post office (Th Tanasan; ☹ 8.30am-4.30 Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun)

Ruamphet Hospital (☎ 0 445 1392; Th Thesaban 1)

Siam Commercial Bank (Th Sratara; ☹ 10.30am-8pm) Has ATM and exchange facilities inside Surin Plaza shopping centre.

Sights

Surin is best enjoyed as a base for day-tripping to nearby attractions.

To see Surin's elephants during the low season, visit the **Elephant Study Centre** (☎ 08 1879 2773; donations appreciated; ☹ 9am-5pm) in Ban Tha Klang, about 50km north of Surin. Dozens of the performers at the annual festival live here, some in traditional Suay homes sheltering both elephants and humans, and there are one-hour shows (donations expected) daily at 10am and 2pm. The village hosts an Elephant Parade, with all the pachyderms brightly painted, around May's full moon for the new monks' ordination ceremony. Buses from Surin (30B, two hours) run hourly. The village **homestay** (☎ 08 1879 2773; per person 250B) programme includes three meals and a little elephant time.

Several renowned craft villages are within easy striking distance of the capital, including **Ban Tha Sawang** where exquisite 'ancient brocade silk' is made on enormous looms worked by four women simultaneously. The village is 8km west of Surin city via Rte 4026, and *săwngthăew* (12B, 20 minutes) run regularly from the market in Surin. Eighteen kilometres

north of Surin via Rtes 214 and 3036 are **Ban Khwao Sinarin** and **Ban Chok** known for silk and silver respectively, though you can buy some of both in each village.

Saren Travel (☎ 0 4452 0174; sarentour@yahoo.com; 202/1-4 Th Theaban 2; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) and

Pirom-Aree's House (opposite) lead a wide range of tours to these places, as well as nearby Khmer ruins.

The **Surin National Museum**, about 5km south of town on Rte 214, was built years ago and looked set to open in mid-2007.

CROSSING INTO CAMBODIA: THE POPULAR ROUTES

Thai-Cambodian border crossings are open 7am to 8pm. Cambodian visas cost US\$20 (riel and baht are also accepted) at the border and you must bring a passport photo. Officials routinely ask for 'stamp fees' or other such bollocks; refuse, remain polite, and they will usually relent.

Chong Jom to O Smach

Eight *sáwngtháew* (40B, 3½ hours) and eight minibuses (60B, two hours) run daily from Surin to Chong Jom. Once on the Cambodian side, there are shared taxis to Siem Reap (US\$10, seven to eight hours). This is not the easiest border to access but because so few foreigners use this crossing, it's relatively hassle free.

For information on travelling this route in the reverse direction, see p222.

Aranya Prathet to Poipet

This, the busiest border crossing, is the direct route to Angkor Wat. Frequent daytime buses (ordinary/air-con 118/207B, four to five hours) from the Northern bus terminal and two trains (3rd class 48B, six hours, 5.55am and 1.05pm) per day connect Bangkok with Aranya Prathet. Do not take the direct Siem Reap buses promoted along Th Khao San or you will end up with an extra-long and uncomfortable ride meant to ensure that you arrive so late you will want to stay at the guesthouses the bus operators are in cahoots with.

After running the gauntlet of touts and scammers (ignore them all; you do not need to change money before entering Cambodia or get assistance getting the visa) you'll get to the border and then things get pretty hassle free. Take the free shuttle to the Poipet 'Tourist Lounge' (five to 10 minutes away) which is the bus terminal for Siem Reap (bus 40,000r, taxi US\$40 to US\$50; five hours), Phnom Penh (bus 60,000r, taxi US\$70 to US\$80; seven to eight hours) and Battambang (bus 32,000r, taxi US\$40, share taxi 10,000r, pick-up inside/outside 16,000/8000r, three hours). The public buses, around the corner, are slightly cheaper than the private.

To travel this route in reverse, see p222.

Hat Lek to Cham Yeam

Buses to Trat (ordinary/air-con 188/257B, 5½ hours) are frequent from both Bangkok's Eastern bus terminal and Northern bus terminal, with those from the latter also stopping at Suvarnabhumi Airport. The easiest way to Hat Lek from Trat is the air-con minibuses (110B, one hour, every 45 minutes between 6am and 6pm). *Sáwngtháew* (50B) also trundle to Hat Lek from the bus station when full.

Motorcycle and automobile taxis will take you across the border for 50B to 80B. Most people take the fast boat to Sihanoukville (US\$15, four hours) which leaves at 8am. There are also minibuses going to Sihanoukville (550B) and Phnom Penh (650B) leaving at 9am from the taxi stand on Ph 3, north of the creek before Ph 12. The journeys take about five and six hours respectively on bad roads. There is accommodation on the island of Koh Kong in Cambodia, but if you leave Trat on the 6am minibus, you can make the boat connection that morning.

Cambodian visas cost 1200B here; dollars and riel are not accepted. The money changers are notorious for short-changing you around 30% to 40%, and even the honest ones offer the lowest rates in the country. The 'Health Quarantine' office on the Cambodian side of the border is a scam, walk right by.

For details on travelling this route in the opposite direction, see p249.

VISITING PREAH VIHEAR TEMPLE IN CAMBODIA

Cambodia's Preah Vihear (p225) ruins, known as Prasat Khao Phra Wihan in Thailand, are all but inaccessible from the south so to see them you've got to go through Thailand. Catch a bus from Ubon Ratchathani to Kantharalak (37B, 1½ hours, half-hourly) and then a *sáwngtháew* to Phum Saron (30B, 40 minutes, half-hourly), which is 10km before the temple. From here you'll have to hire a motorcycle taxi to the park; figure on 200B return with a couple of hours' waiting time. A truck will cost 400B for four people. If you are coming from the west, you can get to Kantharalak from Si Saket (40B, 1½ hours, half-hourly) and continue from there as above.

Sleeping

Sangthong Hotel (☎ 0 4451 2009; 279-281 Th Tanasan; r 80-500B; ☎) This labyrinthine older property is run with jet-engine precision by smiling staff. The 125 rooms range from some rachitic shared bathroom cheapies on the roof to large and comfy midrangers. Air-con rooms start at 240B.

our pick Pirom-Aree's House (☎ 0 4451 5140; Soi Arunee, Th Thungpo; r 120-200B) The new setting 1km west of the city for this longtime budget favourite can't be beat. Simple wooden rooms (all with shared bathrooms) in two new houses and a shady garden overlook an old flower-filled rice paddy. Pirom knows all about the region.

Surin Majestic Hotel (☎ 0 4471 3980; www.surinmajestic.net; 99 Th Jit Bamrung; r 800-1800B, ste 3000B; ☎) This shiny new top-end behind the bus terminal has plenty of extras, such as a fitness centre.

Eating

Petmanee 2 (☎ 0 4451 6024; Th Munrasat; mains 20-80B; ☎ lunch) This simple spot between Ruamphet Hospital and Wat Salaloi is Surin's most famous purveyor of *sôm-tam* and *kài yàng*.

Larn Chang (☎ 0 4451 2869; 199 Th Siphathai Saman; mains 30-180B; ☎ dinner) This old wooden house, with a garden and a rooftop patio overlooking a surviving stretch of the city moat (now known as Suan Rak or Love Park), serves tasty Thai and Isan dishes.

Surin has a good **night bazaar** (Th Krung Si Nai; ☎ 5-10pm) with an excellent selection of Thai and Isan dishes, including, as always, barbecued insects. Two blocks west, vendors fronting the municipal market serve until 2am.

Getting There & Away

Surin's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4451 1756) connects the city to most others in the region, including Khorat (ordinary/air-con 93/130B, four

hours), as well as Chiang Mai (air-con/VIP 690/960B, 14 hours) and Bangkok's northern terminal (ordinary/air-con/VIP 248/342/495B, eight hours).

Surin is on the Bangkok-Ubon train line and there are nearly a dozen services daily to each. A 1st-/3rd-class seat to Ubon (three hours) starts at 140/31B; to Bangkok (eight hours) 1st-/3rd-class prices begin at 346/73B.

UBON RATCHATHANI

pop 115,000

With many interesting temples, frontage along Mae Nam Mun, Thailand's second-longest waterway, and a sluggish character, few Thai cities reward aimless wandering as richly as Ubon.

With the nearby Thai-Lao border crossing at Chong Mek drawing a steady stream of foreigners, Ubon is an increasingly popular destination. The hotel scene is glum, but there are plenty of good restaurants and well-stocked stores offering a chance to stock up on the good life before heading off into rural Laos.

Information

Internet Pirch (382 Th Phrom Rat; per hr 10B; ☎ 9am-11pm)

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

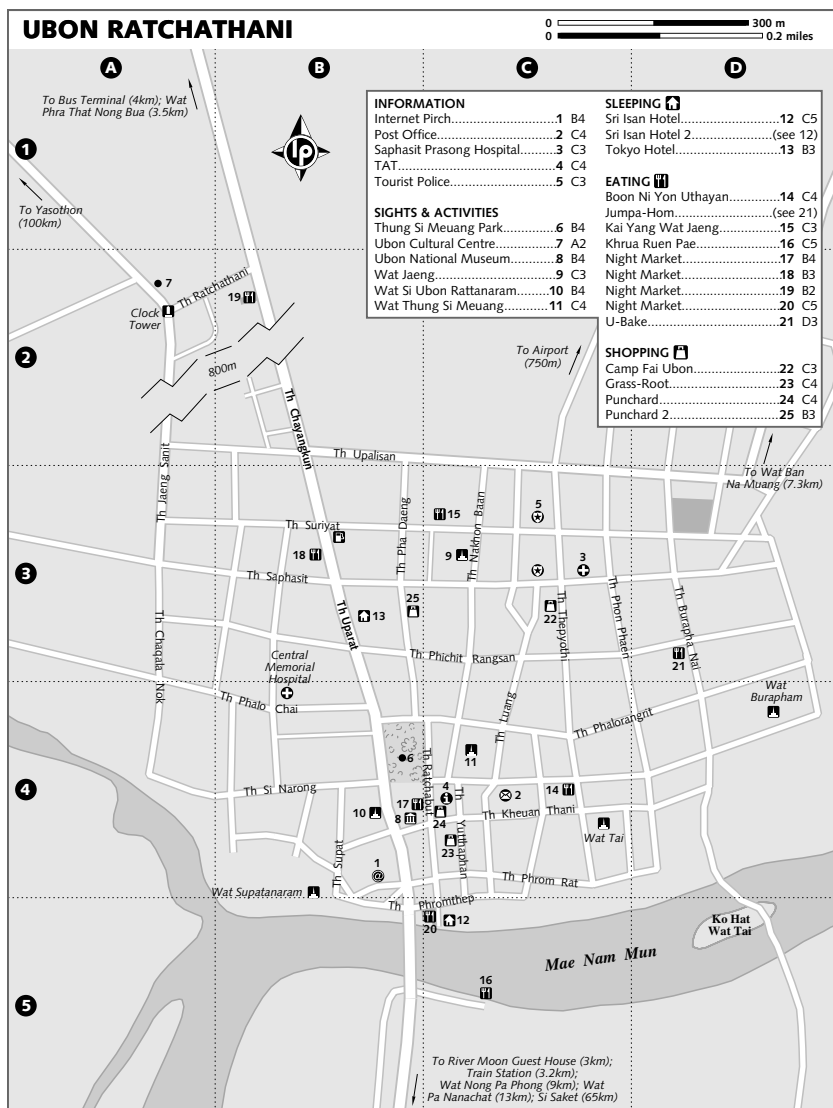
Saphasit Prasong Hospital (☎ 0 4524 0074; Th Saphasit) Has 24-hour casualty.

TAT (☎ 0 4524 3770; 264/1 Th Kheuan Thani; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Suriyay)

Sights

Housed in a former palace of the Rama VI era, **Ubon National Museum** (☎ 0 4525 5071; Th Kheuan Thani; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) is a good place to delve into Ubon's history and culture before exploring the city or province. Just north of the museum is **Thung Si Meuang Park**,



the centrepiece of which is a huge concrete replica of the elaborate votive candles seen during July's **Candle Parade**.

There is more about local culture, plus plenty of wax sculpture, at the museum in the **Ubon Cultural Centre** (☎ 0 4535 2000; Th Jaeng Sanit; admission free; 🕒 8.30am-4pm) at Rajabhat University.

The main things Thai visitors to Ubon want to see is the 7cm-tall Phra Kaew Busarakham, aka the Topaz Buddha, in the *bòt* at **Wat Si Ubon Rattanaram** (Th Uparat). Binoculars are available. Most *faràng* are more fascinated by **Wat Thung Si Meuang** (Th Luang), which has a photogenic *hàw trai* (Tripitaka library) on stilts in the middle of a pond, and **Wat Jaeng** (Th Nakhon Baan)

with its adorable little Lan Xang-style *sim* (chapel).

The two most interesting temples are just north of the city, and easily reached by *sàwngthàew*. The square *chedi* at **Wat Phra That Nong Bua** is richly adorned with *jataka* reliefs and is an almost exact replica of the Mahabodhi stupa in Bodhgaya, India. The *bòt* at **Wat Ban Na Muang** sits on a boat; a ceramic-encrusted replica of King Rama IX's royal barge *Suphannahong*, complete with a sculpted crew, to be precise. The *wihàan* also has a boat-shaped base, this time the prince's personal craft, and the temple's entrance gate is an immense statue of Airavata, Hindu God Indra's three-headed elephant mount.

South of the city is **Wat Pa Nanachat** (www.watpahnachat.org), where English is the primary language. It holds little interest as a tourist destination, but a senior monk is available most days after the 8am meal to answer questions about Buddhism. Any Si Saket-bound bus can drop you on Hwy 226, about 500m from the entrance.

Sleeping

River Moon Guest House (☎ 0 4528 6093; 43 Th Sisaket; r 120-150B) This ramshackle place 200m from the train station somehow manages to exude a positive vibe. Facilities are shared.

Sri Isan Hotel 2 (☎ 0 4525 4544; 60 Th Ratchaburi; r 160-350B; 🍷) This older, dishevelled place, hidden behind its flashier sister sleeper, is, for the price, one of the city's better budget hotels.

Tokyo Hotel (☎ 0 4524 1739; 360 Th Uparat; r 220-600B; 🍷) The Tokyo is rather bland, but it's a well-run midranger with some humble budget rooms in the old building.

Our pick **Sri Isan Hotel** (☎ 0 4526 1011; www.sriisanhotel.com; 62 Th Ratchaburi; r 550-1300B; 🍷 📺) Natural light swims through the atrium, brightening the lobby of this cheerful place. The rooms, which come with fridge and TV, are small but standards are high.

Eating

Boon Ni Yon Uthayan (☎ 0 4524 0950; Th Si Narong; per plate 15B; 🍷) breakfast & lunch) Most of the food for this vegetarian buffet is grown organically just outside the city.

Kai Yang Wat Jaeng (☎ 08 1709 9393; 228 Th Suriyati; mains 20-100B; 🍷) It looks like a tornado whipped through this no-frills spot, but the chefs cook up a storm of their own. This is considered by many to be Ubon's premier

THE BIG BANG

Yasothon, 100km northwest of Ubon Ratchathani, just might be Thailand's most dreary provincial capital – except during the thunderous **Rocket Festival** (Bun Bang Fai) in the second weekend in May. Similar rain and fertility rites are held across Isan, but nowhere as fervently as in Yasothon where the largest homemade missiles are packed with 120kg of explosives.

purveyor of *kài yàng*, *sôm-tam*, sausages and other Isan cuisine.

Khrua Ruen Pae (☎ 0 4532 4342; mains 60-250B; 🍷) lunch & dinner) One of four floating restaurants on Mae Nam Mun, Krun Ruen Pae serves up tasty food and a relaxed atmosphere.

Sharing a water- and plant-filled wooden deck are **U-Bake** (☎ 0 4526 5671; 49/3 Th Phichit Rangsang; chocolate cake 40B; 🍷) lunch & dinner), which has internet access, and **Jumpa-Hom** (☎ 0 4526 0398; mains 65-1500B; 🍷) dinner). Both the bakery and the chichi restaurant serve Thai, Chinese and Western cuisine.

Ubon has many small **night markets** (🕒 4.30pm-midnight) rather than a large one.

Shopping

The speciality of Ubon Province is natural-dyed, hand-woven cotton and you'll find a fantastic assortment at **Grass-Root** (☎ 0 4524 1272; 87 Th Yuthaphan; 🕒 9am-6pm) and **Camp Fai Ubon** (☎ 0 4524 1821; 189 Th Thepyothi; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat). **Punchard** (☎ 0 4524 3433; 158 Th Ratchaburi; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) and **Punchard 2** (☎ 0 4526 5751; 156 Th Pha Daeng; 🕒 9.30am-8.30pm) stock a wider array of handicrafts.

Getting There & Away

Thai Airways (☎ 0 4531 3340; www.thaiair.com) has three daily flights to/from Bangkok (one-way 2700B) while **Air Asia** (☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com) has one flight (1650B).

Ubon's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4531 6085) is north of the town centre, just off Th Chayangkum; take *sàwngthàew* 2, 3 or 10. Frequent buses link Ubon with Mukdahan (ordinary/air-con 80/144B, three hours) and Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (air-con/VIP 411/594B, eight hours).

The **train station** (☎ 0 4532 1004) is located in Warin Chamrap, south of central Ubon; take *sàwngthàew* 2. There are night trains in both

CROSSING INTO LAOS: CHONG MEK TO VANG TAO

Chong Mek is the only place in Thailand where *faràng* can cross into Laos by land (that is, you don't have to cross the Mekong). The border is open from 5am to 6pm daily and you are almost sure to be charged a 'stamping fee' by the Lao immigration officials. Air-con buses direct to Pakse in Laos (200B, three hours) leave Ubun four times daily; they wait for passengers to get their Lao visas. If you got here from somewhere else, you can continue to Pakse by *sáwngháew* (US\$0.80, 75 minutes), taxi (US\$2 per person or US\$10 for whole vehicle, 45 minutes).

For details on travelling in the opposite direction, see p327.

directions connecting Ubun and Bangkok. Fares for 1st-class air-con sleeper/2nd-class fan sleeper/2nd-class seat/3rd-class seat are 1080/401/301/175B.

AROUND UBON RATCHATHANI

Deep in Ubun Ratchathani Province are two of Thailand's remotest national parks. Neither can be reached by public transport.

Up the Mekong from Khong Jiam is **Pha Taem National Park** (☎ 0 4526 6333; admission 400B), where its long namesake cliff both provides stunning vistas of the river valley and holds prehistoric rock paintings. Elsewhere in the 340-sq-km park are waterfalls, odd, mushroom-shaped rock formations, and what the park calls Thailand's largest flower field (blooming late October to late December).

Down where Laos, Thailand and Cambodia come together, an area sometimes called the Emerald Triangle, you'll find the 687-sq-km **Phu Chong Nayoi National Park** (☎ 0 4541 1515; admission 400B). Most visitors are here to see Nam Tok Huay Luang, which plunges 40m, plus rangers lead short bamboo raft trips when there is enough water. At the far end of the park there are superb vistas of the surrounding countryside; it looks a lot like the view from Pha Taem cliff, but with jungle instead of the Mekong at the bottom of the valley.

Both parks have camping sites. At Pha Taem, you will pay 30B per tent and can rent a two-person tent for 150B. Bungalows are another option in Pha Taem and will set you back 1200B in a six-bed fan room or 2000B in a four-bed room with air-con. Bunking down in a three-bed bungalow will cost 600B at Phu Chong Nayoi.

MUKDAHAN

pop 34,300

Linked to the Lao city of Savannakhet by the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge 2, which opened in December 2006, Mukdahan is now a well-

oiled revolving door between the two countries. It's a pleasant, though unexciting town, known for its riverfront market (Talat In-dojin), which stretches under as well as along the riverfront park.

Sights

One of the most oddly, out-of-place landmarks in all of Thailand, **Ho Kao Mukdahan** (☎ 0 4263 3211; Th Samut Sakdarak; admission 20B; ☎ 8am-6pm) is a 65m-tall tower with a good ethnographic museum at the base and great views from the top.

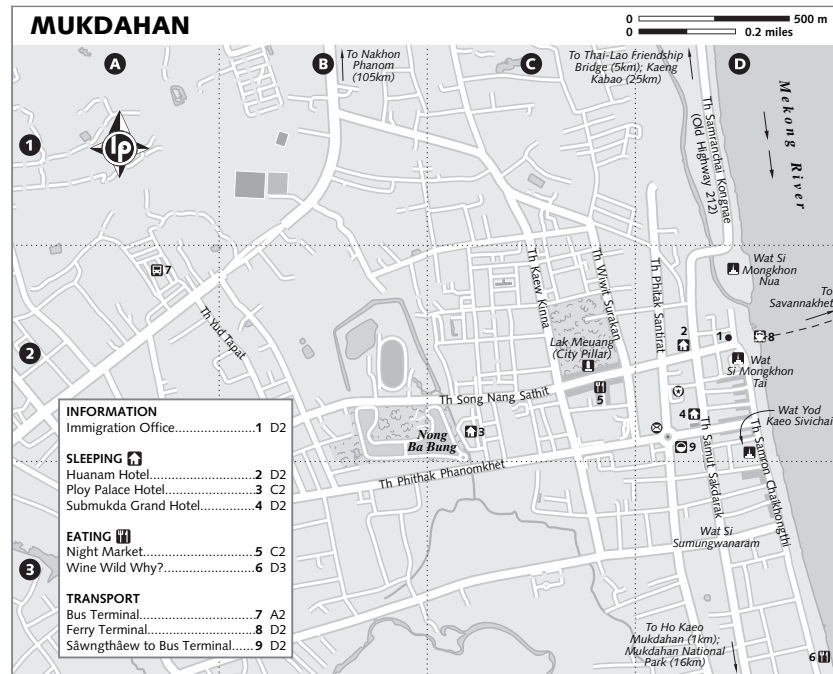
Just 15km south of town is hilly **Mukdahan National Park** (☎ 0 4260 1753; admission 400B; ☎ 5am-6pm) famous for its unusual mushroom-shaped rock formations. For accommodation, you have a choice of camping (30B per person) or bunking down in simple rooms in bungalows (500B) that can sleep seven. Three-person tents can also be rented for 80B. *Sáwngháew* (15B, 20 minutes) headed to Amphoe Don Tan pass the turn-off to the park entrance, and for an extra 20B the driver will take you the remaining 1.5km to the visitor centre.

If you are travelling under your own steam, follow the Mekong River north along Old Hwy 212 (Nong Ak Na Po Yai) for an unvarnished look at traditional Thai life. At the 25km mark, you can kick back at **Kaeng Kabao**, a stretch of rocky shore and islets that hosts several restaurants.

Sleeping & Eating

Huanam Hotel (☎ 0 4261 1137; 36 Th Samut Sakdarak; r 150-320B; ☎ ☎) Rooms aren't quite as slick as the lobby. They are, nonetheless, good value in a good location. Mountain bike rentals are 100B per day.

Submukda Grand Hotel (☎ 0 4263 3444; 72 Th Samut Sakdarak; r 500B; ☎ ☎) This shiny new tower was erected in 2006 to cash in on the expected rise in tour-bus business the bridge would bring. Rooms are boxy, but they're good.



Ploy Palace Hotel (☎ 0 4263 1111; www.ploypalace.com; 40 Th Phitak Phanomkhet; r 1050-3000B; ☎ ☎ ☎) This executive sleepy has plenty of marble and wood for that swanky feel and a decent spread of creature comforts. For something out of the ordinary, ask for the 9th-floor rooms with beehives on the balconies.

Night Market (Th Song Nang Sathit; ☎ 5-10pm) A particularly good spot for eating Isan classics such as *kai yáang*, *sóm-tam*, and deep-fried insects.

Our pick Wine Wild Why? (☎ 0 4263 3122; 11 Th Samron Chaikhongthi; mains 40-130B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Housed in an atmospheric wooden building right on the river, this romantic little spot serves delicious Thai food and bags of character, though the wine list is history.

Getting There & Away

Mukdahan's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4261 1421) is on Rte 212, west of town; to get there from the centre, take a yellow *sáwngháew* (8B) from Th Phitak Phanomkhet, near the fountain. There are frequent buses to Nakhon Phanom (ordinary/air-con 52/93B, two hours) going via That Phanom (ordinary/air-con 28/50B,

one hour), Khon Kaen (air-con 155B, 4½ hours), Ubun Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 80/144B, 3½ hours) and Bangkok's northern terminal (air-con/VIP 364/760B, 11 hours).

THAT PHANOM

This small town might have been forgotten to the world were it not for the looming 57m-tall *chedi* at **Wat Phra That Phanom** (☎ 5am-8pm). It's

CROSSING INTO LAOS VIA THE FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE 2: MUKDAHAN TO SAVANNAKHET

There are 12 daily buses between 7am and 5.30pm crossing the bridge between Mukdahan and Savannakhet, Laos (45B, 40 minutes). Also ferries (50B, 20 to 30 minutes) continue to cross the Mekong from the pier in the heart of town. At our last visit, boat departures were six times between 9.10am and 4pm on weekdays, less often on weekends. Lao immigration is very efficient. See p323 for details on travelling from Laos into Thailand via this border crossing.

a badge of Isan identity and an icon in the region. A lively **Lao market** (☎ 8.30am-noon) gathers by the river on Monday and Thursday.

The traveller original, **Niyana Guest House** (☎ 0 4254 0880; 65/14 Soi 33; r 140B), northeast of the Lao arch of victory, is a tad chaotic, but smiles and advice flow freely from the friendly owner. Bathrooms are shared. A bit further north **Kritsada Rimkhong Resort** (☎ 0 4254 0088; www.kritsadaresort.com; 90-93 Th Rimkhong; r 400-600B; ☎) isn't fancy, but it's as fancy as it gets in That Phanom.

When hunger strikes, there is a small **night market** (☎ 3-9pm) and a clutch of riverside eateries on Th Rimkhong.

Buses depart regularly from the south side of town for Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 102/178B, 4½ hours), via Mukdahan (ordinary/air-con 28/50B, one hour) and Nakhon Phanom (ordinary/air-con 27/49B, one hour, five daily). Nakhon Phanom also has a *sáwngthàew* (36B, 90 minutes, every 10 minutes) service.

NAKHON PHANOM

pop 31,700

In Sanskrit-Khmer, Nakhon Phanom means 'city of hills', but they're talking about the ones across the river in Laos. The fabulous views across the Mekong befit this somnolent town, as does the scattering of graceful French colonial buildings. The **TAT** (☎ 0 4251 3490; Th Sunthon Wiji; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) office has a map pointing out several of them.

Ho Chi Minh lived and planned his resistance movement here in 1928-29 and **Uncle Ho's House** (donations appreciated; ☎ daylight hr) and the **Friendship Village** (donations appreciated; ☎ 8am-5pm) community centre has displays about his time here. They are about 4km west of town in Ban Na Chok.

Sleeping & Eating

Rarely is a 'Grand' hotel truly grand in provincial Thailand, and Nakhon Phanom's **Grand Hotel** (☎ 0 4251 1526; 210 Th Si Thep; r 190-390B; ☎) is no exception. But it's better than average for the price. The view at **Mae Nam Khong Grand View Hotel** (☎ 0 4251 3564; www.mgvhotel.com; 527 Th Sunthon Wiji; r 700-2600B; ☎) is, on the other hand, lives up its label.

There are restaurants along the river, but most of the better eateries are back in the centre of town. **O-Hi-O** (☎ 0 4252 1300; 24 Th Fuang Nakhon; mains 30-220B; ☎ dinner) is an airy bar-eatery

with the usual Thai, Isan and Chinese menu plus movies on the big screen and internet access. The outdoor terrace at the **Indochina Market** (Th Sunthon Wiji; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) food court has choice seats that frame the mountain views.

Getting There & Away

PB Air (☎ 0 2261 0222; www.pbair.com) flies daily from Bangkok (2905B).

Nakhon Phanom's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4251 3444) is east of the town centre. From here buses head to Nong Khai (ordinary/air-con 160/205B, five hours, nine daily until 11.30am), Sakon Nakhon (ordinary/air-con 47/85B, 1½ hours) and Mukdahan (ordinary/air-con 52/94B, two hours), via That Phanom (ordinary/air-con 27/49B, one hour). VIP buses to Bangkok (13 hours) cost 664B to 820B.

NONG KHAI

pop 61,500

Spread out along the leafy banks of the Mekong River, Nong Khai welcomes a steady stream of travellers stopping here before crossing the Friendship Bridge into to Laos. A clutch of excellent places to sleep and eat have sprung up to serve them, making this the only northeastern town with a full-fledged traveller scene; albeit a modest one. But Nong Khai's popularity is about more than just its proximity to Vientiane and its bounty of banana pancakes. Seduced by its dreamy river views, sluggish pace of life and surrounding attractions, many who mean to stay a day end up bedding down for many more.

Information

There is no shortage of banks with ATMs and exchange services in town.

Hornbill Bookshop (☎ 0 4246 0272; Th Kaew Worawut; ☎ 10am-7pm) New and used English-language books, plus internet access.

Immigration Office (☎ 0 4242 0242; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) On the highway bypass that leads to the Friendship Bridge.

Mekong Internet Services (519 Th Rimkhong; per hr 30B; ☎ 10am-10pm)

Nong Khai Hospital (☎ 1669; Th Meechai)

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

TAT (☎ 0 4242 1326; Hwy 2; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) In the OTOP Center, 1km south of town.

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Hwy 2) In the OTOP Center, 1km south of town.

Sights

Sala Kaew Ku sculpture park (☎ 08 1369 5744; admission 10B; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm) is a surreal, sculptural journey into the mind of a mystic shaman. This park offers a potpourri of the Hindu and Buddhist pantheon of deities; and the immense statues offer some freaky photo opportunities. While the motivations for its 20-year construction were spiritual, for the casual browser the end result is a masterpiece of mysterious modern art.

The gardens are 5km southeast of town and easily reached by bicycle; Mut Mee Garden Guest House distributes handy maps if you want to take the scenic route. By bus, board a vehicle heading to Phon Phisai or any other eastern destination and ask to get off at Wat Khaek (10B), as the park is also known; it's about a five-minute walk from the highway.

Nong Khai's most famous typical temple is **Wat Pho Chai** (Th Phochai; ☎ 7am-7pm), home of Luang Pu Phra Sai, a Lan Xang-era Buddha, awash with gold, bronze and precious stones.

Sleeping

Our pick! Mut Mee Garden Guest House (☎ 0 4246 0717; www.mutmee.com; 1111/4 Th Kaew Worawut; dm 90B, r 130-600B; ☎) Nong Khai's budget old-timer has a garden so relaxing you may not want to leave. A huge variety of rooms are clustered around a thatched-roof restaurant, Nagarina (right), where the owner, Julian, holds court with his grip of local legend and his passion for all things Isan. There are sometimes cultural performances here.

Sawasdee Guest House (☎ 0 4241 2502; 402 Th Meechai; r 140-420B; ☎) If you could judge a hotel by its cover, this charismatic piece of living history in an old, Franco-Chinese shophouse would come up trumps, though the tidy rooms lack the exterior's old-school veneer.

Nong Khai Grand (☎ 0 4242 0033; www.nongkhai.grandhotel.com; Hwy 212; r 1290B, ste 3700B; ☎) This slick, modern place has plenty of sparkle. A big hit with passing suits, 'executive' standards are maintained throughout and swanky suites (usually available at 40% discount) are on offer for those after the Midas touch.

Also recommended:

Ruan Thai Guest House (☎ 0 4241 2519; 1126/2 Th Rimkhong; r 120-400B; ☎) A good variety of high-quality rooms and plenty of garden greenery.

Maekhong Guest House (☎ 0 4246 0689; www.mekongguesthouse.com; 519 Th Rimkhong; dm

150B, r 300-500B; ☎) This riverside outfit has little bonuses, like decorative headboards, rarely found at these prices.

Eating

Khrua Sukapap Kwan Im (☎ 0 4246 0184; Soi Wat Nak; mains 20-30B; ☎ breakfast & lunch) The owners of this simple little vegetarian place make a mumsy fuss over *faràng* diners, and serve Thai and Chinese standards that are good enough for carnivores. The juices are excellent too.

Nagarina (☎ 0 4246 0717; mains 35-75B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Mut Mee Garden Guest House (left) tones down its Thai dishes for foreign tongues, but it doesn't spare the spice on its river boat, which is docked just down below. Sunset and night cruises (100B) sail daily.

Rom Luang (☎ 08 7853 7136; 45/10 Th Prajak; mains 40-120B; ☎ dinner) Though the menu is mainly Thai, most of the Yellow Umbrella's best known dishes, like sausages and pork neck, are Isan specialties. The handmade tables and chairs add flair, and the grills stay smoking until 4am.

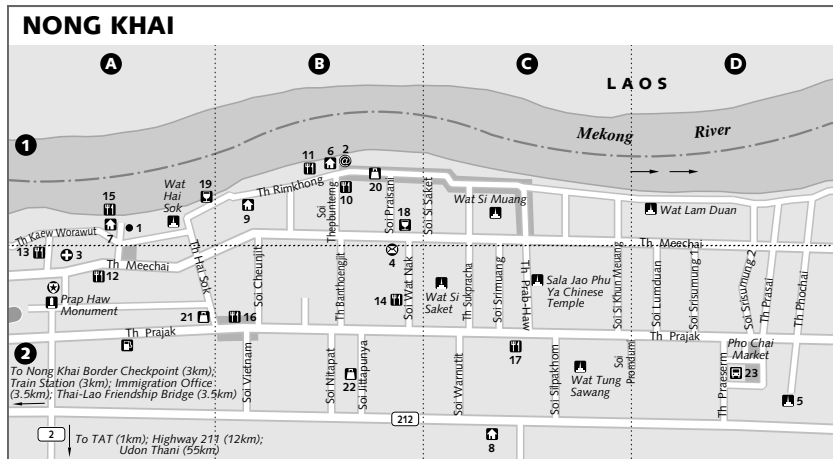
Café Thasadej (☎ 0 4242 3921; 387/3 Soi Thepbunterg; mains 50-310B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Sophistication is in short supply in Nong Khai, but it oozes out of this little restaurant. Both the menu and liquor list, the latter among the best in town, go global. Gyros, weiner schnitzel, pizza and smoked salmon are some of the most popular options.

Also recommended:

Daeng Namnuang (☎ 0 4241 1961; 526 Th Banthoenjiti; mains 30-180B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This riverside place is an Isan institution thanks to its Vietnamese *námneuang* (pickled pork spring rolls).

CROSSING INTO LAOS: NAKHON PHANOM TO THA KHAEK

You can catch a ferry (60B) across the Mekong to Tha Khaek in Laos between 8am and 6pm; they run about every hour. Nakhon Phanom's immigration office, where you need to get your exit stamp, is about 250m south of the passenger ferry terminal. In Tha Khaek, Lao immigration *usually* issues 30-day tourist visas on arrival and there's a **foreign exchange bureau** (☎ 8.30am-3pm) at the immigration office. Details for traversing the border in the opposite direction are on p320.



José Ramon's (1128/11 Th Takai; mains 80-140B; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Surprisingly tasty Mexican and Puerto Rican food.

For quick, colourful eats swing by the **Hospital Food Court** (Th Meechai; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) where about a dozen cooks whip up the standards, or visit the **night vendors** (Th Prajak) who set up their stalls each evening between Soi Cheunjit and Th Hai Sok.

Drinking

our pick Surreal (☎ 08 1391 3828; 476/4 Th Rimkhong; ☎ noon-1am Nov-Apr, 7pm-1am May-Oct) This little place rises above, both figuratively and literally, the other riverside bars located on this end of Th Rimkhong. It looks out over the river, has a free pool table and book exchange, and the owner Mark nearly never stops smiling.

Coco-Na Coffee (☎ 0 4241 1362; Th Meechai; ☎ 5pm-midnight) This coffeehouse-nightclub hybrid attracts a youthful crowd. Live bands play (November to May) in the terrace out back.

Shopping

In an effort to stem the migration of young women to the bright lights of the big city, **Village Weaver Handicrafts** (☎ 0 4242 2651; www.villageweaver.net; 1020 Th Prajak; ☎ 8am-7pm) established a weaving cooperative making and selling high-quality, moderately priced hand-woven fabrics and ready-made clothing. The *mát-mii* cotton is particularly good here. Visitors are also welcome in the **workshop** (☎ 0 4241 1236;

1151 Soi Jitapanya; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat) where some of the products are produced.

The huge **Tha Sadet Market** (Th Rimkhong) offers the usual mix of dried food, electronic items, souvenirs and assorted bric-a-brac.

Getting There & Away

Nong Khai's main **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4241 1612) is located just off Th Prajak, over 1km from most of the riverfront guesthouses. Frequent services link Nong Khai to Bangkok (air-con/VIP 482/700B, 11 hours); Udon Thani (ordinary 40B, one hour), a transfer point to other destinations; Khon Kaen (air-con 148B, 3½ hours); and Loei (ordinary 105B, six hours).

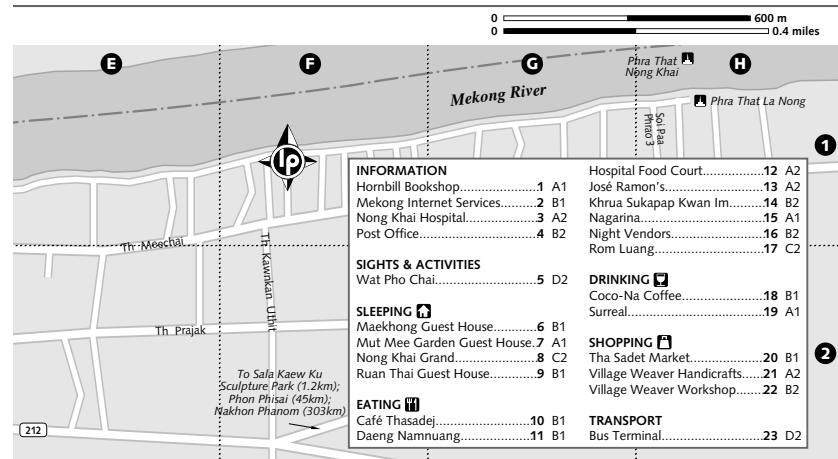
The **train station** (☎ 0 4241 1592) is 2km from town. Nong Khai is at the end of the railway line that runs from Bangkok through Khorat, Khon Kaen and Udon Thani. Most people travelling to or from Bangkok opt for a sleeper train. There are three night trains out of Bangkok daily and two departing Nong Khai. Fares range from 253/388B for 3rd-/2nd-class fan seats to 1217B for a first-class sleeper cabin.

AROUND NONG KHAI

With an early start, these can be day trips from Nong Khai.

Phu Phrabat Historical Park

Steeped in local legend and peppered with bizarre rock formations daubed with ancient cave paintings, **Phu Phrabat Historical Park** (☎ 0



4225 1350; admission 30B; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) is one of the region's highlights, offering great views from the crags of the Phu Phrabat escarpment and plenty of mythical intrigue. Most of the rock formations here feature in an enchanting local legend about two young lovers: there's a short version in the park's museum, but if you're staying at the Mut Mee Garden Guest House (p165) in Nong Khai you can read the complete tale.

To get here, take a bus from Nong Khai to Ban Pheu (35B, two hours), then a *sawngháew* (8B) to Ban Tiu and then a motorcycle taxi or ták-ták the final 4km to the park itself.

Wat Phu Tok

The soporific atmosphere of **Wat Phu Tok** (☎ 6.30am-5pm, closed 10-16 Apr) attracts monks and *mâe chii* (Thai Buddhist nuns) from all over Isan. Monastic *kūti* (meditation huts) and prime meditation places, accessed via a network of rickety staircases, are scattered about an enormous sandstone outcrop.

Ban Kom Kan Phat Tana, the village just outside the wat, runs a **homestay** (☎ 08 6086 1221; 200B per person).

To get here without your own wheels, take a bus to Beung Kan (ordinary/air-con 70/110B, two to three hours) where you'll either need to hire a ták-ták (600B for the return journey and a two-hour wait) or take bus 225 from the clocktower to Si Wilai (20B, 45 minutes) where ták-ták drivers charge around 250B to the wat.

LOEI & AROUND

The city of Loei is little more than a brief base from which to prepare for your adventures into the more remote pockets of the mountainous country beyond. **Phu Krading National Park** (☎ 0 4287 1333; admission 400B; ☎ trail to summit 7am-2pm Oct-May), about 75km to the south, blankets a high-altitude plateau cut through with trails and peppered with cliffs, waterfalls and wildlife, including elephants. Plan on four hours to climb to the top, where

CROSSING INTO LAOS: THE FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE

Nong Khai is the busiest border between Thailand and Laos, and the immigration procedures are straightforward. Take a ták-ták to the border station where you get stamped out of Thailand. From there, catch one of the frequent minibuses that shuttle passengers across the bridge (15B) between 6am and 9.30pm to the Lao immigration checkpoint. Once over the border it's about 20km to Vientiane – there will be plenty of buses (\$US0.40), ták-ták and taxis (US\$5 to US\$7 – bargain hard) waiting for you. If you already have your Lao visa, there are also six direct buses a day to Vientiane from Nong Khai's bus terminal (55B, one hour). To travel across this border from Laos into Thailand, see p285.

most facilities are, and come prepared for the cold, it can approach freezing in December and January. Being the northeast's version of a 'spring break' destination, the park fills up with guitar-toting students during school holidays (especially March to May).

Chiang Khan, still full of traditional timber shophouses, is the archetypal slow-going Mekong town. Several guesthouses arrange boat trips and rent bikes, and **Kaeng Khut Khu**, a set of rapids about 6km downstream, make a popular spot for paddling, picnicking and sunsoaking. The town's temples are modest, but feature a particularly idiosyncratic style with colonnaded fronts and painted shutters that echo the French architectural influences of Laos.

The three-day **Phi Ta Khon Festival**, usually in June, is a curious cross between the drunken revelry of Carnival and the spooky imagery of Halloween. The people of **Dan Sai**, 80km west of Loei, don garish costumes and elaborate masks and dance circles around **Wat Phon Chai**. The small **Dan Sai Folk Museum** (donations appreciated; ☎ 9am-5pm) on the temple grounds holds some of these costumes. Thirty-metre-tall **Phra That Si Songrak** is the most highly revered stupa in Loei Province (you can't wear shoes or the colour red, or carry food or umbrellas anywhere on temple grounds) while the *jataka* murals at **Wat Neramit Wiphatsana** are superb.

Sleeping & Eating

LOEI

Sugar Guest House (☎ 0 4281 2982; 4/1 Th Wisut Titep Soi 2; r 150-350B; 🍷) The cheapest place in town is also the friendliest. The English-speaking owner arranges trips around the province at reasonable prices and rents motorcycles (200B) if you'd rather get there yourself.

AP Court Hotel (☎ 0 4286 1627; www.apcourthotel.com; 31/29 Th Ruamphattana; r 350-600B; 🍷) The rooms at this newly built property are a bit of a letdown compared with the plant- and art-filled lobby (where you can use wi-fi), but the value is undeniable.

Mobile Steak (☎ 08 5008 8288; Th Chumsai; mains 30-159B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) One of Snow White's dwarves welcomes you to this alfresco eatery that serves tasty Thai, as well as slabs of beef, at wooden tables surrounded by pot plants.

PHU KRADUNG NATIONAL PARK

Atop the mountain there are **camp sites** (per person 30B, 2-person tent rental 150B) and 13 swanky

CROSSING INTO LAOS: BEUNG KAN TO PAKSAN

The crossing between Beung Kan and Paksan is used so rarely that many people in Beung Kan, 136km east of Nong Khai, will tell you that foreigners can't cross to Laos here. They can, but visas are not issued on arrival. For information on crossing in the other direction, see p317.

bungalows (4-sleeper 1600B). There are also several small open-air eateries serving the usual stir-fry dishes for 40B.

CHIANG KHAN

our pick **Chiang Khan Guest House** (☎ 0 4282 1691; www.thailandunplugged.com; 282 Th Chai Khong; s/d/tr 200/250/300B) Run by a Dutch tour guide (you'll never be short of local info) and his affable Thai wife (you'll never stop laughing), this traditional-style place with shared bathrooms is built of creaking timber and has bucolic views.

our pick **Loogmai Guest House** (☎ 0 4282 2334; 112 Th Chai Khong; r 300-400B) Combining some minimalist modern artistic styling with oodles of French-colonial class, this old-school villa offers a handful of sparse but atmospheric rooms, an airy terrace with river views and a real sense of history.

Mekong Culture & Nature Tours (☎ 0 4282 1457; mc_n_thailand@hotmail.com; 407 Th Chiang Khan; camping per person 100B, r 800-900B; 🍷) Pricey, but serene, these six shared-bathroom guestrooms and a bungalow sit in the forest 1km upstream from town. Off-season discounts are available.

The guesthouses and the food vendors at Kaeng Khut Khu are generally the best places to eat.

DAN SAI

Standard lodging consists of flash countryside resorts and a simple guesthouse, with nothing in between. But the **information centre** (☎ 0 4289 1094; Th Kaew Asa; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) arranges basic homestay accommodation from 150B per person in nearby villages.

Getting There & Around

Nok Air (☎ 1318; www.nokair.com) connects Loei to Bangkok (1750B, 1½ hours), Udon Thani (600B, 35 minutes) and Chiang Mai (2550B, 2½ hours) on Friday and Sunday.

Sǎwngthǎew (7B) run from the bus station into town about every five minutes, or you can take a tūk-tūk for 20B. There are several ordinary buses through the morning and early afternoon to Nong Khai (105B, six hours) via the scenic route; it's quicker to go to Udon Thani (ordinary/air-con 60/110B, three hours) and change there. There are also four daily air-con Chiang Mai (438B, 10 hours) departures and many to Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (air-con/VIP 344/685B, 10 hours).

For Phu Kradung National Park, buses on the Loei-Khon Kaen line go to the district town of Phu Kradung (55B, 1½ hours) every half-hour. From there, hop on a *sǎwngthǎew* (20B) to the park visitor centre at the base of the mountain, 10km away.

Chiang Khan has no bus terminal, but all vehicles depart from near the town's main junction. Most Bangkok (air-con/VIP 372/540B, 10 hours) buses depart in the early evening. To Loei, there are frequent *sǎwngthǎew* (30B, 1¼ hours) and nine buses (36B, 45 minutes). Currently the only sure way to get from Chiang Khan to Nong Khai is to take the Loei *sǎwngthǎew* south to Ban Tad (20B, 30 minutes) and catch the bus there.

Buses between Loei and Dan Sai (ordinary/air-con 50/60B, 1½ hours) depart about hourly during the day.

KHON KAEN

pop 145,300

As the site of the northeast's largest university and an important hub for all things commercial and financial, Khon Kaen is youthful, educated and on the move. The city has inherited little of Isan's idiosyncratic appeal, but with fine eateries, swanky hotel rooms and plenty of places to wear holes in your dancing shoes, Khon Kaen is the ideal spot to decompress after humping it through the northeast's quieter corners.

Information

It's hard to walk around Khon Kaen without bumping into an ATM or bank.

Khon Kaen Ram Hospital (☎ 0 4333 3800; Th Si Chan)

Lao consulate (☎ 0 4324 2858; 171 Th Prachasamoson; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) Normal turnaround is three days, but for an extra 200B you can get immediate service.

Meeting Net (54/6 Th Klang Meuang; per hr 15B; ☎ 24hr) Check your email here.

Post office (Th Klang Meuang; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat & Sun)

TAT (☎ 0 4324 4498; 15/5 Th Prachasamoson; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Mittaphap) Next to HomePro.

Vietnamese consulate (☎ 0 4324 1586; Th Chata-pading; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) Visas ready next day.

Sights

Although it doesn't seem like it at first look, there is more to do in Khon Kaen than revel in the nightlife and shop for souvenirs. First stop should be **Khon Kaen National Museum** (☎ 0 4324 6170; Th Lang Sunratchakan; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm), which has an interesting collection of artefacts from prehistoric times to the present.

For an excellent introduction to Isan culture, swing by the **Khon Kaen City Museum** (Hong Munmung; ☎ 0 4327 1173; Th Rop Buengkaen Nakhon; admission 90B; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) which sits at the top of **Beung Kaen Nakhon** (Kaen Nakhon Pond), a 100-hectare lake lined with eateries and walkways. At the lake's south end is **Wat Nong Wang Muang** (Th Robbung) with its gorgeous nine-tier *chedi*. Inside you'll find enlightening murals depicting Khon Kaen history, historical displays and a staircase to the top.

Sleeping

Saen Sumran Hotel (☎ 0 4323 9611; 55-59 Th Klang Meuang; s 150-200, d 250B) The city's oldest hotel is also its most charismatic with the wooden front holding onto its once-upon-a-time glory. The rooms are a little shaky, but scrubbed spotless and the owners are a wealth of knowledge about the area.

Grand Leo Mansion (☎ 0 4332 7745; 62-62/1 Th Si Chan; r 350-450B; 🍷) Close to the city's nightlife, this concrete tower is functional and a little frumpy, but the spotless rooms promise a good night's sleep no matter what hour you stumble back at.

Europe Guesthouse (☎ 0 4327 1083; www.eur-ope-khonkaen.com; 23/5 Th Nikorn Samran; r 440-490B; 🍷 🍷) This Dutch-owned place is no fancier than the big places in this class, but its six rooms are far cosier. A tiny fan room goes for just 150B, but, like the others it still has TV and fridge.

Kosa Hotel (☎ 0 4332 0320; www.kosahotel.com; 250-252 Th Si Chan; s 1140-1380, d 1260-1500B; 🍷 🍷 🍷)

This four-star favourite offers fantastic value with excellent facilities and slick service.

Eating

First Choice (☎ 0 4333 2374; 18/8 Th Phimphaseut; mains 30-180B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This plant-ringed, traveller-style eatery has some tasty breakfasts and a good range of Western and Thai dishes, including vegetarian options. It also has some simple rooms upstairs.

our pick Tawantong (☎ 0 4333 0389; 227/129 Th Lang Sunratchakan; per plate 40B; ☺ breakfast & lunch) This all-veggie health-food restaurant across from the National Museum has one of the best meatless buffets in Thailand.

Bualuang Restaurant (☎ 0 4322 2504; Th Rop Bueng Kaen Nakhon; mains 60-350B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Ask a

local out for dinner and they will probably want to go here. It serves up a great spread of Thai, Isan and Chinese dishes on a pier over Beung Kaen Nakhon.

Also recommended:

Kiwi Café (☎ 0 4322 8858; 311/13 Th Robbung; 50-115B; ☺ dinner Mon-Fri, lunch & dinner Sat & Sun) Coffee, wine, cottage pie and, we swear, the best chocolate cake in Isan.

Kao Tom Pae Tee (☎ 0 4324 1932; Th Klang Meuang; mains 50-150B; ☺ dinner) This no-frills local haunt serves up a mean *tôm-yam* until 3am.

Two **night markets** (☺ 5pm-midnight) – a covered one near the air-con bus terminal and an open-air affair on Th Reun Rom – are the life and soul of the budget eating scene.



Entertainment

Khon Kaen's exuberant nightlife is centred on Th Prachasumran, sometimes called Disco Street.

Rad Pub (☎ 0 4322 5987; Th Prachasumran) This multifaceted place with two rooms of live music, 'coyote' dancers and an alfresco restaurant and coffee shop satisfies many tastes.

our pick Iyara (☎ 0 4332 2855; 43 Th Robbung; mains 55-250B; ☺ dinner) Gorgeously decorated with a Khmer-style art theme, Iyara has a *ponglang* (percussion instrument made of short logs) music, dance and comedy show at 7.30pm most nights.

Shopping

Khon Kaen is the best place to buy Isan handicrafts. Run by the Handicraft Centre for Northeastern Women's Development, the out of town **Klum Phrae Phan** (☎ 0 4333 7216; 131/193 Th Chatapadung; ☺ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) has a superb selection of natural-dyed, hand-woven silk and cotton produced in nearby villages. **Sueb San** (☎ 0 4334 4072; Th Klang Meuang; ☺ 8am-6.30pm) also stocks natural-dyed fabrics, plus some atyp-

cal Isan souvenirs. Oversized **Prathamakhan Local Goods Center** (☎ 0 4322 4080; 79/2-3 Th Reun Rom; ☺ 9am-8.30pm Thu-Tue) is a great one-stop handicraft shop and has an eclectic museum.

Getting There & Away

The airport (off Hwy 12) is just west of the city centre; a shuttle runs to most hotels for 60B. **Thai Airways** (☎ 0 4322 7701; www.thaiair.com) operates three Bangkok (2305B, 55 minutes) flights daily.

Both the **ordinary bus terminal** (☎ 0 4323 7472; Th Prachasamon) and the **air-con bus terminal** (☎ 0 4323 9910; Th Klang Meuang) are central and convenient. Buses leave to/from Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (air-con/VIP 329/440B, 6½ hours) frequently. Other air-con destinations include Chiang Mai (542B, 12 hours, 8pm and 9pm), Nakhon Phanom (238B, five hours, four daily) and Nong Khai (148B, 3½ hours, four daily).

Khon Kaen is on the Bangkok-Khorat-Nong Khai railway line, but buses tend to be more convenient. Express trains to Bangkok's Hualaphong station costs (3rd-class/1st-class sleeper 227/1068B) and take about eight hours.

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THAILAND DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Thailand offers the widest and best-priced variety of accommodation in the Mekong region. In Bangkok, the budget range runs up to about 600B and you're looking at about 2500B to move into the top end. In the rest of the country you'll start getting midrange quality at around 400B range and you'll usually start finding true top-end amenities from 1200B.

Rooms under 200B will typically have a shared bathroom and air-con usually kicks in at about the 300B to 400B level. Prices in this guide are high-season rack rates, in US dollars if that's what the hotel uses, but many places offer generous (up to 50%) discounts just for asking. For top-end places, you can usually save money by booking online.

Most national parks have bungalows (typically sleeping six to 10 people and costing between 600B and 2000B) and camp sites (30B per night) for overnight stays. Tents and sleeping bags of varying quality are also usually available for hire. Make reservations through the **National Park Office** (☎ 0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve).

ACTIVITIES

Thailand, having a diverse landscape, offers all sorts of athletic escapes from rock climbing to white-water rafting, but most visitors work up a sweat cycling and trekking.

Cycling

Cycling is a wonderful way to see Thailand. In general, drivers are courteous, and most roads are sealed with roomy shoulders. Grades in most parts of the country are moderate, though you'll suffer some lung-chugging climbs in the far north, especially Mae Hong Son and Nan Provinces. Roads running along the Mekong River make ideal touring routes. The 3000-member **Thailand Cycling Club** (www.thaicycling.com) is a good resource.

Guesthouses often hire bicycles for 30B to 50B per day, but check them over carefully; brakes are not necessarily standard equipment. Quality mountain bikes are available in most tourist towns from 100B.

Trekking

Typical trekking programmes in northern Thailand – Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai are the primary base points for organising tours – run for four or five days and feature daily walks through forested mountain areas, coupled with overnight stays in hill-tribe villages to satisfy both ethnotourism and ecotourism urges. These adventures rank high on most travellers' to-do list, but the final verdict is often mixed because of concerns over exploitation and tourism overload in these sensitive communities. See *Trekking Tips* (p138) for further information.

Other trekking opportunities are available in Thailand's larger national parks, such as Phu Chong Nayoi National Park (p162), where park rangers may be hired as guides and cooks for a few days at a time. Rates are reasonable.

BOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Thailand* guide covers the entire country, or pick up *Thailand's Islands & Beaches* to explore the coast in detail. For more on the capital, try the *Bangkok* city guide or *Bangkok Encounter*.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most government offices are open from 8.30am to 4.30pm weekdays, but often close from noon to 1pm for lunch. Banking hours

are typically 8.30am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday, but most department stores have bank branches inside that open 10am to 8pm daily. All government offices and banks are closed on public holidays. Large shops usually open from 10am to 9pm while smaller shops usually open and close earlier. Restaurants generally open 10am until 10pm, though those specialising in morning meals usually close by 3pm. By law, bars shut their doors at 1am and nightclubs at 2am, though enforcement went slack following the coup. The buildings inside Buddhist temples are generally open dawn to dusk; if you find one closed just ask a monk to open it for you.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Thailand is not a dangerous country, but there are a few things to watch out for.

Thefts are usually a matter of stealth not strength. We receive regular reports of thefts from guesthouse rooms on Bangkok's Th Khao San, from guesthouse safes in Chiang Mai, and on overnight bus and train trips to Chiang Mai. Small locks on bags can help in all of these instances.

Thai friendliness is usually genuine, but Thais rarely approach foreigners on the street. If someone does this to you in Bangkok, especially around popular attractions, there is a good chance it's a prelude to a scam. See p114 for more information. And though it's not so common anymore, be suspicious of anyone offering you cigarettes, drinks or food. Several travellers have re-

ported waking up with a headache and their valuables gone.

A series of bombs exploded in Bangkok on 31 December 2006, and there were two grenade attacks a month later. It's still not certain if this is an escalation of the southern insurgency or postcoup political manoeuvring. This is unlikely to become a future problem, but it would be wise check on this situation.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Thai Embassies & Consulates

Thai diplomatic offices abroad include the following. The Thai Embassy website (www.thaiembassy.org) lists others.

Australia (☎ 02-6273 1149; www.thaiembassy.org.au; 111 Empire Circuit, Yarralumla, Canberra, ACT 2600) Consulates in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney and Perth.

Cambodia (☎ 023-726 306; 196 MV Preah Nordon Blvd, Sangkat Tonle Bassa, Khan Chamkar Mon, Phnom Penh)

Canada (☎ 613-722 4444; www.magma.ca/~thaiott/mainpage.htm; 180 Island Park Dr, Ottawa, ON K1Y 0A2) Consulate in Vancouver.

China (☎ 010-6532 1749; www.thaiembbeij.org; 40 Guang Hua Lu, Běijīng) Consulates in Chengdu, Guǎngzhōu, Hong Kong, Kūnmíng, Shànghǎi and Xiāmen.

France (☎ 01-56 26 50 50; thaipar@micronet.fr; 8 rue Greuze, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-794 810; www.thaiembassy.de; Lepsiusstrasse 64-66, 12163 Berlin) Consulate in Frankfurt.

Israel (☎ 972-3 695 8980; www.thaiembassy.org/telaviv; 21 Shaul Hamelech Blvd, Tel Aviv)

Laos (☎ 21-214581; www.thaiembassy.org/Vientiane; Kaysonne Phomvihane Ave, Xaysettha, Vientiane) Consulate in Savannakhet.

Netherlands (☎ 070-345 2088; thaihg@thaihg.demon.nl; Buitenusweg 1, 2517 KD, The Hague)

New Zealand (☎ 04-476 8616; www.thaiembassynz.org.nz; 2 Cook St, Karori, PO Box 17226, Wellington)

UK (☎ 020-7589 2944; www.thaiembassyuk.org.uk; 29-30 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5JB) Consulates in Birmingham, Cardiff and Liverpool.

USA (☎ 202-944 3608; www.thaiembdc.org/index.htm; 1024 Wisconsin Ave NW, Washington, DC 20007) Consulates in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles.

Vietnam (☎ 04-823 5092; 63-65 Hoang Dieu St, Hanoi) Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City.

Embassies & Consulates in Thailand

Foreign embassies are located in Bangkok; some nations also have consulates in Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen.

Australia (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2344 6300; www.austembassy.or.th; 37 Th Sathon Tai)

Cambodia (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2254 6630; 185 Th Ratchadamri)

Canada (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2636 0540; www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/bangkok; 15th fl, Abdulrahim Bldg, 990 Th Phra Ram IV)

China Bangkok embassy (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2245 7044; www.chinaembassy.or.th/chn; 57 Th Ratchadaphisek); Chiang Mai consulate (Map p134; ☎ 0 5320 0525; 111 Th Chang Lor)

France Bangkok embassy (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2657 5100; www.ambafrance-th.org; 35 Soi 36, Th Charoen Krung); Bangkok consulate (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2627 2150; 29 Th Sathon Tai)

PRACTICALITIES

- *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation* publish national and international news daily.
- There are more than 400AM and FM radio stations; short-wave radios can pick up BBC, VOA, Radio Australia, Deutsche Welle and Radio France International.
- There are five VHF TV networks with Thai programming, plus UBC cable with international programming.
- Thailand uses 220V AC electricity; power outlets usually feature two-prong flat sockets.
- Thailand follows the international metric system.

THAILAND IN WORDS

- *Monsoon Country* (1990) For a look at rural life in Thailand, the books of Pira Sudham, most famously, are unparalleled. Sudham was born into a poor family in northeastern Thailand and he writes in English in order to reach a worldwide audience.
- *Sightseeing* (2005) A debut collection of short stories by Rattawat Lapcharoensap that hop from Thai households to tourist cafés. The stories give visitors a 'sightseeing' tour into Thai households and coming-of-age moments.
- *Thailand: A Short History* (2003) David Wyatt's succinct overview from the early Thai era to the turn of the millennium.
- *Thailand Confidential* (2005) Ex-Rolling Stone correspondent Jerry Hopkins weaves an exposé of everything expats and visitors love about Thailand and much they don't. An excellent read for newcomers.
- *Very Thai* (2005) A pop-culture encyclopaedia by Philip Cornwel-Smith, it's filled with colourful essays about everyday Thailand from the country's fascination with uniforms to household shrines. As a hardcover, it isn't very portable but it does answer a lot of those first-arrival whys.

Germany (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2287 9000; www.german-embassy.or.th; 9 Th Sathon Tai)

India (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2258 0300; www.visa.toindia.com/indian-embassy-in-thailand.html; 46 Soi Prasannit/Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit)

Ireland (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2677 7500; www.ireland.inthailand.com; 28th fl, Q House, Th Sathon Tai)

Israel (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2204 9200; 25th fl, Ocean Tower 2, 25 Soi 19, Th Sukhumvit)

Japan (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2207 8500; www.th.emb-japan.go.jp; 177 Th Withayu)

Laos Bangkok embassy (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2539 6679; www.bkklaembassy.com; 502/1-3 Soi Sahakarnpramoon, Th Pracha Uthit/Soi 39, Th Ramakmahaeng); Bangkok consulate (Map p170; ☎ 0 4324 2858; 171 Th Prachasamson, Khon Kaen)

Malaysia (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2679 2190; 33-35 Th Sathon Tai)

Myanmar (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2233 2237; www.mofa.gov.mm; 132 Th Sathon Neua)

Netherlands (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2309 5200; www.netherlandsembassy.in.th; 15 Soi Tonson, Th Phloenchit)

New Zealand (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2254 2530; www.nzembassy.com; 14th fl, M Thai Tower, All Seasons Pl, 87 Th Withayu)

Spain (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2661 8284; www.embespa.or.th; 193 Th Ratchadapisek)

UK Bangkok embassy (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2305 8333; www.britisembassy.gov.uk; 14 Th Withayu); Chiang Mai consulate (Map p134; ☎ 0 5326 3015; 198 Th Bamrungrat)

US Bangkok embassy (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2205 4000; http://bangkok.usembassy.gov; 120-22 Th Withayu); Chiang Mai consulate (Map p134; ☎ 0 5325 2629; 387 Th Wichayanon)

Vietnam Bangkok embassy (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2251 5836; www.vietnamembassy.or.th; 83/1 Th Withayu); Bangkok consulate (☎ 0 4324 1586; Th Chatapadung, Khon Kaen)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Many Thai festivals are linked to the lunar calendar, so dates change annually. For specific dates, contact TAT.

Lunar celebrations include the following:

Chinese New Year Celebrated with a week of house-cleaning, lion dances and fireworks in February/March.

Magha Puja Commemorates Buddha preaching to 1250 enlightened monks who came to hear him 'without prior summons'. Culminates with a candlelit walk around at every temple; held February/March.

Visakha Puja Commemorates the date of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away. May.

Khao Phansa The beginning of Buddhist 'lent'. July.

Vegetarian Festival For nine days in October, devout

Chinese Buddhists eat only vegetarian food and may perform acts of devotion. The largest celebrations are in Bangkok.

Ok Phansa The end of Buddhist 'lent'. Occurs in October/November.

Loi Krathong Small lotus-shaped boats made of banana leaves containing candles are floated on rivers, lakes and canals. Best seen in Ayuthaya, Sukhothai and Chiang Mai. Held in October/November.

FOOD & DRINK

Welcome to a country where it is cheaper and tastier to eat out than to cook at home. Day and night markets, pushcart vendors, makeshift stalls, open-air restaurants – prices stay low because of few or no overheads, and cooks become famous in all walks of life for a particular dish.

Take a walk through the day markets and you will see mounds of clay-coloured pastes all lined up like art supplies. These are finely ground herbs and seasonings that create the backbone for Thai *kaeng* (curries). The paste is thinned with coconut milk and decorated with vegetables and meat. Although it is the consistency of a watery soup, *kaeng* is not eaten like Western-style soup, but is ladled on to a plate of rice.

For breakfast and for late-night snacks, Thais nosh on *küaytiaw*, a noodle soup with chicken or pork and vegetables. There are two major types of noodles you can choose from: *sên lek* (thin) and *sên yài* (wide and flat). Before you dig into your steaming bowl, first use the chopsticks (or a spoon) to cut the noodles into smaller segments so they are easier to pick up. Then add to taste a few teaspoonsful of the provided spices: dried red chilli, sugar, fish sauce and vinegar. Now you have the true taste of Thailand in front of you.

Not sure what to order at some of the popular dinner restaurants? Reliable favourites are *yam plaá mèuk* (spicy squid salad with mint leaves, cilantro and Chinese celery), *tôm yam kung* (coconut soup with prawns, often translated as 'hot and sour soup') or its sister dish *tôm khàa kài* (coconut soup with chicken and galangal).

Thais are social eaters: meals are rarely taken alone and dishes are meant to be shared. Usually a small army of plates will be placed in the centre of the table, with individual servings of rice in front of each diner. The protocol goes like this – ladle a spoonful of

food at a time on to your plate of rice. Dishes aren't passed in Thailand; instead you reach across the table to the different items. Using the spoon like a fork and your fork like a knife, steer the food (with the fork) onto your spoon, which enters your mouth. To the Thais placing a fork in the mouth is just plain weird. When you are full, leave a little rice on your plate (an empty plate is a silent request for more rice) and place your fork so that it is cradled by the spoon in the centre of the plate.

Even when eating with a gang of *faràng*, it is still wise to order 'family style', as dishes are rarely synchronised. Ordering individually will leave one person staring politely at a piping hot plate, and another staring wistfully at the kitchen.

For more on dining out in the Mekong region, see p86.

HOLIDAYS

Businesses typically close and transportation becomes difficult during these public holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January.

Chakri Memorial Day 6 April; celebrates the founder of the current royal dynasty.

Songkran 13-15 April; start of Lunar New Year. Buddha images are 'bathed', and water is splashed on people.

Labour Day 1 May.

Coronation Day 5 May.

Queen's Birthday 12 August.

Chulalongkorn Day 23 October; King Chulalongkorn is honoured.

King's Birthday 5 December.

Constitution Day 10 December.

New Year's Eve 31 December.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are very common in Thailand, and connections are usually reliable. The going rate is normally 30B per hour. Wi-fi is becoming common in Bangkok and touristy areas.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Country-specific information as well as reader information exchange on the Thorn Tree forum.

Thailand Daily (www.thailanddaily.com) A thorough digest of Thailand-related news in English.

ThaiVisa.com (www.thaivisa.com) More than what the name implies, there is plenty of other travel-related material.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; www.tourismthailand.org) Thailand's official tourism website is a very handy resource.

LEGAL MATTERS

In general, Thai police don't hassle tourists, unless you are caught holding drugs. If it's a small amount you might be able to get away by paying a 'fine', but traffickers are certain to end up in prison.

If you are arrested for any offence, the police will let you make a phone call to your embassy or consulate, if you have one, or to a friend or relative if not. Thai law does not presume an indicted detainee to be either 'guilty' or 'innocent' but rather a 'suspect', whose guilt or innocence will be decided in court. Trials are usually speedy.

The **tourist police** (☎ 1155) usually speak English, often quite well, and offer a range of assistance from providing road conditions during floods to assistance if you've been ripped-off or robbed.

MONEY

The unit of Thai currency is the baht, which is divided into 100 satang; coins include 25-satang and 50-satang pieces and baht in 1B, 5B and 10B coins. Notes are in 10B (brown), 20B (green), 50B (blue), 100B (red), 500B (purple) and 1000B (beige). Except for top-end hotels, which usually quote rates in dollars (because they don't give the best exchange rate, it's usually cheaper to pay in baht) other currencies are rarely accepted.

ATMs & Credit/Debit Cards

Debit and ATM cards issued by your home bank can be used at ATMs, which are widespread, to withdraw cash (in Thai baht only). Cards can also be used for purchases at many shops, hotels and restaurants. The most commonly accepted cards are Visa and MasterCard, followed by Amex and Japan Card Bureau (JCB).

Changing Money

Banks and private moneychangers (only found in popular tourist destinations) give the best exchange rates and hotels give the worst. Since banks charge commission and duty for each traveller's cheque cashed, use large denominations. British pounds and euros are second to the US dollar in general acceptability.

Exchange rates are as follows:

Country	Unit	Baht
Australia	A\$1	27.30
Cambodia	100r	0.81
Canada	C\$1	29.50
China	Y1	4.30
euro zone	€1	44.40
Japan	¥100	27.30
Laos	1000 kip	3.40
New Zealand	NZ\$1	24.20
UK	£1	65.05
USA	US\$1	32.80
Vietnam	10,000d	20.50

POST

The Thai postal system is efficient, inexpensive and reliable; though don't send cash or small valuables, just to be on the safe side. Poste restante can be received in any town that has a post office.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Be aware about having a negative impact on the environment or the local culture. Read the boxed text, p111, for some general guidance on observing social mores. See p122 for advice on what to wear in sacred sites. For trekking tips, see p138 and p484.

Despite Thailand's reputation for sex tourism, prostitution was declared illegal in the 1950s. The government does little to enforce antiprostitution laws in cases of consenting adults; however, anyone caught having sex with a person under 15 years of age could face stiff jail time and a life sentence if the child is under 13. Many Western countries have also instituted extraterritorial legislation where citizens can be charged for child prostitution offences committed abroad. The Thai government encourages people to help eradicate child prostitution by reporting child sexual abuse. **End Child Prostitution & Trafficking International** (Ecpat; ☎ 0 2215 3388; www.ecpat.org) works to stop child prostitution, child pornography and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.

TELEPHONE

The telephone system in Thailand is quite efficient and offers International Direct Dial universally. You can make international calls on payphones to most countries from about 7B per minute (dial ☎ 001 before the number, though for Laos ☎ 007 and country code 856)

with prepaid phonecards available from 7-Eleven stores, or use the government phone offices at or near main post offices. Hotel and guesthouse phone services are usually considerably more expensive, and internet calls vary in quality.

Roaming charges are quite reasonable in Thailand for those with mobile phones. If you buy a SIM card in Thailand for your phone, rates are typically around 3B per minute anywhere in Thailand and between 5B and 7B for international calls.

The ☎ 0 preceding all numbers in this book is only used when dialling domestically.

To accommodate the growth in mobile phone usage, Thailand has introduced an '8' prefix to all mobile numbers; ie ☎ 0 1234 5678 is now ☎ 08 1234 5678.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The helpful **Tourist Authority of Thailand** (TAT; www.tourismthailand.org) has more than two dozen offices throughout the country. Most staff speak English. Check TAT's website for a list of overseas offices, plus plenty of tourism information.

VISAS

Citizens of 41 countries (including most European countries, Australia, New Zealand and the USA) can enter Thailand visa-free at no charge. See the website of Thailand's **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.mfa.go.th) for the full story. Sixty-day Tourist Visas (around US\$25) and 90-day Non-Immigrant Visas (US\$50 for single entry) intended for business, study, retirement and extended family visits are available from Thai embassies or consulates. Officially, on arrival, you must prove you have sufficient funds for your stay, but visitors are rarely asked about this.

If you overstay your visa, the penalty is 500B per day, with a 20,000B limit; fines can be paid at any official exit point or the **Bangkok immigration office** (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2287 3101; Soi Suan Phlu, Th Sathon Tai; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat).

You can extend your stay, for the normal fee of 1900B, by visiting any immigration office. The duration is up to the discretion of the immigration officer. You may also leave the country and re-enter in order to receive another 30-day stamp, but the days of unlimited entry stamps is over. Visitors may now not stay more than 90 days in Thailand

in any six-month period. Confusingly, some border officials are interpreting this to include only being allowed to enter the country three times; others are not.

VOLUNTEERING

Mirror Art Foundation (☎ 0 5373 7412; www.mirrorartgroup.org) Places English and Thai teachers in Chiang Rai Province's Mae Yao hill-tribe villages.

Open Mind Projects (☎ 0 4241 3578; www.openmindprojects.org) Offers a lengthy list of volunteering options throughout the country.

Starfish Ventures (☎ www.starfishventures.co.uk) Has nursing, English-teaching and other projects in Surin Province plus several environmental projects in the south.

Travel to Teach (☎ 0 8424 60351; www.travel-to-teach.org) Offers flexible volunteering positions from two weeks to six months in schools, English camps or temples teaching monks.

Volunthai (www.volunthai.com) Places teachers at local schools in northeast Thailand with homestay accommodation.

TRANSPORT IN THAILAND

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Almost all international flights use Bangkok's much-maligned (but improving) **Suvarnabhumi Airport** (www.bangkokairportonline.com) – pronounced 'soo-wan-na-poom' – though there are a handful of flights to and from other cities, including Chiang Mai.

Bangkok is *the* air travel hub for mainland Southeast Asia, and because of the Thai government's loose restrictions on air fares and close competition between airlines and travel agencies, Bangkok is one of the cheapest cities in the world to fly out of. Some of the major carriers:

Air Asia (airline code AK; ☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com; Suvarnabhumi Airport; hub Kuala Lumpur)

Air China (airline code CA; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2634 8991; www.fly-airchina.com; Bangkok Union Insurance Bldg, 175-177 Th Surawong; hub Beijing)

Air France (airline code AF; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2635 1191; www.airfrance.fr; 20th fl, Vorawat Bldg, 849 Th Silom; hub Paris)

American Airlines (airline code AA; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2263 0225; www.aa.com; 11th fl Ploenchit Tower, 898 Th Ploenchit; hub Dallas)

Bangkok Airways (airline code PG; ☎ 0 2265 5555; www.bangkokair.com; hub Bangkok)

British Airways (airline code BA; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2627 1701; www.britishairways.com; 21st fl, Charn Issara Tower, 942/160-163 Th Phra Rama IV; hub London)

Cathay Pacific Airways (airline code CX; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2263 0606; www.cathaypacific.com; Ploenchit Tower, 898 Th Ploenchit; hub Hong Kong)

KLM-Royal Dutch Airlines (airline code KL; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2635 2300; www.klm.com; 20th fl, Vorawat Bldg, 849 Th Silom; hub Amsterdam)

Lao Airlines (airline code QV; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2236 9822; www.laoairlines.com; Silom Plaza, Th Silom; hub Vientiane)

Lufthansa Airlines (airline code LH; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2264 2400; www.lufthansa.com; 18th fl, Q House, Soi Asoke, Th Sukhumvit; hub Frankfurt)

Northwest Airlines (airline code NW; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2254 0789; www.nwa.com; 4th fl, Peninsula Plaza, 153 Th Ratchadamri; hub Minneapolis)

Orient Thai (airline code OX; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2229 4260; www.orient-thai.com; 18 Th Rachadaphisek; hub Bangkok)

Qantas Airways (airline code QF; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2636 1747; www.qantas.com.au; Tour East, 21st fl, Charn Issara Tower, 942/160-163 Th Phra Ram IV; hub Sydney)

South African Airways (airline code SA; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2635 1414; www.flysaa.com; 20th fl, Vorawat Bldg, 849 Th Silom; hub Johannesburg)

Thai Airways International (airline code TG; hub Bangkok; www.thaiair.com) Lan Luang (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2356 1111, 6 Th Lan Luang); Silom (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2232 8000, 485 Th Silom)

United Airlines (airline code UA; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2296 7752; www.ual.com; 14th fl, Sindhorn Bldg, Tower 3, 130 Th Withayu; hub Chicago)

Vietnam Airlines (airline code VN; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2656 9056; www.vietnamair.com.vn; Th Sukhumvit; hub Hanoi)

Border Crossings

See p101 for the Mekong region's border crossings at a glance. It's possible to travel from Thailand to China (through Myanmar and Laos) by passenger boat; see p148.

CAMBODIA

Thailand has six border crossings open to Cambodia, but only three are of any practical use. For specific border-crossing info, see p158.

LAOS

There are six gateways from Thailand into Laos. A remote border crossing between Muang Ngoen, in Sainyabuli Province, and

Huay Kon, in Thailand's Nan Province, is seldom used by foreigners. The Beung Kan to Paksan crossing is used so rarely that many people in Beung Kan, 136km east of Nong Khai, will tell you that foreigners can't cross to Laos here. They can, but visas are not issued on arrival.

Most foreigners pay either US\$30 or US\$35 – though Canadians get socked with a US\$42 fee – for 30-day Tourist Visas, which are available at all but the Beung Kan crossing. You are also allowed to pay in baht, but the price works out much higher. Besides the fee, you'll need a passport photo and the name of a hotel you will be staying at in Laos. There is sometimes pressure to pay unofficial 'stamping fees' at some checkpoints. The US\$1 (50B) overtime fee charged before 8am, after 4pm and on weekends is obnoxious, but apparently official.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Hopping around the country by air can be quite affordable, and prices can be almost as low as a VIP bus ticket. Most routes originate in Bangkok, either at the new Suvarnabhumi Airport or the old Don Muang Airport. Leading airlines for domestic routes include the following:

Air Asia (☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com)

Bangkok Airways (☎ 0 2132 0342; www.bangkokair.com)

Nok Air (☎ 1318; www.nokair.co.th)

One-Two-Go (☎ 1126; www.fly12go.com)

PB Air (☎ 0 2261 0220; www.pbair.com)

SilkAir (☎ 0 5327 6459; www.silkair.com)

Thai Airways (☎ 0 2356 1111; www.thaiair.com)

Bicycle

See p172 for information on bicycle touring in Thailand.

Boat

The true Thai river transport is the long-tail boat (*reua hǎang yao*), so-called because the propeller is mounted at the end of a long drive-shaft extending from the engine. Boats are a common (and highly recommended) means of travel in Bangkok and, to a lesser degree, along the Mekong River in the far north.

Bus

Thai bus service is widespread, convenient and phenomenally fast, sometimes nail-bitingly so. You are almost always best off travelling with companies operating out of government

bus stations (called 'Baw Khaw Saw') because private companies working through tourist centres like Th Khao San are notoriously corrupt and unreliable, and thefts on the buses are not uncommon.

The cheapest and slowest buses are the fan-only *rót thammádaa* (ordinary buses) that stop in every little town and for every waving hand along the highway, but this class of bus is a dying breed. Most services are in faster and more comfortable air-con buses, usually called *rót ae* (air bus). Longer routes offer 2nd-class and 1st-class air-con services; the latter have toilets. VIP and Super VIP buses have fewer seats so that each reclines more, and hostesses will serve drinks and snacks. On short routes *sǎwnghǎew* (see opposite) operate like buses.

Car & Motorcycle

Cars, 4WDs or vans can be rented in most large cities. Agencies, both international and local, tend to congregate around top-end hotels. Always verify (ask to see the dated documents) that the vehicle is insured for liability before signing a contract. If you have an accident while driving an uninsured vehicle, you're in for some major hassles.

An International Driving Permit is necessary to drive vehicles in Thailand, but this is rarely enforced for motorcycle hire.

Thais drive on the left-hand side of the road (most of the time!). Like many places in Asia, every two-lane road has an invisible third lane in the middle that all drivers feel free to use at any time and passing on hills and curves is common. The main rule to be aware of is that 'might makes right' and smaller vehicles always yield to bigger ones.

Motorcycle travel is a popular way to get around Thailand. Dozens of places along the guesthouse circuit rent motorbikes for 150B to 300B a day. It's also possible to buy a new or used motorbike and sell it before you leave the country: a good used 125cc bike costs as little as 25,000B. If you've never ridden a motorcycle before, stick to the smaller 100cc step-through bikes with automatic clutches. Motorcycle rental usually requires that you leave your passport, and many provinces require you to wear a helmet.

Local Transport

MOTORCYCLE TAXI

Many cities in Thailand have motorcycle taxis (*mawtoesai rǎp jáang*). Rather than cruise the

streets they cluster near busy intersections. Fares tend to run from 10B to 30B.

SĀAMLĀW & TŪK-TŪK

Sāamlāw (also written *samlor*), meaning 'three wheels', are pedal rickshaws. They are most common in the northeast and are great for short distances. Then there are the motorised *sāamlāw*, called *túk-túk* because of the throaty cough their two-stroke engines make. In tourist centres, Bangkok especially, many (not all, it just sometimes seems that way) *túk-túk* drivers are unscrupulously greedy, exorbitantly inflating fares or diverting passengers to places that pay commissions.

You must bargain and agree on a fare before accepting a ride, but in many towns there is a de facto fixed fare anywhere in town.

SĀWNGTHĀEW

Sǎwnghǎew (literally, two benches) are small pick-ups with a row of seats down each side. In most towns *sǎwnghǎew* serve as public buses running fixed routes. But in tourist towns you'll also find *sǎwnghǎew* performing the same function as *túk-túk*, transporting people to and from the bus station or to popular attractions for a bargained fare.

Train

The **State Railway of Thailand** (☎ 1690; www.railway.co.th), has four main lines (northern, southern, northeastern and eastern) branching out from Bangkok. Trains are comfortable, but almost always slower and less frequent than buses; however the sleeper services to/from Chiang Mai and Nong Khai are rightly popular.

Trains are often heavily booked, so it's wise to reserve your place well ahead, especially the Bangkok to Chiang Mai trip. You can make

bookings at any train station (English is usually spoken) and, for a small fee, through some Bangkok travel agencies.

Note that English-language timetables rarely list all the available trains.

CLASSES & COSTS

First-, 2nd- and 3rd-class cabins are available on most trains, but each class varies considerably depending on the type of train (rapid, express or ordinary). First class is a private cabin. Second class has individually reclining seats; depending on the train some cabins have air-con. Non-air-conditioned 3rd class is spartan with bench seating.

Ordinary trains often only have 3rd-class cars and they stop at every it'sy-bitsy station. Express and rapid are, well, faster making fewer stops; there is a 60B surcharge for rapid trains and an 80B charge for express. Some 2nd- and 3rd-class services are air-con, in which case there is a 120B to 140B surcharge.

Overnight trains have sleeping berths in 1st and 2nd class. The charge for 2nd-class sleeping berths is 100B to 240B depending on whether you take an upper or lower (more headroom) and if there is air-con. All 1st-class cabins come with individually controlled air-con. For a two-bed cabin the surcharge is 400B per person. Single 1st-class cabins are not available, so if you're travelling alone you may be paired with another passenger.

The Thailand Rail Pass, which can be purchased at Hualamphong station in Bangkok, is worthwhile if you will be travelling by train extensively. The cost for 20 days of unlimited 2nd- or 3rd-class train travel is 1500B, or 3000B including all supplementary charges.

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